

This week in history: January 6-12

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

5 January 2025

25 years ago: Death sentence postponed for Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan

On January 12, 2000, the Turkish government postponed a vote in parliament that would have carried out the execution of Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan. Öcalan had been labeled a “terrorist” and condemned to death for treason by the government of Democratic Left Party (DLP) leader Bülent Ecevit.

The seven-hour-long negotiating session in parliament ultimately ruled in favor of Öcalan and his lawyers, who had also appealed for a decision from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) before Ankara initiated the death sentence.

In an open attack on the democratic right to political asylum, the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) kidnapped Öcalan from the Greek embassy in Kenya in February, 1999, an operation made possible by information handed over by US spy agencies. Before the Mafia-style raid, Öcalan had been denied asylum by numerous governments, from the Arab nationalist Baathist regime in Syria to social-democratic governments in Europe.

Most Turkish political formations sought to make an example of Öcalan, a bourgeois nationalist who leveraged Kurdish demands for equal democratic and cultural rights by appealing to the Western capitalist powers. This, the Turkish ruling class feared, threatened the break-up of the country, with most of the southeast home to Kurdish majorities. The ruling coalition of the DLP, the Motherland Party (ANAP), and the fascist National Movement Party (NMP), along with Islamic parties and the True Path Party (TPP), voiced support for green-lighting the execution immediately.

Opposition parties such as the Kurdish-nationalist HADEP (Democratic Peoples Party), the PKK, the Turkish Organisation for Industrialists and Businessmen (TÜSİAD), as well as the Islamic-oriented employers organisation (MÜHÜR), had opposed the death sentence. These political forces feared the execution could reignite the Kurdish conflict, endangering Turkey’s planned entry to the EU, destabilizing the nation and opening the door for revolutionary upheaval. They appealed to the Turkish government, NATO, and the EU to arrive at a decision “in the interests of Turkey and its closer links with Europe.”

The policies of the European countries had nothing to do with any concern for the democratic rights of the Kurds, as they continued to provide weapons to the Turkish government. On the same day as the postponement of Öcalan’s execution, editorial offices and apartments in Germany occupied by staff members of the pro-Kurdish newspaper *Özgür Politika* were searched and material confiscated.

50 years ago: Soviet Union launches Soyuz 17 space mission

On January 11, 1975, Soyuz 17, carrying soviet cosmonauts Aleksei Gubarev and Georgi Grechko, launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan. This mission was the first long-duration stay aboard the Salyut 4 space station which had been sent into orbit unmanned in December 1974. The mission lasted 29 days and was the longest Soviet mission in space. A previous US mission, NASA’s Skylab 4, completed in February 1974, had lasted a record 84 days in space.

The Soyuz 17 mission followed a series of setbacks in the Soviet Union’s space station program. In 1971, the Soyuz 11 mission ended in tragedy when its crew perished due to cabin depressurization during re-entry after successfully completing a 23-day stay aboard Salyut 1, the world’s first space station. Subsequent missions also faced challenges: the Salyut 2 station suffered structural failures shortly after launch, and the Soyuz 12 and Soyuz 13 missions, while successful in their limited objectives, did not achieve prolonged stays aboard a space station.

Soyuz 17 represented a turning point. Its successful docking with Salyut 4 and the crew’s ability to carry out an extended mission highlighted the progress made by Soviet engineers in the preceding years and the lessons they incorporated from earlier setbacks.

In addition to achieving a prolonged spaceflight, the Soyuz 17 mission conducted a number of important scientific experiments centered around astrophysical research and conditions of microgravity. Using the advanced Filin X-ray spectrometer and the RT-4 X-ray telescope aboard Salyut 4, the cosmonauts conducted detailed observations of cosmic X-ray sources. These studies provided critical insights into high-energy phenomena such as black holes and neutron stars.

The mission also broke new ground in solar studies. Instruments like the OST-1 solar spectrograph allowed the crew to monitor solar activity, including flares and radiation emissions. These observations were vital for adding to the understanding of the sun’s impact on Earth’s environment and for planning future space missions.

The cosmonauts also conducted pioneering biological experiments. They studied the effects of prolonged weightlessness on various organisms, including plants and insects. For example, experiments with fruit flies found that the insects have an increased rate in genetic mutations when exposed to a microgravity environment. Other tests involving pea plants found that there was no difference in plant growth during the early stages of development but that the plants could not survive in microgravity for more than three weeks.

Another key component of the mission was Earth observation. Gubarev and Grechko captured detailed images of Earth’s surface that would aid in environmental monitoring and resource management by providing data on

phenomena such as desertification, deforestation, and polar ice coverage. Additionally, their observations of atmospheric activity helped refine understanding of weather systems and global climate patterns.

The success of Soyuz 17 set the stage for more missions to the Salyut 4 space station. The next would come in May 1974 when Soyuz 18 would make another successful trip, with cosmonauts staying aboard the station for 63 days.

75 years ago: Nkrumah's "Positive Action" campaign opposes British colonial rule in Ghana

On January 8, 1950, founder and leader of the Convention People's Party (CPP) Kwame Nkrumah announced the beginning of a "positive action campaign" in the British colony of Gold Coast (modern day Ghana). Engaging in strikes, protests, and boycotts of European goods, the masses of Ghana brought the colony to an economic standstill for 21 days in their demand for self-governance.

Fearful of a social explosion, and facing opposition to their colonial rule globally, British officials asked Nkrumah in the early days of January to postpone the campaign and engage in negotiations while they considered the demands of the CPP, primarily that of national sovereignty. The colonial government was in the midst of drafting a new constitution with limited concessions, but refused to grant dominion status to the Gold Coast. Consequently, the CPP withdrew from the negotiations on January 8, and on the same day convened a mass meeting to call for a general strike to begin at midnight.

The strike rapidly developed into a general uprising against British colonialism, including with riots in the capital, Accra, involving broad layers of the oppressed masses.

Governor Charles Arden-Clarke called a state of emergency on January 11 and ordered repressive measures against the population, including banning CPP publications and arresting party members, among them Nkrumah. Anti-African pogroms were encouraged by the British government, which involved the enrollment of European civilians as auxiliary police to terrorize protesting African civilians.

The police crackdown temporarily halted the movement, with Nkrumah and other leaders of the independence struggle confined to prison on sentences of up to three years. However, opposition continued to grow. In 1951, as part of an attempt to stem the tide, the British permitted the first nationwide elections with universal franchise. Nkrumah won in a landslide.

He would serve as prime minister of Gold Coast until 1957, when the British finally agreed to independence. Despite the heroism of the independence struggle, Nkrumah and the CPP did not offer a viable way forward in overcoming the bitter legacy of European colonialism. Representing layers of the native bourgeoisie, Nkrumah's perspective was to maneuver between the Stalinist bureaucracy of the Soviet Union and the imperialist powers within the context of the Cold War. Nkrumah and similar nationalists were hostile to the perspective of the mobilization of the working class throughout the continent for a socialist federation of Africa, instead seeking to establish "independent" capitalist states largely based on the borders imposed by the European colonizers.

100 years ago: Polish press whips up nationalist sentiment against German-speaking city of Danzig

On January 10, 1925, newspapers in Warsaw, the capital of the Second Polish Republic, suggested that the Free State of Danzig, a largely German-speaking semiautonomous city-state on the Baltic Sea under the stewardship of the League of Nations, could be seized by the Polish military much as Lithuania in 1923 had seized the Klaipėda region, another Baltic enclave administered by the League of Nations.

A conflict in Danzig had arisen over the control of the postal system. According to the arrangements of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, Poland controlled the customs authority in city and Polish ships could dock in the port, but the postal system as well as other aspects of the city's infrastructure were operated by the city authorities.

In a provocative move, Polish authorities had painted all the mailboxes in the Polish national colors overnight. Elements in Danzig had in turn painted the mailboxes in the colors of the German Empire. The Polish government demanded an apology and protested to the League of Nations, and the affair created a nationalist furor in Poland.

Danzig (now called Gdansk) was a port city on the Baltic that had been a part of German Empire until its defeat by the imperialist Allied Powers in 1918. The League of Nations had created the Second Polish Republic out of Polish-speaking territory that had belonged to the Russian Empire (overthrown by the Russian working class in 1917) and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (an ally of Germany defeated in 1918) as well as to Germany, the three states that had partitioned Poland in the 18th century. The Free State of Danzig was given special status as a part of neither Germany nor Poland, but administered directly by the League.

Danzig was adjacent to the German region of East Prussia to its east but separated from the rest of Germany to the West by a strip of the Polish-speaking land called Polish Corridor. American imperialism in particular insisted Poland have access through its own territory to the Baltic.

The conflict threatened to throw central Europe back into war again and showed the instability of the national borders that had been created after the war by the victorious imperialist powers, particularly to stop the spread of socialist revolution and the influence of the new Soviet Republic throughout Europe.



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