

This week in history: February 11-17

11 February 2019

25 years ago: NATO sets bombing ultimatum in Bosnia

UN peacekeeping troops in Sarajevo

This week in 1994, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) began a 10-day countdown to carry out airstrikes against Bosnian Serb forces, demanding they withdraw weapons and artillery from around the city of Sarajevo, capital of the former Yugoslav state of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The decision marked the first-ever foreign intervention by NATO and an escalation of the civil war into a full-scale war involving the major imperialist powers.

The pretext for the intervention was the February 4 attack on the Markale market, a popular open-air location in Sarajevo, when 68 people were killed and another 144 injured in the open-air market by a mortar shell. The United Nations admitted at the time that it was not clear whether the mortar was fired by Bosnian Serb forces or by loyalists of the Muslim-led government. Regardless of who was actually responsible for the attack, UN and NATO forces were determined to bomb Serb forces in Bosnia—not because of “humanitarian” concerns but based on the strategic interests of the imperialist powers and in “restoring NATO credibility.”

The week prior to the attack, prime ministers from Turkey and Pakistan visited Sarajevo to call for international support for the Bosnian regime. Russian officials including then President Boris Yeltsin warned against outside military intervention.

Two days prior to the decision, European Union forces were deadlocked over the issue. France, Germany and Belgium called for supporting the ultimatum, with Spain, Portugal, Greece and Britain against. The Canadian government initially resisted until the day of the vote, ultimately yielding to pressure by American imperialism. The British government only voted for the decision when Washington threatened to pull out of NATO altogether.

The US, Germany and other European powers had been pushing for the ethnic partitioning of Yugoslavia since 1991. Russian foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev issued a statement warning of the danger of foreign intervention: “Already once in 1914 a provocation was staged in Sarajevo when a similar horrible act of terror became the cause of a global tragedy,” referring to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand which led to the First World War.

50 years ago: Police attack student demonstrations in US

and Canada

Students confront National Guard troops in Madison, Wisconsin

Police and troops were mobilized this week across North America to attack protests against racism on college campuses. The protests were held across several US states and in Canada, and including building occupations and other attempts to disrupt campus functioning in order to draw attention to pervasive discrimination against minority students.

On February 12, the governor of Wisconsin ordered 900 National Guard troops to the campus of the state university in Madison to break up a four-day-long protest by black and white students. The troops were called in after 1,500 students blockaded buildings. Using fixed bayonets, the guardsmen helped police break up one large gathering of students. The demonstrators were tear gassed and clubbed.

The attack served to swell the ranks of the protesters. That evening more than 5,000 students marched from the campus to the state capitol. In response the governor sent in 1,000 more National Guard troops.

There were similar actions at other campuses. Students and police clashed at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. The protest began when black students took over the administration building. They were supported by about 1,000 white students who surrounded the building. Later that day Duke students voted for a three-day campus wide general strike to protest the police beating of demonstrators.

In another action, black and Puerto Rican students occupied the administrative offices of City College of New York.

On February 11, officials at Sir George Williams University (now Concordia) in Montreal, Canada, ordered police to attack students who had been conducting an occupation of the University computer center for several weeks in protest against racism on the campus.

Until this point the occupation had been peaceful and there had been no damage to any university property. But now under threat of arrest the Canadian students barricaded themselves into the lab and began throwing paper computer punch cards out of the windows.

After a fire started in the building, students were forced to leave. The students believed the police had set the fire to force them out. A right-wing crowd had gathered outside the computer lab and chanted “let the n***s burn.” Ninety-seven people were arrested as the occupation ended.

The wave of demonstrations and occupations centered around the question of discrimination against minority students. These protests were, however, dominated politically by black nationalists and middle-class protest organizations. Most of their demands were of a separatist character, emphasizing the establishment of independent programs and facilities for minority students, rather than expanded opportunities for all students.

75 years ago: Stalin orders deportation of Caucasus nationalities

Trucks carrying Chechen and Ingush people into exile

On February 11, 1944, the Politburo of the Soviet Union met to discuss the fate of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. On the fraudulent pretext that the Chechen and Ingushi people had sided with the Nazis, it was decided to liquidate the autonomous republic and deport the Chechen and Ingush nationalities to Siberia and Kazakhstan.

On February 23, the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, acting under the direction of Lavrenti Beria, began rounding up Chechen and Ingush peoples. In an operation that lasted eight days, 350,000 to 400,000 Chechens and 91,250 Ingush were deported. They packed into railroad cars where thousands perished during the long trip eastward. Greater numbers died when they were dumped in the inhospitable regions of Siberia and Kazakhstan. On March 3 the autonomous republic was abolished.

Hitler had made the Caucasus region a major strategic goal of World War II due to its rich oil resources. He ordered that the Caucasian regions be spared the genocidal treatment that was carried out in other Nazi-occupied parts of the Soviet Union, that the Nazis maintain "model conduct" towards these Moslem areas in order to split them off from the USSR.

The German armies had barely penetrated into the Chechen-Ingush ASSR when the Red Army counteroffensive drove them out of the Caucasus. Because some of the Moslem leaders had fraternized with the Nazis, Stalin ordered whole populations to be collectively punished. Even though the Red Army units of these same nationalities played a heroic role in driving the German armies out, highly decorated Red Army soldiers from these units were discharged and deported as well.

Stalin sought to ensure the Soviet bureaucracy's control over the oil of the Baku region, which was then the principal supply source for Soviet industry. The mass deportations were not reversed until after his death, with Nikita Khrushchev permitting the return of the Chechen and Ingush peoples and reestablishing the autonomous republic in 1957.

100 years ago: Ebert chosen as first president of German republic

On February 11, 1919, the National Assembly meeting in Weimar chose right-wing Social Democrat Friedrich Ebert as the first president of the newly formed German republic. The

assembly, composed of 163 so-called Majority Socialist deputies, 88 Center deputies, 75 Democrats, 42 Nationalists, 22 Independent Socialists and 31 others, was elected in a January 19 national election.

The opening session of the Weimar republic's parliament convened under conditions of civil war throughout Germany. Following the partial uprising by the Berlin proletariat and the January 15 murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the principal leaders of the newly formed Communist Party, the forces of counterrevolution seized the initiative. Between January and May 1919 thousands of workers and socialists died at the hands of the regular army and the fascistic Freikorps, directed by the regime of the social-democrats Ebert, Philipp Scheidemann and Gustav Noske.

One of the tasks of the new government was the elimination of the remains of the system of workers councils established by the revolution of November 1918. The Central Council of the Workers and Soldiers Councils, elected in Berlin by the National Congress of Councils, was theoretically the highest revolutionary organ of the state. It was packed with right-wing Social Democrats, who offered no resistance to Ebert. Nevertheless, when they offered to transfer their power to the national assembly, Ebert would not allow it. He declared that the council had nothing left to transfer and should simply shut down and disappear.

Noske made clear the government's position on January 21 when he threatened a group of soldiers protesting the reintroduction of insignia of rank and recruiting for the volunteer Freikorps: "You do not seem to have a clear idea of the powers of your Soldiers Council; that is something we shall teach you in the next few days. There is going to be a big change! The government is not going to put up with your measures and is going to intervene as it has already intervened elsewhere." The last remark was a thinly veiled reference to the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

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