

# This week in history: December 26-January 1

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.

**26 December 2022**

## **25 years ago: Hong Kong kills all chickens to combat deadly avian influenza strain**

On December 29, 1997, Hong Kong began to slaughter all 1.5 million chickens in its territory due to the outbreak of a deadly avian flu strain. Geese, ducks and other fowl in contact with the chickens at its 1,000 wholesalers and chicken stalls were also all killed.

Hong Kong's Agriculture Department suspended their usual daily import of 75,000 chickens from mainland China as some scientists suspected that that was where the birds were getting the flu from.

A(H5N1) influenza first appeared as a public health problem in May of the same year when a three-year-old boy died of the disease. Scientists estimated that sometime prior to 1997 the H5N1 strain began to establish itself in Asian poultry populations.

The virus at first seemed to pose little threat as it only produced mild symptoms such as ruffled feathers and reduced egg production. However, it mutated into the highly pathogenic form capable of killing birds within 48 hours and with a mortality rate close to 100 percent. The Hong Kong outbreak was the first to threaten human populations, with 18 people hospitalized and six dying. The virus has subsequently been able to mutate and "jump" species and has infected other mammals including pigs, cats, cattle and dogs.

Dr. Robert G. Webster wrote in 2006:

"The culling of all poultry in Hong Kong ended the first wave of H5N1, but the virus continued to circulate among apparently healthy ducks in the coastal provinces of China.

From 1997 to May 2005, H5N1 viruses were largely confined to Southeast Asia, but after they had infected wild birds in Qinghai Lake, China, they rapidly spread westward. The deaths of swans and geese marked H5N1's spread into Europe, India, and Africa. Infections with highly pathogenic H5N1 viruses were confirmed in poultry in Turkey in mid-October 2005, and the first confirmed human cases in Turkey occurred in early January 2006. Thus, H5N1 influenza viruses continue to emerge from the epicenter."

## **50 years ago: United States ends military draft**

On December 29, 1972, the last Americans to be drafted into compulsory military service were entered into the US Army.

Of the nearly 2.6 million Americans sent to Vietnam during the course of the war, about 25 percent, or 648,500 young men, were drafted. About 30 percent of all Americans killed, a total of 17,725, were draftees. In total, between 1964 and 1973 about 2.2 million men were drafted, the great majority never seeing service in Vietnam.

The draft, overseen by the Selective Service System, originally functioned in a manner in which the names of all eligible men were collected and called as needed to fill vacancies in the military. The called names were then passed to local draft boards, which were responsible for evaluating the draft eligibility of each individual and deciding if they were to be inducted. In this manner, by 1967, about 40,000 men were called by the draft each month.

In giving the local board the ability to choose who was drafted, the system very often allowed for youth from wealthier families, more likely to have political connections, to be exempted. In addition, college students, in that period generally from upper middle class backgrounds, were exempt from the draft. As a result, the vast majority of men drafted into military service were of working class background. Even among volunteers, the great majority were working class and poor young men who believed that by enlisting they could choose a deployment that would keep them away from Vietnam. There was also a racial disparity. Some 64 percent of eligible black men were sent to the war compared to only 31 percent of eligible white men.

The clear inequality in the draft process, as well as principled opposition to the war itself, sparked fierce protests. The burning of draft cards at anti-war protests became a common sight. By 1970 over 210,000 men were accused of draft avoidance-related crimes, about one quarter of all criminal court cases that year.

After taking office in 1969, President Nixon did not immediately follow through on campaign promises to end the draft. Instead, in December 1969, he instituted a lottery system that was supposed to be more equitable. The lottery, which was based on age, saw the youngest possible men selected first, making those aged just 19 years old the first to be taken. Draft calls began to shrink by 1971, and in 1972 Nixon suspended them entirely.

Ending the draft was part of Nixon's plan to undermine the anti-war movement, linked to his "Vietnamization" plan of gradually reducing the number of US soldiers in Southeast Asia, even as he ramped up the imperialist bloodbath through air strikes and vast weapons

shipments to the puppet regime in Saigon. Nixon's policy had its effect. With many of the anti-war protesters drawn from radical middle class layers, the elimination of the lottery removed the direct threat of being sent to the war. The political tendencies heavily composed of these layers, indifferent to the impoverished masses in Southeast Asia and hostile to the American working class, shifted sharply to the right or dissolved entirely.

### **75 years ago: US holds final trial of Nazi war criminals**

On December 30, 1947, US military prosecutors began the last of a series of 12 trials against German figures facing war crimes charges for their role in the Nazi regime. The hearings, held under the auspices of the American army, followed on but were separate from the Nuremberg Trials presided over by an International Military Tribunal.

In the final trial, the 14 defendants had all been prominent members of the Nazi military leadership during World War II, some having participated in its High Command. They were charged with crimes against peace by waging an aggressive war; war crimes by being responsible for the ill-treatment of prisoners and enemy combatants; crimes against humanity by ordering murder, torture and extermination; and participating in and organising the formulation of those crimes, i.e., conspiracy.

Of the 14, Johannes Blaskowitz, one of the most prominent defendants, was not convicted because he committed suicide during the proceedings. Blaskowitz had played a central role in the German invasion of Poland at the beginning of the war, and its last offensive against France at its conclusion.

After a trial that dragged on for almost one year owing to administrative delays, mixed verdicts were handed down. All of the defendants were acquitted of the first and fourth charges, that is crimes against peace. This was significant, given that a number of them had participated in the planning and execution of aggressive invasions, such as with Poland. Two were found not guilty of any charges.

Among those convicted of counts two and three were Walter Warlimont and Otto Wöhler. As senior army generals it was found that they had implemented decrees related to Operation Barbarossa, the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, mandating the deportation of prisoners, including civilians, to slave labor camps. Hermann Reinecke was found guilty after evidence that as head of the General Office of the Armed Forces, he had helped devise and implement the prisoner of war policy during Barbarossa that resulted in the deaths of more than 3 million captive Red Army soldiers.

Reinecke and Warlimont were the only defendants to be given life sentences. Another involved in the murder and mistreatment of Soviet POWs was given a 20-year sentence. Others were let off with time served or given relatively lenient sentences of less than ten years duration.

Even those punishments would largely be annulled. By 1954, all of the German military leaders convicted at the trial who remained alive had been freed. In 1950, US High Commissioner John McCloy had established a joint US-German review panel to reexamine the sentences. Many of them were reduced. That decision came as the right-wing West German government of Konrad Adenauer was seeking to begin rearming Germany in the context of the Cold War

against the Soviet Union.

### **100 years ago: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics created**

On December 30, 1922, the first All-Union Congress of Soviets adopted two documents founding the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the Declaration and the Treaty on the Formation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Delegates to the Congress from the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the Transcaucasian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (which included the Soviet republics of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan), the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic had endorsed the treaty and declaration on the previous day.

The USSR was an enormous step forward in creating a worldwide socialist alliance based on "reciprocal confidence and peace, national liberty and equality, the pacific co-existence and fraternal collaboration of peoples," as the USSR's constitution of 1924 expressed it.

The USSR expressed the voluntary union of all the progressive social forces of all the nations of the former Tsarist empire. The working class, peasantry, and other impoverished and oppressed layers of the formerly oppressed countries, with the Communist parties at their head, allied with the workers and peasants of the former oppressor nation, Russia, on the basis of the construction of socialism. Article 4 of the Constitution of the USSR gave the various nationalities in the union the right to secede.

Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Bolshevik party and the head of the Soviet state had insisted on the guarantee of the full equality of the nationalities in the USSR as part of his struggle—and soon Leon Trotsky's—against the privileged bureaucracy in the Soviet state and Communist Party, whose chief spokesman was Josef Stalin.

The bureaucracy had formed out of the isolation of the workers state in an imperialist encirclement and the legacy of Tsarist backwardness. Lenin, although suffering from the effects of his second stroke, by December had sought to expose the Russian chauvinism of Stalin (who was an ethnic Georgian).

In one of the letters that comprise his "testament" written on December 31 Lenin noted:

"In one way or another ... it is necessary to compensate the non-Russian for the lack of trust, for the suspicion and the insults to which the government of the 'dominant' nation subjected them in the past ...The Georgian [Stalin] who is neglectful of this aspect of the question, or who carelessly flings about accusations of 'nationalist-socialism' (whereas he himself is a real and true 'nationalist-socialist,' and even a vulgar Great-Russian bully), violates, in substance, the interests of proletarian class solidarity, for nothing holds up the development and strengthening of proletarian class solidarity so much as national injustice."



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