

This week in history: December 22-28

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

21 December 2025

25 years ago: Fire kills over 300 people in China

On the evening of December 25, 2000, a devastating fire ripped through the four-story Dongdu Building in Luoyang, Henan province, killing more than 300 people. The blaze began at approximately 9:35 p.m. in a basement where construction workers were welding. According to reports, the work was carried out without proper safety procedures or licenses. Flammable materials ignited and quickly consumed most of the building.

Carbon-monoxide poisoning was the primary cause of death. Witnesses said the toxic smoke spread rapidly, reaching the top floor in seconds. The suffocating fumes overwhelmed the patrons of an unlicensed nightclub that was holding a Christmas Eve disco, and within a few minutes the entire building was filled. Fire crews were eventually able to extinguish the blaze at about 12:45 a.m. with enormous difficulty, but the scene left was catastrophic: hundreds of bodies and only a small number of survivors. Many of the victims on the top floor showed signs of dying by inhaling toxic fumes; others managed narrow escapes by jumping to air cushions below or by staying near windows for fresh air until rescuers finally arrived.

The Dongdu Building had long been known as a hazard. It had been listed among the 40 most dangerous buildings in Henan province, had repeatedly failed fire-safety inspections over the previous three years, and had been inspected just a week before the disaster receiving another abysmal safety record. Despite these warnings, required safety upgrades such as sprinklers and alarm systems had not been installed, and authorities refused to condemn the building. Emergency exits were inadequate or inaccessible: the roof exit from the disco was reportedly locked, other exits were blocked by construction materials or merchandise, and small windows prevented effective escape. Street stalls, parked equipment and other obstructions also hampered fire engines and emergency response, allowing the fire time to spew its deadly smoke.

This tragedy was not a mere “accident,” nor did it happen in isolation, apart from social and economic conditions. It was a product of changes that followed the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party’s embrace of market reforms and its restoration of capitalism in the preceding decades: a rapid, profit-driven development of urban areas, lax enforcement and curtailing of safety and labor regulations, and the transformation of workplaces and public spaces into sites of private profit. Luoyang’s population had surged as rural migrants arrived

seeking employment, yet urban planning and regulatory oversight failed to keep pace. The result was a climate in which business owners and developers operated with minimal accountability, prioritizing profit over basic safety standards. These socioeconomic preferences turned the Dongdu Building into a scene of shock, horror and working class anger.

50 years ago: First congress of the Cuban Communist Party held in Havana

On December 22, 1975, the First Congress of the ruling Communist Party of Cuba (PCC) concluded in Havana. The five-day event, attended by over 3,100 delegates, marked the formal “institutionalization” of the Cuban Revolution, moving it from rule by Fidel Castro’s revolutionary decrees to a Stalinist-style state apparatus.

The centerpiece of the congress was an 11-hour report delivered by Castro, the party’s First Secretary. While the speech celebrated the revolution’s survival against US-backed subversion and blockade, it was also forced to address deep-seated economic failures. Castro admitted the ambitious 10-million-ton sugar harvest—a project that had drained the country’s resources between 1965 and 1970—had failed. He declared “reality proved stronger than our plans,” announcing a retreat from economic diversification and industrial development back to sugar exports dependent on subsidies from the Soviet Union.

The proceedings formalized Cuba’s integration into the Soviet bloc’s economic and political orbit. Castro expressed gratitude to the Kremlin for paying inflated prices for Cuban sugar and continuing to supply raw materials and fuel despite Havana’s shortfalls. Simultaneously, the congress signaled a desire for “normalization” with the United States. Castro indicated readiness to negotiate with Washington should its blockade be relaxed, while also praising Western capitalist leaders like former French President Charles de Gaulle and Britain’s Labour government for their “openness” to economic ties.

The overture to Washington came despite the fact that the US government had repeatedly attempted to assassinate Castro—plots that had recently become public through congressional investigations into the CIA. Castro acknowledged these revelations but did not alter his

willingness to make a deal with imperialism.

The congress approved a draft of a new constitution to be implemented in 1976. It legally established the PCC as the “superior guiding force” of society and created a new National Assembly of People’s Power. It also consolidated the Castro family’s domination of the state, with Raúl Castro, Fidel’s brother, confirmed as Second Secretary and head of the Revolutionary Armed Forces.

The 1975 congress was labeled the “First” because it did not continue the lineage of the original Communist Party of Cuba, founded in 1925 by Julio Antonio Mella and Carlos Baliño. That earlier organization, rooted in the urban working class and peasantry, had transformed into the Popular Socialist Party (PSP) in 1944, functioning largely as a Stalinist appendage of Moscow. The party that held the 1975 congress was formally a new entity, created in 1965 from the merger of Castro’s 26th of July Movement, the student-led Revolutionary Directorate, and the PSP. This merger consolidated petty-bourgeois nationalist tendencies, in alliance with Stalinism, over the independent interests of the working class.

The “socialism” proclaimed in Havana in 1975 was a fiction, disguising the actual nature of the Castro regime, which lacked any genuine connection to the working class. Despite the hosannas of the Pabloites and other renegades from Trotskyism, the Cuban Revolution had not produced a workers’ state. Nationalization was imposed from above by the PCC, not through soviets or workers’ self-rule. The working class did not exercise political power. On the contrary, the police-state regime suppressed all independent working class activity, outlawed Trotskyism, and had actually welcomed Trotsky’s assassin, Ramon Mercader, when he was released from a Mexican prison in 1960.

75 years ago: US pledges to finance France’s colonial war in Vietnam

On December 23, 1950, the United States signed the Pentalateral agreement, committing itself to supporting the French war against the Viet Minh. The other signatories of the Pentalateral agreement were France, the kingdoms of Laos and Cambodia, and the State of Vietnam, the French-backed semi-colonial regime established in 1949. The United States agreed in this pact to supply France with roughly \$1.2 billion worth of military equipment over a period of four years.

The French war against the Viet Minh—the nationalist front of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) led by Ho Chi Minh—was an imperialist war of repression in which France attempted to reimpose control over Vietnam after World War II. The war began in 1948 with the occupation by French troops of the formerly French colony of Indochina.

The pact was signed amid a period of French escalation of the war, marked by the appointment of General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny as commander-in-chief of the French forces. Only one day prior to the agreement being signed, the general had ordered the French Air Force to bomb a group of Viet Minh fighters with napalm, in the first use of the deadly compound in Vietnam. Scorched-earth tactics, including the burning of crops, would also be overseen by de Lattre during his command.

By supplying vast quantities of US equipment to France and its puppet state in the region, Washington obtained a legal and practical lever for continued presence in Indochina after the

withdrawal of French forces in 1954. Much of the material was to revert to US title “at the conclusion of hostilities.”

During the initial stages of the Vietnam War in early 1960s, the Pentalateral agreement remained a significant document outlining the legal status of US material and personnel in Vietnam, with Washington using the retrieval of its equipment as a pretext for deploying troops.

100 years: Communist Party of India holds founding congress

On December 25, 1925, the founding congress of the Communist Party of India (CPI) opened in the industrial center of Cawnpore in the British Raj, now the city of Kanpur in the state of Uttar Pradesh in northern India.

The number of delegates present differs according to various accounts but lies somewhere in the range of 300 to 500, among them representatives from Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and Lahore. Many, according to British intelligence reports, were workers and peasants. Delegates represented several local Marxist currents from British-ruled India, the territory that now comprises Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

The new CPI adopted the basic Bolshevik understanding that only a proletarian vanguard party, independent of bourgeois nationalism, could lead working class emancipation. Yet the party began its life in a very hostile environment: legal repression by colonial authorities, weak industrial base relative to population, and intense competition from bourgeois-nationalist currents. To this must be added the political dangers posed by the Stalinist degeneration of the Third International, which would accelerate over the next few years.

The congress was convened by Satyabhakta (Chakhan La), who had been inspired by the Russian revolution and had corresponded with leading British communists, and had broken with Gandhism—though not Hinduism—in 1920.

The congress rejected Satyabhakta’s proposals to constitute the new party under his conception of “National Bolshevism,” independent of international influence, and instead voted to apply for membership in the Communist International.

The program adopted by the congress included the abolition of landlordism without compensation to the landlords, nationalization of all key industries and transport by the state, universal suffrage, compulsory and free primary education for all.

Significantly, the congress called for complete national independence from British imperialism, a position not yet taken by the bourgeois Indian National Congress, which was instead calling for dominion status within the British Empire.



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