

This week in history: January 12-18

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

11 January 2026

25 years ago: DRC President Laurent Kabila assassinated

Laurent Kabila, the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), was assassinated in his office at the Marble Palace on January 16, 2001. The killer, a former bodyguard of the country's third president, unloaded four close-range shots into Kabila's abdomen before fleeing, then suffering the same fate as his unsuspecting victim. Following the assassination, the presidential chief of staff, Colonel Eddy Kapend, appeared on national television urging loyalty within the armed forces. Kabila's son, Joseph Kabila, succeeded his father as president of the DRC.

Initial reports surrounding the assassination were murky, confused and contradictory. They revealed the existence of a deeper conspiracy and fierce factional rivalry vying for power and influence in the power vacuum left by Kabila's death.

The killing took place amid an extremely volatile military and regional conflagration, the Second Congo War. In this bloody conflict, Rwanda and Uganda supported rebel forces fighting against Kabila's government, while Angola, Zimbabwe, and Namibia intervened militarily to keep his fragile regime afloat. The war-torn DRC suffered from mass displacement, hunger, rampant inflation, the collapse of public services and unpaid wages, debt bondage and imperial intrigue.

The first reports of the killing came from the former colonizer, Belgium, describing a brief but intense gun battle lasting about thirty minutes in the capital. Belgian government statements denied that a coup had occurred, but instead portrayed the assassination as the result of a personal dispute that quickly escalated into a deadly shooting.

However, more than likely, both the killing and its aftermath bore the fingerprints of imperialist intervention, chiefly from the United States, the United Kingdom and France. The day after the assassination, a joint Pan-African-French summit convened in Cameroon, aimed at countering U.S. influence on the continent and reinforcing French policy objectives. Kabila had hoped to consolidate his political position at that meeting and end the war on terms favorable to his government and himself personally.

Washington and London, by contrast, blamed Kabila for prolonging the multi-state war, accusing him of clinging to power and blocking the full implementation of the Lusaka Peace Accord. Their preferred outcome revolved around diminishing France's historical role as the leader in providing economic development aid to sub-Saharan Africa.

Kabila was seen as an obstacle to these strategic objectives, ending his presidency as the recipient of an assassination plot. On assuming power, his son revived the Lusaka agreement.

50 years ago: Spain drafts striking workers to repress labor uprisings

On January 14, 1976, the Spanish monarchy of King Juan Carlos I issued a military order drafting thousands of striking postal workers into the army. The move was a desperate attempt to break a strike wave that was paralyzing the country just months after the death of the long-time dictator Francisco Franco.

Facing an estimated 150,000 workers on strike in the Madrid area alone, the government first applied the draft to 2,000 postal workers. When this failed to quell the unrest, the regime expanded the order to 4,000. Far from stifling the movement, the targeted conscription of striking workers caused major outrage, and the rebellion spread rapidly across cities like Barcelona, Valencia and Madrid.

The government expanded the effort and moved to further draft 72,000 rail workers and 52,000 postal workers nationwide, in a massive attempt to force the working class back to work under military discipline. In Barcelona, following pitched battles between riot police and thousands of protesters, the regime even attempted to draft striking firemen and policemen.

The strike wave was driven by a combination of a fight for improved living conditions against soaring inflation and political demands for an end of what remained of the Francoist dictatorship. Minister of Finance Villar Mir had arrogantly declared that Spaniards must limit their aspirations for higher living standards, blaming workers' previous wage increases for the country's economic issues.

Recognizing its fragility, the government officially announced one day later, on January 15, that scheduled parliamentary elections for the spring would be postponed for one year. The monarchy's situation was like a boiler with a faulty pressure gauge; as internal pressure from the working class reached a critical level, the regime attempted to prevent an explosion by welding the safety valve shut.

The post-Franco monarchy was bolstered by international support. In the same week as the labor draft, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger signed a new four-year pact with the Spanish regime,

providing \$1.22 billion in military credits and grants in exchange for continued U.S. access to critical naval and air bases, including the Rota nuclear submarine base.

In this crisis the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) acted as a further brake on the mass opposition, arguing that the monarchy could be “slowly reformed” by waiting patiently for state-run elections. Marcellino Camacho, a leading Stalinist and head of the Workers Commissions (Comisiones Obreras), declared, “I am convinced that freedom is about to come. But when it comes, this will be the result of a peaceful struggle led by the Spanish people. Our movement above all, inspired by humanitarian motives, is determined to avoid bloodshed.”

But the strike wave demonstrated that the Spanish working class was much further to the left and was politically primed for a revolutionary confrontation with the remnants of the Francoist dictatorship. Over the course of 1976 the PCE and other parliamentary parties would work to block that confrontation from taking place.

75 years ago: France inflicts heavy defeat on Vietnamese liberation forces

On January 17, 1951, French troops inflicted a heavy defeat on Vi?t Minh forces, following a five-day engagement known as the Battle of V?nh Yên.

The engagement was part of the First Indochina War. In the wake of World War II, the imperialist powers, led by France, had sought to regain effective colonial control over Indochina, in the face of opposition from the masses. The French established the State of Vietnam in 1949, an entity that effectively functioned as a puppet of Paris. Its troops, together with soldiers from the French army, operated under the banner of the French Union.

Over the months preceding the battle, Vi?t Minh forces, headed by Ho Chi Minh, had carried out a series of raids against French Union forces from neighboring China, where they had been permitted to establish bases by the Stalinist government of Mao Zedong. The attacks, which claimed over 6,000 French Union troops, triggered a political crisis in Paris. The response was to dispatch General Jean de Lattre de Tassigny to oversee a troop surge and brutal counter-insurgency actions.

One of de Lattre's first engagements was to order an offensive against V?nh Yên, where the Vi?t Minh had a strong presence. Over the course of several days, the city, in the Red River Delta region of northern Vietnam, was besieged by thousands of French Union troops. De Lattre's surge included the dispatch of aerial units. They would carry out widespread bombardments, against which the Vi?t Minh was largely defenseless, and used the chemical weapon napalm.

Under the command of Võ Nguyên Giáp, who would later achieve global fame as the central military leader in the defeat of the US invasion of Vietnam, Vi?t Minh forces retreated into the mountains near V?nh Yên on January 17. Casualty figures remain disputed, but according to some estimates as many as 6,000-9,000 Vietnamese fighters were killed.

The brutal French offensive came just weeks after the signing of the December 1950 Pentalateral Agreement, under which the United States agreed to military aid for the neo-colonial French effort.

100 years ago: Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* premieres in Moscow

On January 18, 1926, Sergei Eisenstein's film *Battleship Potemkin*, about a mutiny on a tsarist battleship near Odessa during the 1905 revolution, opened to the public in Moscow at the Goskinoteatre.

The first screening of the film had been at a December 21st invitation-only meeting in Moscow, commemorating the 20th anniversary of the 1905 revolution, but the film was not immediately distributed by Soviet authorities.

One historian relates that the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky entered the office of the Soviet bureaucrat in charge of film distribution, Konstantin Shvedchikov, and banging his fists and cane on Shvedchikov's desk demanded that he “immediately export *Potemkin* and told him he would go down in history as a villain if he did not.” When Shvedchikov asked him if he was through. Mayakovsky responded, “Shvedchikovs come and go but art remains! remember that!”

After this and other interventions the film was distributed to Germany, where it received enormous praise from audiences and critics. It was only after the foreign acclaim that the film was shown to the Soviet public.

In the last century, the film has taken its place as one of the classics of Soviet and world cinema. As the *World Socialist Web Site* noted in its commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the film:

A supreme achievement, *Potemkin* is consistently included on lists of the greatest films ever made. Initially intended as one of a number of sequences within a broader film to mark the anniversary of the 1905 events, the tale of the sailors' revolt against atrocious conditions, the enthusiastic support they receive from the Odessa working class and the vicious reprisals of the tsarist forces came to embody the entire experience of that defeated revolution, the “dress rehearsal” for 1917.



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