

This week in history: November 12-18

12 November 2018

25 years ago: Abacha stages military coup in Nigeria

On November 17, 1993, General Sani Abacha, the minister of defense, removed interim President Ernest Shonekan through a military coup and declared himself president. A veteran of previous military seizures of power going back to the 1960s, Abacha played a prominent role in the 1983 coup that placed General Muhammadu Buhari in power, and became army chief of staff in 1985 after General Ibrahim Babangida assumed the presidency. He became minister of defense in 1990.

The military intervened in Africa's most populous country in the midst of a deepening social and political crisis, in the face of a nationwide general strike called by Nigerian unions against a government decree raising gasoline prices by 700 percent. The coup followed the military decision to overturn the results of the June 1993 presidential election because the winner, wealthy businessman Moshood Abiola, was from the Yoruba minority in the south, while the military caste was based in the largest ethnic group, the Hausa, who live mainly in the north of the country.

Nigeria's oil reserves are among the largest in Africa, and exports topped \$11.5 billion in 1992, enough to finance a decent standard of living for the population. But under capitalist rule and in the framework of a global system dominated by a handful of imperialist powers, living standards in Nigeria had declined and the population was subjected to military rule for most of the period since nominal independence in 1960. During ten years of military rule since 1983, the generals acted as enforcers for the International Monetary Fund and the big oil companies, driving down per capita income from \$1,000 in 1980 to less than \$300.

The imperialist powers, headed by the United States, issued sanctimonious statements deploring the Abacha coup and urging a return to "democracy." The only real objection by Washington was that military rulers like Babangida and Abacha were too greedy, and stole so much of the oil wealth that Nigeria could not pay its debts. By the time of the coup, the government owed \$30 billion to foreign banks, more than \$5 billion of it past due. Debt service was set to absorb 133 percent of total government revenues.

Abacha's regime became the most brutal of all the military dictatorships in the oil-rich country, jailing several former presidents, hanging Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, an

opponent of the multinational companies that raked in the lion's share of Nigeria's vast oil wealth, and sentencing famed author Wole Soyinka to death *in absentia*. The Nigerian regime amassed unprecedented currency reserves and the Abacha family itself accumulated a fortune estimated at \$5 billion through massive corruption. During his rule, Nigeria dominated the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and sent Nigerian troops into Liberia and Sierra Leone on "peacekeeping" missions.

50 years ago: US military begins new Laos bombing campaign

On November 15, 1968, the US military began Operation Commando Hunt, with the mission of destroying the Ho Chi Minh trail, the main supply route from North Vietnam through parts of Laos and into South Vietnam to the liberation forces fighting the US occupation regime and its Saigon puppets.

This new operation came just weeks after President Johnson had announced a temporary cessation of direct bombing of the North. This bombing halt simply allowed the US to shift all its resources to bombing southern Laos in an attempt to disrupt the trail. Given that the physical destruction of the entire trail was impossible, Commando Hunt was meant to slow the flow of goods by destroying trucks and other means of supply.

The result was over three million tons of explosives being dropped almost constantly for just under three years. The bombing destroyed villages and turned hundreds of thousands of people into refugees. Even years after the bombings stopped, many civilians have been killed by bombs that did not initially explode on impact with the ground but were triggered when dug up, often times by children.

Despite the massive onslaught of bombs, Operation Commando Hunt was largely ineffective. The North Vietnamese army had great success in camouflaging the near 2000-mile Ho Chi Minh trail from US planes. Even when a piece of the trail was successfully hit it was easily repaired. The transport routes were constantly being maintained and expanded, both with vast labor armies, and with more modern construction machinery imported from the Soviet Union and other eastern bloc countries.

75 years ago: Nazi troops capture the Greek island of Leros

On November 16, 1943, Allied forces, including British and Italian troops, surrendered control of the Greek island of Leros to Nazi troops after over a month of fighting. The seizure of the garrison island was part of a broader scramble between the German regime and the Allied powers over control of the strategically critical Dodecanese islands in the Aegean Sea.

On September 3, a new Italian government, formed after the ouster of fascist dictator Benito Mussolini by the king and sections of the military, signed an armistice with the Allies, after the mass landing of British, US and Canadian troops. Italian forces, which had occupied many of the Dodecanese islands on behalf of Mussolini's regime, largely surrendered to the Allies.

German troops, based in occupied Greece, were mobilized to prevent the loss of the islands. At the same time, the Third Reich orchestrated Mussolini's escape from prison, and the establishment of a fascist Italian Social Republic in the northern and central Italy, propped up by the German military.

Beginning on September 26, the German air force carried out a massive bombardment of Leros. They sank three Allied warships on the first day of battle, and wiped out much of the island's civilian and military infrastructure over the following two weeks.

On November 12, German warships landed on the north-east coast of the island. The fascist troops were able to reach shore successfully in part as a result of confusion among Allies forces. They were able to seize several Italian batteries. Over the following days, hundreds of German parachutists were deployed to the area, aiding in the consolidation of military dominance in the center of the island.

The following days were dominated by heavy fighting, resulting in significant casualties on both sides. On November 16, British troops formally surrendered after it became clear that their position was hopeless.

100 years ago: First American pro-Bolshevik newspaper is published

On November 16, 1918, members of the left wing of the American Socialist Party began to publish the *Revolutionary Age* to explain the ideas of Bolshevism to socialist-minded American workers. The weekly newspaper was initially published out of the Boston branch of the Socialist Party, where the left was in control, but soon moved to New York.

The editor was Louis Fraina, who had immigrated from Italy at the age of five and joined Daniel De Leon's Socialist Labor Party as a teenager and the Socialist Party in 1917 based on its opposition to the war. He met Leon Trotsky, who had played a pivotal role in defining the antiwar position of the American party, during the latter's stay in New York in the first months of 1917.

A revolutionary left wing in the Socialist Party had coalesced around the journal *Class Struggle* after May 1917, in which Fraina played a leading part. In 1918 Fraina was the first to edit and publish a book of post-revolutionary writings of Lenin and Trotsky, *The Proletarian Revolution in Russia*.

Contributing editors of the *Revolutionary Age* included *Class Struggle* editor Ludwig Lore, who had worked with Trotsky on the antiwar statement of the Socialist Party, and socialist journalist John Reed, who had just finished writing his monumental eye-witness account of the Russian Revolution, *Ten Days That Shook The World*. Both Fraina and Reed would help found the American Communist movement the next year.

The first issue of the *Revolutionary Age*, whose subtitle was *A Chronicle and Interpretation of the Events in Europe*, was entirely devoted to international affairs, included articles opposing imperialist intervention against Soviet Russia, an explanation of the Soviet system and an analysis of the November Revolution in Germany.

In 1919 the *Revolutionary Age* would be absorbed into the *New York Communist*. Among the many socialists whom for whom it clarified the basic ideas and policies of the Bolsheviks was the 28-year old James P. Cannon, a future founding member of the Communist Party and later the founder of the American Trotskyist movement. Cannon remarked decades later, that though the publication had Fraina's stamp of "romanticism and sectarian rigidity upon it," the journal helped him (Cannon was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World at the time) in "completely revising my syndicalist views."



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