

This week in history: November 17-23

17 November 2014

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Mass demonstrations begin against Czech regime

A mass demonstration of students in Prague on November 17, 1989, followed a smaller one the previous day in the city of Bratislava, both called to commemorate International Students Day. The day marked the anniversary (in this case, the 50th) of the murderous assault by Nazi forces on the University of Prague, after protests against the death of a student, Jan Oplatal, at the hands of the Nazi invading army.

The 1989 demonstrations were fueled by popular hostility to the Stalinist regime under Communist Party General Secretary Miloš Jakeš. Club-wielding riot police cordoned off the Prague demonstration, blocked off exit routes and began beating up protesters. Over the next several days, theater strikes spread from Prague to other cities.

Playwright and anti-socialist political theoretician Václav Havel, the leader of the Civic Forum who would later serve as the Czech president, emerged as an outspoken advocate for the protests, seeking to work with the Stalinist bureaucracy to restore capitalism.

Early the same week, the Jakeš regime had received written warnings from Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai Ryzhkov of the consequences of a refusal to make significant reforms. The presidiums of the Communist Parties of Bulgaria and Romania also received these communications from the USSR. The Czech regime had been in place since the repression of the “Prague Spring” in August of 1968, when the Soviet Union invaded the country to dismantle the more liberal regime of Alexander Dubček.

On November 21, the Civic Forum met with Prime Minister Ladislav Adamec and received assurance that no further violence would be used against protesters. A two-hour general strike was announced for November 27. Czech federal television began broadcasting a live report from the demonstration, but was cut off when a demonstrator called for a new government under Dubček to replace the current regime.

Factory workers expressed support for the protests and on November 24, the CP Presidium, including Jakeš, resigned.

Later, these events were dubbed by the capitalist press as the beginning of the “Velvet Revolution,” but just as in East Germany, their outcome was counterrevolutionary. The popular hostility to the Stalinist regimes was absolutely warranted, but due to the confusion and lack of revolutionary leadership, the movement resulted in the re-establishment of capitalism.

[top]

50 years ago: FBI Director Hoover denounces Martin Luther King, Jr.

On November 18, 1964, FBI head J. Edgar Hoover publicly denounced civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., calling him “the biggest liar in the country,” following allegations that Hoover's federal agents were acting in collusion with racist forces in the South to prevent the investigation of violent attacks and killings of blacks.

Hoover's outburst came during a three-hour news conference in which he also denounced the Warren Commission Report into the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the supposed “coddling” of criminals by “bleeding heart” judges.

Blacks and civil rights activists had faced a growing wave of racist terror in the South, despite the passage of civil rights legislation by the Congress. This included the kidnapping and murder of three civil rights workers in Philadelphia, Mississippi, in June, 1964, and continuous assassinations, bombings, and beatings organized by the Ku Klux Klan with the encouragement of the Democratic Party-controlled southern state administrations.

King, who had recently been awarded the Nobel Peace prize, noted that the FBI had still not arrested a single suspect in the murder of the three civil rights workers, or in the Birmingham church bombing where four black children were killed, or in any of the other less-publicized racist atrocities in the South.

However, King refused to call for a break with the Democratic Party. “Rather than criticize the FBI, I have acted as a mediator, urging Negroes to keep faith with the FBI, and not to lose hope,” King said in a statement to the press following news of Hoover's comments.

In fact, the FBI was deeply involved in the harassment and violence against the civil rights movements, including King

himself, whose phones were tapped and who was the target of an orchestrated smear campaign organized by Hoover. The intent was to “neutralize Martin Luther King, Jr., as an effective Negro leader,” according to bureau documents. Later, in 1965, an FBI informant participated in the murder of white civil rights activist Viola Liuzzo, who was posthumously victimized in yet another FBI smear campaign.

See: Viola Liuzzo: martyr in the struggle for social equality
[top]

75 years ago: “Phoney War” punctured by German sinking of HMS *Rawalpindi*

On November 23, 1939, an armed British merchant cruiser, HMS *Rawalpindi*, was sunk by two German battleships, the *Scharnhorst* and *Gneisenau*, north of the Faroe Islands, in the waters known as the Iceland Gap.

The captain of the *Rawalpindi*, Edward Coverley Kennedy, refused the surrender demanded by the German naval command. Captain Kennedy (father of the late author and liberal campaigner Ludovic Kennedy) and 237 others died in a hopelessly one-sided affair.

After Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had dissected Poland in September 1939, a state of war existed between France, Britain and Germany, but there was virtually no fighting. Both Western Allies, Britain and France, were obliged by their treaty commitments to Poland to mount a military offensive against Germany, but delayed doing so. The French general staff had devised no operational plans to attack Western Germany’s heavily fortified French frontier. An attack upon Germany’s Rhineland was out of the question because Belgium’s neutrality would not permit transit rights to French troops.

For their part, the British leadership felt incapable of matching the might of the Wehrmacht. After only six months of rearmament, the British military command possessed neither the weaponry or man power to mount a credible challenge to Germany’s Western European flank. This temporary military state of affairs was known at the time as the “Bore War” in Britain, the “Strange War” in France and in American parlance as the “Phoney War.” It would last until Germany invaded France in April 1940.

[top]

100 years ago: Britain seizes control of Basra in modern-day Iraq

On November 21, 1914, British forces seized control of Basra, in modern-day Iraq, from the Ottoman Empire, following a battle that had begun on November 11. The fighting was part of the attempt by British imperialism to establish dominance over the geo-strategically critical and resource-rich Middle East, at the expense of its rivals and nominal allies.

The Ottomans had suffered a series of crushing military defeats over the preceding years, losing control of their possessions in modern-day Libya to Italy in the Italo-Turkish war of 1911-12, and their historic dominance in the Balkan region to a coalition of Balkan states in the first Balkan war of 1912-13. On November 5, 1914, Britain had established a protectorate in Cyprus, where the Ottomans had previously had a strong political influence.

On November 6, British troops landed at Fao, a port in the Al Faw peninsula of modern-day Iraq. They engaged in heavy fighting over the following days with Ottoman troops, capturing the fortress of Fao, and taking 300 Ottoman prisoners on November 8. The battle ended Ottoman control of any part of the Persian Gulf.

British troops marched from Fao to Basra and were unsuccessfully attacked by Ottoman troops en route, on November 11. The Ottomans retreated to defensive positions, but their few thousand troops were routed, incurring as many as 1,000 casualties in the final stages of the fighting. British casualties reportedly numbered some 350.

The seizure of Basra was part of a broader British strategy aimed at securing control over the oil fields of Persia and modern-day Iraq—a strategic aim shared by the German Empire. In 1907, Britain had signed a treaty with Russia, dividing Persia into a British-controlled region in the southeast, a Russian zone in the north, and a neutral “buffer” area.

The British pursuit of this strategy over the course of World War I would lead to the brutal repression of Arab resistance-fighters, followed by the redrawing of the borders of virtually the entire region at the conclusion of the war.

[top]



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