

This week in history: December 10-16

10 December 2018

25 years ago: US admits secret tests of radiation weapons

The US government deliberately released massive amounts of radiation into the environment as part of a secret program aimed at developing a weapon using radioactive fallout, according to congressional report released on December 15, 1993. The General Accounting Office conducted a nearly two-year investigation into the radiation releases, which took place in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and its findings were confirmed by officials of the Department of Energy, which operates the US nuclear weapons production and testing system.

At the time of the tests, several years after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II, government scientists claimed that open-air tests of atomic weapons did not endanger civilian lives through the creation of radioactive particles pushed into the upper atmosphere by the mushroom cloud, and then falling to the ground over a wide area. They hoped to focus the radioactive fallout so that it could be used as a weapon against a future enemy.

At least a dozen secret tests took place at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee and the Dugway Proving Ground, 90 miles west of Salt Lake City, and other tests were conducted at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in northern New Mexico. After one such test at Los Alamos, fallout could be detected as far away as 70 miles.

The tests released quantities of radiation ranging from several hundred to several thousand curies, thousands of times more than would be considered unacceptable exposure today. Only the nuclear disasters at Chernobyl and Fukushima have generated greater quantities of fallout affecting widespread civilian populations.

The investigation was prompted by pressure from Senator John Glenn of Ohio, the former astronaut, who had been inquiring into the health effects of the nuclear industry for more than six years, following a report in 1986 of a large-scale, intentional release of radioactive iodine from the nuclear processing plant in Hanford, Washington, which involved 7,800 curies, several million times the level believed to be safe.

The GAO report said the US government was planning two types of radiation weapons, one to expose enemy soldiers to nuclear materials on the battlefield so powerful they would be killed or incapacitated immediately, but with a relatively short half-life so that American troops could then pass through the

same territory unharmed. The other would spread long-lasting radioactive particles, rendering land unfit for human habitation for a considerable period of time.

The Department of Energy admitted the truth of the GAO report. Robert Alvarez, an aide to Secretary of Energy Hazel O'Leary, said, "The public record is very clear that the United States Government engaged in deliberate acts of deception against the American public in the 1940's and 1950's in order to prosecute the nuclear arms race."

50 years ago: Mass political repression in Brazil

After replacing General Humberto Castelo Branco in 1967, retired General Arthur de Costa e Silva, now president, pledged to "humanize" the dictatorship established in the 1964 military coup and promised to transition Brazil to a democracy.

While this promise was never true to begin with, on December 13, 1968, it was fully exposed as a massive lie. Costa e Silva issued Institutional Act Number 5 (AI-5) which gave the President the power to recess the Brazilian congress, imposed a state of siege, and ultimately made the executive branch the sole legal authority in Brazil. Over the next few days his military-backed regime arrested hundreds of political opponents.

The crackdown followed a year of student protests. In June the government ordered the suspension of classes at the University of Rio and in October it carried out a roundup of 700 left-wing students.

Costa e Silva ordered the crackdown after congress refused to hand over an opposition deputy for trial. The representative, Marcio Moreira Alves, had been charged with violating national security for making a speech calling for a boycott of the September 7 Independence Day parade. Military leaders called the speech "insulting."

Some members of the military-backed government party, the Alianza Renovadora Nacional (ARENA), voted along with the opposition to uphold the right of congressional immunity from prosecution. Silva immediately assumed emergency powers and indefinitely suspended the congress. He later claimed "subversives" were attempting to overthrow his regime.

Among those arrested was the director of the largest newspaper in Rio de Janeiro. The government also detained former President Juscelino Kubitschek, the former chief of the cabinet and other political opponents. Moreira Alves, the opposition deputy whose speech sparked the crisis, fled the

country.

The government imposed strict censorship on news reports, including details of the arrests. All foreign reports had to be cleared by the authorities. After AI-5 the Brazilian government also greatly expanded its policy of using torture to silence political dissidents.

75 years ago: Soviets try Nazi war criminals

On December 15, 1943, Soviet authorities began the first trial of Nazi war criminals in the Ukrainian city of Kharkov. Standing before the military tribunal of the 4th Ukrainian Front were three Germans military and intelligence officials and one Soviet collaborator.

The three Germans, Wilhem Langheld, Hans Ritz and Reinhard Retzlaff, were the first Axis personnel to face a war crimes public trial since the war began in 1939. They were chosen to represent the three branches of the Nazi extermination machine: one from the Army, one from the police, one from the SS.

The prosecution charged that the Nazi defendants played a “direct part in the mass and brutal extermination of peaceful Soviet people by the use of specially equipped automobiles known as ‘murder vans,’ and also with having taken a personal part in mass shootings, hangings, burning, plunder and outrages on Soviet people.” The Russian collaborator, Mikhail Bulanov, faced similar charges as well as the added charge of treason.

Although all accused had pleaded guilty, the Soviet government heavily advertised the trial and produced a documentary film and book based on the preceding. Soviet citizens, captured German soldiers and the accused gave testimony. Medical experts outlined the discovery of dozens of mass graves containing the bodies of thousands of victims throughout the Kharkov region.

The German Wehrmacht first occupied Kharkov in late October 1941, after the surrender of the last Red Army defenders of the city, second largest in Ukraine. The bulk of the killings which followed were perpetrated by the Einsatzgruppen, or mobile death squads, who targeted Jews and Communist Party officials. The worst massacre in Kharkov came two years to the day before the start of the trial, with the mass shooting of 15,000 Jews at Drobytsky Yar.

The Soviet prosecution stressed that the crimes of the defendants were the result of the illegal actions of the German government and military high command. They conceded that the German defendants had acted under orders, but rejected that as a defense. The accused were found guilty December 18 and executed the following day.

100 years ago: Lloyd George wins Britain’s “khaki election”

In the British election held on December 14, 1918, David Lloyd George's coalition government won a large majority on

a platform promising social reforms, as well as punishment of the German “war criminals,” full payment by the defeated powers of the costs of the war and measures to prevent foreign goods from being dumped in Britain.

The vote was called the “khaki election” because of the participation of the returning soldiers, as well as the open appeal to militarism by the government. The coalition was dominated by the right-wing Conservative Party, which won three times as many seats as Lloyd George's faction of the Liberals. Two rival factions of Liberals were virtually wiped out, in some cases losing to the Labour Party, whose vote increased significantly. The electorate was substantially increased by the granting of suffrage to all men 21 and over and to women over 30.

Britain's losses in the first imperialist war were 900,000 killed and 1,500,000 wounded. Its total expense exceeded £8 billion and its burden of domestic and foreign debt was 10 times what it had been in 1914. Although a “victor,” Britain had clearly ceded first place to the US—from whose bankers it had borrowed enormously to finance the war effort—as the greatest imperialist power. The British ruling class confronted the problem of reintroducing soldiers to industry and the demands of the working class for social reforms and improved wages.

In Ireland, India, Egypt and Palestine the British imperialists confronted growing national movements, if not open revolt. In Ireland, the candidates of Sinn Fein, the political arm of the Irish Republican movement, won an enormous victory in the December 14 elections.

Writing earlier in 1918, Leon Trotsky explained the essential relations between Britain, the US and Europe:

“What does America need? America needs Germany to exhaust Britain and Britain to exhaust Germany. And then American capital will appear as the heir who will plunder the world.

“When America noticed that Britain was bowed down and bent to the ground while Germany was standing upright she said: ‘No, I must support Britain—like the rope supporting a hanging man—just so they will exhaust each other completely and so that European capital will be completely deprived of the possibility of ever getting to its feet again.’

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