

This week in history: November 23-29

22 November 2020

25 years ago: Irish voters legalize divorce

On November 24, 1995, Irish voters approved an amendment to the constitution to permit divorce. The referendum vote was approved by a narrow margin—50.3 percent to 49.7 percent, or a mere 9,000 votes. Some 1.6 million people, 61 percent of those eligible, voted on the issue. The amendment was proposed by the Fine Gael-Labour Party-Democratic Left government of John Bruton.

Until the referendum, Ireland, long dominated by reactionary Roman Catholic clergy, was the only Western country that prohibited the legal dissolution of marriages. At the time there were an estimated 80,000 people who found themselves in broken marriages but could not divorce.

Because of the close margin, an official recount was ordered but the percentages held. Dublin, home to approximately one-third of the country's population, voted heavily for legalizing divorce. Rural areas voted mostly against but gave more support to the measure than a similar one that was defeated two-to-one in 1986.

The Roman Catholic Church carried out a fierce campaign against the proposal in the overwhelmingly Catholic country. The anti-divorce camp placed ads in the media that declared "YOU WILL PAY!" And "Hello, Divorce. Bye-Bye, Daddy."

Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa weighed in with appeals for a "no" vote. A church spokesman declared that if divorce were legalized, Catholics who divorced and remarried would be denied the sacraments.

50 years ago: Yukio Mishima commits suicide after failed coup attempt in Japan

On November 25, 1970, Yukio Mishima, a famous Japanese artist, attempted to lead a military coup against the government of Japan to restore the emperor to his pre-WWII status as the head of state and as the earthly manifestation of a God-like being.

Mishima was a leading member of the right-wing *Tatenokai* (Shield Society) militia that operated within the Japanese Self-Defense Forces. He was opposed to the limitations put on Japan and its military by the United States after World War II and hoped to spark a restoration of the old empire to combat the leftward movement of Japanese workers and youth. The coup came in response to Zenkyoto student demonstrations in 1968, which were led in part by the Japanese Communist Party.

Leading a small group of *Tatenokai* members, Mishima visited the commandant of the Self-Defense Force Tokyo headquarters, which would not have been unusual. Once inside they barricaded themselves in the commandant's office and took him hostage. Shortly after, Mishima walked out onto a balcony and delivered a speech to a group of soldiers who had gathered below. The speech was a right-wing and anticommunist diatribe calling on the Self-Defense Force to take control of the government and begin a process of reestablishing a militarist society and ancient cultural practices.

After he failed to win the soldiers to back him in the coup, Mishima returned inside and committed *seppuku*, a form of ritualistic suicide performed by samurai.

Mishima was one of the most well-known artists in postwar Japan. He won a number of awards and was a finalist for the Nobel prize in literature in 1963. His early works depicted desperate individuals who, shunned by a dishonest society, often turned to suicide. In one of his best-known works, *The Sound of Waves*, Mishima depicts a utopia where traditional Japanese culture is practiced unopposed.

As he progressed through his career, Mishima developed increasingly fascistic beliefs about Japanese society and its past. Among his writings is a short story entitled "The Voices of the Heroic Dead," in which he praises soldiers who died in an earlier coup on February 26, 1936, and a play entitled *My Friend Hitler*. In 1967 Mishima volunteered to join the Japanese Self-Defense Force, and a year later he founded the *Tatenokai*.

In the aftermath of Mishima's coup attempt, his followers formed a number of new right-wing groups, including the fascist-minded *Issuikai*. These extreme right-wing groups

continue to hail Mishima as the model of their ideals.

75 years ago: People's Republic of Yugoslavia proclaimed

On November 29, 1945, the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia was proclaimed following the successful repulsion of Nazi Germany's attempt to subjugate the country, and Germany's defeat in World War II in May. The establishment of the republic involved the deposing of King Peter II and the end of the Karađorđević dynasty that he headed. It was the outcome of a mass partisan struggle against fascism.

Early in 1941, Prince Regent Paul had declared that Yugoslavia would join with the fascist regimes of Italy, Japan and Germany. Several days later, the British orchestrated a coup that scuttled the alignment with the Axis Powers and installed the 17-year-old Peter II as king. Germany responded by launching an offensive in April 1941, which rapidly overwhelmed the defenses of the kingdom. Parts of Yugoslavia were then annexed by Italy, Bulgaria, Hungary and Germany, while the Third Reich established puppet governments in Croatia and Serbia.

The brutal fascist assault provoked massive popular opposition. Socialist workers and peasants of all the nationalities joined the struggle. Intense guerilla fighting, involving tens and even hundreds of thousands of Yugoslav partisans, won widespread support. In early 1945, the partisans initiated a general offensive that succeeded in expelling the fascist powers.

The Allies, led by Britain, had pushed for the maintenance of the Yugoslav monarchy after Germany's defeat. After months of uncertainty, the monarchy was dissolved at the initiative of the People's Front, dominated by the Communist Party of Marshal Josip Broz Tito.

Unlike elsewhere in Eastern Europe, the defeat of the fascists had not primarily been carried out by the Soviet Union's Red Army. This gave developments in Yugoslavia a relatively independent character, as opposed to the countries where Moscow was able to gradually impose Stalinist bureaucracies modeled on that of the USSR.

Tito was nevertheless a confirmed Stalinist, who had been involved in murderous purges against dissidents in the Yugoslav Communist Party. While his regime would carry out public works programs and other initiatives that would raise living standards, it was hostile to the independent mobilization of the working class and based on the nationalist and anti-Marxist perspective of "socialism in one

country."

100 years: American unions seek to halt immigration

On November 27, 1920, The American Federation of Labor (AFL), the largest confederation of unions in the United States, issued a call for the complete halt to immigration for two years. The AFL's journal, the *Federationist*, published an article that called on local unions to appoint committees to approach local congressmen to "insist upon the protection that Congress should give our people."

The United States was entering into a recession and millions of workers were now unemployed. The AFL, an organization primarily of skilled workers ruled by the reactionary bureaucracy of Samuel Gompers, had given its full support to the Wilson administration during the war to keep workers on the job.

The year 1919 was one of enormous labor struggles that produced a nationalist reaction in the US by the ruling elite and the trade union leaders. The government launched the infamous Palmer Raids to suppress left-wing dissent in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution. The newly formed Communist movement was driven underground, and thousands of immigrants were deported because of their left-wing political views.

More fundamentally, the AFL leaders had seen the radicalizing impact of millions of new immigrant workers on the American working class itself, which threatened to undermine their privileged position. Immigrant workers had played a key role in the great 1919 steel strike, whose principal leader, William Z. Foster, was to join the Communist Party.

The campaign of the AFL influenced the passing of the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, which not only restricted immigration but set quotas for various national groups, in particular for immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe who had been among the most militant workers in the United States.



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