

This week in history: November 14-20

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25 years ago: Criminal convictions reversed for Iran-contra conspirator Poindexter

Five felony convictions against former national security adviser Admiral John M. Poindexter were thrown out by a federal appeals court on November 16, 1991. The highest-ranking Reagan administration official to be convicted on criminal charges in the Iran-contra affair, Poindexter was at the center of the operation involving the sales of Hawk missiles to Iran for funds that were then illegally used to supply the counterrevolutionary Contra forces fighting the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. He was forced to resign when the affair became public in November 1986.

Poindexter was convicted in April 1990 on five felony charges of lying, conspiracy and obstructing Congress, five weeks after his trial began. The most serious count was conspiracy with his deputy, Lt. Col. Oliver North, to destroy documents and deceive Congress about both the supplying of arms to the Contras and the sale of weapons to Iran. He was also charged with sending letters to Congress that fraudulently claimed that the Reagan administration was not helping the Contras and directing North to make similar false statements.

Poindexter's defense was that he was acting under the authority of the White House, but in previous videotaped testimony to the court, Reagan claimed memory lapses and said he didn't know about the diversion of funds. When asked if Poindexter should have informed him of any such activities, Reagan said, "Yes," adding, "unless maybe he thought he was protecting me."

Poindexter never took the stand in his own defense, likely to avoid facing perjury charges resulting from conflicting testimony he gave before Congress under a grant of immunity. He had admitted to personally destroying an official document signed by Reagan authorizing the arms sales to Iran. He also admitted to approving the diversion of funds to the Contras.

The same day, a federal judge let former Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams off with just two years probation and 100 hours of community service for withholding information from Congress.

50 year ago: Soviet writers protest sentencing of two authors

On November 19, 1966, a petition signed by 63 Soviet writers protesting the sentencing of two authors to hard labor was made public in Western Europe and the United States. Andrei D. Sinyavsky and Yuli M. Daniel had been sentenced in February 1966 to terms at hard labor for publishing abroad satirical writings which criticized the Stalinist bureaucracy. The signers of the petition offered to guarantee the "good conduct" of the convicted writers if the Soviet government agreed not to implement the sentence.

The petition, addressed to the Presidium of the 23rd Congress of the Soviet Communist Party, rejected the claim that the writings of Sinyavsky and Daniel were "anti-Soviet." It declared, "The condemnation of writers for the writing of satirical works creates an extremely dangerous precedent and threatens to hold up the progress of Soviet culture." The petition concluded by calling for "more freedom for artistic experiment."

In a letter addressed to the Union of Soviet Writers and the Stalinist press, literary critic Lidiya K. Chukovskaya bitterly denounced Kremlin toady Mikhail Sholokhov. The author of *Quiet Flows the Don* supported the prosecution while denouncing the punishment as too lenient. "Your speech at the congress," she wrote, "can really be called historical. In the whole history of Russian culture I know of no other case of a writer publicly expressing regret as you have done, not at the harshness of a sentence, but at its leniency."

The statements were published in the Western capitalist press but were ignored by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Among international authors who petitioned for release of Sinyavsky and Daniel were Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass, Lillian Hellman, Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Robert Lowell, Philip Roth, Marguerite Duras and Philip Toynbee. Despite the protests, the men continued to be held at a prison camp 200 miles east of Moscow. Daniel was released after five years; Sinyavsky after seven.

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75 years ago: War of starvation against Leningrad

On November 15, 1941, beleaguered Soviet Red Army units southeast of Leningrad finally crumbled under the heavy firepower of the German Army, allowing the city of Tikhvin to fall

to Hitler, thereby sealing off Leningrad from food shipments.

For two months Tikhvin had been the only rail link supplying food and ammunition to the nearly three million people encircled by German troops in the south and Finnish troops in the north. Cargo from Moscow via rail link through Tikhvin would be transferred to boats on Lake Ladoga and shipped to a port that relayed it to Leningrad. But now the loss of Tikhvin, combined with the formation of ice on Lake Ladoga, threatened to starve the city. Hitler rejoiced: "Leningrad is doomed to die of famine."

The second-largest Soviet city had only one week's supply of flour and cereals, a two-week supply of fats and no meat. Between September 2 and November 13 food rations had been cut four different times. On November 20, rations were cut a fifth time to starvation levels. Daily bread rations for front-line troops had gone from 800 grams to 500 grams; rear troops, 600 to 300 grams; workers, from 400 to 200 grams (one-third loaf of bread); nonworkers and children, 200 grams to 125 grams (two slices of bread).

In November, 11,000 Leningraders died of hunger. Temperatures fell to 20 and 30 degrees below zero, with snow drifts up to six feet deep. In December 52,000 died, despite a counteroffensive by the Red Army which opened an ice-road across frozen Lake Ladoga. In January there were 150,000 deaths. During the two-and-a-half-year siege of Leningrad, an estimated 630,000 to 900,000 members of the civilian population would die as a direct result of hunger from the blockade.

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100 years ago: Battle of the Somme ends with over 1 million casualties

On November 19, 1916, British and French authorities ended their months-long offensive aimed at routing German troops in the strategically critical region of northern France along the Somme River. The offensive, begun in July and dubbed the Battle of the Somme, witnessed the greatest imperialist bloodshed to that point in history, claiming more than a million casualties.

The Allied offensive had seen heavy losses on both sides from the earliest stages of the offensive. On the first day of fighting, July 1, British casualties are estimated to have been 57,470, including almost 20,000 dead after the thousands of troops thrown into battle confronted entrenched German positions.

Over the ensuing months, hundreds of thousands more would die in Allied offensives and German counteroffensives, with the battle increasingly devolving into a war of attrition. Commanders on both sides repeatedly sacrificed thousands of troops for the sake of gaining a matter of meters, in protracted trench warfare. The battle saw the use of new weapons of war, including the British deployment of chemical weapons, tanks, and airplanes for reconnaissance and bombing raids.

The British decision to end the campaign followed a series of failed attempts to secure a decisive advantage. In late September, Allied forces had launched a major assault on German positions at Thiepval Ridge, with British-led troops firing 60,000 field artillery and 45,000 heavy artillery rounds and hundreds of gas shells. The following month, the Allies initiated the Battle of Ancre Heights, which ended in a strategic stalemate amid harsh winter weather and heavy casualties. On November 13, British forces sought to take advantage of German exhaustion, directly attacking Ancre Valley.

The offensive was called off on November 18. A substantial factor in the decision was the mounting opposition to the war among soldiers and the working class at home. At the end of October, anger over mass casualties contributed to the defeat of a plebiscite on military conscription in Australia. Anti-war rallies had been attended by hundreds of thousands. A similar movement was developing against the moves by British authorities to expand compulsory military service.

At the end of the carnage, British troops had suffered an estimated 420,000 casualties, with French losses standing at around 200,000. As many as half a million German troops perished or were wounded.

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