

This week in history: October 28-November 3

28 October 2019

25 years ago: Susan Smith confesses to killing her children

On November 3, 1994, Susan Smith confessed to murdering her three-year-old and one-year-old sons, Michael and Alexander, in South Carolina. Smith, who was white, had previously told police that she was carjacked at a red light by an armed black man who drove away in the vehicle with her children. Her impassioned pleas were broadcast across national media outlets for nine days during an extensive search operation until she admitted to fabricating the story and driving her children into a lake, where their bodies were found drowned in her vehicle.

The crime, and the furor over it, revealed much that was rotten in American society. The utter intellectual and moral bankruptcy of the corporate-controlled media was on particular display. When Smith attempted to blame a black carjacker for her crime she was saying “what she figured the authorities would want to hear and believe,” David Walsh wrote in the *International Workers Bulletin*, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*. “It fit the bill: the assault on the urban poor, anti-crime hysteria, and the whipping up of racism.” (“An American Nightmare,” November 14.)

For days, the media, seizing on the image of a bereft mother, promoted the climate of fear and anger toward the urban poor. However, once Smith confessed to the crime, it shifted gears, focusing on “how much evil can lurk in even a mother’s heart,” as *Newsweek* intoned. No attempt was made in the deluge of coverage to consider what the episode actually revealed about the state of American society and culture.

Smith’s father, an unemployed textile worker, shot himself in the head when she was 8 years old. After her mother remarried, her stepfather, a prominent local member of the right-wing Christian Coalition, molested her. As an adult, Smith also had serious financial problems. A 23-year-old single mother of two, she consistently fell short on income for her monthly bills and was still indebted to the doctor who delivered her second son. As an adult, Susan Smith found herself in the midst of an unhappy marriage. An extramarital affair with the son of her boss ended badly when he wrote her an email that he was “terminating” the relationship—his unwillingness “to assume the responsibilities of being a father” cited as one of the reasons for the break-up.

“Smith is a social type,” Walsh wrote. “There are many like her in America today. She is a lower middle class woman who has seen both poverty and comfort ... She lives in a society in which wealth and status are the measures of success. She saw her relationship with a most promising man slip away, at least partially on account of her children. She had very little to sustain her ... It is

not difficult to see how the combination of intense pressures, acting on someone who was essentially empty inside and unstable, could produce an unbearable and explosive psychic tension. This is the stuff of a Theodore Dreiser novel.”

50 years ago: Emílio Garrastazu Médici becomes president of Brazilian military dictatorship

On October 30, 1969, General Emílio Garrastazu Médici was sworn in as the new president of Brazil. The military president was the replacement for the military junta which had assumed direct rule at the end of August in order to prevent Brazil’s vice president, a civilian, from assuming the office of the presidency after the previous military dictator, President Arthur da Costa e Silva, became deathly ill.

With Médici’s rise to the country’s highest office came nearly 60 amendments to the Brazilian constitution that transferred virtually all power to the presidency.

The Brazilian military, backed by the Lyndon Johnson administration in the United States, first assumed rule of Brazil after a coup in 1964 overthrew the democratically elected civilian government. Since that time, the country was ruled by a series of dictators chosen from the top ranks of the military.

Médici was arguably one of the most ruthless of these military rulers. Under his regime, often referred to as the “years of lead,” strict press censorship was put in place, political opponents were arrested and tortured, and the death penalty was administered to those convicted of “subversion against the government.”

The worst violence was leveled against the various guerrilla movements that had formed since 1964 in opposition to the dictatorship. These movements included organizations like Ação Libertadora Nacional and Revolutionary Movement 8th October. The members of these organizations consisted generally of Stalinists and Maoists who broke with the Communist Party of Brazil after the party did not take up an armed struggle against the military regime. By the end of Médici’s presidency in 1974, virtually all of these guerrillas had been arrested or killed, bringing an end to the Araguaia Guerrilla War. Officially, many of the belligerents targeted by the dictatorship are still considered “missing.”

Inequality soared under Médici. While his presidency oversaw the “Brazilian Miracle,” the largest economic growth in the country’s history with annual GDP growth of around 10 percent, virtually all of the increased wealth accrued to the bourgeoisie and

the upper-middle classes. Meanwhile, inflation soared, effectively cutting the purchasing power of the average worker in half.

Médici maintained close ties to the Nixon administration and proved to be a useful tool to U.S. imperialism. In 2008, after formerly classified U.S. State Department documents were made public it was revealed that Médici had collaborated with and assisted the U.S.-backed 1973 coup against Chilean president Salvador Allende.

75 years ago: Slovak anti-Nazi uprising brutally repressed

On October 28, partisans of the Slovak resistance movement acknowledged that their attempt to oust German occupiers from the country and overthrow the Nazi-collaborationist government of Jozef Tiso had been defeated. The suppression of the uprising by the Slovak military and German SS soldiers included mass reprisals, and the killing of anyone suspected to have taken part.

Plans for a revolt had first been discussed in late 1943 by Edvard Beneš, leader of the Czechoslovak exile government in London. Various political tendencies were involved, including socialists and communists, as well as bourgeois nationalists.

The uprising began on August 29, targeting the city of Banská Bystrica. The initial effort was largely abortive, with most partisan troops involved being disarmed by Slovak government and German forces within several days.

A new offensive in early September under the leadership of Ján Golian was more successful, mobilizing an estimated 47,000 partisans and resulting in the capture, by September 10, of wide swathes of eastern and central Slovakia. The partisans included dissident divisions of the army, who were hostile to Tiso's close ties to the German government.

The Nazis responded brutally, transferring some 40,000 SS officers to Slovakia. They were involved in the mass round-up of some 20,000 Slovakian troops accused of having aided the Soviet Red Army and the partisan uprising. Over the following weeks, the uprising would be hampered by the stalling of the Red Army's summer offensive in the east. The Red Army was unable to enter Slovakia, and the Stalinist bureaucracy was widely accused of limiting aid to the country's rebel partisans.

On October 17, Germany began a counteroffensive, sending a further 35,000 troops to Slovakia from neighboring Hungary. In the course of heavy fighting, including guerrilla engagements, the partisans lost most of the territory they had held for the previous two months and were forced to retreat into the mountainous countryside.

The Nazis and their local collaborators carried out a series of massacres, murdering anyone suspected of involvement in the uprising and destroying some 93 villages accused of having aided it.

100 years ago: Nearly half a million US coal miners strike

On November 1, 1919, 425,000 coal miners in the United States struck in opposition to the leadership of the United Mine Workers (UMW) union.

A rank-and-file upsurge forced the union leadership to call a national convention of the union in Cleveland in September. Some 2,000 delegates called for a national strike to begin on November 1.

Miners had struck in the summer in the Illinois coalfields to protest the imprisonment of socialist workers' leader Tom Mooney. When the UMW enforced a stipulation in the contract with coal operators that they would be fined for an unauthorized strike, the miners began to hold meetings outside of and opposed to official union channels. They elected Policy Committees to discuss demands and called for the spreading of the strikes.

The miners' demands broadened to oppose the prolonging of the wartime "Washington Contract," which had heavy fines for striking and whose wage agreement was battered by post-war inflation, to 1920. A bitter fight against the union bureaucracy began, which included violent attacks on militant workers. But by the end of the summer, teams of militant miner "crusaders" had ranged though the state and nearly half of the 90,000 Illinois miners were on "unauthorized" strike.

President Wilson declared the November strike unlawful and Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer asked a federal judge to freeze the union's strike fund. The union was prevented from assisting miners and it sought to end the strike.

As historian Jeremy Brecher notes, "Acting President John L. Lewis ordered the strike call cancelled, declaring, 'We are Americans, we cannot fight our Government.'" Miners ignored him. As a fuel shortage began to grip the country, federal troops were called out to the coalfields in several states. Mines were reopened under martial law in North Dakota.

The strike only ended when Wilson proposed a 14 percent wage increase and arbitration. But 1920 saw more wildcat strikes and a particularly sharp situation emerging in West Virginia where coals miners, often in opposition to the UMW, sought to contest the power of the coal operators in the southern counties of the state, resulting in bloody encounters between company thugs and miners over the next several years.



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