

This week in history: September 23-29

23 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: US continues political and covert assault on Sandinista regime

On September 27, 1988, US President Ronald Reagan made a speech before the UN General Assembly accusing the Nicaraguan Sandinista government of being a “totalitarian regime.” He went on to declare that the “continuing deterioration of human rights in Nicaragua” is “the one exception” to what he claimed was progress in reducing international tensions.

Reagan added that the conflict in Central America posed a risk to Soviet-American relations, calling on the Soviet Union “to assist in bringing conflict in Central America to a close by halting the flow of billions of dollars’ worth of arms and ammunition to the Sandinista regime.”

The previous week, US Speaker of the House Jim Wright stated publicly, “We had received clear testimony from CIA people that they have deliberately done things to provoke an overreaction on the part of the government in Nicaragua.” This marked the first admission by a US government official of such CIA activity in Nicaragua. Wright explicitly confirmed that the CIA reported it to Congress.

In November 1986 the Iran-Contra affair first came to light, exposing the role of key US government and military officials in conducting an illegal war against the Sandinistas, circumventing a congressional ban by supporting the counterrevolutionary army called the Contras with funds raised through the secret arms-for-hostage deals with Iran.

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50 years ago: Dominican president toppled in CIA-backed coup

On September 25, 1963, a military coup d’état removed the democratically elected Dominican Republic President Juan Bosch from office, replacing him with a three-person commission as a front for military strongman Colonel Elías Wessin. Bosch fled to Puerto Rico. He had been in office for just seven months.

The coup was backed by the CIA and given the go-ahead by the Kennedy administration. Bosch, a writer and a bourgeois politician initially favored by the John F. Kennedy as a “third force” in Latin America, had swept to victory in December 1962 as the head of the reformist Dominican Revolutionary Party. The election had been made possible by the assassination of Trujillo in 1961—in which, according to a CIA memo, there had been “quite extensive Agency involvement with the plotters.” Trujillo had been a longtime US stooge whose despotic regime, Kennedy feared, would provoke a revolution.

Bosch lost Washington’s backing after making gestures toward the Castro government in Cuba, and, in order to placate the demands of the Dominican Republic’s working class and impoverished masses, implementing a liberal constitution and calling for certain modest social reforms. These moves angered industrialists, the wealthy owners of rural *latifundia*, the Catholic Church hierarchy, and other former backers of Trujillo.

After Trujillo’s killing, Kennedy had projected three possibilities in Dominican Republic: “a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime, or a Castro regime,” he told advisers. “We ought to aim at the first, but we can’t renounce the second until we are sure that we avoid the third.” This formula explained the brief tenure of Juan Bosch.

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75 years ago: Munich conference called on Czechoslovakia

Late on the afternoon of September 26, 1938, Sir Horace Wilson, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain’s

closest adviser, met with Adolf Hitler in the Reich Chancellery. Wilson told the German dictator that the British government would recommend a supervised territorial transfer of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia to Germany. Threatening military action against both Britain and France, Hitler responded by giving the Czechs until 2 p.m. on September 28 to unconditionally accept the terms of a German occupation by October 1.

Panic-stricken, Chamberlain turned to Italian dictator Benito Mussolini to orchestrate a solution, sending the British ambassador to Italy, Lord Perth, to implore Italian foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano for an intervention. Mussolini telephoned Italy's ambassador to Germany with the following instructions: "Go to the Führer at once, and tell him that whatever happens, I will be at his side, but that I request a 24 hour delay before hostilities begin." Pleased, Hitler agreed to Mussolini's request. Chamberlain now invited Italy to join with Britain, France, and Germany in a four-power summit slated to begin in Munich before 2 p.m. on September 29 to determine the fate of Czechoslovakia.

The Nazis lust for war was not shared by the German population. On September 27 a motorized division of the German army paraded through Wilhelmstrasse past government buildings. Hitler watched the spectacle for three hours, with the intention that the cavalcade would intimidate the foreign diplomats and journalists gathered in the city. However, American journalist William Shirer noted that citizens shied away from the military bravura. He described Berliners ducking into doorways at the sight of the procession and averting their eyes from the fascist war machine as "the most striking demonstration against war I've ever seen."

Hitler was most disappointed and angered by the reaction of Berliners, in sharp contrast to the hysterical response his bellicose threats had received from thousands of fascist fanatics gathered at the Sportpalast only hours previously. A biographer of Hitler noted of the discrepancy between the two audiences, "The contrast with the reactions of the hand-picked audience in the Sportpalast was vivid. It was a glimpse of the mood throughout the country. Whatever the feelings about the Sudeten Germans, only a fanaticized minority thought them worth a war against the Western powers."

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This week in September 1913, tensions between China and Japan flared into a major diplomatic row over the deaths of three Japanese citizens in Nanking during the concluding stage of a rebellion against the central government in Peking. The rebellion, led by the Kuomintang, had begun in July in response to the assumption of quasi-dictatorial powers by President Yuan Shikai. It was violently suppressed, and ended in September.

On September 27, the Japanese government issued a demand for a formal apology from Chinese officials in Nanking, with a three-day ultimatum. Japanese citizens in Nanking were instructed by the government to take refuge in the heavily fortified consulate, which had been reinforced with an extra detachment of 100 Japanese marines. Japanese warships were dispatched to the Yangtze River, awaiting the Chinese response to the ultimatum, in a move that the *New York Times* described as "threatening war."

Within days of the Japanese demand, it was reported that General Chang Hsun, commander of Chinese troops in Nanking, had personally apologized at the Japanese consulate, flanked by as many as 800 Chinese soldiers. The apology averted the immediate threat of a broader conflict.

The aggressive response from Tokyo was in part a reaction to Japanese nationalist sentiment, which found expression in rallies in many cities. It also took place under conditions of a scramble for control of China by the various major powers, who were concerned about the implications of the political upheaval for their concessions—portions of Chinese territory controlled by imperialist troops. In April, the Chinese government had secured a loan of \$25 million from Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan.

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100 years ago: Tensions between China and Japan in aftermath of rebellion