

This week in history: November 25–December 1

25 November 2019

25 years ago: US House passes General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

On November 30, 1994, the US House of Representatives passed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) by a 288 to 146 vote. The lame-duck meeting of the Democratic-controlled House sent President Bill Clinton's legislation to implement an expanded GATT to the Senate for a final vote. Majorities of both Democrats and Republicans supported the trade pact.

Hailed by Clinton as a "historic vote for American workers, farmers and families," the bill passed on a bipartisan level because the vast majority of American big business stood to gain from the lowering of trade barriers and tariffs. Equally decisive was the concern in the ruling class that defeat of the bill would send shock waves through world financial markets and trigger a collapse of confidence in the already shaky US dollar.

The official debate on GATT reflected differences within the capitalist class. The starting point of both camps was how to safeguard the profits and markets of American corporations. The treaty was part of ongoing efforts of the ruling classes of the major imperialist powers to maintain their dominance of the vast majority of the world's population.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy allied itself with the most right-wing forces in American politics, opposing the bill from a nationalist, backward perspective based on the pipedream of an isolated and self-sufficient American economy. In addition to the AFL-CIO, the official anti-GATT lineup included Jesse Jackson, Ralph Nader, Patrick Buchanan, Jesse Helms, billionaire Ross Perot and House Democratic Whip David Bonior.

Providing a "left" cover for the right-wing lineup were the various Stalinist and middle class radical groups. In opposition to this, the Workers League, forerunner of the Socialist Equality Party, opposed GATT on the basis of socialist internationalism. Global integration of the world economy on a capitalist basis meant the driving down of wages and living standards for the working class internationally in a race to the bottom, in which workers from different countries were pitted against each other by their respective ruling class.

50 years ago: Trial and cover-up of the My Lai Massacre

On November 25, 1969, the first reports emerged in the press that a low-ranking US Army officer, Lieutenant William Calley Jr., would be charged by a military court for killing 109 men, women and children at My Lai, South Vietnam, in March 1968. The charges against Calley were an attempt at damage control after the massacre at My Lai had been made public by journalist Seymour Hersh one week earlier.

Hersh's investigation had revealed that over 500 Vietnamese civilians were slaughtered in the South Vietnamese village of My Lai. The report shocked millions of Americans, who were horrified to learn the truth of the nature of the war. Already, workers and students had expressed their opposition to the Vietnam War by participating in mass demonstrations. Yet, the orientation of many of the demonstrations was to oppose the war on the basis of the numbers of American soldiers who had been killed. By November 1969 over 40,000 Americans had died in Vietnam.

The My Lai Massacre revealed the far greater death toll being inflicted on Vietnamese civilians. The most accurate studies on the war conservatively estimate that at least two million Vietnamese civilians were killed during the time that US forces were actively fighting.

Most of the civilian deaths were from those living in South Vietnam, the people the United States were ostensibly "protecting." My Lai revealed that the United States was carrying out a massive campaign of terror against an unarmed and defenseless population.

The US government initially sought to cover up the My Lai Massacre like countless other such killings. However, once the story became widely known, military officials attempted to portray the murders as the actions of one man, William Calley, and not as one element of a systematic policy of mass killing.

Calley was singled out in the investigation as the lowest ranking officer involved in the killings. Initially over 26 individuals were named in the Army's investigation. But only Calley would face charges. Calley, did in fact kill over 100 Vietnamese civilians at My Lai, according to the court martial which found him guilty. But later independent investigations into the slaughter found that Calley was one of many soldiers

who had been ordered by his superiors to “kill anything that moves” as they entered villages to carry out search and destroy missions.

Originally sentenced to life in prison for the “premeditated murder of not fewer than twenty people,” Calley would serve just three years under house arrest after President Nixon commuted his sentence. He remains the only person ever convicted for the deaths at My Lai.

75 years ago: Himmler orders destruction of Auschwitz crematoria

On November 26, 1944, Heinrich Himmler, the chief of German police and director of the Reich Main Security Office for the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler, ordered preparations to be made for destruction of the crematoria at the Auschwitz concentration camp, at which nearly one million Jews had been murdered.

The order was an ultimately unsuccessful bid to cover up evidence of Nazi war crimes, amid major advances by Britain, the US and the Soviet Union, which demonstrated that Germany’s military defeat was near.

In July, Soviet troops had overrun the Majdanek concentration camp in the Polish city of Lublin, before the German SS officers who operated the facility had time to destroy evidence of their mass murder. Over the following weeks and months, the Soviet and Allied press widely publicized what had been discovered at the camp, including mass graves, thousands of starving prisoners and partially intact crematoria.

The Auschwitz concentration camp had initially been established to hold Polish political prisoners, after the country was occupied by the Nazis in 1939. The first gassings of Soviet and Polish prisoners took place in 1941. With the launching of the Nazi’s genocidal “final solution” program, the camp became the site of unprecedented state mass murder.

Over the course of the war, 1.3 million people were deported to the camp, with some 1.1 million perishing. An estimated 960,000 Jews were killed at the camp. 865,000 had been gassed immediately upon their arrival.

In early October, two divisions of the Sonderkommando, comprised of prisoners forced to do work at the camp, launched a rebellion which won widespread support. It was brutally suppressed by the SS, with torture and mass reprisals taking place.

Himmler’s call for the destruction of the crematoria took place in the context of Soviet advances into Poland and across Eastern Europe. In January 1945, the remaining prisoners at Auschwitz would be taken on death marches to other concentration camps, where the vast majority of them were

murdered. Soviet troops would liberate Auschwitz in late January 1945. In the preceding days, the Nazis set much of the camp on fire and sought to blow up the crematoria.

100 years ago: Bulgaria signs peace treaty with Allied imperialist powers and Balkan states

On November 27, 1919, as a result of the Paris Peace Conference in the aftermath of the First World War, the Kingdom of Bulgaria signed a treaty with France, Britain, the United States and surrounding states such as Yugoslavia, Greece and Romania at Neuilly-sur-Seine, a suburb of Paris.

Bulgaria ceded Western Thrace to the authority of the imperialist powers, who eventually awarded the territory to Greece. This removed Bulgaria’s only outlet to the Aegean. The kingdom also ceded four smaller areas to the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (Yugoslavia), one which included a strategic position overlooking the Bulgarian capital, Sofia. Dobruja, a region between the Danube River and the Black Sea, was ceded to Romania. The Bulgarian army was reduced to 20,000 soldiers and Bulgaria was forced to pay 100 million British pounds in reparations.

During the Balkan wars of 1911–13, Bulgaria had played an aggressive role, first against the Ottoman Turks and then against its erstwhile allies, Greece and Serbia, in an attempt to become the leading regional power in the Balkans. Instead the Kingdom found itself exhausted and isolated.

Any regional role became impossible for Bulgaria without outside imperialist influence, and, after first declaring neutrality, the country was drawn into the First World War on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary in October 1915.



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