

This week in history: November 18-24

18 November 2019

25 years ago: Hurricane Gordon dissipates after two weeks of destruction

On November 21, 1994, Hurricane Gordon dissipated over South Carolina after nearly two weeks of destruction throughout the Atlantic and Caribbean. The hurricane hit parts of Central America, the Cayman Islands, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Cuba, the Turks and Caicos islands, the Bahamas, and the southeastern US coast for nearly two weeks.

The final official death toll was 1,149, making Gordon the deadliest hurricane in the Atlantic since 1979. The vast majority of deaths occurred in Haiti—floods and mudslides destroyed entire communities, making an exact death count impossible. On November 19, officials in Haiti reported 531 deaths but within two days increased their estimate to upwards of 2,000. Six deaths were reported in Costa Rica, two in Panama, four in Jamaica, two in Cuba, five in the Dominican Republic, and eight in the United States.

The US had already stationed around 12,000 troops in Haiti prior to the hurricane during the ousting of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who were then called on to repair infrastructure to get supplies and resources disbursed in the aftermath. In Costa Rica, President Jose Maria Figueres declared a state of emergency due to flooding that destroyed 70 houses, leaving 4,000 people homeless. The flooding also hit Panama and Nicaragua.

In the US, Gordon spawned six tornadoes that touched down in Florida. The worst tornado destroyed a mobile home park in Brevard County, injured 40 people and killed an elderly man. An estimated \$275 million worth of crops were destroyed, causing vegetable prices to increase across the country. Internationally the damage was assessed at \$594 million.

Most of the deaths in Haiti occurred in Port au Prince, Jacmel and Léogâne. The impact of the hurricane was compounded by poverty, lack of resources, poor infrastructure and capitalist destruction of the environment. Major deforestation stripped Haiti of its tree coverage, leaving mountain slopes completely open for a deluge of rainwater to flood down and sweep away everything in its path. Flood-prone denuded hillsides housed large communities of impoverished people living in poorly-constructed shacks, washed away in the mudslides and flooding.

50 years ago: Native American group begins occupation of Alcatraz island

On November 20, 1969, a group of about 90 Native Americans led by Richard Oakes sailed small boats across San Francisco Bay and began an occupation of Alcatraz Island, site of the notorious Alcatraz Federal Penitentiary, which had closed in 1963. The occupation, which demanded that the largely abandoned island be turned over to Native Americans, lasted for 19 months and involved, at its peak, about 400 people.

The group behind the occupation, Indians of All Tribes (IOAT), believed that Alcatraz belonged to Native Americans by virtue of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie between the US government and the Lakota tribe. The treaty included a stipulation that abandoned and unused federal land could be reclaimed and turned over to natives.

Since Alcatraz had been declared surplus federal property in 1964 after the prison's closing, Oakes and his followers believed that it qualified to be transferred to native control. IOAT wanted to transform the island into a Native American resource and cultural center where American Indians could study their history and receive economic assistance. The group set up a governing council and a school for the children of the occupiers.

The occupation was also a protest against the US government's "Indian Termination Policy." The policy consisted of various laws that, beginning in the 1940s, sought to end the semi-sovereign status of the Indian nations on the federal reservation system, and assimilate their populations. Under termination, the government also began withdrawing large amounts of aid that reservations relied upon in order to force Native Americans off their territories into larger cities to find work.

The results of the termination policy were catastrophic. According to US census data, in 1969 over one-half of Native American families lived below the poverty line. These conditions drew many young and militant Native Americans into the "Red Power" movements like IOAT and the American Indian Movement (AIM). Most of the occupiers on the island were young Native American students.

In a message to the Department of the Interior after the occupation began, Oakes said, "We invite the United States to acknowledge the justice of our claim. The choice now lies with the leaders of the American government—to use violence upon us as before to remove us from our Great Spirit's land, or to institute a real change in its dealing with the American Indian."

Over time, however, maintaining the occupation became increasingly difficult. The US Coast Guard would routinely seize boats headed to Alcatraz with food and other supplies and the island's electricity was shut off. Maintaining a regular supply of clean water was a constant problem. Conditions were unstable and sometimes deadly. Oakes himself left the occupation in January

1970 after his daughter died in an accident falling from a high ledge. In June 1971, the final 15 remaining protesters were removed by federal agents.

75 years ago: Allied forces capture German town

On November 19, 1944, the British Second Army secured control of Geilenkirchen, a German town in North Rhine-Westphalia, near the border with the Netherlands. The successful offensive, aimed at establishing a base of operations for further incursions into Germany, underscored the military crisis of the Nazi regime and heightened the anticipation of a full-scale Allied invasion.

The capture of the town was part of a joint US-British offensive dubbed Operation Clipper. Its aim was to remove German defensive forces of the Geilenkirchen salient as the precursor to a broader operation to take control of the Roer Valley and the Hürtgen Forest.

Operation Clipper was launched early in the morning of November 18. The plan was for a two-pronged offensive, involving the use of specialized British weaponry, including flame-throwing tanks, dubbed “Churchill Crocodiles,” and fast-advancing US troops. It began with an artillery bombardment of German positions, then attacks by British infantry and tanks. They rapidly secured strategically important high ground east of the town. Over the following two days, the German forces mounted an unsuccessful counterattack, only temporarily halting the British and US advance.

On November 19, Geilenkirchen was taken by British troops. German artillery bombardments over the following days targeted the route to Tripsrath, the destination of an intended Allied supply route. Allied troops secured control of the hamlet of Bauchem on November 20, after a concentrated four-hour artillery barrage. Sürgerath was also rapidly cleared. Over the following week, heavy rain, creating too much mud for tanks to pass through, and determined German defenses, prevented the US troops from advancing onto the town of Würm, their intended final destination in the operation.

Despite this, the seizure of Geilenkirchen and the eventual opening of supply lines to forward positions, including Tripsrath, created the conditions for further assaults on German territory.

The Anglo-American Operation Queen, aimed against the Ruhr River would be launched in late November. It dragged on for two months of heavy fighting, before the US and British troops involved reached the Ruhr and attempted to take control of its dams. A successful German counterattack, involving massive resources, would compel the Allies to temporarily retreat and to suspend offensive operations inside Germany until February 1945.

The fall of Geilenkirchen, however, was symptomatic of a broader crisis of the fascist military forces throughout Europe. Throughout 1944, the Soviet Red Army made a series of advances across Eastern Europe, liberating major towns and cities that had been under the yoke of the Third Reich for a number of years. In

Southern Europe, the last German troops were evacuated from Greece in the early weeks of November, following their defeat by the country’s anti-fascist partisans. In Western Europe, French forces liberated Strasbourg in late November, ousting the Nazis from a symbolically significant city near the border with Germany and paving the way for further offensive operations.

100 years ago: US Senate fails to ratify Treaty of Versailles

On November 19, 1919, The United States Senate failed to secure the two-thirds majority needed to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, which had been negotiated by the Allied imperialist victors of World War I at the Paris Peace Conference that June. The failure was a devastating defeat for US President Woodrow Wilson, who had tied the fate of his administration to the United States agreeing to join the League of Nations.

The Treaty was negotiated by the British, French and Americans, and imposed on Germany, the main defeated power, onerous reparations and disarmament that were contributing factors to the rise of the Nazis in the next decade. The Treaty also set up a framework for the regulation of inter-imperialist rivalries by dividing up the colonial spoils of war and by providing for common military intervention against disturbances against the imperialist order. This would be overseen by the League of Nations, a body Lenin aptly called a “thieves’ kitchen.”

Participation in the League was the main issue dividing the American ruling class. President Wilson, a Democrat, advocated for the treaty and would not accept any compromise with Republicans, who controlled the Senate after the election of 1918, or with defectors from his own party. Although Wilson’s opponents had a range of objections to the treaty, the ones that drew the most hostility were the provisions in the League’s charter that allowed the League to decide on military intervention independent of a vote by the US Congress.

With the failure of ratification, the United States signed a separate peace treaty with Germany and did not become a member of the League of Nations.



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