

This week in history: November 15-November 21

15 November 2010

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

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to the state monopoly on foreign trade.
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25 years ago: Gorbachev-Reagan summit in Geneva

On November 19-20, 1985, US President Ronald Reagan and newly installed Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev met for the first time at a summit in Geneva. The meeting realized few concrete results, but Gorbachev's decidedly friendly posture toward Reagan signaled the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy's aim of reaching an accommodation with Western imperialism.

The Soviet bureaucracy was far more desirous than Washington of a sharp curtailment of nuclear spending. Gorbachev indicated this to Reagan by requesting a cessation of the latter's "star wars" Strategic Defense Initiative and a total ban on nuclear testing, as well as by suggesting the nuclear disarmament of Europe.

Gorbachev and Reagan also discussed "regional issues," a euphemism for the proxy wars fought between the two all over the world. Bugged down in Afghanistan by US-funded Islamist insurgents, among them Osama bin Laden, the Kremlin was willing to barter its influence over bourgeois-national and anti-colonial movements, for example in Nicaragua and South Africa.

Behind Gorbachev's embrace of Reagan was the increasingly desperate economic crisis engulfing the Soviet economy. The Stalinist bureaucracy's response to this, which was expressed politically by the elevation of Gorbachev to Communist Party chief, was to initiate the restoration of capitalist property relations, including an end

50 years ago: Sino-Soviet rift deepens

On November 16, 1960 at a Moscow congress where 81 of the world's Stalinist Communist Parties were present, the rift between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China came out into the open in the form of a sharply worded attack on Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev by China's ally, Enver Hoxha of Albania.

Until 1960, the deterioration in relations between the two giants of the "communist world" remained largely behind the scenes. After Stalin's death in 1953, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Stalinists began to assert themselves more on the international stage, in effect competing with the Soviet Union for influence over Third World movements.

As with Moscow's aid, Beijing's "assistance" to such movements was always carried out from the standpoint of China's national interest. In response, the Soviet Union began from the mid-1950s withdrawing badly needed technical assistance from Beijing, scaling back financial aid and scotching its promise to help China develop nuclear weapons, while cultivating friendly relations with China's rival, India.

This nationalist rivalry between the two bureaucracies was dressed up in ideological garb, with China attempting to maintain the appearance of being more "revolutionary," even as it promoted the reactionary and non-Marxist position that peasants and "the armed struggle" could take the place of the working class, while Moscow accused China of "deviationism" because its activities were not controlled entirely by the Kremlin. Until 1960, however, this phony ideological dispute was carried out through criticism of two

stalking horses: the Chinese criticized Yugoslavia under Tito (who had been rehabilitated by Khrushchev), while the Soviet Union and its allies attacked China's ally Hoxha of Albania.

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75 years ago: Philippines converted to US protectorate

The Commonwealth of the Philippines was officially inaugurated on the morning of November 15, 1935. A crowd of 300,000 witnessed the ceremony on the steps of the Legislative Building in the capital of Manila.

The country remained under semi-colonial control as a commonwealth of the United States, even though Washington claimed the new status represented a transition from colonial status to full sovereignty. Military affairs remained under the jurisdiction of Washington. While the new Commonwealth had its own Constitution, Executive, National Assembly and Supreme Court, most legislation required the approval of the US president. With a growing conflict with Japan in the Pacific threatening to explode into war, Washington had no intention of giving up the strategically located islands.

The Philippines had been annexed as an American colony after the US victory over Spain in the Spanish-American war of 1898 and a brutal counterinsurgency campaign against the native population's resistance. Prior to the establishment of the Philippine Commonwealth, between 1901 and 1935, the Philippines had an 'Insular' government, a form of colonial rule established by the Spanish and subsequently perpetuated by the US under its Bureau of Insular Affairs.

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100 years ago: Tolstoy dead at 82

Perhaps the world's greatest living novelist, Count Lev (Leo) Nikolayevich Tolstoy died on November 20, 1910, at

the age of 82.

In his most famous works, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, as well as in dozens of other novels, plays, and stories, Tolstoy addressed with keenness and sensitivity the consequences of the social contradictions engulfing Russia during his long life—which had seen the manumission of the serfs in 1861 and the first working class revolution in 1905. That his works had such resonance outside of Russia is a testament to the novelist's deeply realistic grasp of the drama and tragedy in social relationships. It is also testament to the flowering of Russian literature. When Tolstoy was young Pushkin, Lermontov, and Gogol were still alive; Dostoyevsky, Turgenev and Chekhov were his contemporaries; Gorky and Yesenin had emerged by the time of his death.

These same social contradictions, coupled with his aristocratic background against which he rebelled but could not overcome, colored Tolstoy's social thought, with less happy results. He was an eclectic—a Christian spiritualist, vegetarian, opponent of socialism, and pacifist—whose theory of non-violent protest was ineffective against the brutalizing power of the czar. Yet Tolstoy's sympathy for the peasants and the downtrodden could impart even to his politics a sincere outrage.

Trotsky, himself a master of Russian prose, wrote the following about Tolstoy two years before the latter's death. "[T]hough he refuses a sympathetic hearing to our revolutionary objectives, we know it is because history has refused him personally an understanding of her revolutionary pathways. We shall not condemn him. And we shall always value in him not alone his great genius, which shall never die so long as human art lives on, but also his unbending moral courage which did not permit him tranquilly to remain in the ranks of *their* hypocritical church, *their* society and *their* state but doomed him to remain a solitary among his countless admirers" (*Tolstoy: Poet and Rebel*).

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