

This week in history: February 1-7

31 January 2021

25 years ago: Ex-Stalinists, neo-fascists back interim Italian premier

On February 1, 1996, merchant banker and two-time former cabinet minister Antonio Maccanico was named as interim prime minister of Italy. He was the first would-be premier to receive the support of both the ex-Stalinist PDS (Party of the Democratic Left) and the neo-fascist National Alliance, an event that marked a further stage in the rightward evolution of the remnants of the Italian Communist Party.

The right-wing Forza Italia of Silvio Berlusconi also supported Maccanico's selection by President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro to replace another non-party technocrat, banker Lamberto Dini, who resigned a month prior after a year in office. But Maccanico was unable to form a government despite the support of the three major voting blocs, and returned his mandate two weeks later.

Both Maccanico and Scalfaro said the new government would seek agreement by the three parties on a new electoral structure. Their goal was to replace the current system of proportional representation, which gave considerable influence to minority parties, with a more restrictive structure based on the French constitution. The French model provided for a strong, quasi-bonapartist president who carried out military and foreign policy without regard to parliament.

The political significance of the appointment of Maccanico lay in the decision of the PDS Stalinists to seek a deal with the fascists and Forza Italia, bypassing the regionalist Northern League, the other major party in parliament. Fascist leader Gianfranco Fini and PDS leader Massimo D'Alema announced their support for Maccanico and pledged to cooperate with him in the formation of a government.

Ultimately, the maneuvers failed, parliament was dissolved and the Stalinist-led Olive Tree (L'Uliva) coalition won a general election in April, bringing the Italian Stalinists into government for the first time in 50 years.

Maccanico later drafted the "Lodo Maccanico Schifani" law, a forerunner of the immunity laws used to protect politicians from prosecution. Such laws had been abolished earlier in the 1990s following the "clean hands" campaign against corruption in both the state and in business circles. Billionaire Silvio Berlusconi, of Forza Italia, later used Maccanico's laws to establish immunity for himself and others in his circle.

50 years ago: Rolls-Royce comes under control of British government

On February 4, 1970, the British luxury automaker and aircraft engine company Rolls-Royce was nationalized by the United Kingdom after financial crisis and bankruptcy. The engine manufacturer was split into two entities: Rolls-Royce 1971 Limited, the airline engine manufacturer and military contractor; and Rolls-Royce Motors Holdings, the automaker.

While best known for being one of the world's earliest high-end automakers in the 1920s and 1930s, by the 1970s Rolls-Royce had transitioned into producing engines for large machinery, including airplane engines. The company began building engines for English planes in 1914, during the First World War, and began a long history of supplying both the British and American governments with engines in various military vehicles.

In 1967 Rolls-Royce won a contract to build an engine to be used in the new 400 passenger Lockheed L-1011 jet airliner. The Rolls-Royce engine project, the RB211, was riddled with problems both mechanical and financial. The engine was originally designed to use carbon fiber material to make the engine lighter than other available jet engines and better suited to power massive passenger planes. However, the carbon fiber design was not capable of withstanding the impact of birds, which can be pulled into large jet engines. The design was replaced with a titanium alternative but this proved to be costly and was not immediately able to provide the lift needed for the L-1011 to fly.

In late 1970, Rolls-Royce reported that the construction of the RB211 had grown to £170.3 million, twice the original cost projections. By the time the project had concluded the cost of producing each engine was greater than the £230,375 that it could be sold for, causing Rolls-Royce to go bankrupt.

On its own, Rolls-Royce would have been unable to fulfill its obligation to provide the RB211 to Lockheed. The American company would have also faced significant losses, as it would have had to find an alternate designer for its engine, or scrap the L-1011 entirely. In addition, the 80,000 workers employed by Rolls-Royce would have been threatened with factory closures.

The Conservative Heath government considered the collapse of Rolls-Royce, a leading military contractor, to be a matter of

national security and intervened on behalf of the company to keep it afloat. While the state acquisition of the engine manufacturer is generally referred to as a nationalization, it would be more accurate to describe the situation as a bailout.

After the government took control of Rolls-Royce, the company reached a new agreement with Lockheed to complete the RB211 engine, canceling the steep financial penalties that had been levied against Rolls-Royce for failing to provide the engine on time. Eventually, after significant improvements to the jet engine, it was able to be sold to Lockheed, as well as to Boeing for use in 747s.

Rolls-Royce remained under government ownership until 1987, when it was turned over for public purchase. By then the government had absorbed much of the debt that had been accumulated in the process of building the RB211, enabling the privatized company to begin making profits.

75 years ago: Soviet Riga Trial convicts Nazi war criminals

On February 3, 1946, a military tribunal organized by the Soviet Union in Riga, the capital of Latvia, concluded with eight Nazi war criminals being convicted of a range of war crimes in Ukraine and the Baltic states.

The most prominent of the defendants was Friedrich Jeckeln, who had served as head of the Nazi police and SS death squads in southern Russia and Ostland (the German designation for the occupied Baltic states and part of Belorussia). The others included military commanders who had overseen mass killings and the implementation of the Third Reich's genocide of European Jewry.

Over the course of a week, the tribunal heard evidence of the crimes, including some confessions. The open trial was widely reported on, further establishing that the Third Reich's drive to colonize Eastern Europe and overthrow the Soviet Union had involved violence against civilians on a mass scale. Prosecutors stated that they were seeking to trace the "blood trail" that marked Nazi Germany's conquests in the region.

Jeckeln, it was established, had organized some of the worst massacres perpetrated by the Nazi regime. These included the Rumbula massacre, during which some 25,000 Jews were murdered, in or on their way to the Rumbula forest near Riga, between November 30 and December 9, 1941, and the Babi Yar massacre in Ukraine. On September 29-30, 1941, nearly 34,000 Jews were killed in the Babi Yar ravine, near Kiev. Over the course of the German occupation, some 150,000 were murdered there.

Jeckeln had devised a system, first implemented at Rumbula, for such mass killings. It involved forcing the victims into large trenches from which there was no escape. Prosecutors were able to demonstrate Jeckeln's direct responsibility for the

murder of over 100,000 Jews, Roma and other targets of the Nazis. Alexander Boecking, another of the defendants, had overseen the "Germanization" of Estonia, which involved looting, displacement and mass extermination, as well as the use of forced labour.

Jeckeln, Boecking and four of the other defendants were sentenced to death after conviction, and were hanged in Riga's Victory Square before a large crowd.

100 years ago: Stepped-up fighting between IRA and British forces

On February 3, 1921, over 500 soldiers of the Irish Republican Army, the nationalist organization fighting the British presence in Ireland, attacked British forces in Rosscarbery, in County Cork, one of the centers of the insurgency.

At about 10:00 p.m., a large party of IRA soldiers attacked the Burgatia House, the residence of the local magistrate, and fortified the premises for an attack on a regular convoy of British military. The nationalists initially attacked a unit of police who were passing. The IRA had neglected to cut the telegraph wires and the British were able to reinforce themselves quickly, and the IRA was forced to retreat. Six IRA men died, and the British had no casualties.

After the British withdrew, the IRA returned the next night and burned the Burgatia House to the ground.

Also on February 3, General Sir Edward Strickland, the British Commandant in Dublin, declared martial law in that city. "Attacks on the military and police are so frequent night and day," the *New York Times* noted, "that the newspapers have difficulty in reporting all of them." Nine police were killed and two wounded in an IRA ambush in County Limerick.

The situation had become so desperate for the British, that, according to the *Times*, "Every police and military lorry here now carries a hostage chained and padlocked to a seat."



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