

# This week in history: December 27-January 2

27 December 2021

## 25 years ago: Tanzania ejects hundreds of thousands of Rwandan refugees

The Tanzanian government followed through on a deadline of December 31, 1996 for the forced return of nearly a half million Rwandan Hutus out of refugee camps in Tanzania, where they had been living since 1994. The refugees were forced back across the border by Tanzanian soldiers in a military operation that had begun December 15.

Tanzanian soldiers halted an effort by Hutu militiamen and exiled leaders of the ousted Rwandan government to move the refugees further north and east, away from the Rwandan border. It was the second mass return of refugees to Rwanda, following the November 1996 liquidation of most refugee camps in Zaire, where Hutu militias had been routed by armed Zairean Tutsis in rebellion against the government of Zairean President Mobutu Sese Seko.

Rwandan government troops searched most of the returning Hutus for weapons or for evidence linking them to the massacres of the minority Tutsi population in 1994. Thousands of the returning refugees were arrested on charges relating to the 1994 events.

Officials of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, who administered the four huge camps on Tanzanian territory, admitted that they had abandoned their longstanding policy of opposing forced repatriation of refugees and were bowing to what one senior official called the “new realities” in Africa. He was referring to pressure from the major imperialist powers, including the United States, to close the camps and curb expenditures on feeding and housing the refugees.

In November, more than 600,000 refugees left camps in Zaire and crossed into Rwanda after a rebellion broke the hold of the Hutu militants in the camps there.

The Benaco camp, one of the largest in the region, which once held 165,000 people, was effectively cleared out within days of the December 15 operation. Some refugees who refused to leave the camp were violently evicted by police, and many sick and elderly had to wait for transportation to the border.

## 50 years ago: Former Nazi officer becomes United Nations Secretary-General

On January 1, 1972, Austrian Kurt Waldheim became Secretary-General of the United Nations. He replaced U Thant of Burma, who had held the office of the UN’s chief administrator since 1961. While this fact was not widely known at the time of his election as UN Secretary-General, Waldheim had been a high-ranking Nazi officer during the Second World War and complicit in some of the greatest crimes of the Wehrmacht forces.

Waldheim first became a supporter of the Nazi regime shortly after the German annexation of Austria, joining the National Socialist German Students’ Federation (NSDStB) in 1938. Not long after he joined the Sturmabteilung (SA), the paramilitary wing of the Nazi party, where he was promoted to the Mounted Corps. In 1941 he was drafted into the Wehrmacht army and participated in the invasion of the Soviet Union. After being wounded, he was transferred to Yugoslavia where he served as an aide to Nazi General Alexander Löhr, who was found guilty and executed in 1947 for war crimes carried out against the Yugoslav partisans and civilian population.

Waldheim was highly decorated by the Nazi regime, including being given the Zvonimir medal, an honor bestowed by the fascist Ustaše regime in Croatia which collaborated with the Nazis and carried out massive extermination campaigns of its own. His name also appears on the Wehrmacht’s “honor list” of those who contributed to successful military operations.

Managing to escape arrest at the end of the war, Waldheim used his connections to join the Austrian diplomatic service. In 1956 he was appointed ambassador of Canada and then later Austria’s permanent representative to the United Nations.

Waldheim held the office of UN Secretary General for 10 years. He ran for a third term in 1981 but lost. It was later, in 1985, when he ran for election as president of Austria, that more details of his Nazi past became known, and an investigation was conducted. In its final report, the commission conducting the investigation wrote:

The commission has received no knowledge of any case in which Waldheim raised an objection or protested against an injustice which he clearly would have known about or undertook any sort of countermeasure to prevent such an injustice or at least to make its implementation more difficult. On the contrary, he participated repeatedly in illegal procedures

and thus facilitated their execution.

For more extensive details, the author recommends: Kurt Waldheim (1918-2007): Ex-UN chief's Nazi past covered up

## **75 years ago: US and Britain merge their occupation zones of Germany**

On January 2, 1947, the zones of occupied Germany controlled by Britain and the United States were formally merged, after an agreement between the governments of the two nations the previous month. The resulting entity, dubbed Bizonia, was to be economically and administratively integrated, including through the creation of a new currency.

The formation of Bizonia effectively overturned arrangements that the Allied powers, including the Soviet Union, had set in place in the concluding stages of their war against Nazi Germany. At the Potsdam Conference of 1945, the Allied leaders had agreed that postwar Germany would be administered through the creation of separate occupation zones of France, Britain, the US and the Soviet Union. These were to oversee a protracted process supposedly aimed at demilitarization, denazification, decentralization and democratization.

Over the course of 1946, as the US and Britain turned to aggressive Cold War policies, tensions with the Soviets grew. US government representatives condemned the Soviet Union for continuing to extract agreed-upon reparations from Germany. With anti-communist propaganda, they claimed that the Soviets intended for Germany to remain impoverished while the US would support the country's reindustrialization and prosperity.

The creation of Bizonia was angrily denounced by Soviet leaders. Basing themselves on the Stalinist program of seeking an accommodation with imperialism to advance the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy, they bitterly condemned it as a betrayal of the agreements reached at the Potsdam Conference. France initially rejected offers to merge its occupation zone with Bizonia, fearful that its own imperialist interests would be undermined by growing US influence and a unified Germany.

## **100 years ago: Miners revolt in South Africa**

On December 28, 1921, South African gold miners in what is now Gauteng Province began a strike that became a virtual insurrection over the next few months. Known as the Rand

Rebellion or the General Strike of 1922, the uprising was suppressed by military force, assassination, and judicial frame-up by the South African state.

The strike began after a drop in the price of gold on international markets caused the mine owners to cut wages for white mine workers, who were better paid than black workers. The Chamber of Mines, the employers' organization, deliberately fomented racial divisions and threatened to give black workers access to jobs held by white workers. As the white miners began their strike, they made no effort to appeal to black workers. The uprising consisted overwhelmingly of white workers and the slogan "for a white South Africa" was widespread. Consequently, it did not attract the support of the African nationalist movement, including the African National Congress, which had been founded in 1912.

Leaders of the newly formed South African Communist Party, which had been founded based on the unity of black and white workers, played a leading role in the strike, but the party adapted to the chauvinistic sentiments of many white workers. Nevertheless, when white workers attacked black workers, the Communist Party issued leaflets with the slogan "Hands off the black workers!"

By early January, the entire South African mining industry and most related industries had been shut down. Because of the intransigence of the mine owners, workers began to organize paramilitary self-defense units. The government declared martial law and troops, police and armed "citizens' militias" of the middle class were mobilized. By March 10 a full-scale insurrection took place. The workers' paramilitaries seized railway stations and controlled the city of Johannesburg.

They were met with brutal force by the government under the leadership of Prime Minister Jan Smuts. Aerial bombardments killed hundreds, including Communist Party leaders. Miners were forced to surrender, and thousands were taken prisoner. Four strike leaders were subsequently hanged in the repression that followed.



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