

This week in history: December 11-17

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: Bill Clinton orders bombing of Iraq, killing hundreds of civilians

On December 16, 1998, US President Bill Clinton, joined by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, launched a four-day bombing attack on Iraq. The barrage of 400 cruise missiles and 650 sorties against a defenseless country took a terrible toll. Most of the casualties were civilians. The death toll was officially unknown, but estimates ranged between 200 and 1,200.

Washington's eagerness to bomb Iraq was based on the assumption that it could not retaliate, and US air power would operate with impunity. This was taken for granted as well by the media, which viewed war against Iraq as an opportunity to showcase American firepower on human targets. The Pentagon had advised Clinton that the "rolling" attacks would kill possibly 10,000 Iraqis. "That was the medium case scenario," one administration spokesman told the press in November.

Clinton had an evident political motive in launching the attack on Iraq. The four days of bombing were the four days leading up to the impeachment vote by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives. This was an attempt to oust a twice-elected president on the basis of a concocted sex scandal. But rather than tell the truth to the American people about this right-wing political coup, Clinton sought to appease the right wing and wrap himself in the mantle of "Commander-in-Chief" by slaughtering defenseless Iraqis.

The carnage inflicted by American and British hi-tech weapons of mass destruction compounded the death and suffering caused by the previous eight years of crippling economic sanctions. The previous October, Denis Halliday, head of UN humanitarian operations in Iraq, resigned his post in protest over the refusal of the UN, under pressure from Washington, to lift the sanctions. According to the UN's own figures, the sanctions were responsible for an increase of 90,000 deaths per year. Various reports estimate that between 500,000 and 1,000,000 Iraqi children had died since 1990 as a result of the sanctions.

After Baghdad complied with the US demand to rescind its ban on UN weapons inspections, the Clinton administration, together with the Labour government in Britain, initially rejected Iraq's letter, searching for any pretext to launch their assault. In November, details had emerged of the scale of the planned assault, which had been called off several times.

The claim that the US was motivated by the threat of "weapons of mass destruction" was belied by its own international policies. Just two weeks prior, the White House announced it was lifting most of the mild sanctions it had imposed on Pakistan and India after those countries exploded nuclear devices earlier in 1998. The standard that the US imposed on Iraq for ending the sanctions could not even be met. Through the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM), which functioned as a virtual arm of the US State Department and the CIA, Washington insisted that Iraq prove a negative: the nonexistence of the capability (or the potential for developing the capability) to build so-called weapons of mass destruction.

50 years ago: British Tory government imposes three-day work week

On December 13, 1973, British Prime Minister Edward Heath announced that starting January 1 the work week would be reduced to just three days, with a corresponding loss in pay for the lost hours. The decision would essentially mean a cut in pay of 40 percent for over 13 million workers.

The UK was in the midst of a historic energy and inflationary economic crisis. Beginning with the global currency shocks that came with the ending of the Bretton Woods system of dollar-gold convertibility, the UK had seen prices skyrocket. From 1971 through 1973, inflation in Britain hit about 9 percent per year before leaping to 16 percent in 1974 and peaking at over 24 percent in 1975.

Workers, spearheaded by the coal miners, launched major strikes to keep their wages up with inflation. In January and February of 1972, British miners carried out a strike involving over 250,000 workers that froze the economy and impacted the distribution of electricity throughout the country. Preparing for a new strike that would begin in February 1974, miners had already been slowing coal production to keep the government from stockpiling supplies to undermine the strike.

In his address announcing the cut to the work week, Heath stated, "Though the electricity supply industry started the winter with good stocks of coal, those stocks are now having to be run down at the rate of about one million tons a week." After admitting that the combined actions of rail and energy workers were paralyzing industry he added,

“In this situation the government has a responsibility to take the measures necessary to safeguard the electrical system from major disruption, to prevent essential services from being placed in jeopardy, and to insure the maintenance of a reasonable level of industrial activity.”

The attack on their pay only further galvanized workers against the conservative Heath government. At the end of January 1974 miners voted by over 80 percent to launch another nationwide strike against Heath and the three-day cuts.

The strike would again cause major shutdowns and energy blackouts. As a state of total rebellion emerged Heath was forced to call an election for February 28, 1974. As Heath put it himself, the main issue in the strike came down to “Who governs Britain?”

Heath would be ousted in the election, bringing the Labour Party, led by Harold Wilson, back to power. Compelled by the revolutionary potential of the miners’ strike, the new Labour government immediately approved the workers’ demands for a 35 percent wage increase.

The 1974 strike and election would be the political end of Heath. One year later he was replaced as the leader of the Conservative Party by Margaret Thatcher.

75 years ago: British soldiers massacre 24 during Malayan Emergency

On December 12, 1948, British soldiers rounded up and summarily executed 24 unarmed men, in what became known as the Batang Kali Massacre, after the northern town where the killings were perpetrated. The murders occurred during the Malayan Emergency, a period of effective martial law declared the year before that was imposed to shore up British colonial rule and suppress a popular insurgency.

The killings came to symbolize the brutality and terror of this period. It was carried by Scots Guards, one of the five Foot Guards regiments of the British Army, tracing its origins to protection of the British Royals as early as the 17th century. In Malaya, the Scots Guards were responsible for various menacing patrols and were often composed of British citizens with ties to the major plantations.

In the massacre, the guards surrounded a rubber plantation at Sungai Rimoh near Batang Kali, rounding up all of the civilians there. The men were separated from the women and children, supposedly for interrogation. But they were lined up and executed with machine-gun fire. The only male survivor had fainted, escaping because the guards thought he was dead. Several women and children also bore witness to what had occurred.

Decades later, one of those child survivors recalled that she and her mother had been forced to retrieve and clean the corpse of her father a week after his murder. “The bodies were covered in flies. They were bloated and swollen, lying in groups of three or four. Finally I found my father. He had been shot in the chest. That day, December 12th, had been my birthday. My mother cried almost every day.”

The massacre was the subject of a decades-long cover-up. In its immediate aftermath, the British introduced a new regulation permitting the use of lethal fire against those who attempted to escape arrest, in a clear attempt to retrospectively legitimize the murders. In the 1970s, accounts of the killings were published, but there was no attempt to hold the immediate perpetrators to account.

In a last push for justice, survivors and relatives of the dead personally petitioned Queen Elizabeth II in 1993, 2004 and 2008, asking her to order an official inquiry. They were rebuffed and their actions in the British courts were similarly unsuccessful. No one was ever arrested, much less charged, and the British government never acknowledged any responsibility. The period of “emergency” rule lasted until 1960.

100 years ago: Trotsky publishes letter against bureaucratism in Pravda

On December 11, 1923, Trotsky published the document that has come to be known as “The New Course (A Letter to Party Meetings)” in *Pravda*. Trotsky and co-thinkers in the Russian Communist Party had already begun the struggle against the Soviet bureaucracy in the state and Communist Party apparatus in October, in important documents such as the “Declaration of the 46” and Trotsky’s letter of October 23 to the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission. But these had been confined to leading groupings inside the party. The “Letter to Party Meetings” was the first public attack by Trotsky against the privileged bureaucracy whose main representative was Joseph Stalin.

The letter read in part: “The party press has recently presented not a few examples that characterize the already ossified bureaucratic degeneration of party morals and relations. The answer to the first word of criticism is: ‘Let’s have your membership card!’ ... The renovation of the party apparatus naturally within the clear cut framework of the statutes must aim at replacing the mummified bureaucrats with fresh elements closely linked with the life of the collectivity or capable of assuring such a link. And before anything else, the leading posts must be cleared of those who, at the first word of criticism, of objection, or of protest, brandish the thunderbolts of penalties before the critic.”

The letter had been written on December 8, but the ruling “troika” of Stalin, Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev had sought to delay its publication. The “troika” was unable to respond to Trotsky directly and it was at this point, as the Marxist historian Vadim Rogovin notes, “they decided to change the topic of discussion, replacing an examination of Trotsky’s arguments with hints at and references to his pre-revolutionary disagreements with Lenin; Trotsky’s position in the current discussion was supposedly a repetition of those disagreements.”

This response was to have enormous repercussions in the fight of the Left Opposition against Stalinism, since it meant that Trotsky and his co-thinkers would now have to contest a revisionist pseudo-history that would ultimately lead to sweeping historical falsifications about Trotsky’s role in the Russian Revolution and his relations with Lenin.



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