This week in history: November 28-December 4

28 November 2016

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

25 years ago: Pan American World Airways ends operations

On Wednesday, December 4, 1991, one-time industry giant Pan American World Airways shut down operations and grounded all its aircraft after running out of cash. For 64 years as a major American carrier, Pan Am clippers symbolized the power and might of American capitalism and its preeminent place in the world economy.

Pan Am ignominiously collapsed after Delta Airlines pulled out of a deal to give the dying airline an infusion of capital. In desperation, Pan Am turned for help to its traditional rival, TWA. The latter, however, was in no shape to bail out another company since it was about to declare bankruptcy itself.

The final death rattle of the pioneer trans-oceanic air carrier came after a protracted period, lasting well over a decade, in which Pan Am sold off one route after another in an attempt to stay in business. It is no accident that the end came in the midst of the collapse of the 1980s speculative boom, an intractable and deepening recession, massive trade and budget deficits and a raging crisis in the banking system.

The demise of Pan Am was moreover symptomatic of a crisis wracking the American airline industry as a whole. Two other major airlines were liquidated in 1991—Eastern and Midway—and other major airlines, such as TWA and Continental, were either in bankruptcy already or preparing to file with the bankruptcy courts. United Airlines announced it expected record losses for the fourth quarter of 1991.

The Pan Am collapse wiped out 7,500 jobs, while 4,000 Midway employees found themselves suddenly unemployed the previous month.

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50 year ago: Jordanian troops clash with Syria

On December 2, 1966, Jordanian troops crossed the border into Syria in pursuit of alleged terrorist infiltrators, sparking an exchange of acrimonious charges by both governments. At least one person was killed inside Syrian territory in the clash.

Jordan's King Hussein justified the action and charged the Palestine Liberation Organization, which had supported demonstrations demanding arms to fight Israel, with seeking to overthrow his government. He claimed that the Baathist bourgeois nationalist government of Syria was involved in a "left-wing" plot to infiltrate Palestinian agitators into Jordan to destabilize his regime. The Syrians, he charged, were also sending saboteurs into Jordan "to blow up government buildings, bridges and military telephone lines." Hussein charged Syria with arming and training Palestinian commandos for guerrilla raids against Israel. Jordan banned activity by the PLO.

The Syrians meanwhile denounced Jordan for failing to adequately respond militarily to a November 13 Israeli attack. Both Egypt and Syria, which was ruled by the "Arab socialist" Baath Party after a February 1966 coup, charged Jordan with "collusion" with Israel. Hussein, in response, claimed that his government was making full military preparations to repel any further attacks by Israel. He noted the absence of any military activity by Syria and Egypt during the recent Israeli raid. Hussein declared Jordan would fight by itself if necessary.

King Hussein was praised as a "moderate" by the US. Unlike the nationalist regimes in Syria and Egypt, which sought and received support from the Soviet Union, Jordan depended solely on the West for armaments.

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75 years ago: Nazi special forces massacre German Jews in Lithuania

On November 29, 1941, Nazi forces carried out their second mass killing of Jews in four days in Lithuania. The victims in both cases were German Jews who had been deported to Lithuania after the German conquest of that territory as part of the invasion of the Soviet Union, which began on June 22, 1941.

In the massacre at the Ninth Fort in Kaunas, Lithuania, Nazi paramilitary forces executed 693 men, 1,155 women, and 152 children, each with a single bullet to the neck, with the bodies heaped within giant earth pits dug by 300 enslaved Red Army prisoners. These Jews had been expelled from Vienna and Breslau. The earlier massacre at the same location on November 25 involved Jews from Berlin, Munich and Frankfurt. Almost five thousand Jews in total were murdered in the two Ninth Fort massacres.

The massacres were the first instance of the systematic killing of German Jews during the Holocaust. Concentration camps existed within Germany at the time, but not yet extermination camps.

Jews from Germany and Austria were called "Reich Jews" by the Nazi authorities. The deportation of the Reich Jews began in mid-October and continued until February 1942, 53,000 Reich Jews and 5,000 Gypsies were transported to Lithuania and murdered.

The Ninth Fort massacres were conducted by Einsatzkommando 3, a mobile killing squad and sub-unit of the larger Einsatzgruppen, led by Karl Jager. Jager, a Swiss-born devoted Nazi, was central to the almost total eradication of Lithuanian Jewry. His detailed reports of the murderous actions of his Einsatzkommando unit, including both German Nazis and Lithuanian collaborators, became known as the "Jager Report."

The almost daily reports kept a running record of the murder of nearly 138,000 Jews. The unit killed mainly Jews, but also 1,000 communists, hundreds of disabled people, and scores of those deemed criminals. On 17 occasions, daily executions exceeded 2,000 people.

The title of the compiled daily killings was, "Complete tabulation of executions carried out in the Einsatzkommando 3 zone up to December 1, 1941." This "Jager Report" came to light in 1959 and stands among the massive body of evidence revealing the murderous barbarism committed by German fascism. It is considered the most detailed and precise surviving chronicle of the activities of an Einsatzkommando unit, and a crucial record documenting the Holocaust in the Baltic region.

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On November 29, 1916, the British government of Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George announced that from December 1 it would assume direct control of all coal mines in South Wales, a hotbed of working class militancy. The move came amid growing opposition in the working class to the imperialist slaughter of World War I.

The government appointed a committee representing the Board of Trade, the Home Office and the Admiralty for the administration of the mines. It was scheduled to meet immediately to consider the question of wages.

There had been a long-running dispute over the demands of South Wales coal miners for a second 15 percent increase of the war bonus. The Board of Trade had attempted by intervention to procure a settlement, but the mining companies objected to any examination of their books with a view to whether they could "justifiably" meet the miners' demands.

The takeover of the mines was an unprecedented action aimed at preventing an explosion among miners that would interfere with coal supplies and disrupt Britain's imperialist war effort. There had been disputes between the mine owners and coal miners over wages since the beginning of the war in August 1914, as prices and profits soared.

In 1915, Lloyd George, then minister of munitions, had intervened and conceded the miners a 15 percent pay increase despite the opposition of the mining companies. The move intensified divisions within the government. Five days after the increase, Asquith had resigned with the apparent intention of forming a reconstructed government with himself as prime minister. Lloyd George, with little support in the Liberal Party, parried the move, managing to form a coalition government with Tory leader Andrew Bonar Law.

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100 years ago: British government takes over coal mines