

This week in history: November 10-16

10 November 2014

[25 Years Ago](#) | [50 Years Ago](#) | [75 Years Ago](#) | [100 Years Ago](#)

25 years ago: Nicaraguan peace talks suspended by contras

Nicaraguan peace talks in New York effectively collapsed when leaders of the US-backed contras demanded their immediate suspension on November 15, 1989. The talks, which were initiated by the Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega, began on November 9 at the United Nations building in New York City.

A 19-month cease-fire between the Nicaraguan government military and the counterrevolutionary forces known as the contras officially ended on November 1 when Ortega announced the Sandinistas would use “all the force necessary to strike the contras that have been killing our people.” At the same time, he proposed the international negotiations.

In the first day of the talks, the Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Miguel D’Escoto stated, “We will not continue to declare a unilateral cease-fire as long as that means we cease and they fire.” The government presented a 15-point peace plan that included a pledge by Sandinistas to stop accepting shipments of arms and a plan for provisions to be distributed to repatriated contras.

The US media and politicians, as well as the United Nations establishment under then Secretary General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, had cynically expressed “extreme concern” at the end of the cease-fire. Knowing that the contras did nothing without orders from Washington, Ortega condemned the US as well as regional leaders who claimed they wanted to disband the contras without making any effort to carry that out.

The contras held bases in neighboring Honduras, crossing south into Nicaragua to make raids on peasant communities. In August 1989, the five Central American presidents signed the Tela Accord, setting a December 5 deadline for the disbanding of the contras. The US, on the other hand, had

approved \$49.7 million in “humanitarian aid” for the contras to be disbursed through February 1990.

On the evening of November 15, the contras suddenly called for a suspension of the talks. American attorney Paul Reichler, who acted as a spokesman for the Sandinistas during the talks, said that the contra delegation received a sudden order from the Civic Military Commission, a four-man body set up by the contras the previous week to direct the negotiations, to break off the talks. Its leader, Israel Galeano, known as Commander Franklin, was seen entering the building where the talks were held in the company of an unidentified state department official.

[top]

50 years ago: Israel provokes border clash with Syria

This week in 1964, Israel and Syria engaged in a series of border clashes. Seven Syrian soldiers and three Israelis were killed in the fighting, which began on November 13 in the border area north of the Sea of Galilee and near three strategic rivers: the Jordan, Baniyas, and Hasbani.

On November 14, Syria issued an urgent letter to the United Nations Security Council calling for it to investigate “the latest Israeli aggression against the Syrian Arab Republic,” amid worries that Israel might use the clash to launch a full-scale attack on Syria. Syria's chief delegate to the UN, Rafik Asha, accused Israeli fighters of strafing Syrian villages and bombing them with napalm in an act of “carefully planned aggression.”

Israel countered, accusing Syria of beginning hostilities by firing on an Israeli border patrol vehicle, but the preponderance of the evidence—especially that after the initial exchange the fighting took place inside Syria, not Israel—implicated Tel Aviv.

The Council heard both sides on November 16, and commissioned Lt. Gen. Odd Bull of Norway to investigate for the UN Truce Supervision Organization. The Security Council resolution ultimately placed equal blame on both belligerents, and failed to note the entry of Israeli fighter jets

into Syrian airspace. Backing Syria, the Soviet Union vetoed the resolution.

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War had ended with a UN-supervised Demilitarized Zone created between Israel and Syria. Israel made it an informal policy, however, to absorb the territory by evicting Arab farmers and building its own settlements. In the words of Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, the plan was to alter “the lines of the ceasefire accord with military actions that were less than a war” by “seiz[ing] some territory and hold[ing] it until the enemy despairs and gives it to us.”

[top]

75 years ago: Soviet Army moves into Baltic States

On November 14, 1939, Red Army detachments moved into the Baltic state of Lithuania under the terms of an agreement forced on the small country by Stalin and his foreign minister Molotov. Eventually Red Army forces would swell to some 20,000 troops stationed in Lithuania.

In the course of negotiations, Molotov coerced the Baltic states into accepting a military pact with the Soviet Union by giving them the alternative of military destruction at the hands of the Soviet military. All three Baltic states—Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia—accepted a 10-year “Pact of Mutual Assistance,” allowing the Soviet Union to base military commands and army bases on their territory and islands within the Baltic Sea.

In addition to the 20,000 in Lithuania, a further 30,000 Soviet troops would subsequently be stationed in Latvia and another 25,000 in Estonia. All three countries had been secretly assigned to Moscow’s sphere of influence under the terms of the notorious Stalin-Hitler pact, signed in August 1939 between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

Leon Trotsky criticized the move into the Baltic states from the standpoint of international socialism. “It cannot be doubted that control over the military bases on the Baltic coast represents strategic advantages,” Leon Trotsky wrote from his Mexican exile. “But this alone cannot determine the question of invasion of neighboring states.”

“The defense of an isolated workers state depends much more on the support of the laboring masses all over the world,” he explained. “The invasion of the Red Army is seen by the populations not as an act of liberation but as an act of violence, and thereby facilitates the mobilization of world public opinion against the USSR by the Imperialist powers. That is why it will bring in the last instance more harm than advantages to the USSR.”

[top]

100 years ago: Germany and Russia fight battle of Łódź

On November 11, 1914, the German and Russian armies confronted one another near Łódź, a city in what is now south-central Poland. The battle was part of the German advance into Russian Poland, following the outbreak of World War I in August. While the battle lasted only three weeks, there were heavy losses, with close to 200,000 combined casualties, according to one estimate.

The German Ninth Army, under the command of General August von Mackensen, was dispatched against the Russians in order to relieve the Austro-Hungarian army, which had suffered defeats in the Eastern Front’s southern theater. Mackensen drove between the Russian First and Second Armies, shattering the First and very nearly cutting off and surrounding the Second, before being pushed back by a Russian counterattack.

The battle is thought of as a tactical victory for the Russians because Mackensen’s advance was stopped, but it was a strategic defeat. Russia never again threatened German territory, and the Austrian front was preserved. The Russian army evacuated Łódź on December 6 along with great swathes of western Poland. The city then remained in German hands throughout the war.

The German generals of the Eastern Front, Paul Von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, were portrayed as brilliant military heroes, but their alleged genius was primarily owed to the inferiority of their opponent. The first months of the war had already shown that Czarist Russia was woefully unprepared for the demands of war. Germany, which considered Russia a secondary threat to its primary concentration—the war with France and Britain on the Western Front—used its interior position and rail lines to move its forces rapidly. Russia’s peasant army was notoriously ill-equipped and poorly led. This had led to catastrophe at the Battle of Tannenberg in late August, when Russia had lost a whole army—170,000 killed, wounded, and captured—to Germany’s losses of 14,000.

[top]



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