

This week in history: December 3-9

3 December 2018

25 years ago: Christian Democrats suffer political collapse in Italy

In two rounds of municipal and regional elections concluding December 5, 1993, the Christian Democratic Party, which had ruled Italy as part of coalition governments throughout the period since World War II, suffered an historic rout, with millions of voters shifting their support both to the neo-fascist right and the Party of the Democratic Left (PDS), the successor organization to the Italian Communist Party.

The coalition of the Christian Democrats and three smaller “center” parties won no more than 15 percent of the first round of the vote in the November 21, and placed not a single candidate into the second round, December 5, in any major city or region. In most cases, the runoffs were between candidates of the PDS and two ultra-right opponents, the MSI, the neo-fascist party founded by former supporters of Mussolini, and the Northern League, the regional chauvinist party founded by Umberto Bossi.

Candidates backed by the PDS won control of Italy’s five largest cities: Rome, Naples, Milan, Genoa and Trieste. The runoff for mayor of Rome, the capital and largest city, saw Franco Rutelli, a Green running with support from the ex-Stalinist PDS, defeat Gianfranco Fini of the MSI. The fact that the successor party to Mussolini’s blackshirts won 40 percent of the vote in the Italian capital, 50 years after the dictator’s overthrow, was a warning to the Italian and European working class.

The political authority of the Christian Democrats had been undermined by the economic crisis and massive job cuts at major industrial companies like Fiat, Olivetti and Alfa Romeo. Added to this was the impact of a mushrooming scandal over the systematic payoffs to Italian politicians of all parties by the corporate elite, in the course of which more than 3,000 politicians, bankers and corporate executives were indicted, arrested or forced to resign their positions.

Particularly destabilizing in Italy was the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resultant transformation of the main Stalinist parties in Western Europe, like the Italian Communist Party (PCI), which had a symbiotic relationship with the Christian Democrats over the previous four

decades. The PCI served to politically straitjacket the working class and block any challenge to capitalist rule, while enjoying enormous privileges as the official opposition party in parliament and the ruling party in many cities and regions.

The PCI was always the most right-wing of the Stalinist parties in Western Europe, pioneering the reformist doctrine known as “Euro-Communism,” which foreshadowed the open abandonment of even the pretense of a connection between the PCI and the perspective of socialism, let alone revolution. The transformation of the PCI into the PDS was another step in grooming the former Stalinist party to play the role of stabilizer and defender of Italian capitalism after the break-up of the Christian Democrats.

50 years ago: Vietnam peace talks to be resumed

Changing its decision in early November to leave the Paris Peace Talks, the government of South Vietnam announced on December 7, 1968 it would re-join the negotiations. The envoys left Saigon just three hours after the national legislature voted to give official approval to participation in the negotiations. The delegation was led by Nguyen Cao Ky, vice president of South Vietnam and the former air force commander who was appointed the “Supreme Advisor” for the team.

The South originally pulled out of the talks on the grounds that the National Liberation Front (NLF) would be given a seat at the negotiation table as an independent entity. The South Vietnamese Government claimed that the NLF was an arm of the North Vietnamese government and thus didn’t deserve its own recognition. The South had also made a deal with Richard Nixon’s campaign to delay negotiations until he had won the US presidential election.

Even though the representatives from the South had returned to Paris, negotiations continued to be delayed. Stemming from the same issue, the independent status of the NLF, a dispute over the seating arrangements blocked the talks from beginning.

North Vietnam proposed that the participants sit at a round table to suggest that all participants were on equal footing. The South rejected this and called for a rectangular table and that the NLF must sit with the North to demonstrate that

they are the same entity. In reality, the four different groups did represent two fundamental interests. The US and South Vietnam represented imperialism while the NLF and North Vietnam represented the Stalinist leadership in Hanoi.

It took seven months for the issue to be resolved. The groups eventually compromised on a round table that had rectangular tables on its sides so that the North and NFL could claim that it was a four-sided conference while the US and the South could interpret the talks as bilateral.

As talks stalled, the war reheated. During November, US casualties in Vietnam fell to their lowest level for the year as the NLF pulled its forces away from the major cities. In the opening weeks of December, however, the NLF announced it was launching a new offensive against the Americans. NLF forces began concentrating near Saigon, Danang and the central highlands. The US countered by stepping up the bombing of supply routes in Laos.

75 years ago: Italian Jews deported to Auschwitz

On December 6, 1943, 246 Jews were shipped by train from Milan and Verona to Auschwitz. The trainload were among first deportations of Jews since the German occupation of Italy in began September 1943.

The German government had long desired that its Italian ally collaborate in persecution and murder of European Jews. The Italian Fascist regime had, starting in 1938, introduced anti-Jewish legislation and began to exclude Jews from public life. But it had balked at exterminating Italian Jews or Jews in the territories it had occupied in the Balkans.

Nazi troops took control of much of Italy after the collapse of the fascist government of Benito Mussolini in July 1943 and an invasion of the country by the Allied powers in September. German forces established the puppet Italian Social Republic in central and northern Italy. They immediately moved to extend the horrors of the Holocaust into parts of Europe formerly occupied by Italy as well as the northern two-thirds of Italy itself.

Beginning in October, the Germans with the help of Italian police and fascist forces started to round up Jews in major Italian cities. On October 16, German Special forces in Rome arrested 1,259 Jews. Some 1,007 of them were deported to Auschwitz, reaching the death camp on October 23. On December 1, the Italian Social Republic issued an order that decreed that all Jews were to be arrested and imprisoned. Former Italian concentration camps were converted into transit camps to house the Jews before their deportation to the killing centers in Germany and Poland.

By the end of the war, around 7,400 Italian Jews had been murdered. Broad sections of the Italian population, especially the working class, opposed the fascist onslaught

with many assisting in hiding and protecting Italian Jews.

100 Years Ago: Constantinople under Allied military rule

On December 8, 1918, following the defeat of Turkey and its World War I allies, Germany and Austria-Hungary, by the Allied imperialists, Britain, France, Italy and the United States, the Turkish capital Constantinople was placed under the joint military administration of the victorious powers.

The British launched an offensive in September which broke the Turkish lines in Palestine near the Mediterranean Sea and began to roll up their forces, which were then surrounded by cavalry. The British and Allied forces, under Gen. Allenby, took Damascus in early October, then Beirut (taken by French naval forces October 7), Homs and Aleppo (both in present-day Syria) on October 15 and 26, respectively.

On October 13, the new (and last) Turkish sultan, Mohammed VI, dismissed his Young Turk ministers, Talaat and Enver Pasha, and appointed Izzet Pasha as grand vizier. The Ottoman rulers then appealed to President Wilson to arrange an armistice.

On October 30, an armistice was concluded at Mudros. Under its terms, the Turks were obliged to open the Dardanelles strait to Allied shipping, repatriate Allied prisoners, demobilize their armies, sever relations with the Central Powers and place Turkish territory at the disposal of the Allies for military operations. On November 12, the Allied fleet passed the Dardanelles and arrived at Constantinople the next day.

The British imperialists fought the war in the name of smashing the absolutism of the sultan and “liberating” the Arabs, Kurds and Armenians. In reality, the Allied occupation of Turkish territory was the prelude to an undignified scramble, spearheaded by the British, for dominion over the Near East and the former territory of the Ottoman Empire. A British expeditionary force occupied Arabia and Mesopotamia, French imperialism occupied Syria, Greek forces, at the behest of the British, landed in Smyrna and occupied the western part of Asia Minor and Italian troops invaded Anatolia, the southwestern region of Turkey.

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