

This week in history: February 28-March 6

27 February 2022

25 years ago: Albanian uprising ignites new Balkan crisis

On March 1, 1997, Albanian Prime Minister Aleksander Meksi resigned amid protests of citizens who had been swindled out of their life savings through government-backed pyramid schemes. The demonstrations quickly escalated into a full-scale uprising in which armed rebels took over one-third of the country.

The government of President Sali Berisha lost control of the army. He clung to power through the use of his secret police to enforce a state of emergency in the capital of Tirana while cracking down on opposition figures and the press. Berisha ultimately resigned in July 1997, and subsequently returned to power in 2005-2012.

In late 1996, social discontent turned into protest with the collapse of the pyramid schemes which flourished in Albania after the restoration of capitalism in 1989-91. These took the form of investment funds which promised investors 200 percent interest rates and quickly soaked up the life savings of at least one-third of the country's 3.5 million inhabitants.

The protests over the investment scandal escalated after the government ordered the funds closed down in January. Demonstrators stormed and burned down police stations and Democratic Party offices.

The Western media habitually explained the phenomenon with condescending references to the Albanian population's irrational belief in "get rich quick" schemes. In reality, the funds received the endorsement of the ruling Democratic Party of Berisha in return for campaign contributions. DP election posters often included logos of the funds.

As for "get rich quick" schemes, government officials and their cronies had turned themselves into millionaires overnight by selling off, in the wake of the restoration of capitalism, state industries and the country's natural resources to foreign interests. Others within the ruling party, including Berisha's ministers, reaped their fortunes through outright gangsterism.

The crisis was the direct outcome of capitalist restoration and imperialist intervention in the Balkans. Albanian workers, who remained Europe's poorest during the 45-year rule by the Stalinist police state founded by Enver Hoxha, saw their jobs and incomes decimated following the self-liquidation of the Stalinist regime.

Both Washington and the European Union supported Berisha as an anticommunist proponent of the "free market" and a supposed anchor of stability in the region. They helped him to consolidate the kind of right-wing dictatorship which ruled the fragmented Balkans in the period between the two world wars.

The Socialist Party, the successor to the former ruling Stalinist

Party, accepted an EU proposal for a new government of "national unity," but rebels initially rejected it and refused to lay down arms, demanding that Berisha resign and that money taken from the people be repaid.

50 years ago: Supreme Court refuses to hear Juan Farinas case

On March 1, 1972, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the appeal of Juan Farinas, a member of the Workers League, the predecessor of the Socialist Equality Party in the US, who had been charged in January 1971 with violating the Selective Services Act by protesting the Vietnam War. By refusing to hear the case, the Supreme Court upheld the lower appellate court ruling that sentenced Farinas to two years in prison.

The case against Farinas was political. He had, in fact, never broken the law. Though he was opposed to the war, he reported to the Army induction office after he was drafted. Outside of the induction building he participated in an anti-war demonstration and handed out leaflets to the other draftees. This was the basis for the charges. He never refused to serve in the Army but was charged with "interfering" with the Selective Service System by speaking out against the war and discussing it with the others drafted alongside him.

Farinas's attorney, Sanford Katz of the American Civil Liberties Union, told the Workers League's newspaper, the *Bulletin*, "Juan Farinas is being sent to jail for two years because he expressed his views. There is no question in my mind that if Juan Farinas had gone into the induction center and leafleted and spoke to other inductees promoting the interests of the American Government in Southeast Asia, they would not have arrested him."

In a statement, Farinas wrote,

The Supreme Court's decision not to review my conviction constitutes a blatant and open attack by the Nixon Government on the rights of all workers and youth in the United States. The capitalist class, its government and the courts think they can silence me by sending me to jail. But they are mistaken! It is not my voice alone that rises against the bosses' murderous war in Vietnam ... it is the voices of millions of American workers and youth who today have served open notice to this rotten capitalist system that they will not have their right taken away.

At the time Farinas was criminally charged, he was a member of the Progressive Labor Party but later broke with its Stalinist/reformist politics and joined the Workers League, the American Trotskyist party, which waged a campaign in his defense.

75 years ago: Kuomintang responds to popular upheaval in Taiwan with brutal massacre

On February 28, 1947, the Kuomintang (KMT), the right-wing nationalist regime that ruled Taiwan, responded to mass protests by workers and youth with indiscriminate violence, killing many thousands.

The KMT was headed by Chiang Kai-Shek, a warlord and the butcher of the 1925-27 Chinese revolution. At the time of the Taiwan massacre, the KMT was locked in a civil war with the Chinese Communist Party in mainland China. After Japan's World War II defeat in 1945, control of Taiwan was handed to the KMT by the United States, which was anxious to suppress any revolutionary movement in China, which it viewed as an expansion of Soviet influence. The militarist and authoritarian government, thoroughly corrupt and led by brutal generals from the KMT's National Revolutionary Army (ROC), who had been sent from mainland China, rapidly confronted widespread popular hostility.

The February 28 incident was precipitated by the actions of KMT customs agents the day before. They had struck a widow with the butt of a gun in Taipei, the island's capital. The individual who was attacked was being harassed on suspicion that she was selling contraband cigarettes, an industry that KMT controlled and profited from. When a crowd gathered, an officer fired into it, hitting a man who died the next day. Protesters marched to the governor-general's office, demanding that the officers involved be arrested and charged. Soldiers again opened fire, killing three, sparking a series of clashes. Martial law was declared on the evening of February 28.

The repression was met with rioting throughout the island. The KMT government effectively lost control of large sections of Taiwan. In urban areas, barricades and self-defense groups were organized. Militias battled the police. Several Taiwanese groups issued demands, including for greater autonomy, an end to official graft and free elections.

The government of Chen Yi sought to stem the tide, while waiting for reinforcements from the province of Fujian in the southeast of the mainland. Their arrival on March 7 was the signal for widespread state violence.

The *New York Times* cited the account of an American in Taiwan, who reported that the ROC troops "indulged in three days of indiscriminate killing and looting. For a time everyone seen on the streets was shot at, homes were broken into and occupants killed. In the poorer sections, the streets were said to have been littered with dead. There were instances of beheadings and mutilation of bodies, and women were raped."

Between 18,000 and 28,000 people are estimated to have been killed. The mass crackdown was the beginning of a protracted "White terror" that would persist with differing degrees of intensity for the next 45 years, and under which the KMT would respond to any manifestations of opposition with "disappearances," assassinations, frame-ups and mass killings.

100 years ago: F.W. Murnau's film *Nosferatu* premieres

On March 4, 1922, *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror*, a silent film directed by F.W. Murnau, based on Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, premiered in the Marmorsaal theater of the Berlin Zoological Garden. The film starred Max Schreck as Count Orlok, a vampire. *Nosferatu* is widely regarded as one of the first classics of 20th century filmmaking.

In the film, the Romanian Count Orlok seeks to buy a house in Germany. Real estate agent Thomas Hutter (Gustav von Wangenheim) is sent to Orlok's castle in Transylvania to arrange the purchase. While there, he begins to suspect that the count is a vampire. Orlok then steals away in a ship, carrying the coffin he sleeps in, and makes his way to the house he has purchased in Germany. Once he is there, a mysterious plague erupts in the local village. Here Hutter and his wife Ellen (Greta Schröder) discover a way to destroy the vampire.

The filmmakers were sued by descendants of Bram Stoker for copyright infringement and received ownership of the film. They ordered all copies destroyed, although, fortunately, some survived.

The film is justly famous for its use of photography to conjure an aura of the otherworldly. WSWS critic Joanne Laurier noted, "The stature of *Nosferatu* in the history of cinema has a great deal to do with Murnau's ability to provide an intense emotional experience, pared down to its essential content, and his success (at least from his point of view) in removing extraneous, non-cinematic components inherited from the past."



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