

This week in history: January 20-26

19 January 2025

25 years ago: Labour Party leader Tony Blair attacks the democratic right of trial by jury

On January, 21, 2000, Labour leader Tony Blair visited a school in London, England to supposedly attack “forces of conservatism and reaction” that were undermining his “radical” agenda. His phony remarks and public relations show was in response to the House of Lords voting down a government measure to restrict the right to trial by a jury of one’s peers. A multi-party alliance voted to torpedo the Criminal Justice (Mode of Trial) Bill by a margin of 222 to 126. The conservative forces opposing the bill, however, did so not out of concern for defending centuries old democratic rights, but to grandstand opportunistically to win votes.

The proposed bill aimed to eliminate the right of defendants in England and Wales to decide in which court their criminal cases would be heard. It included “middle-ranking” offences such as theft, possession of drugs, assault and bodily harm to another person. Overall, around 280,000 cases were brought to the courts each year in which defendants had the choice to be tried either before magistrates or in Crown court before a jury, all revolving around the defendant’s preference. The bill would have placed this decision solely in the hands of the magistrates.

Home Secretary Jack Straw, a former opponent of the bill when the Tories had been in power pushing for its implementation, declared it as a “modernising reform.” This deliberately misleading term had been employed repeatedly over the previous several years to obscure the reactionary content of measures introduced by Labour, particularly in social policy and the field of democratic rights.

Revealing the right-wing character of the Labour Party, Blair made the bill the central plank of his “tough on crime” agenda. According to Labour’s propaganda, jury trials were not a democratic right in keeping with the principle “innocent until proven guilty” but a “soft option” for criminals. The money expended on such trials was being “wasted” on providing such a “luxury,” money in Blair’s view that could have been used better by employing more police officers.

The legal profession and civil rights groups were repulsed by Labour’s draconian law-and-order offensive and condemned the bill as an attack on democratic rights. David Pannic, a leading human rights and public law specialist said that defendants facing serious charges would have been tried by “representatives of the Establishment” and, “rightly or wrongly, to be prejudiced against them or ignorant of their personal circumstances.”

Blair and Straw nevertheless vowed that they would continue the battle to pass the anti-democratic legislation in the guise of fighting the “forces of conservatism and reaction, left or right, even when they have superficial popular appeal.”

50 years ago: State of emergency declared in Bangladesh

On January 25, 1975, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman’s government in Bangladesh declared a state of emergency, abolishing constitutional rights and banning all political activities and parties outside of the ruling Awami League (AL). Days later, the AL-dominated legislature passed a law abolishing the constitution and handing virtually all power to Rahman, who was named president for a five-year term.

The decree granted the regime sweeping powers, including the ability to seize newspapers and detain individuals indefinitely without trial. It introduced harsh penalties including long prison terms or deportation for political opposition to the government. Fundamental rights like freedom of speech and assembly were quashed. Newspapers critical of the government were shut down and public political activity of any kind was punished with arrest and violence from police and military forces.

Rahman had risen to power as a leader of the AL during the independence movement against Pakistan, of which Bangladesh had been a part known as East Pakistan. For his activities Rahman served 12 years in prison, including during the 1971 war of independence. After the war, he quickly assumed the highest positions of power in the new government of Bangladesh, first as president and then as prime minister in 1972.

In power, the AL proved itself to be a vehicle of personal enrichment for its leaders, while the rural masses and working class struggled to rebuild a country that had been ravaged by both civil war and natural disasters. Its economy wrecked, Bangladesh had to rely on foreign aid to stave off bankruptcy. Rahman cultivated relations with US imperialism and met with US President Gerald Ford in 1974 to discuss American access to Bangladesh’s large reserves of natural gas.

Opposition to the AL quickly grew swiftly in the early 1970s, with left-wing and socialist parties exerting significant influence among the impoverished masses. In response, Rahman’s regime unleashed a wave of political repression. The Rakkhi Bahini, a paramilitary force loyal to the government, carried out extrajudicial killings, torture, and other violence targeting opposition leaders, trade unionists, and left-wing student activists. Estimates suggest as many as 30,000 people were killed by state forces and AL militias between 1972 and 1975.

The emergency decree of January 1975—the culmination of years of mounting crises, including devastating floods, rampant corruption, and political unrest—allowed for an even greater escalation of Rahman’s authoritarianism.

In August 1975, Rahman was assassinated in a military coup.

75 years ago: Pro-Dutch forces in Indonesia launch a failed coup attempt against Sukarno regime

On January 22-23, 1950, the Legion of the Just Ruler militia in Indonesia launched a failed coup with the attempt of overthrowing the regime of President Sukarno. The insurrection was aimed at toppling the Republic of Indonesia, proclaimed in August 1945 almost immediately after Japan's defeat in World War II.

The Dutch Indonesian Round Table Conference of December 1949 gave conditional recognition to the Republic of Indonesia, but only as a component part of the United States of Indonesia (RUSI), a sort of halfway house between direct control rule and independence. Among the requirements of the agreement reached at the Round Table Conference was Indonesian reparations to the Netherlands for the expenses of its colonial administration, and favorable treatment to Dutch companies.

The Legion of the Just Ruler—or in Indonesian, the Angkatan Perang Ratu Adil (APRA)—was headed by Raymond Westerling, a former captain of the Dutch military who personified the attempt of the Dutch to retain a level of control over their former colony. Westerling had gained notoriety for suppressing resistance in 1946 to Dutch rule in Sulawesi with summary executions of dissenting villagers.

The coup attempt was directed against the RUSI government, which included both the republic led by Sukarno, and other territories, including those under princely control, remaining under Dutch rule. The RUSI government thus consisted of both pro-republican and pro-federalist factions. Belonging to the latter was Sultan Hamid II, who gave his support to APRA and conspired in the coup along with Westerling.

Westerling issued a number of demands to the RUSI government on January 5, which included the recognition of APRA as the official army of the state of Pasundan (today's West Java). After receiving no reply from the government to this ultimatum, Westerling assembled his militia and captured the cities of Bandung, Jakarta, and Buitenzorg.

The forces headed by Westerling, some 2,000 strong as estimated by one historian, were ultimately defeated by Indonesian police and military forces. Westerling escaped first to Singapore and then to the Netherlands where he lived until his death in 1987, while Hamid II was arrested in April for his role in the coup. APRA ceased to function within a month after the coup attempt, and later that year the RUSI was dissolved in favour of the modern-day Republic of Indonesia, with the incorporation of the states of Pasundan and West Kalimantan, and the central government based in Jakarta.

100 years ago: Trotsky removed as Commissar of Military Affairs

On January 26, 1925, Leon Trotsky was removed from his post as People's Commissar of War and Naval Affairs by the machinations of the Stalin clique in the bureaucratic apparatus of the Communist Party and state.

The loss of his position was the final blow of a months-long campaign of slander and falsification by Stalin and his collaborators Gregory Zinoviev and Lev Kamenev to distort and magnify pre-

revolutionary differences between Trotsky and Lenin as well as to diminish Trotsky's decisive role in the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

The Stalinist campaign accelerated in response to the publication of Trotsky's "Lessons of October," which reviewed the class pressures on the Bolshevik Party on the eve of the October Revolution and singled out the hesitation of Bolshevik "moderates" such as Kamenev and Zinoviev in preparing a seizure of power by the working class.

Trotsky's removal from this leading position showed how far the factional strength of the bureaucracy against the working-class Bolshevik elements in the party had advanced. The Commissar of War and Military Affairs was one of the highest posts in the Soviet government, and Trotsky was not only the co-leader of the Russian revolution but the founder of the Red Army and its leader during the Civil War of 1918-23.

In 1924, the Red Army officer and journalist Larissa Reisner's articles and essays on the Russian Civil War, written from 1918 to 1921 and published in *Izvestiya* and Alexander Voronsky's *Red Virgin Soil*, were collected in book form as *The Front*, and they give a fitting view of Trotsky as a military leader from a leading participant in the Civil War (Reisner died from typhoid in 1926 but worked with Trotsky after his removal from his post as Commissar. All references to Trotsky were later cut out of her work when her *Collected Works* was published after her death.)

Here is her description of Trotsky at the battle of at Svyazhsk in 1918:

All Trotsky's organizational genius now became apparent. Across openly sabotaged railway-lines, he managed to get new regiments and artillery through, and everything the army needed for resistance. ... Trotsky gave his new Red Army a backbone of steel, refusing to yield an inch, inspiring its fighters with his ruthless authority and icy calm. ... The revolutionary in him was never pushed aside by the soldier, the leader, the commander. And when a deserter was confronted with his terrible voice, he stood in fear of him, as of one of us, a great rebel who would punish anyone guilty of cowardice or treason—treason not only to the army, but to the World Proletarian Revolution.



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