

This week in history: December 4-10

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25 years ago: International Space Station launched

On November 20 and December 4, 1998, the first sections of the International Space Station (ISS) were launched into orbit, beginning what was then the largest and most complex single engineering project ever undertaken.

The Zarya Control Module was carried into orbit in November enclosed in the nose fairing of a Russian Proton rocket launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. Zarya (Sunrise), was the main propulsion and command module for the space station.

The Unity module was transported into orbit on December 4 aboard the Space Shuttle Endeavour. A mechanical arm on Endeavour was used to grab Zarya and maneuver it into position. Unity was then docked and, in a series of three space walks, connected to Zarya. The mission control centers in Houston and Korolev monitored the systems over the following five months to ensure all was working according to plan.

Those were the first of 45 planned launchings aimed at completing the project in 2004 at the cost of \$40 billion. The scientific potential of the International Space Station was enormous. Its construction and assembly involved the combined efforts of space agencies and engineering firms in 16 different countries—the US, Russia, Canada, Japan, Brazil, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom.

Plans for the space station first emerged under the Reagan administration in the mid-1980s. Its Cold War origins were epitomized by its name—Space Station Freedom. Other nations were invited to participate but the USSR was excluded. The project was part of a US attempt to assert its domination in space and was linked to Reagan's announcement in 1984 of the Star Wars program, one of the main planks of the Strategic Defense Initiative.

The aim of the "Initiative" was to develop the means for completely neutralizing any Russian nuclear missile attack on the US and thereby to completely alter the existing military balance of forces. One purpose of the Star Wars program was to develop the capacity to destroy missile attacks from space using lasers.

The US lagged behind the Soviet Union in important areas of space technology and spacecraft.

Soviet efforts culminated in the construction and launching of Mir space station in 1986. The establishment of Mir gave the USSR a formidable advantage in space research. The US, even with its Skylab program during the 1970s, had been unable to gain experience in the mounting of long-term manned space flights.

However, US plans for Space Station Freedom as well as the Star Wars program changed drastically with the collapse of the USSR in 1991. The breakup and economic crisis throughout the former Soviet Union provided the US and other major powers with opportunities to buy up its scientific achievements, research establishments and scientists at bargain prices.

Faced with chronic economic difficulties, the Russian Space Agency was increasingly reliant on US government money to keep operating.

50 years ago: Sunningdale Agreement between UK and Republic of Ireland

On December 9, 1973, the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland announced an agreement signed in Sunningdale, England that would establish a new form of administering Northern Ireland. The agreement enshrined a new "power-sharing" ruling executive for the North with ministerial positions split between Brian Faulkner's Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) led by Gerry Fitt. Sunningdale also created a Council of Ireland made up of equal representatives from the new Northern Ireland executive and the Republic of Ireland.

The deal had two main purposes.

First, to oversee the economic development of partitioned Ireland—that is the exploitation of its working class—but not without "appropriate safeguards for the British Government's financial and other interests." And second, to establish a collaboration between the police forces and judicial systems of the North and South to crack down on "persons committing crimes of violence," meaning the bombings and other violence of the Troubles, the period of near civil war that began in the 1960s. The agreement did not mention the ongoing internment without trial of thousands of Irish youths in the North suspected of support for Sin Féin, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), or other banned Irish Nationalist organizations.

The Sunningdale Agreement was the first time that the government of the Irish Republic officially stated that it would accept the continued control of Northern Ireland by Britain until a majority in the North decide to unite with the Republic. Likewise in the agreement the British government claimed that if in the future the majority in the North supported a united Ireland it would not block reunification.

The news of Sunningdale was met with immense hostility by the Ulster unionist organizations and their fascist paramilitaries. Rejecting even the possibility of a united Ireland, the right-wing unionists immediately began plotting the sabotage of the agreement. The Ulster Unionist Council rejected the agreement virtually immediately after it was signed. By January 1974, when the executive officially took office, Faulkner had been ousted as leader of the UUP and replaced by an anti-Sunningdale faction, though he remained as the Chief Executive of Northern Ireland.

A state of unionist revolt took hold in Northern Ireland. An organization calling itself the Ulster Workers Council brought together the main unionist parties and loyalist paramilitaries to plan for a general strike to bring down the executive council. The strike, taking place in May 1974, crippled the economy. On May 15 Faulkner resigned, along with the other members of the executive, marking the end of Sunningdale.

Two days later two car bombs exploded in Dublin killing 33 and wounding hundreds more. It was the single bloodiest event of the Troubles. Due to political interference a complete investigation was never held. No one was ever held responsible. However, a later report concluded that the bombing was likely conducted by Ulster unionist forces aided by the British Army, with the aim of totally burying Sunningdale.

75 years ago: UN adopts Universal Declaration of Human Rights

On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the recently established United Nations (UN) adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). The document outlined a set of rights, which stated that all people possessed and had to be protected. But it outlined them as a set of affirmations, rather than anything binding on UN member states or legally enforceable.

The preamble, clearly referencing the horrors of World War II and fascism through which the world had recently past, declared:

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.

And:

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.

The rights it enumerated included “to life, liberty and the security of person,” freedom from slavery and servitude, from torture and cruel and degrading punishment and to equality before the law. A number of other civil liberties were outlined, such as freedom of the press and freedom of speech.

The document had been prepared by a UN drafting committee, led by Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of deceased former US president Franklin D. Roosevelt. Its principal authors were the jurists John Peters Humphrey from Canada and René Cassin from France. The document is notable for its universalism, enumerating rights that are not limited to a country or people but are applicable to all. And the thrust of what is outlined makes clear that it is governments that pose the greatest potential threat to the civil liberties and democratic rights of the population.

The UDHR, however, was essentially a “humanitarian” mask on the new imperialist order that the US was seeking to entrench following the war, including through the establishment of international mechanisms such as the UN. Eleanor Roosevelt and others would emphasize that the document was entirely non-binding, could not be enforced and that what it outlined was essentially aspirational.

The six countries in the Soviet bloc abstained on the resolution, as did South Africa, then under apartheid rule, and the absolutist monarchy of Saudi Arabia.

Some of the rights, such as “to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment,” inherently cannot be established under capitalism, based as it is on the exploitation of the working class. The various civil liberties outlined by the document were and have continuously been under assault by the ruling elites, presiding over a social order in its death agony.

As it adopted the declaration, the UN was already sanctioning major imperialist crimes. That included the establishment of Israel in 1948, as an imperialist beachhead in the Middle East, through the violent expulsion of the Palestinians. The US was engaged in an increasingly aggressive Cold War against the Soviet Union, which saw Washington allied with militarist and fascistic forces, from the warlordist Kuomintang in China to

Nazi collaborators in Greece. Domestically, the US government was carrying out a sweeping crackdown on civil liberties through the McCarthyite witch-hunts.

100 years ago: Brecht play banned by Leipzig authorities

On December 8, 1923, Bertolt Brecht’s full-length play, *Baal*, was performed in the Altestheater in Leipzig, Germany. The play had been enthusiastically welcomed by half the audience and condemned by the other half. It created a scandal and was banned by the city’s mayor after the first performance, who also reprimanded the play’s director, Alwin Kronacher. One reviewer, Alfred Kerr, summed up the production as: “Liquor, liquor, liquor, naked, naked, naked women.”

Brecht wrote the play when he was 20 years old in the spring of 1918, toward the close of the First World War and in the last days of the German Empire. The play concerns a dissolute young writer named Baal who puts food, alcohol and sex before his literary ambitions.

As one critic has noted, “Baal urges positive acceptance of the transitoriness, ugliness and so-called evil of life as sources of pleasure, amusement and heightened awareness. Brecht’s presentation of Baal’s life aims to unhinge our normal moral judgements.”

The play’s rehearsals had, in fact, been chaotic and often drunken. Brecht intruded on the director’s role, and sought to lecture the actors, although, as some confessed, he mesmerized them.

By 1923, nevertheless, the anti-establishment tone of the play struck a chord, both negative and positive. Brecht’s first stage production, *In the Jungle of Cities*, had been attacked by Nazis in Munich in May, and there was a general uproar in the theater world about the censorship of *Baal* in Leipzig.



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