

This week in history: November 6-12

6 November 2023

25 years ago: US Supreme Court permits state subsidy to religious schools

On November 9, 1998, the US Supreme Court, in an 8-1 ruling issued without comment, refused to hear a legal challenge to the state of Wisconsin's policy of subsidizing tuition at private and religious schools in Milwaukee. The decision was a defeat for the groups challenging the school voucher plan, which included the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers and the American Civil Liberties Union.

The action fell short of a full-scale endorsement of the constitutionality of school vouchers, since the court merely declined to hear the appeal against a decision by the Wisconsin state Supreme Court upholding the voucher plan, rather than hear arguments and issue its decision. The result was that legal challenges to similar voucher plans in other states would continue through the court system, resulting in an eventual Supreme Court ruling. Such appeals were also under way in Arizona, Maine, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Vermont.

The technical limitation in the ruling did not alter its political significance. For the first time in US history, the Supreme Court permitted a state to subsidize religious education. Twenty-five years prior, in its last major ruling on the subject, the Supreme Court struck down a plan by New York state to provide tuition subsidies for private religious schools, on the grounds that it violated the separation of church and state. In 1998 the court decided to not strike down an equally flagrant violation of this constitutional doctrine.

The Milwaukee plan had been the focus of right-wing and religious groups seeking to attack the primacy of public education. Wisconsin's Republican Governor Tommy Thompson first introduced the plan eight years before, presenting it as a means to assist low-income parents in the state's largest city in finding a better education for their children. Initially the vouchers were limited to private nonreligious schools, but a 1995 amendment explicitly endorsed the use of the vouchers at religious schools, and use of the vouchers then quadrupled, with the bulk of the students going into Catholic parochial schools.

50 years ago: Egypt and Israel agree to ceasefire in Yom Kippur War

On November 11, 1973 the governments of Egypt and Israel

agreed to a ceasefire, bringing the fiercest fighting of the Yom Kippur War to a close. The war had begun just over one month prior, on October 6, when Egypt and Syria mounted a joint offensive that broke through Israeli defenses and destroyed a significant supply of tanks and other weapons.

Israel responded with counterattacks that pushed back the front lines in Syria and succeeded in sending soldiers to cross the Suez Canal for an incursion into Egypt that brought Israeli forces within 60 miles of Cairo. However, as a result of its initial advance, Egypt regained and held both sides of the Suez Canal, a major strategic victory.

After the first few weeks of fighting a tense stalemate ensued with Israeli troops having surrounded and trapped the Egyptian Third Army in the Sinai. Meanwhile Israel's troops had dug in close to Egyptian cities like Suez and Ismailia but failed in attempts to capture them. During the Israeli siege on these cities, Egyptian civilian militias were rapidly organized to support the regular army. The front line of the war curved across the Suez, with both Egypt and in the northern front Syria having forces extended to points where they risked being totally annihilated.

The situation threatened to pull into the fighting both the Soviet Union, allied with Egypt, and the United States, which backed Israel. After the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) began an oil embargo, President Richard Nixon ordered the Pentagon to draw up plans for major military invasions in the Middle East.

However, in the context of a major domestic political crisis in the US and the debacle of the American military in Vietnam, Nixon found himself forced to agree to negotiations with Egypt. The week before the US House of Representatives had taken the first steps towards impeaching Nixon for his role in the Watergate break-in and cover-up. At the same time a large-scale strike wave was underway and a mass anti-war mood persisted in the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Vietnam. The oil embargo had an immediate effect, furthering resentment towards Nixon as prices at the gas pump, as well as for other goods, jumped amid historic levels of inflation.

Under these conditions, Nixon sent Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to negotiate a ceasefire between Egypt and Israel. In the truce signed in a military tent 60 miles from Cairo, Major General Aharon Yariv of Israel and Lt. General Mohammed Adbdel Ghany el-Gamasy agreed to six points. Israel agreed to allow the supply of both Suez and the Egyptian Third Army and the removal of checkpoints on the Cairo-Suez road. The deal also included a prisoner exchange.

While the Camp David Accords that would officially end the war between Egypt and Israel were still five years away, the ceasefire

was the beginning of a long negotiation process that would change the balance of forces in the Middle East. While Egyptian President Anwar Sadat succeeded in his goal of forcing Israel and the US to cede back full control over the Suez Canal, it was a significant milestone in the decline of bourgeois nationalism as a force against imperialism. The coming years would see, in return for the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt become the first Arab country to officially recognize the State of Israel and abandon support for the Palestinian people.

75 years ago: Japanese military leader Hideki Tojo convicted of war crimes

On November 12, 1948, the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, established by the US government, found top military leader Hideki Tojo and 24 co-defendants guilty of major war crimes perpetrated by Japan during World War II. Two days earlier, on November 10, the tribunal had issued a declaration that Japan was guilty of the crime of waging a war of aggression against the US, Britain, France and the Netherlands.

Tojo personified the reactionary character of the Japanese ruling elite, still steeped in medieval feudalism, but pursuing an expansionist imperialist foreign policy. He had been both the prime minister from 1941 to 1944 and president of the Imperial Rule Assistance Association, a powerful political organization that advocated aggressive militarism.

Tojo had overseen and been directly responsible for a host of crimes committed during Japan's war efforts in the Pacific. These included the imposition of slave labor on the many populations conquered and occupied by the Japanese, the sanctioning of mass killings and reprisals and the establishment of a sexual exploitation and abuse network to service Japanese troops abroad.

His installation as prime minister in 1941 had been associated with preparations for a full-scale war in the Pacific, accompanying the fascist-led hostilities in Europe. That culminated in the December 1941 operations, which included near-simultaneous attacks on the US military base of Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, together with invasions of British-controlled colonies, such as Singapore, Malaya and Hong Kong and the US-ruled Philippines.

Tojo had been ousted as prime minister in 1944, as the Japanese war effort floundered, the prospect of defeat became imminent, and amidst intensifying factional conflicts within the ruling elite itself.

The tribunal sentenced Tojo and six high-ranking co-defendants to death. Others received substantial prison terms.

Tojo was prosecuted because he was among the most visible and prominent proponents of the Japanese war effort. The focus on Pearl Harbor and the declaration that Japan had waged a war of aggression against the US was also aimed at legitimizing American imperialism's increasingly bellicose activities in the Indo-Pacific and on a global scale. The conviction was handed down as the Truman administration was waging a Cold War against the Soviet Union internationally, aimed at asserting the

untrammelled hegemony of the US.

At the time, Japan remained under effective US martial law, which was producing growing popular discontent. While leading figures were convicted by the tribunal, much of the Japanese ruling elite and state bureaucracy remained intact and were used as an instrument of the American occupation.

100 years ago: Hitler leads Beer Hall Putsch in Munich

On November 8, 1923, Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi party, attempted to seize power in Munich, the capital of the state of Bavaria, in a coup that has come to be called the Beer Hall Putsch.

Germany was in the throes of a revolutionary situation. Hyperinflation and mass unemployment made it impossible for the middle class and the working class to live. The industrial Ruhr Valley was occupied by French troops, and dissatisfaction with the Weimar government, a coalition of Social Democrats and centrist capitalist parties, was ubiquitous. The German Communist Party had narrowly missed the chance at a nationwide insurrection.

The entire country was under martial law and a far-right faction in Bavaria—which itself hoped to seize national power—had already set itself up in defiance of the Weimar government.

Hitler had hoped to organize a march of armed Nazis on Berlin in imitation of fascist leader Benito Mussolini's notorious March on Rome of the previous year. As a prelude, he sought to seize power in Bavaria with the assistance of Erich von Ludendorff, the former head of the military high command, and his followers.

On November 8, 600 Nazi stormtroopers with leading Nazi figures, including Hitler, Hermann Göring, Alfred Rosenberg and Rudolf Hess, surrounded a beer hall at which the three leading officials of the Bavarian government were speaking. The Nazis entered the beer hall in which 3,000 people were assembled. Hitler fired a shot at the ceiling for quiet and proclaimed the beginning of the national revolution and assured the audience that his coup was not directed at the army or police but at the "the Berlin Jew government and the November criminals of 1918."

The Nazis arrested the three government leaders, but they were released by Ludendorff on a promise of cooperation. That evening, however, the three ordered preparations to be made against an insurrection by Hitler's forces and the next day police dispersed a Nazi march to the war ministry, where Hitler hoped to topple the government. Sixteen Nazis and four policemen were killed.

Hitler escaped but was arrested two days later. He was tried for treason, convicted and sentenced to five years in a minimum-security prison. He ended up serving only eight months. It was during this time that he wrote *Mein Kampf*, in which he outlined his plans for the extermination of the Jews.



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