

This week in history: December 12-18

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

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25 years ago: Probe concludes that TWA Flight 800 disaster caused by mechanical failure

On December 12, 1997, the federal probe and public hearings into the crash of TWA Flight 800 concluded. Investigators for the National Transportation Safety Board, the FBI and the Federal Aviation Administration presented their conclusions. They agreed that the explosion which killed 230 people on July 17, 1996 was the consequence of a mechanical failure, not a terrorist bomb or missile.

The explosion took place in the center fuel tank of the Boeing 747 jet. While the investigators could not pinpoint the exact source of the detonation, the general causes were clear. The tank, one of three, was empty because Flight 800 did not require a maximum load of fuel for its trip from New York to Paris. The vapors in an empty tank, the residue of liquid jet fuel, were highly flammable. A spark produced a flash fire in the center tank which then spread to the fully loaded fuel tanks on either side, producing catastrophe.

The TWA Flight 800 tragedy held two important political lessons. First was the sinister purposes of the hue and cry over alleged terrorism that was taken up by government and airline spokesmen and the mass media in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. It was widely suggested that unnamed organizations linked to the Middle East had planted a bomb on board the jetliner. There were demands for a US retaliatory strike against Iran, Iraq, Libya or whatever country would be unfortunate enough to be cast as the perpetrator of the atrocity.

The second lesson was the wider social implications of the actual findings of the probe: that the deaths of 230 people was an accident, that is, the byproduct of the routine day-to-day operations of the airline industry. The implications of this finding for airline safety were far more troubling than the prospect of terrorist bombs.

According to NTSB, the possibility of a catastrophic detonation of fuel tanks was well known in the industry since the 1990 explosion of a Philippine jumbo jet. Yet there had been no effort to redesign tanks to reduce the potential for a flash fire, or to alter the practice of flying with vapor-filled tanks on shorter flights which did not require a full load of liquid fuel. The reason was because it would have been too expensive for airlines to pump an inert gas into empty fuel tanks to reduce fire risk, as was common practice for some military planes.

50 years ago: North Vietnam delegation walks out of Paris peace negotiations

On December 16, 1972, the North Vietnamese delegation to peace negotiations in Paris walked out after the US dramatically altered terms for peace made the previous October. US President Richard Nixon, acting through his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, had pledged the withdrawal US forces from Vietnam if the North agreed to recognize the South as a legitimate government, to establish a council that would oversee post-war reconstruction, and to elections in South Vietnam.

Nixon had been anxious to make significant progress in the negotiations, which had been deadlocked for years, before the US presidential election in November. Just after the initial proposal had been reached in the private talks with the North, Nixon proudly announced to the nation that “peace is at hand.” The prospect that the war was nearing an end contributed to Nixon’s landslide re-election.

However, the terms of the October proposal had not been discussed with South Vietnam’s President Nguyen Van Thieu. When Thieu learned of the agreement, which would ultimately have ousted him from power, he was outraged and refused to support the plan, instead submitting his own proposal that would entrench his government in power.

When negotiations resumed on December 14, the representatives from the North believed that Nixon and Kissinger had only proposed the October agreement as a ruse to lure the Northern government into negotiations, all the while planning to impose new conditions not previously stated. After it was clear the Southern government had no intention of honoring the October terms, the North walked away from the negotiations.

Nixon responded by threatening “grave consequences” if the North did not return to the negotiating table within 72 hours. The North refused, and Nixon ordered a bombing campaign, “Linebacker II,” to begin. The operation was the largest heavy bomber campaign since the end of the Second World War and involved hundreds of US B-52 planes. The mission was described by the US military as being a “maximum effort” campaign to destroy critical military sites and trade routes between North Vietnam and China. The 12-day bombing campaign killed at least 1,624 civilians.

Though a massive war crime, the bombing campaign had no effect on the negotiations. Nixon ultimately had to browbeat Thieu into

accepting the agreement, telling him that if he did not sign, the US would make a separate peace with the North. On January 27, 1973, the Paris Peace Accords would be signed on the basic terms of the October agreement. The agreement would only break down after US troops were withdrawn and the Southern government collapsed under the force of a military offensive by the revolutionary forces.

75 years ago: Zionist organizations escalate violent attacks in Palestine

This week in December 1947, Zionist groups carried out a series of violent attacks on Palestinian civilians and organizations. The incidents would result in a substantial increase of communal violence over the following months. They were part of a campaign by the Zionists, spanning more than two years, to pressure the imperialist powers to establish a Jewish state that would be based upon the violent subjugation of the Palestinians.

On December 12, Zionist organizations carried out a raid on the newspaper office of exiled Grand Mufti Amin al-Husseini. The Muslim leader had long been closely associated with Palestinian nationalism. The attack, which involved throwing grenades into the office, killed at least six Arabs.

The following day, on December 13, Irgun, one of the Zionist militias, hurled bombs into a crowd of civilians near the Damascus Gate in Jerusalem's Old City. A second, coordinated attack was also carried out in Jaffa. At least sixteen people were killed and almost 70 were injured.

On December 18, what became known as the Al-Khisas raid was carried out. Earlier in the day, a member of a Jewish kibbutz had been shot dead while traveling on a horse cart. The killing had been related to a personal dispute. Members of the Haganah, the largest Zionist paramilitary, falsely assumed that the murder had been a politically motivated act of violence.

That evening Haganah operatives entered the village of Al-Khisas. They attacked several houses, throwing grenades inside them indiscriminately. Twelve were killed including five children. Al-Khisas and its residents had nothing to do with the murder earlier in the day. The Upper Galilee region, where it was located, had only seen limited fighting previously, but the raid led to an increase in clashes.

The violence came just weeks after the newly established United Nations General Assembly had passed a resolution, on November 29, mandating the partition of Palestine along ethno-communalist lines and the creation of a Jewish state. Months earlier, Britain, emerging from World War II, had signified its intention to abandon its former colonial possession.

The United States, seeking to secure its global imperialist hegemony, supported the creation of the Israeli state, which was to serve as a bulwark for predatory operations against the Arab masses throughout the region. The United Nations decision emboldened groups such as Irgun, based on openly racist and fascistic conceptions that the Arabs were an inferior race. At the same time, it was met by increased resistance from the Palestinians.

100 years ago: Lenin suffers second stroke

On the morning of December 16, 1922, Vladimir Lenin, the head of the Soviet state and founder of the Bolshevik Party, suffered his second stroke, which would partly paralyze him and remove him from political activity at a critical time in the history of the Soviet Republic.

Lenin had had his first stroke in May and had only been able to fully return to work in October. In the weeks before the second stroke, he had become fully aware of the destructive and chauvinistic role that Stalin, who was increasingly the leader of the bureaucratic faction in the party, and his supporters had played in the Georgian Communist Party. Lenin had proposed a "bloc" with Leon Trotsky against the growing power of the bureaucracy inside the Communist Party and the workers' state.

Trotsky wrote in his autobiography that Lenin "planned to create a commission attached to the Central Committee for fighting bureaucracy. We were both to be members. This commission was essentially to be the lever for breaking up the Stalin faction as the backbone of the bureaucracy, and for creating such conditions in the party as would allow me to become Lenin's deputy, and, as he intended, his successor to the post of chairman of the Soviet of People's Commissars."

But this work was interrupted by the second stroke. Doctors forbade Lenin visitors, and besides medical staff, only his wife, sister, and a few secretaries were allowed to see him. Stalin was delegated by the Central Committee to ensure that Lenin remain isolated. According to historian Moshe Lewin, Stalin "was beginning to fear that the rapprochement between the two men [Lenin and Trotsky] would be accompanied by a positive campaign against himself. This is why Stalin did all in his power to strengthen still further his supervision of Lenin."

It was after December 25, 1922, that Lenin began to dictate the letters that have come to be known as his "testament" in which he urged the leadership of the Communist Party to remove Stalin from his position as General Secretary.



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