

This week in history: August 22-28

21 August 2022

25 years ago: Atrocities in Algeria military crackdown

On August 28, 1997, over 300 people were hacked to death in the village of Rais, about 30 miles south of Algiers, in Algeria. The attack was part of a wave of atrocities committed during fighting between Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas and the Algerian military regime, which had intensified late that summer.

Two days prior, a massacre took place in the Beni-Ali mountain hamlet 40 miles south of Algiers. Official statistics of the death toll vary but are estimated between 60-100 people.

On September 6, 80 people were killed in Beni-Messous, just 12 miles west of the capital, during a three-hour rampage of violence. Entire families had their throats slit by a band of about 50 attackers. Dozens more people were killed that same day in similar incidents elsewhere in the country.

The Bentalha massacre later that September raised suspicions that Algeria's military-dominated government had been behind some of the escalating violence. The victims of Bentalha, as in most of the other cases, were mostly women and children. While authorities put the death toll at 85, independent sources said that over 200 were killed.

The Algerian military regime touched off the civil conflict by canceling the 1992 parliamentary elections after fundamentalist Islamic candidates appeared likely to win. While the Armed Islamic Group (AIG) had carried out widespread killings, targeting intellectuals, journalists, and secular political figures, as well as workers and peasants, security forces and paramilitary units were believed to be engaged in similar massacres.

In 1997, the regime created a militia of 150,000 men to carry the war against the AIG into the rural areas. These forces operated like Latin American death squads, entering villages suspected of harboring AIG guerrillas and killing indiscriminately, in what was described by the army itself as a program to "eradicate" the opposition. Some opposition spokesmen blamed the massacres on a factional struggle within the regime between those seeking a negotiated settlement with the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and those demanding continued military repression.

US and French diplomats began meeting on a possible joint initiative aimed at halting the conflict. The two countries were both supplying the Algerian regime with military hardware and US- and French-based oil and gas conglomerates were competing for control of Algeria's rich energy reserves.

50 years ago: US teachers union convention hears call for Labor Party

The week of August 22, 1972, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) held its 56th annual convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. The convention took place as educators had been battling against attacks on public education from school boards and legislatures throughout the United States, and there was mounting rank-and-file hostility to the Democratic Party as well as the Republicans.

Hoping to suppress opposition to the AFT leadership, President David Selden and other union bureaucrats attempted to block the delegation of teachers from Newark, New Jersey from being seated at the convention. Newark teachers had been on strike during February 1972, defying a court "back to work" order and bravely facing down both police, who arrested several teachers, and right-wing provocateurs.

Selden claimed that the Newark delegation had not followed proper local election policy and was in violation of the Landrum-Griffin Act, and thus could not be seated. This maneuver did not fool the delegates, who clearly saw through the attempt to remove this militant section of teachers. The convention overwhelmingly voted to approve the seating of the Newark delegation.

Rather than use the convention to prepare teachers for a struggle against cuts to education funding, the AFT leadership, headed by Selden and with long-time State Department collaborator Albert Shanker pulling the strings, instead used the meeting to campaign for the Democratic Party in the upcoming presidential election. Selden urged teachers to support George McGovern, the senator from the right-to-work state of South Dakota, who was invited to address the convention.

The largest opposition group in the AFT was the United Action Caucus, who presented themselves as a more progressive alternative. However, on the major issue confronting the convention—the endorsement of a presidential candidate—the caucus was in agreement with Selden on supporting McGovern. Both groups presented the issues facing teachers as stemming personally from US President Richard Nixon and declared that replacing him would alleviate the attacks on teachers.

The only group that offered a socialist alternative in the crisis was the Workers League, the American Trotskyist movement and predecessor of the SEP. One delegate to the convention, a teacher from Portland and a supporter of the Workers League, took the floor of the convention directly after McGovern, and stated her opposition to his candidacy.

"This man has proven which class he serves," the teacher said. "We must defend the gains made in the past 40 years. We, the teachers fighting for our needs and the needs of those we teach, must go on the offensive." She concluded by calling for the convention to adopt a resolution to build a labor party in the US, "to run our own candidates, answerable only to the needs of the working class."

75 years ago: German industrialists from IG Farben tried for war crimes in the Holocaust

On August 27, 1947, the trial of 24 leading representatives of IG Farben, a major German chemicals firm that had been closely aligned with the Nazi regime, began in Nuremberg. The proceedings were one of a series conducted by US military courts that followed the Nuremberg Trials, which had been overseen by an International Military Tribunal shortly after the end of World War II.

IG Farben, in the late 1930s and early 1940s the largest chemical trust in the world, typified the connection between major industrial concerns and the militarist German state, including its fascist incarnation. The corporation had played a major role in the aggressive German military effort in World War I, including through the production of vast quantities of synthesized nitrate used in explosives. In the 1930s it had been pivotal to German remilitarization under the Nazis.

During the Second World War, IG Farben made use of extensive slave labor provided directly by the Nazi regime. This included a company facility on the grounds of the infamous Auschwitz concentration camp. It was known as Auschwitz III, but the company itself described the site as “IG Auschwitz.” The camp was built in late 1941 by forced laborers and opened in 1942. At its peak, it forced labor from some 11,000 slave workers. In total, roughly 35,000 prisoners worked there. At least 25,000 died from hunger, disease, or exhaustion.

Degesch, a subsidiary of IG Farben, owned the rights to Zyklon B, the poison gas used in the Nazi death camps to kill millions of Jews, Roma, and political opponents. IG Farben also played a decisive role in the continuation of the German war effort, developing processes to synthesize gas and rubber from coal, thereby facilitating military operations, including when Germany was cut off from major oil fields.

The trial underscored the increasing leniency with which the US authorities were prosecuting Nazi war criminals, under conditions with the developing Cold War against the Soviet Union. The 24 defendants faced a range of charges, including preparing to wage a war of aggression, using slave labor, and other crimes against humanity. Ten of the twenty-four were acquitted entirely, one was discharged on medical grounds. The rest were convicted of at least one count. The majority of these were soon released on time served. None of the IG Farben executives remained in prison throughout the 1950s.

The US judges had allowed those charged to advance a defense of “necessity” on the counts of using slave labor. Charges of the use of slave labor were dismissed, except in the specific case of Auschwitz III. All were acquitted on the charge of preparing an aggressive war.

The majority verdict was egregious enough for one of the judges, Paul M. Hebert, to file a dissenting opinion, despite the highly political character of the case. Hebert stated: “the record shows that Farben willingly cooperated and gladly utilized each new source of manpower as it developed. Disregard of basic human rights did not deter these defendants.”

He continued: “Willing cooperation with the slave labor utilization of the Third Reich was a matter of corporate policy that permeated the whole Farben organization ... For this reason, criminal responsibility goes beyond the actual immediate participants at Auschwitz. It includes other Farben Vorstand plant-managers and embraces all who knowingly participated in the shaping of the corporate policy.”

100 years ago: Head of Irish provisional government assassinated

On August 22, 1922, the head of the new Irish Free State’s Provisional Government, and the commander-in-chief of the Irish National Army, Michael Collins, was assassinated in County Cork in a gunfight with irregular units of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) who opposed the Provisional Government and the Anglo-Irish Treaty that had given birth to it.

Collins was ambushed as he and his companions were touring Cork, his native county, an act that his advisors argued against because it was an IRA stronghold. He and his entourage fought from the cover of their car, but Collins left its safety and was shot in the head, the only casualty of the fight.

Collins had been a leader of the 1916 Easter Rising in Dublin against British Imperialism and had narrowly escaped summary execution after the British took him prisoner when the uprising was suppressed.

During the Irish War of Liberation after 1919, Collins was the finance minister in the Dáil Éireann, the nationalist parliament. He became Director of Intelligence for the Irish Republican Army, the insurgent force fighting the British, and created a special squad which he led in the liquidation of British intelligence agents and members of the Royal Irish Constabulary, the pro-British police force.

After the truce between the British and the nationalists, Collins was an active participant in peace negotiations between the two countries and became a supporter of the conditions of the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, which codified the division of Ireland into a majority-Catholic region in the southern 26 counties, and a majority-Protestant region in the northern six counties that remained a part of the British Empire. Even the southern, “Free State” had limited autonomy and required elected officials to take an oath of allegiance to the British crown.

Despite attempts at compromise, the Irish nationalist movement split into two groups, a pro-Treaty faction lead by Collins and Arthur Griffith and an anti-Treaty faction lead by Eamon de Valera. The two factions began military actions against each other, with the Free State forces supplied by the British and the anti-treaty forces largely waging a guerilla war.



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