

This week in history: November 4-10

3 November 2024

25 years ago: Clinton prepares crackdown in Puerto Rico

This week in 1999 the Clinton administration was making preparations to dispatch 300 federal marshals to Puerto Rico in order to shut down protests against military live-fire drills on the the 20-mile-long island of Vieques, located about 8 miles off the island colony's east coast.

US government agents were concerned over potentially massive organized protests. During live-fire drills the previous April, a stray bomb exploded that killed one Puerto Rican civilian, David Sanes, employed by the Navy, and injured four others. Popular anger compelled Governor Pedro Rosello to form a commission of inquiry, which recommended an immediate and permanent cessation of military exercises on the island.

The Pentagon formed its own commission and recommended to the Clinton administration that military exercises should be phased out over the next five years, but that any immediate respite in training would endanger "national security." A meeting between Governor Rosello's chief of staff and Defense Secretary William Cohen resolved nothing, as the *USS Eisenhower* battle group prepared to start firing live ammunition. While talks carried on, protesters refused to leave their occupation of the bombing range.

Popular sentiment against US government militarism resonated deeply among working class inhabitants on the island of Vieques and more broadly across Puerto Rico. The US Navy had used Vieques and the neighboring island municipality of Culebra as military zones for the previous six decades, as training for invasions against countries throughout Latin America.

During its military training sessions, the Navy employed radioactive shells tipped with depleted uranium. A Navy spokesman confirmed that one month before the fatal "accident" at Vieques, a fighter jet mistakenly fired 236 of the shells, only 57 of which were subsequently recovered. The shells, which take years to degrade, threatened the island's water, atmosphere, soil and people. The cancer rate on Vieques was double the average rate on the Puerto Rican mainland and it had a higher infant mortality rate.

According to the report issued by the Puerto Rican governor's commission, US military exercises on the island "have restricted the residential area and the commercial activity of the civilian population to a strip of territory approximately three miles long in the center of the island." It had also placed restrictions on fishing, the principal industry of the island's inhabitants.

50 years ago: States of siege declared in Argentina and Bolivia

On November 7, 1974, the governments of Argentina and Bolivia declared themselves to be in a "state of siege" to combat uprisings and threatened military coups against the US-backed dictatorships that ruled both countries. The following weeks would see an intensification of measures to repress left-wing political organizations with state-backed fascist violence.

In Bolivia, a coup attempt by sections of the military against President Hugo Banzer was the trigger for the siege declaration. Soldiers of the 12th Infantry Regiment and the US-trained anti-guerrilla rangers took control of the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra for a short period before being ousted by forces loyal to Banzer.

The coup was led politically by dissident members of the National Revolutionary Movement and the Bolivian Socialist Falange party. Both parties were far-right organizations that were a part of Banzer's ruling coalition and that had backed him in the 1971 coup that first placed Banzer in power as dictator.

The leaders of the coup attempt included Carlos Valverde, a former Interior Minister, and a general, Julio Prado. This faction had broken off from the main party organizations who still supported Banzer. The break occurred shortly after Banzer canceled his pledge to allow elections by the end of 1974.

According to the radio broadcast the coup plotters aired from Santa Cruz de la Sierra, they were supporters of former President Victor Paz Estenssoro, who also once backed Banzer but was now living in exile in Peru.

Shortly after the coup began, Banzer traveled from the capital in La Paz to Cochabamba to rally loyal forces to his defense. Still in control of most military resources, including the air force, he was able to oust the rebellion and retake control of the city.

Two days later, on November 9, Banzer announced the removal of all civilian elements from the government and that the military would fully govern the country until at least 1980. All political parties and organizations, including trade unions, were ordered to be disbanded. While it was a faction of his own right-wing supporters that carried out the coup, the repression that followed targeted primarily left-wing and socialist workers and youth.

Almost simultaneously, a similar process was underway in neighboring Argentina. On the first of November the guerrilla Montoneros fighters carried out the assassination of Alberto Villar, the head of Argentina's secret police and a leader of the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (AAA). The AAA was a fascist terrorist organization dedicated to the elimination of socialist organizations through mass murder.

A wave of fighting and assassinations between AAA and different anti-government guerrilla organizations followed immediately after Villar's death. On November 7, Argentine President Isabel Perón, who came to power in July 1974 after her husband Juan Perón died in office, declared her own state of siege.

To an even more brutal degree than in Bolivia, the state of siege was used to allow and justify unrestricted fascist violence against socialist parties and trade unions. The AAA, already composed largely of police, was permitted to begin an unrestricted reign of terror.

In particular, the AAA targeted the Argentine Socialist Workers Party (PST) and the Argentine Communist Party. In the first week of November alone three members of the PST were gunned down by the AAA.

75 years ago: Over 300,000 striking US miners sent back to work by United Mine Workers union

On November 9, 1949, approximately 320,000 striking miners were sent back to work by a resolution passed by the United Mine Workers (UMW) Policy Committee.

The nationwide strike had begun on September 19, its immediate cause the suspension of benefit payments for anthracite and bituminous coal miners. It expanded to include demands for better wages, hours and working conditions. At its peak, the strike involved approximately 400,000 miners.

The UMW had previously ordered some 80,000 striking workers west of the Mississippi back to work on October 3. The November 9 resolution ordered the remaining 320,000 workers back on the basis of a three-week "truce" settlement with the mining companies. The strike was meant to resume on November 30 if no contract settlements had been reached by that time.

Initially, the strike did resume at that date. But the next day, the UMW policy committee ordered the miners yet again to resume work on a three-day per week basis, beginning on December 5. Ultimately, almost the entirety of the US mining industry refused the demands of the striking workers. The miners were sent back to business-as-usual work at the end of the year.

The November 9 UMW resolution was passed amidst moves by the Truman administration to break the strike. The White House had openly floated the idea of using the 1947 Taft-Hartley Law to crush the strike.

The resolution followed by two days a Supreme Court decision that upheld a contempt fine of over \$1 million against the union. *The Militant*, then the Trotskyist newspaper in the US, commented on this decision the next day, writing: "the Supreme Court is not concerned with safeguarding the interests of the mass of the people, and least of all the interests of labor. It safeguards the sanctity of profits and the perpetuation of the capitalist order."

100 years ago: Pogrom of Muslims in Yugoslavia

On November 9, 1924, over 2,000 Orthodox Christians massacred as many as 1,000 Muslims in the village of Šahovići, (today Tomaševo), in the oblast of Cetinje (today Montenegro) in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

The pogrom occurred in retribution for the assassination of a regional leader, a Christian Montenegrin official, Boško Bošković, on November 7. The authorities blamed a leader of the Kachaks, an Albanian nationalist movement based in Kosovo, for the assassination, although he was in Albania at the time. Speakers at Bošković's funeral whipped up hostility to the local Muslim population for the murder.

It was revealed later that Bošković had been killed by members of another Christian clan.

The authorities issued an order to disarm the population of Šahovići and took 50 of its leading citizens into "protective custody." The next day mobs were organized in nearby villages and the 50 Muslim leaders were seized and executed. The mob was armed partly with weapons taken from Šahovići.

The Stalinist leader Milovan Djilas, one of the founders of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1945, whose father participated in the pogrom, wrote in his *Land Without Justice* (1958) of what followed:

After those prisoners in Sahovici were mowed down, one of our villagers, Sekula, went from corpse to corpse and severed the ligaments at their heels. This is what is done in the village with oxen after they are struck down by a blow of the axe, to keep them from getting up again if they should revive ... Babies were taken from the arms of mothers and sisters and slaughtered before their eyes ... The beards of the Moslem religious leaders were torn out and crosses were carved into their foreheads ...

The survivors appealed to King Alexander I for justice, and the facts of the massacre were raised in parliament, but without result. The remaining Muslims emigrated to Bosnia and Herzegovina or Turkey.



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