

# This week in history: September 19-25

18 September 2022

## 25 years ago: Bentalha massacre in Algeria

On September 22 and 23, 1997, between 200 and 400 civilians were slaughtered in the Algerian town of Bentalha, most of them women and children. The Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (AIG) claimed responsibility for the attack, as it had the Rais massacre of August 29, 1997, in which hundreds were murdered.

The massacres unfolded in the context of the civil war between Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas and the Algerian military regime, which had intensified late that summer. The regime had touched off the fighting by canceling the 1992 parliamentary elections after fundamentalist candidates of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) appeared likely to win. Islamic militia, including the AIG, took up arms in response to the military's usurpation.

While the 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 massacres as well. Witnesses reported that official armed forces were positioned outside of Bentalha and did nothing to stop the brutal murders, even preventing those from neighboring villages from entering to assist the victims during the attack, which lasted roughly six hours.

In 1997, the Algerian government 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 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: Ferdinand Marcos declares dictatorship in Philippines

On September 23, 1972, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos issued Proclamation 1081 imposing martial law on the Southeast Asian country of 38 million people. With the proclamation Marcos

arrogated to himself the power to rule by decree and began a brutal crackdown on the Philippine worker masses, who had, in the previous years staged large demonstrations against his administration and waged major industrial struggles.

The establishment of a dictatorship in the Philippines did not come as a surprise. It had been openly discussed in ruling circles ever since mass protests erupted in 1970, part of a revolutionary upsurge of the working population on a global scale. Furthermore, the "right" of the Philippine president to declare martial law had been enshrined in the country's constitution as a holdover from US colonial rule of the islands. Several of Marcos predecessors had threatened to use this power, but never succeeded in carrying it through.

To provide a justification, Marcos had ordered the military to stage a number of bombings in 1971 and 1972. In response to each bombing, Marcos claimed that communist "urban guerillas" were responsible, and that fierce military action would be the only solution. The final bombing before the declaration of martial law came on September 22 when Marcos' Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile staged an attack on his own motorcade. Later, in 1986, Enrile admitted that the bombing was faked to provide a pretext for dictatorship.

Once the news of martial law had been announced Marcos shut down all press, television and radio. Police began carrying out mass arrests of political rivals and dissidents. Within a few weeks the bourgeois political opponents were released and allowed to walk free if they became supporters of Marcos and the military regime, which many did. Other were sent into exile abroad.

The working masses of the Philippines received no such leniency. Strikes were banned and anyone suspected of being a dissident was arrested without charge, often tortured and killed. Between 1972 and 1977, 60,000 people were arrested for political crimes. Unknown thousands more were "salvaged," the term adopted for those the regime secretly kidnapped and murdered.

The two rival Stalinist parties, the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), played a central role in facilitating the dictatorship. Abandoning the working class, they claimed there existed a progressive section of the national bourgeoisie, which, under pressure from the masses, could be influenced into carrying out reforms. This political fantasy extended even to Marcos himself. The PKP endorsed Marcos for president in 1965, and even supported his imposition of martial law. The PKP would use the dictatorship to murder its own members who opposed dictatorship. The party leadership labeled them as "Trotskyite" oppositionists.

Marcos would stay in power as military dictator for 14 years. In 1986 he would be ousted by a mass movement of the population

and forced to flee to Hawaii. However, many of his closest supporters and administrators of the dictatorship were allowed to remain in office.

### **75 years ago: Marshall Plan conference ends in Paris**

September 22, 1947 marked the end of a lengthy conference in Paris, which had begun in mid-July, over the US Marshall Plan, a proposal for postwar economic recovery in Europe dominated by American imperialism. The conference, involving 16 European states, concluded by establishing the Committee for European Economic Cooperation and submitting a list to the US Truman administration, specifying requests for financial assistance.

In early June, US Secretary of State George C. Marshall had outlined the new doctrine, which took his name. The Marshall Plan would involve major US government and business investment in Europe. While couched in terms of ending the economic crisis and mass deprivation that persisted after World War II, its aim was to advance US control over Europe, in part by disciplining nominal allies and deepening the Cold War directed against the Soviet Union.

The Stalinist Soviet government denounced the plan as American interference in Europe that threatened a new war. Its representatives walked out of a pre-conference with the US and Britain and refused to participate in the meeting proper. However, the protracted deliberations also highlighted divisions and anxieties among a number of the European participants.

The French delegation expressed concern over the implications of the stated policy of Marshall to rebuild German industry, fearing that this move, a direct repudiation of earlier promises by Washington, would ultimately threaten the position of the French ruling class. This was countered by the Netherlands, Belgium and several other small states, whose own economic development had historically been linked with Germany's. For their part, the Scandinavian states called for their nominal "neutrality" to be respected, under conditions where the Cold War threatened to disrupt their trade and other economic ties to the Soviet Union.

Britain appealed for special recognition as a major belligerent in the war. UK Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin played a key role in crafting the policies adopted by the conference. These were fully in line with the Cold War confrontation with the USSR. But Bevin stymied US calls for greater capitalist European economic integration under Washington's control. Instead, the conference provided for the formation of nationally based committees that would report on and coordinate the use of the American aid.

The conference asked the US for a total of \$22 billion in aid. President Harry Truman cut the figure to \$17 billion as he shepherded the measure through the US Congress.

On September 20, 1922, a conference in Paris that included Britain, France, Italy and Japan, as well as Yugoslavia, Greece and Romania, sought to negotiate with the Turkish nationalist movement of Kemal Ataturk over the control of the Dardanelles. The critical strait that connects the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara was the scene, at Gallipoli, of some of the most bitter fighting in World War I. The US was not an official participant in the talks, and the imperialist powers excluded the Soviet Republic.

Britain, France, Italy and Greece had occupied Turkey since the surrender of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, in a bid to dismember the latter. The Greeks, serving as a catspaw for British imperialism, sought aggressively to claim Turkish territory. But by the summer of 1922, the Turkish nationalist forces had forced the evacuation of the Greek and French troops from southern and eastern Anatolia. Ataturk's forces began to threaten some of the most vital imperialist interests in the region: control of the seaways that linked the Mediterranean to the Black Sea.

Britain was ready to go to war. On September 18, London sent its Atlantic fleet to the Dardanelles and the Turkish capital of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) to the north along the strait of the Bosphorus, which connects the Sea of Marmara to the Black Sea.

The British bourgeoisie, however, encountered not only opposition from its own working class but from French imperialism and the desire of the American imperialists to keep their distance from the crisis. Notably, one member of the British Commonwealth, Canada, also refused to participate in the war when its Prime Minister Mackenzie King telegraphed British Colonial Secretary Winston Churchill that he would refuse to go to war without the consent of the Canadian parliament.

On September 21, the Turkish nationalists issued an ultimatum to the Allied imperialists that East Thrace on the European side of the Bosphorus be evacuated. The British warned that any Turkish advance on the Dardanelles would be an act of war. France and Italy, however, evacuated their forces from the area. The *New York Times* noted, "The French and Italian generals express regret [to the British] that their governments find themselves unable to participate in the preparations for defense."

By September 23, the British reversed themselves and agreed with France and Italy to give the Turks East Thrace in return for the supervision of naval traffic through the Dardanelles by the League of Nations.



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### **100 years ago: Imperialist powers in disarray over Dardanelles crisis**