

This week in history: November 21-27

21 November 2016

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

25 years ago: Haitian refugees die on the high seas

Late on November 22, 1991, a boat carrying 160 refugees sank in the straits between Haiti and Cuba, with all those aboard lost. The bodies of men, women and children continued to wash up on the Cuban shore over several days. This was but one of many boats overcrowded with Haitian refugees. The responsibility for the deaths of such innocent people lay with the US government.

In the aftermath of the Haitian military's overthrow of the elected government of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the Bush administration sanctimoniously condemned the coup and demanded the return of "democracy" in Haiti. With estimates of over 1,500 killed in the coup itself and daily reports of military round-ups, shootings, torture and invasions of working class neighborhoods, the State Department decreed that Haitians fleeing their homeland were "economic refugees," undeserving of the democratic right to political asylum.

To deny them this right, the Coast Guard mounted a permanent blockade in Haitian waters, halting refugees on the high seas, detaining them and burning their boats.

The previous week, Washington ordered 538 of the refugees sent back into the clutches of the Haitian junta. Following a temporary court injunction against this patent violation of even the meager rights granted refugees under US immigration laws, those captured were held by the hundreds on the open decks of Coast Guard cutters, in some cases in shackles and under conditions almost as foul as those of the old slave ships which plowed the same waters in an earlier epoch.

On November 26, the Pentagon announced the dispatch of hundreds of troops to the US Naval base in Guantanamo, Cuba to erect a concentration camp in which Haitian refugees would be housed in tents, ringed by barbed wire and under the guard of military policemen armed with M16 rifles.

[top]

On November 23, 1966, the newspaper of the Chinese Red Guards reported a violent clash between student members of the Red Guards and factory workers in Beijing. The battle lasted for 15 hours, after students from an engineering college went to the Machine Tool Factory 1 to attempt to spur greater production from the workers by "propounding the thought of Mao Zedong."

Workers responded with hostility to the intrusion and closed the factory gates. The students sent for reinforcements and a battle reportedly started after they scaled the walls. Despite the arrival of military police, the fighting went on into the middle of the next day. The paper reported 60 people injured. Only with the arrival of a top Chinese Communist Party official were the sides separated.

The next day Stalinist CCP leaders asked Red Guards from the countryside to leave Beijing within 72 hours. The officials claimed that acts of torture and violence on the part of the Red Guards would be punished.

The battle at the Machine Tool Factory 1 came in the midst of an influx of Red Guards into Beijing as part of an ongoing purge of the top leadership of the Chinese Communist Party by the faction headed by Mao. Posters appeared in the capital denouncing Liu Shao-chi, the Chinese head of state since 1955 and formerly the number two figure in the bureaucratic hierarchy. The Red Guard posters denounced Liu as a "bourgeois reactionary."

Also targeted by the Red Guards were Communist Party General Secretary Deng Xiaoping and another leading Stalinist bureaucrat, former Beijing Mayor Peng Chen. The demonstrations by the Red Guards were accompanied by increased armed patrols and the strengthening of guards at government buildings.

On November 29, Red Guards from Beijing Normal University sacked and defaced the tomb of Confucius, who, according to tradition, had been interred at the site in 478 BC. Confucius was targeted as part of China's feudal history that the "Cultural Revolution" sought to eradicate.

[top]

75 years ago: Red Army defeats Wehrmacht at Rostov

50 year ago: Chinese Red Guards attack workers

On November 21, 1941, as part of the attack upon the Soviet Union's Caucasus region during Operation Barbarossa, German forces entered the Soviet city of Rostov and seized a bridgehead across the River Don. Hitler was overjoyed, believing the Soviet Union's North Caucasus oilfields within striking distance.

The Russian city of Rostov-on-Don lies at the mouth of the Don River where it flows into the Sea of Azov, part of the Black Sea. The city is strategically located and was an important target for the Wehrmacht as the gateway to the Caucasus, and ultimately the oil around Baku and Grozny. The North Caucasus provided 80 percent of the Soviet Union's oil supplies.

When news of Rostov's fall arrived in Berlin, Goebbels' propaganda machine immediately announced, to much fanfare, that the "gateway to the Caucasus" had been opened. But as journalist William Shirer noted "It did not remain open very long." Only days after German forces took Rostov, on November 27, defended by poorly-armed Hungarian troops on their left flank and overextended on both their northern and southern flanks, Red Army Marshal Timoshenko seized the opportunity and counterattacked across the frozen solid River Don. The Soviet 37th Army sent General von Kleist's panzer army into headlong retreat.

General von Kleist wanted to retreat to a secure defensive position at the River Mius which flowed into the Sea of Azov. But Hitler forbade such a move and demanded the retreat be halted immediately. Field Marshal von Rundstedt, the senior officer in the German Army, refused to conduct the order seeing it as military madness to order distant troops to stand fast regardless of their peril.

Hitler relieved von Rundstedt of his duties the next day and replaced him with Field Marshal von Reichenau, a devoted Nazi. Nevertheless, later that same day, von Reichenau telephoned to report that Red Army troops had broken through the line drawn by Hitler and requested permission to retreat to the line von Rundstedt had initially demanded. Hitler agreed to the retreat and subsequently compensated von Rundstedt with a birthday present of 275,000 Reichsmarks.

Shirer notes of the events: "The retreat from Rostov is another little turning point in the history of the Third Reich. Here was the first time that any Nazi army had ever suffered a major setback." The leader of German Panzer units, Colonel General Heinz Guderian, commented afterwards, "Our misfortune began with Rostov, that was the writing on the wall."

[top]

On November 21, 1916, Emperor Franz Josef I, the Habsburg ruler of Austria-Hungary, died in Vienna at the age of 88. His nearly 70-year reign symbolized the historical decay and stagnation of the 450-year-old Habsburg dynasty, which collapsed two years later under his successor, Carl Franz Josef.

Franz Josef was born in the revolutionary year of 1830 and ascended the throne amid even greater revolutionary struggles in 1848, which had forced the abdication of his uncle. During the early years of his reign he presided over two disastrous wars that cost Austria nearly all of its Italian territory and its hegemony over the German states.

After the formation of the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary in 1867, an alliance with rising German capitalism seemed to restore the Habsburg Empire to its former glory, but World War 1, whose immediate cause was the assassination of the heir to the Habsburg throne, brought about the final collapse of the rotting and senile regime.

The Austro-Hungarian Empire contained at least 11 major ethno-language groups, including—in addition to Germans and Hungarians—Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Ruthenians (Ukrainians), and several South Slav nationalities, whose national aspirations were constantly crushed with an iron fist. The Balkan wars strengthened the states to Austria's south, including Serbia, Romania, and Greece. Serbia was allied to Russia and set on union with the South Slav peoples of the Habsburg Empire—and through the creation of a "Yugoslavia" with access to the Adriatic Sea.

The emperor's death nearly coincided with a statement by Great Britain and France, couching their imperialist war aims in the language of the "rights of nationalities." They called for dismembering the Habsburg Empire by reconstituting an independent Poland and urging the Czechoslovaks, Italians, Romanians and Slavs of Austria-Hungary be freed from foreign domination.

[top]



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100 years ago: Austrian Emperor Franz Josef dies