

This week in history: September 16-22

16 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: New coup signals revolutionary crisis in Haiti

On September 17, 1988 the Haitian dictatorship of Gen. Henri Namphy was overthrown in the course of a series of battles between rival military factions. US-backed Gen. Prosper Avril appointed himself president.

The takeover followed months of widespread popular opposition to the Tontons Macoutes, the brutal personal police force of the 29-year Duvalier dictatorship, which was overthrown in 1986. This movement provoked Gen. Avril, one-time adviser to the Duvalier regime and ally of Namphy, to visit Washington two weeks before his coup.

Six days before the Avril coup, the Tontons Macoutes carried out a massacre at St. Jean Bosco Church in Port-au-Prince, the parish of liberation theologian Jean-Bertrand Aristide, killing up to 50 people and injuring some 80 more. The Namphy regime turned a blind eye to the preparations for the assault. Two other churches were burned down. A wave of popular retribution exploded against the Tontons Macoutes, resulting in the killing of at least a dozen members of the hated force.

In an expression of the fears of imperialism in the political situation, an unnamed European diplomat told the *Washington Post*: “We are waiting to see if Avril will take the Army in hand. The only force that is organized in this country is the Army. If it cracks, there will be nothing.”

US imperialism gave rapid approval of the Avril

coup. The removal of Namphy was seen as a last-ditch effort to avoid a revolutionary explosion.

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50 years ago: Britain cobbles together Malaysia

On September 16, 1963, the country of Malaysia came into being as a federation of former British colonies Malaya, Singapore, Sarawak, and Sabah (North Borneo). The United Kingdom immediately entered into a military alliance with the new state, pledging to defend it in case of war and maintaining its military bases. Australia and New Zealand also signed military treaties with Malaysia, a country of then only 10 million inhabitants. (Singapore would leave the federation in 1965).

Malaysia was of great strategic significance because of its location astride the Strait of Malacca, the seaway connecting the Indian and Pacific oceans, and because of its wealth in a number of key commodities, including tin, rubber, bauxite, and oil. The new government was anti-communist and pro-Western.

The treaties with the UK, Australia, and New Zealand were aimed against Indonesia, whose president, Sukarno, declared the new state “illegal,” and withheld recognition. In reaction to the creation of Malaysia, as many as 10,000 protesters stormed the British embassy in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, ransacking it and destroying the ambassador’s Rolls Royce. The Philippines also withheld recognition, as Manila still laid claim to parts of North Borneo.

75 years ago: British and French governments abandon Czechoslovakia

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On the afternoon of September 22, 1938, one week after initial discussions at Berchtesgaden had drawn to a close, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler and British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met once more in Bad Godesberg to discuss the fate of Czechoslovakia. Hitler, claiming to defend the interests of the persecuted German minority in Czechoslovakia, demanded the predominantly German-speaking areas be severed from the central European state.

After the first meeting, Chamberlain claimed he had dissuaded Hitler from attacking Czechoslovakia. If self-determination was granted to the Sudeten Germans, Chamberlain told his ministers, it would satisfy Berlin. He spent the week between his meetings with the German dictator, together with his French counterpart Eduard Daladier, pressuring the Czech government to agree to their own geographical dismemberment in exchange for an international guarantee against invasion.

At the second meeting, Hitler told his stunned British counterpart that he could not sign a non-aggression pact with the Czechs until Hungarian and Polish claims on Czech territory had been settled. Working himself up into a frenzy, Hitler ranted about how the Czech leader Edvard Benes was responsible for alleged attacks upon the Sudeten Germans. Hitler concluded by demanding an immediate German occupation of the Sudeten territory. Chamberlain capitulated, offering to take the new demands to the Czechs.

It had become apparent that neither Britain nor France was prepared to go to war with Germany. The Soviet Union, while massing troops on the Ukrainian border, made clear it would only defend Czechoslovakia if the French would abide by their commitment to that country's independence.

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100 years ago: Miners strike begins in Colorado

On September 16, 1913, over 11,000 coal miners went on strike in Colorado, demanding better pay and working conditions, as well as recognition of the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), their

union, by the major mining companies. The strike lasted over a year, and included some of the most violent industrial confrontations of the period.

Prior to the strike, coal miners in Colorado faced a death rate more than double the national average. They were denied the right to organize, deprived of the eight-hour day, and were often paid according to the tonnage of coal produced, with other labor necessary to the mining process unpaid. One of the largest mining companies, the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, was owned by John D. Rockefeller, the richest American.

Following the refusal of the mining companies to accede to the demands of the workers, the UMW initiated a mass walkout and strike. Workers were immediately evicted from their company homes, forcing them to live in makeshift tent encampments. The companies hired scab labor and employed private security contractors. In October, the Colorado National Guard was deployed against the strikers.

The strike culminated in the notorious Ludlow Massacre the following spring. On April 20, 1914, a company militia attacked a workers' encampment killing 20 people with a barrage of machinegun fire, including two women and eleven children. A number of workers' leaders were killed in execution-style murders.

Over the following weeks, strikers took up arms and engaged in a series of violent battles with the company militia and local authorities. Over 70 people were killed in the conflicts. Protests were held across the country in opposition to the massacre, and Rockefeller's offices and home were picketed. The Wilson administration, fearful of the development of a broader movement of the working class, deployed federal troops. The strike ended in November 1914. (See "Remembering the Ludlow Massacre")

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