

This week in history: August 19-25

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago

18 August 2024

25 years ago: Report reveals British mercenaries planned assassination of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan

On August 22, 1999, confidential documents leaked to the *Sunday Times* revealed that a mercenary outfit with close links to the Special Air Service (SAS) and British Intelligence had offered to assassinate Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Öcalan four years earlier. The fee proposed by Aims Ltd, of Salisbury, Wiltshire to the Turkish government for the assassination was £5.75 million.

Aims Ltd made the proposal to assassinate Öcalan after it was asked by the Turkish government in 1995 to advise on how best to neutralize him. In a detailed 11-page proposal, the company offered to track and pinpoint Öcalan and arrange for his murder or kidnap. Former SAS soldiers were to be used to train a Turkish hit squad to carry out the attack. The assassination proposal, code-named “Melody,” was presented as a simpler alternative to kidnapping Öcalan. According to Aims Ltd, kidnapping and a public trial “would make incredible public relations and prestige for Turkey worldwide. But [it] of course would be a much more dangerous and complicated operation.”

“Having done considerable research on this, I have come to the conclusion that, when the operation is successfully completed, there will be an outcry worldwide over this matter,” it went on to warn. The simplest option, “of course, is the disposal of the party in a given area.”

The assassination plan did not materialize, but Aims Ltd was one of two British firms that provided military equipment and training facilities to the Turkish special forces who abducted Öcalan from Kenya in February 1999 and flew him to Turkey, where a show trial in June condemned him to death by hanging. The two companies were paid hundreds of thousands of pounds for their role in preparing the ground for his kidnap, according to the *Times* Insight team.

The Insight team’s revelations were embarrassing for the British government for two reasons. First, they proved British involvement in the kidnapping of Öcalan, at that point attributed only to the Turkish government, the CIA and the Israeli security service Mossad. Second, they pointed to the growing use of private security firms as an extended arm of the secret services MI6 and MI5.

50 years ago: Young coal miner shot dead by company foreman in

Harlan County strike

On August 24, 1974 Lawrence Jones, a 23-year-old miner on strike in Harlan County, Kentucky, was shot and killed by Billy C. Bruner, a company foreman who had attacked the picket line. The murder of Jones sparked a massive upsurge of militancy among the miners who had been on strike for over 13 months in a bid to win improved conditions and recognition of the United Mine Workers (UMW).

The strike against the Duke Power Company, who owned the Brookside Mine, began in June 1973. In addition to official representation by the UMW, miners demanded increased wages, pensions, improvements to safety and healthcare benefits for treatment of Black Lung and other illnesses associated with work in the coal mines.

Harlan County, Kentucky earned the nickname “Bloody Harlan” for its history of militant class battles between the mine workers and the owners and their hired security agents, or “gun thugs,” as the workers termed them. For nearly the entire decade of the 1930s a virtual state of war existed in Harlan County, with local and state police mobilized to assist the companies in suppressing efforts of the mine workers to strike and form a union.

Hoping to crush the strike and make an example out of the Harlan miners, the company took a hard line during the 1973-74 strike. Miners were locked out of the mines and armed guards patrolled the entrances to break up picket lines and allow scab labor into the mines.

Throughout the strike, battles on the picket lines were frequent. Company thugs often rammed picket lines with cars, attacked pickets with clubs, and fired shots at the workers. Workers stood their ground, refusing to be intimidated, and often responded blow for blow to attacks against them.

The strike was a powerful expression of working class solidarity and struggle. The miners, with the support of their wives, who took on critical leadership roles in the strike, received support from around the country. In the week leading up to Jones’ murder over 125,000 miners took strike action in support of the Harlan strike. Virtually all production of coal in the country was brought to a standstill.

Enraged by the intransigence of the miners, Bruner, acting on behalf of the mine owners, attacked a picket line outside the Highsplint mine where Jones had been on strike. Witnesses reported that Bruner approached the picket line with a shotgun, hit one worker with the butt of his weapon, and then fired at Jones point blank, striking him in the

head and killing him instantly.

Workers were outraged at the death of their young brother. They began to arm themselves in large numbers. "Everyone was walking around with their hands on their guns," said one miner who spoke with the *Bulletin*, the US predecessor to the WWS.

Fearing an all-out armed uprising by the miners, in the days after Jones' murder the company moved quickly to accept the demands of the miners and agreed to sign a contract with the UMW. Workers won substantial improvements to their pay and other conditions with the average daily wage increasing from \$30 to \$50.

Over 3,000 miners from throughout Kentucky attended Jones' funeral. One miner who attended told the *Bulletin*, "That boy paid a great deal for this contract. He gave his life."

75 years ago: Conference begins talks on Indonesian independence

On August 23, 1949, representatives of the Netherlands and Republican leaders of Indonesia began talks at The Hague that would result in an agreement establishing effective Indonesian independence. Dubbed the Dutch-Indonesian Round Table Conference, the gathering, facilitated by the United Nations, would span over two months.

The gathering was the culmination of a years-long conflict. With the 1945 defeat of imperial Japan, which had occupied the archipelago during World War II, Indonesian nationalist leaders rapidly proclaimed independence. The Dutch at the same time organised a massive military intervention, with the support of the British and other imperialist powers, to reestablish control over its old colonial possession.

By August 1949, the resulting war had spanned four years. It had involved guerrilla fighting and brutal Dutch counter-insurgency operations, including the bombing of densely-populated civilian areas. The bourgeois nationalist independence leaders, including Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta, had repeatedly made substantial concessions to the Dutch, including with the disarming and repression of more radical independence forces.

The Netherlands had violated earlier internationally brokered peace agreements. That included the Linggadjati Agreement of 1947 and the Renville Agreement of 1948. Both of those saw Sukarno and Hatta make substantial territorial concessions to the Dutch and their local proxies. The deals, however, were opposed both by nationalist forces within Indonesia, and hard line elements of the Dutch state. A brutal bombing campaign by the Netherlands, effectively abrogating the Renville Agreement, had provoked substantial international outrage.

The move towards a brokered independence occurred under conditions where it was becoming clear that the Netherlands would be bogged down in a years- or decades-long conflict, that it could not financially sustain. The increasing opposition of the other imperialist powers to such an effort did not stem from humanitarian concerns. Instead, there was fear that the war in Indonesia could destabilise the Indo-Pacific further, under conditions of popular insurgencies developing in many countries. The attempt of the Netherlands to reestablish direct colonial control was also out of step with the post-World War II order, in which the old European powers were increasingly supplanted by a dominant American imperialism.

The agreement reached at the conference and signed on November 1 provided for the cession of sovereignty to the United States of Indonesia, a federal entity established by the Netherlands. In addition to the Republican forces, it incorporated reactionary feudal elements that had collaborated with the Dutch. The deal mandated Indonesian reparations to the Netherlands for the expenses of its colonial administration, and favorable treatment to Dutch companies.

100 years ago: Spanish troops hard pressed by rebels in Morocco

On August 21, 1924, press reports detailed the crisis of the Spanish military in its struggle to maintain colonial domination of Morocco during what has come to be known as the Rif War.

Beni Hassan and Beni Said tribal fighters attacked Spanish forces led by José Riquelme in the north of the country. The Spanish troops were limited in their mobility by unseasonable rains and in some cases were isolated by Rifian forces resulting in substantial casualties for Riquelme's troops.

That June, Beni Hassan and Beni Said tribesmen had gone over to the Rifian leader Abd el-Krim, who had established an independent Republic of the Rif. The Spanish had used airplanes to bomb settlements associated with the rebellion, killing mostly women and children. By 1924, the Spanish had begun using chemical weapons against the Rifians.

Notably, there was significant opposition in Spain to the colonial war. In August 1923, Spanish troops had mutinied or refused to board ships embarking to Morocco, and Barcelona had seen mass anti-war demonstrations.

In July 1924, Primo de Rivera, the Spanish dictator, visited Morocco to assess the situation. De Rivera had come to power in a military coup in September 1923 largely because of the so-called Disaster of Annual in July 1921 when the Spanish forces suffered a major defeat at the hands of Abd el-Krim and lost an estimated 20,000 soldiers.

De Rivera functioned largely as a Bonapartist figure who balanced between pro-and anti-interventionist elements in the military, bureaucracy and monarchy, all of whom in turn faced widespread opposition by the Spanish working class and peasantry.

Once in Morocco, De Rivera proposed a tactical retreat and retrenchment of Spanish forces to areas closer to the coast. The French, however, had joined the Spanish in May and the two imperialist powers were able to retake Morocco by 1926.



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