

This week in history: October 19–25

18 October 2020

25 years ago: Mass protest in Okinawa against US military

On Oct. 21, 1995, an estimated 85,000 residents of Okinawa demonstrated to demand reduction in the US military presence in Japan. The rally was sparked by outrage over the rape of a 12-year-old school girl by US soldiers, fanned by Japanese nationalist politicians, including the island's Governor Masahide Ota.

At the time, half of the 45,000 US soldiers in Japan were stationed in Okinawa, a small island with a total population of 1 million. There had been mounting opposition to the island's use as a military base, which included live artillery shelling, parachute landings and military use of harbors and airfields.

A resolution approved at the rally stopped short of calling for a total US withdrawal, but did urge a reduction in land use and a revision of the agreement that set rules for American troops stationed in Japan. The resolution condemned the "occupation mentality" of US forces which encouraged soldiers to commit "brutal crimes."

American officials apologized for the crime that led to the demonstration and simultaneously refused to withdraw its military presence from the region. US Defense Secretary William J. Perry stated that they could not close down an entire base. Ambassador and former Vice President Walter Mondale told the *New York Times* that the military base could not close because it "provides stability in the region. The Cold War ended in Europe, but it has not quite ended here."

The three American soldiers went on trial in Okinawa on Nov. 7. The main offender, US Navy Seaman Marcus Gill, pleaded guilty to rape, while the other two, US Marines Rodrico Harp and Kendrick Ledet, pleaded guilty to conspiracy. All three served their terms in Japanese prisons and were released in 2003.

The demonstration was unprecedented in size, the largest until another violent incident in 2016 led to a similar protest to demand demilitarization after the rape and murder of a 20-year-old woman by an American military contractor.

50 years ago: Martial law in Quebec

On Oct. 16, 1970, Canada's House of Commons passed a resolution endorsing the use of the War Measures Act that had been imposed in Montreal by Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. The move was a declaration of martial law in Montreal after a kidnapping plot had captured a British government official and

killed Quebec Vice Premier Pierre Laporte. This was the only time the War Measures Act had been invoked in Canada while the government was not officially at war.

Earlier in October members of the terrorist separatist organization Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) kidnapped the British Trade Commissioner James Richard Cross. The kidnapping set off a massive crisis in the Canadian province which would see federal military forces deployed to Montreal and other areas.

The FLQ demanded that a number of their members be released from prison in exchange for Cross. In the late 1960s the FLQ had staged a number of bombings targeting military buildings and other Canadian federal property. The most notable were bombs that were detonated at the Montreal Stock Exchange and the home of Montreal's mayor in 1969.

In the days after the kidnapping of Cross the FLQ manifesto was broadcast over the CBC and other major media outlets. The manifesto stated, "The Front de libération du Québec wants total independence for Quebecers, united in a free society and purged for good of the clique of voracious sharks, the patronizing 'big bosses' and their henchmen who have made Quebec their private hunting ground for 'cheap labor' and unscrupulous exploitation."

A second kidnapping was staged on Oct. 10 where Laporte was taken by the FLQ. Shortly after he was taken captive, the FLQ killed him, though this was not revealed until one week later. After news of the killing spread, the government heightened its military response to the kidnappings and began mobilizing thousands of troops to Montreal. Prime Minister Trudeau became actively involved in putting down the FLQ. In response to a reporter who asked Trudeau how far he was willing to go, the Prime Minister responded, "Just watch me."

The terrorist attacks by FLQ were used as the pretext for a massive crackdown against the working class and left-wing parties. By the end of the crisis nearly 500 people were arrested including artists, union leaders, and journalists, and over 3,000 police raids were conducted, mostly in Montreal.

Among those arrested were Michel Chartrand, leader of the largest trade union in Montreal, members of the Saint-Henri workers committee, members of Ligue Socialiste Ouvrière, the Internationalists, a Maoist party, and many others who had no connections to FLQ. Essentially anyone who was identified with radical politics or willing to speak out against the War Measures Act became a target for arrest.

Cross was eventually released on Dec. 4 after an agreement was reached to allow five members of FLQ to be exiled to Cuba. Three leading members involved in the kidnapping, Paul Rose, Jacques Rose and Francis Simard, were arrested and later charged with Laporte's murder. Federal troops remained in Quebec until

January 1971.

75 years ago: French Stalinists win largest vote in legislative election

On Oct. 21, 1945, national elections were held for a new legislative assembly tasked with drafting a constitution for a fourth French republic, less than a year after the liberation of the country from German occupation, and some five months after the defeat of the Nazi regime marked the end of World War II in Europe.

The election was held amid mass anti-fascist sentiment and rising working-class militancy throughout Europe. The Allied powers, primarily Britain and the United States, and the French ruling elite, headed by General Charles de Gaulle, were desperate to stabilize capitalist rule in that country, after the establishment had been discredited by its support for the Vichy regime, which had collaborated with the Nazis in the imposition of fascist rule.

Reflecting the developing political radicalization, a three-party alliance of the French Communist Party (PCF), the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO) and the Popular Republican Movement (MRP) swept the election.

The PCF, headed by Maurice Thorez, won the largest share of the vote, securing more than five million ballots, over 26 percent of the total. The MRP received almost 25 percent of the votes and the SFIO close to 24 percent. The election was also marked by the collapse of the Radicals, one of the dominant bourgeois "left" parties of pre-war French politics. Their vote fell to just eleven percent, amid mass anger over their role in facilitating the establishment of the Vichy regime. Openly right-wing parties also received negligible support.

The PCF-SFIO-MRP coalition joined with de Gaulle in calling for a "yes" vote on a referendum, tied to the election of the French National Assembly, asking whether it should be empowered with the mandate to draft a new constitution. This passed with an overwhelming majority.

The support of the PCF for the official elections and the establishment of a new capitalist government in France was a key component of betrayals of the working class by the Stalinists throughout Europe. The Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union had agreed with the Allied powers to restabilize bourgeois rule throughout Western Europe, in exchange for the carving out of its own sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. This entailed the suppression of mass struggles in a host of countries, and open alliance with right-wing capitalist politicians such as de Gaulle.

In this reactionary campaign, the Stalinists cynically traded on the prestige of the Soviet Red Army, after its decisive role in the defeat of the Nazis, and widespread support for the resistance movements in countries such as France, in order to prevent a revolution.

On Oct. 25, 1920, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Italian government of Giovanni Giolitti signed the Accord of al-Rajma with the Senussi Order, an Arab religious order and clan that originated in Mecca, in what is now Saudi Arabia.

Italy, which had colonial ambitions in Libya and had fought the Senussi since 1911, ceded Cyrenaica, a region in the east of the country, to Idris, one of the leaders of the order. The accord granted Idris a monthly stipend by the Italian government but required that he disarm his troops, which he never did. Fezzan, a largely desert region in the south remained under the military control of Italy.

In the north of the country, an independent Arab-controlled state, the Tripolitanian Republic, which had been declared in 1919, was disintegrating and by 1922 Idris absorbed the republic into Cyrenaica, directly flouting Italian interests. Idris was forced into exile in Egypt in 1922 when fascist leader Benito Mussolini came to power in Italy.

In 1923, Italian imperialism began its bitter colonial "pacification" war to suppress Libyan independence. The war, which lasted until 1931, when the Senussi leader Omar al-Mukhtar was captured and hanged, was a "classic genocide" in the words of one historian.

Italian troops bombed Libyans with chemical weapons and executed prisoners of war. Over a quarter of the population of 225,000 were killed. Nearly 100,000 nomadic peoples, mostly women and children, were forcibly expelled from Cyrenaica in 1931 and marched across the desert to concentration camps near Benghazi. Italian troops shot stragglers.

After the defeat of Italian imperialism by the Allies in the Second World War, Idris returned from exile and ruled the nation as its king from 1951 to 1969, when he was overthrown by Muammar Gaddafi's Free Officers Movement.



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100 years: Italian accord grants parts of Libya to Arab ruler