

This week in history: December 19-25

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.

18 December 2022

25 years ago: US President Clinton extends troop presence in Bosnia

On December 23, 1997, US President Bill Clinton paid a visit to troops stationed in Sarajevo, Bosnia, after indefinitely extending their stay and failing to meet two earlier deadlines for their withdrawal. The announcement of the extension, made at a White House news conference on December 18, underscored Washington's growing military interventions in every corner of the globe.

Thousands of US soldiers had been serving as part of a NATO-led force under Washington's control since the signing of the Dayton Accords of 1995. In 1997, the Americans numbered about 8,500, out of a total occupying force of more than 30,000.

Clinton first promised that US troops would be withdrawn by the end of 1996. Immediately after his reelection, he announced that they would stay through June 1998 but not longer. By 1997, the White House, with broad bipartisan support, declared it would set no date for the completion of the US mission. Clinton made the pre-Christmas visit to Bosnia to review US troops, accompanied by his 1996 rival, Republican Bob Dole, and a dozen congressmen of both parties.

The US president advanced a two-fold argument for his open-ended commitment of American military forces. On the one hand, he claimed that the NATO occupation force had made tremendous "progress," ending the bloodshed and helping to rebuild roads, schools and the political system. At the same time, he argued, this "progress" was "not yet irreversible."

The Dayton Accords promised to unify Bosnia, one of the components of the former Stalinist-ruled Yugoslavia, which had in turn split into warring Muslim, Croat and Serb-led factions. The so-called peacekeeping mission, far from succeeding in its pledge of reunification, had in fact ratified the sectarian divisions. The NATO troops enforced an armed truce, which was established when the fighting had stopped three years before.

Bosnia remained thoroughly split along ethnic lines, without even an integrated postal service. Less than 20 percent of the two million refugees from the civil war were at this point able to return to their homes. Serb, Croat and Bosnian Muslim forces continued to accumulate arms for a future round of mutual slaughter.

Within Bosnia, the NATO troops more and more conducted themselves as an occupation force. The Bosnia operation exposed the changed role of NATO since the end of the Cold War. The supposed

threat that called the imperialist military alliance into existence nearly 50 years earlier had disappeared. Far from leading to a scaling back of US military deployment, the post-Cold War period witnessed increasingly reckless use of military power by Washington.

50 years ago: East and West Germany sign "basic treaty"

On December 21, 1972 the two German governments, East Germany (German Democratic Republic) and West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany), signed a treaty designed to ease tensions between the two. The "basic treaty" or *Grundlagenvertrag* meant an official end to the state of open hostility between the two governments.

Since the end of the Second World War, Germany had been partitioned between the Federal Republic, allied with the US and other capitalist powers, and the German Democratic Republic, part of the Stalinist bloc dominated by the USSR.

The city of Berlin was also divided by the Berlin Wall constructed by the East German Stalinist government in 1961. The Wall prevented free travel by residents between the two portions of the city, dividing many families.

While the December 1972 agreement was a significant change, it did not involve establishing full diplomatic recognition and the exchange of ambassadors. Under the terms of the treaty each government would set up a "permanent mission" headed by a "permanent representative."

The treaty was the result of negotiations lasting more than two years. Its most immediate effect was the easing of border restrictions. Germans with family on the other side of the frontier were given permission to cross on a daily basis. Additionally, a joint commission was established to discuss changes to the conditions in place at the end of World War II. Municipal services in Berlin such as water and sewage and firefighting were disrupted by the artificial division.

The agreement also set the stage for East Germany to gain diplomatic recognition from several nations who had previously refused it. Over the next two years the DDR would open embassies in Australia, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands and the United States.

Both representatives, however, also registered complaints about

some of the treaty's final terms and many questions remained unresolved.

"We are under no illusions that this will be an easy way to go," the DDR spokesman told reporters, complaining that previously West Germans had violated the strict terms of their visitor passes. His Western counterpart separately observed that, "Nobody can imagine that after so many years of hostility the development of relations will take place without friction. There will be difficulties and annoyance."

The signing of the German treaty came in the context of wider efforts at "détente" by the US and Soviet governments. US President Richard Nixon and Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev met in Moscow in May 1972. Nixon had made a visit to China in early 1972 to meet with Mao Zedong.

75 years ago: Greek Stalinists proclaim Provisional Democratic Government

On December 24, 1947, the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) proclaimed the formation of a Provisional Democratic Government in the areas that it controlled along the country's mountainous northern borders.

The new entity was counterposed to the national administration in Athens. Dominated by World II fascist collaborators, monarchists and conservatives, the latter had been engaged in a civil war with partisan forces, led by the KKE, since the previous year.

From the outset of the conflict, the Greek state's campaign against the rebels had received financial and military support from Britain. In February 1947, the US government provided \$400 million to the right-wing Athens government, along with support for Turkey, in the first practical application of the Truman Doctrine, which justified American intervention anywhere in the world in the name of a struggle for "democracy."

The announcement of the Provisional Democratic Government was a maneuver by the Stalinists, who were in a deepening crisis. During the concluding stages of World War II, they had allied with bourgeois-democratic parties, in line with the Soviet bureaucracy's support for the restabilization of capitalism throughout Western and Southern Europe.

With the outbreak and development of the civil war, the KKE found itself increasingly isolated, with many of its erstwhile Greek bourgeois allies openly joining the camp of reaction. The founding of the provisional government was an attempt to revive a Popular Front-style alliance with sections of the political establishment. The government, however, was composed exclusively of KKE leaders.

The principal aim was to create an entity that would receive at least some international recognition, as a means of placing pressure on the national government and its imperialist patrons to come to the negotiating table. In the first instance, the KKE hoped that its government would be recognised by Yugoslavia and Albania, which border northern Greece and had been taken over at the end of World War II by Soviet-aligned forces.

Stalin, however, would later inform the KKE that the Soviet Union and its allied Eastern European states would refuse to grant recognition to the new entity. The Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy was fearful that recognition would intensify the conflict with the US and the other imperialist powers in the emerging Cold War. It was also

hostile to the prospect that the partisan struggle in Greece could result in a socialist revolution in that country, and revolutionary struggles elsewhere, undermining its counter-revolutionary grip.

100 years ago: Fascists massacre workers in Turin, Italy

Between December 18 and 20, 1922, fascist thugs engaged in a brutal pogrom against Communists and other workers in the city of Turin, one of the centers of working-class organization in Italy. The fascists launched an anti-Socialist pogrom after a Communist tram worker, Francesco Prato, assassinated two fascist leaders on December 18.

The Turin Massacre (Italian: *Strage di Torino*) began when fascists took reprisals by burning down the city's trade union headquarters late on the 18th. The next day right-wing forces attacked workers' clubs that belonged to the Socialist Party and destroyed the editorial offices of *L'Ordine Nuovo* ("The New Order"), founded by Antonio Gramsci and now the newspaper of the new Communist Party. The fascists took several editors prisoner and threatened to execute them.

The fascists hunted down Communists throughout the city and killed 11 workers—by some estimates, 24—as well as seriously wounding dozens more. They tortured Pietro Ferrero, the secretary of the Turin section of the Federation of Metal Workers, and tied him, still alive, to the back of a truck and dragged him to his death along Corso Vittorio Emanuele, before dumping his corpse at the foot of the statue of King Vittorio Emanuele II. An anarchist, Ferraro had opposed Italian participation in World War I and collaborated with *L'Ordine Nuovo* from 1919.

The fascist strongman, Benito Mussolini, had taken power on October 28, after the infamous "March on Rome" staged by fascist paramilitaries. Decisive sections of the Italian bourgeoisie welcomed Mussolini, whose fascist fighting squads had conducted a low-intensity civil war with the workers movement after the Socialist Party and unions prevented the Italian working class from seizing power during the "two red years" (Biennio Rosso) in 1919-20 of mass factory occupations.



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