

# This week in history: January 31-February 6

30 January 2022

## 25 years ago: Constitutional coup removes Ecuador president

On February 6, 1997, Ecuadorian President Abdala Bucaram was ousted by a congressional vote charging him with “mental incapacity.” In the course of the week, three different people claimed to be legitimately in charge of the South American country.

Bucaram, who referred to himself as “El Loco,” or the “crazy one,” because of his unconventional behavior on the campaign trail and in office, refused to recognize the vote. The move came after a month of street protests and a two-day general strike against austerity measures that had been imposed on orders from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Both his Vice President, Rosalia Arteaga, and Fabian Alarcon, the head of Congress, claimed the right of succession to Bucaram, who himself denounced the congressional vote as illegal.

As in most political crises in Ecuador’s modern history, the dispute was resolved through the intervention of the military and behind-the-scenes machinations of the United States embassy. The army announced that it would no longer accept Bucaram’s orders, Arteaga was installed for two days, and Alarcon then formed a new government.

Elected six months earlier on the basis of a populist campaign, Bucaram quickly adopted an extremely stringent economic austerity package, raising electricity, telephone and public transit prices while proposing the wholesale privatization of state-owned enterprises. Banks and investment firms hailed the measures, bidding up the price of government bonds.

Bucaram apparently antagonized the multinational corporations, however, with demands for bribes and the imposition of new tariff duties. This prompted an all but open demand from the US embassy for his ouster. Speaking to a group of Ecuadorian businessmen in January, US Ambassador Leslie Alexander denounced the government and declared, “Unless a dramatic attack is rapidly made on the systematic corruption now afflicting this country, it will be my duty to officially warn my fellow citizens of the

dangers of investing here.”

While Alarcon temporarily rescinded some of Bucaram’s most extreme economic policies, there was little doubt that he would quickly move to impose another restructuring plan that would meet the requirements of the IMF.

## 50 years ago: Massive blizzard devastates Iran

Beginning on February 3, 1972, the deadliest blizzard in recorded history hit Iran. An estimated 4,000 people were killed by the storm, and tens of thousands were made refugees. Hundreds of towns were completely buried in snow. Three villages—Kakkan, Kumar, and Sheklab—were totally destroyed, with no survivors.

The blizzard came after an extended period of drought that had lasted four years. But rather than being relieved by rain, the drought was followed by a weeklong snowstorm that covered the entire country. In areas typically known for their arid and warm climate, temperatures dropped to as low as -13 degrees Fahrenheit, with snow accumulating to a depth of 10 feet and even as much as 26 feet.

After a week of constant snowfall, rescue teams were deployed by helicopter to villages. But storms resumed on February 11, forcing rescue teams to evacuate. Rather than continue attempts to dig out survivors, the teams resorted to dropping containers of food and other supplies in hopes survivors could recover them.

The blizzard exposed the deep poverty and economic backwardness of Iranian society, after decades of US domination under the brutal regime of the Shah, Reza Pahlavi, which siphoned off the nation’s oil and gas wealth to international corporations and a thin layer of the Iranian elite. Lacking infrastructure to deal with a winter storm, villagers were left with no option but to shelter in their homes while the snow piled up around, trapping them inside. Surviving Iranians then faced food shortages as transportation and shipping was held back for weeks after the storm.

## 75 years ago: Top Stalinist agent arrested in the US in early stages of Cold War

On February 4, 1947 Gerhart Eisler was arrested at his New York home and taken to Ellis Island prison as an “enemy alien.” Two days later, he was brought before the House Un-American Affairs Committee (HUAC), which demanded that he answer questions about his relationship with the US Communist Party (CP). When he refused, Eisler was charged with trumped-up immigration offenses. The German citizen was alleged to be one of the leading agents of the Soviet Union in the US.

Eisler had been in Europe during the war and was detained in Nazi-occupied France. Shortly after the Nazis annulled the Stalin-Hitler pact with their 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union, Eisler escaped Europe and was granted refuge in the US. His entry, under conditions of restrictive immigration policies which would have ordinarily prevented him from admission, coincided with the beginning of a wartime alliance between the Soviet Union and the Allied imperialist powers.

The FBI closely monitored Eisler, but made no attempt to block his activities. He was a well-known political figure, having in 1919 helped to establish the Austrian Communist Party, then a genuine revolutionary organization. He was involved in significant factional conflicts in the German Communist Party in the 1920s.

Eisler aligned himself with the Stalinist bureaucracy, which usurped power from the Soviet working class and carried out a brutal campaign against those who had led the Russian Revolution, including Leon Trotsky. In the mid-1920s, Eisler was dispatched by Stalin to China, where he oversaw purges of Trotsky’s supporters from the Communist Party and assisted in imposing a class collaborationist program that led to the defeat of the 1925-27 Chinese Revolution. He was reportedly dubbed “the executioner.”

In October 1946, Louis Budenz, a former Stalinist turned right-wing anti-communist, publicly claimed that Eisler, though not a member of the American CP, “controlled” it with “directives right from the Kremlin’s mouth.”

The apparent shift in the US government’s attitude to Eisler coincided with the first stages of the Cold War, as American imperialism sought to guarantee its hegemony in war-ravaged Europe and worldwide, including through aggressive confrontation with the Soviet Union. Eisler was charged with several offenses. With his legal appeals exhausted, he fled to Britain in 1949, and then on to East Germany, in whose Stalinist regime he served as a functionary until his death two decades later.

## 100 years ago: James Joyce’s Ulysses published

On February 2, 1922, Sylvia Beach’s Shakespeare and Co. in Paris published James Joyce’s modernist novel, *Ulysses*. The book was printed in an edition of 2,000 by Maurice Darantiere in Lyon. February 2 was also the Irish novelist’s 40th birthday.

The novel is widely regarded as one of the main works of the modernist movement in literature that included a wide range of authors of several nationalities: Andre Gide in France, the Americans T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, as well as Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster and D.H. Lawrence in the United Kingdom, among others. Literary modernism often emphasized the disjunctive states of consciousness of characters. The movement was powerfully affected by the carnage of the First World War, in addition to the work of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and the irrationalism of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

*Ulysses* takes place in a single day, June 16, 1904, in Dublin, and shows the internal lives of several characters such as Leopold Bloom, Molly Bloom, and Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of Joyce’s novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). Chapters of *Ulysses* are modeled on books of the ancient Greek epic poem, Homer’s *Odyssey* (“Ulysses” is the Latin version of the name of the protagonist of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus).

Because of the novel’s sexual frankness, it encountered frequent censorship and was the cause of lawsuits. It also became a cause celebre in the defense of freedom of expression. *Ulysses* was banned in 1921 in the United States after a part of it was published in the *Little Review*, and it was not until a judge in the United States ruled that the work was not obscene, after a second trial in 1934, that the work could be circulated in an English-speaking country. It was banned in the United Kingdom until 1936, and it was not available in Ireland until the 1960s.



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