

This week in history: December 30-January 5

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

29 December 2024

25 years ago: Federal judge rules New York state must pay former Attica prisoners \$8 million

On January 4, 2000, a US federal judge ruled that the state of New York must pay \$8 million to 1,281 former Attica prisoners tortured and beaten during the September 1971 assault by police and state troopers. After 25 years of litigation in the class action suit, however, New York authorities said only around 400 former Attica prisoners will be compensated. Another 400 individuals had died and the remaining individuals had not been located. The survivors of this heinous act of government barbarism had the choice to accept the settlement or fight for more compensation through the court system.

The settlement itself disclosed the hypocritical sham of the class-based American “justice” system, allowing the ruling class to wash their bloody hands of any guilt, pennies on the dollar. Originally asking for \$2.8 billion, the 400 claimants were now awarded a meager sum of only \$20,000 each. Their lawyers were expected to be paid around \$4 million. None of the prison officials, state troopers, or politicians such as the late Governor Nelson Rockefeller had to admit any guilt for killing and torturing prisoners.

Quoted in the *New York Times*, 66-year-old Frank B.B. Smith, who was attacked and burned, narrowly escaping castration and death, said, “Anybody can feel bad about what happened at Attica, but there’s no amount of money that can compensate.” Smith died at the age of 71, in 2004.

The Attica prison uprising in 1971 shocked the world and exposed the inhumane and rotten conditions prisoners endured under the capitalist prison system in the United States. After prisoners seized the compound for five days demanding basic democratic, human and constitutional rights, Governor Rockefeller ordered state troopers to attack in what can be described as nothing short of a bloody massacre. A total of 43 people died, mostly by the fusillade of police bullets.

The lasting impact of this rebellion by the most oppressed sections of society was that on the eve of the 21st century, New York authorities took preemptive measures to prepare for possible prison strikes and protests, in response to the repressive prison atmosphere and the legacy of the Attica prison rebellion. Prisoners were passing leaflets displaying demands headlined with the words “Wake Up.” The protest revolved around refusing to work their prison jobs until the clampdown on parole for long-term prisoners was stopped. Prison officials put Sing Sing prison and its 1,800 inmates on lockdown.

Other prisoners from Green Haven Prison were transferred to compounds hundreds miles away from family members as a form of punishment for possessing protest leaflets.

Top officials in Nixon administration guilty in Watergate trial

On January 1, 1975, four top officials in the administration of former president Richard Nixon were found guilty of charges related to the coverup of the Watergate break-in. The former officials were Attorney General John Mitchell, Assistant Attorney General Robert Mardian, White House Chief of staff Bob Haldeman, and Domestic Affairs Advisor John Ehrlichman.

The jury found that the four men were guilty of conspiracy, obstruction of justice and perjury. A fifth defendant in the case, Kenneth Wells Parkinson, a lawyer hired by the Nixon re-election committee after the break-in had already taken place, was acquitted of all charges.

While the four officials were found guilty, the trial marked the effective end to any further exposure of the political crimes spearheaded by President Richard Nixon and his top aides. Next to Nixon himself, Mitchell, Haldeman and Ehrlichman were the most notorious in lying to Congress and the public during the investigations into the Watergate break-in.

Nixon was given a sweeping pardon by his successor President Gerald Ford in September 1974 to prevent him from ever being put on trial. And while Nixon’s closest political cronies were purged, the key national-security officials in the administration, most notably Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Secretary of Defense (and former CIA director) James Schlesinger, went untouched.

Evidence presented in the trial included testimony from other former Nixon administration officials and the now famous White House tape recordings. While president, Nixon had hoped to suppress these tapes from the public but was forced to turn them over to Congress by order of the Supreme Court. His resignation followed shortly after the release of the tapes.

The trial showed that Mitchell and the others knew of the Watergate plot and the “White House Plumbers” unit that carried out the break-in at the Democratic National Convention and other illegal spying operations, that they worked to cover-up the White House’s

leadership of the plot, and that they lied to congress during the official investigation.

Notably, the defendants requested that Nixon be called upon to testify in the trial. However, the judge, John J. Sirica intervened to block the former president from taking the stand on the claim that it would be of “limited value.”

While the charges could have landed the men in prison for up to 25 years, they were given the most lenient sentences possible. Mitchell would serve the longest sentence, 19 months in a minimum-security prison, while Haldeman and Ehrlichman served 18 months. Mardian appealed his conviction in 1976 and his charges were dismissed.

75 years ago: Soviet Khabarovsk trials conclude with sentencing of Japanese war criminals

On December 31, 1949, the Soviet Union’s Khabarovsk war crimes trial concluded with the sentencing of 12 defendants from Unit 731 and Unit 100, biological weapons units of the Japanese Kwantung Army operating during World War II.

Held in the far eastern Russian city of Khabarovsk, the trial began on December 25 and brought charges of “criminal experiments on human beings,” “employment of bacteriological weapons in the war against China” and “preparations for bacteriological warfare against the Soviet Union” against Japanese military officers and medical staff. The sentences of the defendants ranged from two to 25 years in a Siberian labor camp.

There is a wealth of evidence to substantiate the charges of war crimes against the defendants, which more broadly point to the brutality of Japanese imperialism throughout World War II. Unit 731 in particular, operating from Manchuria during the war, conducted dangerous experiments on humans without their consent, and used the research gained from such experiments to launch biological and chemical attacks on civilian populations.

The testimonies provided during the six-day trial were significant in further exposing Imperial Japan's criminal activities during World War II. Lieutenant General Kajitsuka Ryuji, the former Chief of Medical Administration of the Kwantung Army, stated: “I was well informed ... that Detachment 731 experimented continuously on human beings with the object of discovering the most effective types of bacteriological weapons. I knew that Detachment 731 employed bacteriological weapons in 1941-42 against the Chinese Army and Chinese civilians.”

There were political calculations behind the holding of the trial by the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy. It occurred under conditions where the World War II alliance between the Soviet Union and the “democratic” imperialist powers, including the US and Britain, had completely broken down. In its place, Washington had launched a Cold War, aimed at crippling Soviet influence and establishing untrammled dominance in Europe and globally. As part of that program, the US was developing a new Japanese regime that included former war criminals. In China, the 1949 revolution had resulted in the defeat of the right-wing Kuomintang and the coming to power of the Chinese Communist Party.

In 1956, those who were still serving their sentences were released and allowed to return to Japan.

100 years: Stalin prepares to bring slanders against Trotsky to a crescendo

On January 4, 1925, the *New York Times* published an article about the upcoming Plenum of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party to be held on January 17-20 1925 in Moscow. The unsigned article from wire services predicted, “among the questions of internal and international policy of Soviet Russia which will come up for discussion at that conference the Trotsky controversy is considered the most important.”

The “Trotsky controversy” refers to the months of nonstop slander against Trotsky by the Stalinist apparatus in the party and state bureaucracy occasioned by the publication of his famous essay “Lessons of October.” Writing in the wake of the failure of the German revolution in October 1923, Trotsky had examined the conflicts in the leadership of the Bolshevik party over the question of armed insurrection in the weeks before the October Revolution in Russia in 1917.

Trotsky singled out the vacillating nature of the most “conservative” section of the Bolsheviks, represented by Gregori Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev, two principal allies of Stalin in 1924. Far from a subjective attack on the two leaders, Trotsky sought to uncover the objective character of class pressures on the leadership of a revolutionary party when it takes a major leap in the class struggle, the seizure of power by the working class.

The article was a blow to the bona fides of the Stalinist apparatus and provoked a firestorm of slander and the beginnings of the entrenched historical falsification that would become the hallmark of Stalinism within a few years. The campaign established two key fabrications: it magnified the pre-war disagreements between Trotsky and Lenin and diminished the central role that Trotsky played in the insurrection of October 25, 1917.

In his autobiography, Trotsky later described its impact: “The masses were stunned, puzzled, and overawed. Thanks to its sheer bulk, the campaign of ignorant lies took on political potency. It overwhelmed, oppressed, and demoralized the masses.”

For tactical reasons, Trotsky and the Left Opposition in the Communist Party, which he led, had held back from responding to the campaign. By December, Trotsky in fact was unable to respond because of serious illness, which prevented him from attending the plenum at all.

While calls at the plenum were made to expel Trotsky from the party or remove him from the Central Committee, Stalin felt that such actions were premature and ran the danger of arousing the Soviet working class. The plenum contented itself with removing Trotsky, the founder of the Red Army, from his posts of People’s Commissar of Army and Fleet Affairs and Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council.



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