

This week in history: December 25-31

27 December 2023

25 years ago: Tamil socialist barred from entering Australia

On December 30, 1998, the Australian High Commission in Sri Lanka rejected the application of Tamil socialist Rajendiram Sutharsan for a temporary visa to attend the summer educational school of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) of Australia.

The decision to bar Sutharsan from entering Australia marked the first time that delegates from Sri Lanka were prevented from attending educational seminars and conferences organized by the Australian SEP. It had far-reaching implications for the democratic rights of workers and their organizations to engage in political discussion in Australia and internationally.

Sutharsan was one of four members of the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka who had been arrested and detained for almost two months in 1998 by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The four Tamil socialists had been held in the Killinochchi area in the north of the country. Throughout their detention, the LTTE leadership, notorious for its brutal treatment of political opponents, refused to acknowledge the arrests, or provide information about the whereabouts and health of the SEP members. The LTTE only released them after an extensive international campaign for their freedom waged by the SEP and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI).

The SEP in Australia then invited Sutharsan to attend its educational school so he could thank his co-thinkers for their support and speak about his experiences, as well as the more general political issues facing the working class in Sri Lanka. The SEP of Sri Lanka consistently opposed the government's long-running war against the Tamil people in the north and east of the island. At the same time it advanced a working class and internationalist perspective for uniting the workers and oppressed masses, Sinhalese and Tamil, in opposition to the LTTE's separatist policies.

As Sutharsan was preparing to leave for Australia, the Australian High Commission in Colombo turned down his visa application. A written decision prepared by Jan Cleland, second secretary (immigration), cited as the sole basis for the rejection of Sutharsan's visa his alleged failure to prove that the intended visit was genuine.

"As you have provided little information with regard to the purpose of your visit and also shown few commitments to support your return to Sri Lanka, I am not satisfied that you meet this requirement," she wrote.

After a lengthy telephone discussion with SEP Assistant National Secretary Linda Tenenbaum in Sydney, Cleland finally agreed to review, but not reverse, her decision. But she demanded that details be sent concerning Sutharsan's background and association with the party, the SEP's provision of an interpreter during his stay, and evidence of commitments to convince the High Commission that Sutharsan would return to Sri Lanka.

Twenty-five pages of documents were faxed to the Australian consular authorities in Colombo, detailing Sutharsan's arrest by the LTTE and the broad support won by the international campaign for his release from human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, as well as parliamentarians, trade union officials and numerous individuals in Sri Lanka and around the world. In spite of this,

the High Commission refused to reverse the decision.

50 years ago: Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* is published

On December 28, 1973, *The Gulag Archipelago* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn was published for the first time in France. The book documented and made new revelations about the Stalinist terror and prison system in the Soviet Union. It quickly was translated into many languages and became one of the best-selling books of the period, with as many as 30 million copies sold.

While the book contains important historical information, particularly in relation to the Moscow trials and the experiences of individuals imprisoned and exiled by Stalin, it embraces the anti-communist lie that the Stalinist terror was the natural result of Marxism. Among its faults the book largely ignores the struggle of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition against Stalin.

Solzhenitsyn was indeed himself a victim of the Stalinist purges. While serving as an artillery commander in the Red Army during the Second World War, Solzhenitsyn was imprisoned in 1945 for writing letters to a friend that were critical of Stalin, despite having been decorated with the Order of the Red Star only months prior.

For his "crime" Solzhenitsyn was sentenced to serve eight years in different labor camps. Then once the term had been served in 1953, he was ordered into exile for life to Birlik in southern Kazakhstan. He would spend nearly a decade imprisoned and in exile. These years would be where he drew inspiration for his writing.

After Stalin's death in 1953 Solzhenitsyn was released from exile and exonerated by Nikita Khrushchev's new regime. Khrushchev, characterized by his "Secret Speech," was attempting to distance his government from Stalin's crimes while maintaining the bureaucratic apparatus and nationalist political orientation of the Soviet Union.

This included the release of many writers and artists like Solzhenitsyn who were being held as political prisoners. Only after his release was Solzhenitsyn able to begin serious writing.

In 1962, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, a novel depicting life in one of Stalin's labor camps, was published and widely read. This book helped make Solzhenitsyn among the most well-known writers in the Soviet Union.

However, Solzhenitsyn found himself in the good graces of the Soviet bureaucracy only temporarily. Major events like the Hungarian Revolution, the Prague Spring, and a growing "dissident" movement of Soviet writers and artists in the 1960s and 70s prompted the Stalinist apparatus to begin a new wave of crackdowns.

From the years 1965 until *The Gulag Archipelago* was published, Solzhenitsyn was hounded by the KGB, had his works and several drafts of the book confiscated, and was expelled from the Union of Writers. For it to be published at all, drafts of the book had to be smuggled out of the

Soviet Union. Two months after the book was published, in February 1974, Solzhenitsyn was forced to leave the Soviet Union and was stripped of his citizenship. He would be granted asylum in West Germany before moving to the United States shortly after.

Precisely because of the right-wing and anti-communist conclusions that Solzhenitsyn draws in *The Gulag Archipelago* he was accepted with open arms by the US ruling circles and academia. The imperialist intelligentsia sought to make Solzhenitsyn the face of the Soviet dissident movement in the west, to create a myth that the Soviet population rejected the Russian Revolution and was clamoring for the establishment of a capitalist regime. Left-wing opponents of Stalinism, such as the writer Varlam Shalamov, himself a former Left Oppositionist, and later the Marxist historian Vadim Rogovin, received no such attention and favorable treatment.

Solzhenitsyn was allowed to return to Russia in 1990 just before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Upon his return he began hosting a television talk show characterized by fascistic rants condemning the Russian Revolution and calling for a strong-man style presidency. In increasingly reactionary writings, he advocated monarchism, Russian nationalism, and the Russian Orthodox Church, while mixing in criticism of “Western decadence.” His two-volume history of Russian-Jewish relations, *Two Hundred Years Together*, had strongly antisemitic motifs. He died in 2008 a vocal supporter of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

75 years ago: Israel launches offensive against Egypt in the Sinai

On December 25, 1948, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) launched an attack on the Egyptian military in the area of the Sinai desert. The offensive, part of the Arab-Israeli war, was notable for pointing to the expansionist character of the newly-formed Zionist state.

The Israeli attack was part of a broader maneuver known as Operation Horev. The aim was to trap Egyptian forces in the Gaza Strip, cutting them off from supply lines and thereby inflicting a rout.

In the days leading up to the offensive, Israel had secured the Beersheba–’Auja road from Egyptian forces. That was the main artery leading to the city of Beersheba, dubbed the capital of the Negev desert and a key southern Israeli city. The Southern Command of the IDF, under the control of Yitzhak Rabin, later an Israeli prime minister, responded to the tactical victory by seeking to press the advantage.

Whether the government of Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had given permission for the incursion into Egypt itself remains debated. Nevertheless, on December 25, the IDF moved into the Sinai desert, with heavy fighting ensuing.

Several Israeli raids captured key outpost towns, isolating the Egyptian forces. The Egyptian expeditionary troops in the Gaza Strip were effectively encircled.

The battle resulted in a tactical Israeli victory. Ben-Gurion called off the offensive after it became clear that the ability of the Egyptians to conduct further operations within what would become Israel was finished. The Egyptian government expressed its willingness to enter into negotiations for an armistice, which would be concluded early in the new year.

The battle thus played a significant role in consolidating the Israeli state, proclaimed earlier in 1948 with the backing of the United Nations, Britain and the US. The establishment of the Zionist regime was viewed by the imperialist powers as an opportunity to develop a beachhead in the Middle East, directed against Arab nationalist regimes and the Arab masses.

In addition to fighting a coalition of Arab states, the IDF continued a program of ethnic cleansing against the Palestinians that had been initiated, even before the formal founding of Israel, by Zionist paramilitaries which were then integrated into the Israel Defence Forces.

100 years ago: Leftist attempts to assassinate Japanese Crown Prince Hirohito

On December 27, 1923 a 24-year old leftist, Daisuke Nanba, fired a pistol at a carriage carrying Crown Prince and Regent Hirohito to the opening session of the Diet. Hirohito was not injured, although a companion was. The event has come to be known as the Toranomon Incident after the street intersection between the palace and the imperial Diet building where the shooting occurred.

Nanba was the son of a Diet member and was a sympathizer of the Communist Party. He had pursued a traditional upper-class career, planning to become an officer in the army, until 1919 when lectures on politics at Waseda University in Tokyo radicalized him.

In 1921 he was apparently affected by a well-known essay on the Russian Revolution by the Marxist professor Hajime Kawakami, and broke with his family background. The Kanto Massacre, the series of government sponsored pogroms against Koreans and summary executions of leftists by the police and military in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake of September 1, 1923, motivated Nanba to attempt the assassination of the Crown Prince. Another contributing factor was his anger at the 1911 state execution of K?toku Sh?sui, one of the founders of Japanese anarchism and a prominent anti-war activist.

Hirohito, the crown prince, was head of state for all practical purposes, since his father, the Emperor Yoshihito, was suffering from a serious mental illness and played no role in government in the final years of his life. He died in 1926 and Hirohito then assumed the throne.

Nanba was brutally beaten by the police, whom he informed that he had been attempting to start a social revolution. Leftist party and newspaper offices were closed and the government forbade newspapers to publish any information on the incident until it had released an official statement.

The Toranomon Incident forced the immediate resignation of Prime Minister Yamamoto Gonnohy?e and his cabinet, as well as of Nanba’s father, the member of the Diet. Nanba was declared insane in the press, but at his trial, he argued that he was fully responsible for his actions. He was executed on November 15, 1924.

The Japanese Diet used the Toranomon Incident as partial justification for the anticommunist Peace Preservation Law of 1925.



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