

This week in history: November 30-December 6

29 November 2020

25 years ago: Former dictator Roh Tae-woo jailed in South Korea

On December 5, 1995, Roh Tae-woo, South Korea's former military ruler, was indicted along with seven prominent corporate executives on charges involving more than \$370 million in bribes paid to Roh's political slush fund.

Roh and his predecessor, General Chun Doo-hwan, were both jailed. In addition to the bribery charges, they were expected to be indicted in connection to the 1979 coup that brought General Chun to power, and the bloody suppression of an uprising against the dictatorship in Kwangju in 1980.

Then Chun's military chief, Roh personally supervised the massacre, which claimed the lives of several hundred workers and students. Opposition leader Kim Dae-jung, who became president in 1998, was indicted for instigating the rebellion and only escaped execution after a storm of international protest.

The indicted corporate chiefs included the heads of Daewoo and Samsung, both among the largest conglomerates in Asia. Significantly, though charged with similar crimes as Roh, they both were allowed to remain free while awaiting their trials.

The president, Kim Young-sam, was elected in 1993 as the result of a deal struck with Chun and Roh. A former "pro-democracy" leader, Kim became the candidate of the ruling Democratic Liberal Party (DLP) and agreed to protect the pair from rising demands for their prosecution for the crimes of the dictatorship.

When the slush fund revelations surfaced, Kim himself faced the specter of being caught up in the scandal. His party, the DLP, was suspected of having received \$72 million from Roh. In an effort to prevent the fall of his own government, Kim turned against his predecessors.

Kim Dae-jung called for National Assembly hearings to investigate President Kim. There were also rumors of a new military coup. In August 1996, both Roh and Chun were convicted of treason, mutiny, and corruption. Chun was sentenced to death, which was later commuted to a sentence of life imprisonment. Roh's original 22½-year imprisonment was reduced on appeal to 17 years. By 1997, both had been pardoned and released from prison by Kim Young-sam.

50 years ago: Military trial of Basque separatists begins in Spain

On December 3, 1970 the mass trial of 16 members of the Basque separatist organization Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty, or ETA) began in Burgos. The Spanish dictatorship accused the defendants of killing Melitón Manzanás, a high-ranking officer in the Franco regime known for collaborating with Nazi Germany during WWII and for torturing political prisoners.

The ETA assassinated Manzanás on August 2, 1968, in retaliation for the killing of ETA member Txabi Etxebarrieta by the Guardia Civil on June 7, 1968, in Tolosa. The Spanish dictatorship responded to Manzanás' assassination by ordering martial law in Gipuzkoa province, where the ETA operated, and rounding up alleged members.

In addition to those who carried out Manzanás' killing, the leadership of ETA was charged with murder and forced to stand before a military tribunal. The predetermined verdict was a death sentence for six of the most prominent defendants, and long prison sentences for the rest.

Spanish workers opposed the trial. They saw it not as an attack against ETA and the Basque

nationalists alone, but as an assault on democratic rights. The day the trial opened, over 100,000 workers in Spain went on strike in opposition to the Franco government, paralyzing the major industries. In response the fascist regime declared a three-month state of emergency and deployed militarized police to suppress demonstrations.

The defense of the 16 ETA members was led by Gregorio Peces-Barba, who would later be one of the co-writers of the 1978 Spanish constitution. Knowing that the trial was a sham but that it had attracted the attention of an international audience, the defense used the opportunity to criticize the Franco regime. In the trial's first days the defendants made political statements and reported that they had been tortured. The tribunal responded by banning the defendants from reading any statements. Near the end of the trial one defendant, Mario Onaindia, attempted to attack the tribunal officers with an axe but was quickly subdued by guards.

The verdict of the trial was made official on December 28th.

Two days later, fearing continued strikes and opposition from the working class, as well as growing international pressure, Franco commuted the six death penalties to 30 years in prison.

75 years ago: General Douglas MacArthur orders arrest of Japanese war criminals

On December 6, 1945, General Douglas MacArthur, the effective leader of US-occupied Japan, ordered the arrest of former Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe and eight of the country's other civilian and military leaders for war crimes, setting the stage for criminal prosecutions. Ten days later, Konoe would commit suicide by taking a dose of potassium cyanide as he was about to be detained.

Prosecutions of senior Japanese military officials proceeded in its former dominions that had been conquered by the US military at the conclusion of World War II. On December 7, for instance, General Tomoyuki Yamashita, who had led Tokyo's invasions of Malaya and Singapore and its brutal occupation of the Philippines, was sentenced to death in a Manila court for war crimes.

The arrests ordered by MacArthur would be followed by two-year long hearings of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, beginning in April 1946. Twenty-eight Japanese leaders faced 55 separate counts. These included "Class A" offences, relating to a joint conspiracy to initiate war, "Class B" charges for conventional war crimes, and "Class C" counts for crimes against humanity. Prosecutors relied on the doctrine of "command responsibility," whereby political and military officials are responsible for widespread atrocities committed by their forces, even if there is no record of specific orders being issued.

While the trial resulted in a series of prosecutions, one of its central aims was to shield Emperor Hirohito of any responsibility by presenting him as little more than a figurehead. In reality the emperor, a linchpin of the previous military-bureaucratic regime, had been intimately involved in cabinet discussions and planning of the Japanese war efforts.

The US support for Hirohito was one prong of its attempts to stabilize capitalist rule in Japan and throughout the Asia-Pacific region. Paralleling developments in Germany, large sections of the Japanese military and civilian state apparatus were permitted to remain in place. Especially as the US turned to a Cold War policy directed against the Soviet Union in the late 1940s, any talk of a further reckoning with Japan's war crimes was dropped.

100 years: Coal miner shoots sheriff in Mingo County, West

Virginia

On December 7, 1920, Henry Sizemore, a miner in Mingo County, West Virginia, shot Deputy Sheriff E. B. Whitt at the entrance of the Black Diamond mine. Whitt, who was laying in wait to ambush Sizemore, was only lightly wounded. Mingo County was the center of the West Virginia "Mine Wars" of the 1920s.

Sizemore had appeared at the mine that afternoon to get his fellow miners to strike. He had succeeded in leading a partial walkout earlier in the day, but mine supervisors had persuaded the men to go back to work. After Sizemore entered the mine the second time, Whitt was ordered to ambush him at the entrance. Later that night, Sizemore was shot by another sheriff.

The Black Diamond fell under an order issue by Governor John J. Cornwell, a Democrat, to open the mines. It was not a part of the area placed under the control of federal troops two weeks earlier.

The miners had been fighting for union recognition against the violent opposition of the mine operators. Miners, scabs, and lawmen had been killed in an ongoing civil war since the "Battle of Matawan" on May 19, 1920. The most recent victim of murder had been Irwin Elkins, a striking miner who was killed by a scab on November 23 on a local passenger train.

Coal operators brought in 150 strikebreakers to the county on December 6 and had plans to bring in 200 more. The military had allowed picketing at the mines if miners did not interfere with production. A correspondent for the *New York Times* reported that the "general impression here is that a peaceful settlement between the operators and the United Mine Workers appears to be out of the question."



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