

This week in history: September 9-15

9 September 2013

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

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Soviet CP admits murder of Leon Trotsky ordered by Stalin

The September 9, 1988, edition of *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party, acknowledged for the first time that the 1940 assassination of Leon Trotsky was ordered by Stalin. The article, titled “The Demon of the Revolution,” a reference to Trotsky, was written by Dmitri Volkogonov, a historian and top political officer in the Soviet Army. In it, he wrote, “Yes, Stalin wanted Trotsky’s death.... Trotsky had been able to understand Stalin, his motives and intentions from the inside.” He added that the decision by Stalin to kill Trotsky was reached in 1936, after the publication of Trotsky’s historic analysis of the Soviet bureaucracy, *The Revolution Betrayed*.

Up until the time of the *Pravda* article, the official position of the Stalinist bureaucracy was that Trotsky was a counterrevolutionary spy and agent of Hitler. The crisis erupting in the USSR forced admissions by the Gorbachev regime, desperately attempting to bolster credibility by discarding the most blatant and obvious lies of the past.

Volkogonov wrote: “Having his share of the abilities of a publicist, orator and organizer, Trotsky played a well-known role in the October armed uprising and in the years of the civil war, when he was people’s commissar for war and naval affairs and Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Council.”

The article stated that Trotsky’s popularity in the USSR was only rivaled by that of Lenin at the time of the October Revolution. Volkogonov said that even after Trotsky’s exile, “it always hurt Stalin to remember that in the years of the civil war the future exile was closer to Lenin than him, the future general secretary.”

The *Pravda* article went on to imply that Trotsky only

became an enemy of the revolution after 1924, when he took up the struggle against Stalin’s doctrine of “socialism in one country.” Volkogonov then made the ludicrous suggestion that Trotsky, because he led the political attack on Stalin, was partly responsible for the concentration of power in the hands of the general secretary of the party.

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50 years ago: Four girls murdered in Birmingham church bombing

At 10:22 a.m. on September 15, 1963, a dynamite bomb planted by members of the Ku Klux Klan ripped through the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, just as dozens of children were arriving. Four young girls were killed in the blast: Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Addie Mae Collins, all age 14, and 11-year-old Denise McNair. Twenty-two more were wounded.

Later in the day, Johnny Robinson, 16, was gunned down by Birmingham police as he ran away from them, and 13-year-old Virgil Ware was shot and killed in an ambush as he rode his bicycle in a Birmingham suburb.

The industrial city was a center of US steel production with both iron and coal mines in its hinterland. It had become the frontline in the struggle between the mass movement of black workers and poor against Jim Crow segregation—which sought to legally divide white and black workers—and state and local authorities, backed by the Ku Klux Klan, that sought to maintain segregation. So many racist bombings had taken place in Birmingham in the early 1960s that the town had earned the moniker “Bombingham.”

In May 1963, after the persistent mobilization of thousands of black workers and youth against the city administration, business owners, Alabama governor George Wallace, and Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor and his brutal police, an agreement was reached to integrate public spaces.

The Klan responded with a terror campaign. The dynamite was planted by Klansmen Thomas Blanton, Herman Frank Cash, Robert Chambliss, and Bobby Frank Cherry. None of

the men were initially convicted, in part because the Federal Bureau of Investigation, under J. Edgar Hoover, hid evidence from prosecutors. The case was twice reopened subsequently. Chambliss was convicted in 1977, and Cherry and Blanton in 2001 and 2002, respectively. Cash died in the interim.

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75 years ago: Hitler gives “humanitarian” disguise to Czechoslovakia threats

The crisis provoked by Nazi Germany’s open threat to wrest control of the Sudetenland border region from Czechoslovakia escalated during the week beginning September 9, 1938. Emboldened by the appeasement by France and Britain of Hitler’s belligerent demands upon Czech territory and their refusal to take action in the face of German and Italian support of Franco in Spain, the Nazis whipped up hysteria at a Nuremberg party rally to amplify their threats.

On September 12, Hitler addressed the rally. In a short speech, continually interrupted for minutes on end by frantic and deafening fascist chants, Hitler claimed that the Czechoslovak government aimed to exterminate the Sudeten Germans, and that since the creation of Czechoslovakia at the end of World War I, over 600,000 Germans had been forced from their homes or face starvation.

The Czechoslovak government, under pressure from Great Britain, had recently acceded to German demands for Sudeten autonomy. This only allowed Hitler to escalate his provocations. Within days, his Nuremberg speech triggered violent clashes in Czechoslovakia. Jews fled as swastika-wearing militia took control in places like Marienbad.

Informed by intelligence that the Nazis intended to invade Czechoslovakia in late September, the British prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, held a three-hour meeting with Hitler on September 15 in Berchtesgaden. Hitler refused to modify his demand for Sudeten autonomy. Chamberlain returned to London, where his government prepared a plan that would accept Hitler’s demands in return for a guarantee that what was left of Czechoslovakia would be spared.

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100 years ago: Uprising in Macedonia following end of Balkan wars

On September 9, 1913, an uprising by the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO) and Albanian leaders in Macedonia took place in the Serbian-controlled regions of Ohrid, Debar and Struga. The uprising took place just over a month after the signing of the Treaty of Bucharest, which concluded the Second Balkan War. Local Albanians and Bulgarians expelled the Serbian officials and army who had captured the regions during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913.

The IMRO central committee and Albanian revolutionary committees opposed the Treaty of Bucharest, which was concluded under the auspices of the major powers. The carving up of the Balkans had seen more than 150,000 Macedonian Bulgarians fall under Serbian rule.

The rebels took Debar on September 9 and elected a temporary government. In Struga and Ohrid, the Serbian officials and army were expelled and a temporary Bulgarian government was formed.

On September 11, the Serbian king issued a decree calling for the suppression of the revolt, and 100,000 soldiers were mobilized. Thousands of rebels attempted to hold Ohrid, but were overwhelmed by Serbian forces. With its Greek allies, Serbia occupied Podgradetz, near Ohrid, and burned down villages. Fierce battles were fought with much loss of life on both sides. Bulgarian and Albanian rebels retreated to Albania through Golo Bardo. The Serbian army destroyed around 180 villages in the regions between Ohrid, Gostivar and Debar, committing massacres throughout Macedonia.

The US-based Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP), established to study the causes and impact of war on civilian populations and comprising academics, lawyers, ambassadors and other professionals, sent an international commission to investigate the Balkan crisis. The report produced by the CEIP in 1913 denounced the policy of the Great Powers, stating that “these unhappy Balkan states have been until now much more the victims of the European decisions than of their own faults.”

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