

This week in history: November 15-21

14 November 2021

25 years ago: Mass protests across former Yugoslavia

On November 21, 1996, 100,000 people protested in Zagreb, the capital of the former Yugoslav republic of Croatia, after the right-wing nationalist regime of Croatian President Franjo Tudjman ordered the shutdown of an opposition radio station. The massive protest in Croatia followed weeks of huge demonstrations in Belgrade, Serbia, the capital of what remained of Yugoslavia.

The demonstrations revealed the extent of the social crisis across the former Yugoslavia and underscored the fragility and reactionary character of the Dayton Accords peace agreement, which the United States and NATO had attempted to implement among Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Slovenia just one year prior. The Dayton agreement provided no solution to the lack of jobs and housing, nor the inability of refugees to be able to return to their homes. It did nothing to change the underlying economic, social, and political conditions which gave rise to the civil wars that had destroyed Yugoslavia in the preceding years.

All the rival nationalist parties in power in the various components of the former Yugoslavia faced widespread popular opposition.

The protests in Yugoslavia were initially sparked by the Milosevic regime's annulment of local elections which the ruling party lost in Belgrade and most other major cities. In Croatia, Tudjman blocked new opposition-led parties from even forming after losing municipal elections. His ruling Croatian Democratic Union, or HDZ, had kept control of parliament only by seating representatives from Herzegovina, which the Croatian regime ostensibly recognized as part of Bosnia. The region was a stronghold of Croat militias and the semi-fascist wing of the HDZ.

And in Bosnia the regime of President Alija Izetbegovic, which based itself on religion-based appeals to the Muslims who made up the largest single group in that republic, responded to the so-called peace settlement by driving 60,000 Serbs out of the suburbs of Sarajevo and mobilizing goons to terrorize parties who called for interethnic unity.

50 years ago: Thai military dictator stages "self-coup"

On November 17, 1971, Thanom Kittikachorn, who had ruled the country as effective dictator for nearly a decade, launched a military coup against his own government. While remaining as prime minister under the longtime king, Bhumibol Adulyadej (who reigned from 1946 to 2016), Thanom assumed full control over the military, disbanded parliament and declared martial law throughout the country.

The coup was carried out explicitly for anti-communist purposes. In a statement announcing the military takeover, Thanom's junta justified their actions, citing "Communist insurrection in northern Thailand, student demonstrations, obstruction by members of Parliament, strikes, terrorism and subversion."

In the 1970s Thailand was in the midst of great social and political crises. Left-wing protests against inequality and strikes had swept through the country and were particularly strong in northern Thailand, where the Communist Party had its major base of support. These movements threatened the power of the nominal parliamentary regime, which had ruled since 1963, when Field Marshal Thanom became Prime Minister Thanom in a shift sanctioned by the monarchy.

Even though parliament was dominated by right-wing political parties, the Thai ruling class and its US backers feared it would not be stable enough to suppress the growing danger of social revolution among the Thai workers and peasants. The Nixon administration gave full backing to the coup and immediately recognized the new government as legitimate. Thanom's very first action after the self-coup was to go directly to the US embassy to meet with Ambassador Leonard Unger and await his marching orders from Washington.

Shortly after the meeting with the ambassador, Thanom issued a statement declaring his continued commitment to supporting US interests and allowing the continued presence of US airbases in Thailand which were used to support the monstrous bombing campaign against Vietnam.

The reorganized military regime under Thanom carried out a reign of political terror, targeting all left-wing and socialist political groups. Student protests at the universities were heavily repressed, and key leaders of opposition groups were arrested.

A few months after the coup in January 1972 the military government would launch a major terror operation sending 12,000 troops to the northern provinces attempting to crush the Thai Communist Party. As a result, those areas were thrown

into a state of guerrilla war. At least 200 Communist Party members were killed over the course of the six-week operation.

Thanom would stay in power until October 1973, when he would be ousted from power by a popular uprising.

75 years ago: Netherlands seeks to head off Indonesian independence

On November 15, 1946, representatives of the Netherlands government and leaders of the Indonesian independence movement signed the Linggadjati Agreement, providing for the creation of a federation in the sprawling Southeast Asian archipelago.

After months of brutal attempts to repress a mass popular movement, including an assault on Surabaya that killed thousands of civilians in late 1945, the Dutch were attempting to delay and undermine Indonesian home rule after it had become clear that the reimposition of the old colonial authority would not be possible.

Indonesia, a Dutch colony for several centuries, had been occupied by Japan in World War II. With Tokyo's defeat, nationalist leaders Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta had proclaimed independence in August 1945. The Netherlands, backed by Britain and the other imperialist powers, sought to put down the anti-colonial movement, launching a major military assault.

As it became clear that this would be a costly and protracted operation, the Dutch shifted tack and agreed to negotiations.

At the Linggadjati talks, they nominally recognized the control of the Republic proclaimed by Sukarno and Hatta over the islands of Java, Madura and Sumatra. But this was to become one of three states, in a national federation. The others would be the State of Borneo, where Dutch influence was greater, and the Great East, comprising Sulawesi, Maluku, the Lesser Sunda Islands and Western New Guinea, under the direct control of the Netherlands. The Dutch monarch would be the head of state of the federation.

While the conservative independence leaders agreed to this arrangement, which was not to come into effect until 1949, it was opposed by more radical leaders of the anti-colonial movement as a maneuver aimed at providing more time for the crisis-ridden Dutch authorities. As a result of internal conflicts, the deal was not ratified by the Republic's Central National Committee of Indonesia until February 1947, after Sukarno and Hatta threatened to resign if it were rejected.

Negotiations for the implementation of the agreement would rapidly break down, as the Netherlands demanded further concessions, including a police force jointly controlled by the Dutch, including in Republican areas, with equal weight in the federation for its two puppet entities, which would thereby have

greater control than the Republic, and have exclusive control over Indonesian foreign policy. In July 1947, the Dutch abrogated the Linggadjati Agreement and launched a military offensive to overthrow the Republic.

100 years ago: British suffocate Indian prisoners in train car

On November 20, 1921, 67 Muslim rebels, who had been arrested by the British, suffocated in an overcrowded train car in the south Indian state of Kerala. These were among 100 prisoners that were being sent from Tirur, a town in the Malappuram district of Kerala, to a prison in Podanur in Tamil Nadu. The prison was full, so the rebels were sent back to Tirur.

Also known as the "Wagon Tragedy," the deaths occurred on the trip back because the train car had no ventilation, and, in the words of one historian, because in spite of the "continuous clamor for air and water, the door was not opened ..." When the British held an inquiry, no one was punished for the murders.

The rebels were insurgents from the Malabar Rebellion which had begun in August, an uprising of predominantly Muslim peasants against the British, as well as the Hindu landlords they supported. The scale of the rebellion was unprecedented, and although the Indian national movement officially disavowed its use of violence, it was a part of the rising of the Indian masses against British imperialism in the aftermath of World War I.

Rebels captured and destroyed colonial offices and telegraph and railway stations. It is estimated that the rebellion covered over 2,000 square miles (5,200 km) and that over 10,000 people died. The British imprisoned 50,000 people and deported about 20,000.



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