

This week in history: September 1-7

1 September 2014

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

25 years ago: Last apartheid election in South Africa

The votes were cast for the final national election to take place under the apartheid regime in South Africa on September 6, 1989. The elections had been called to demonstrate backing for the anti-apartheid reformist measures of National Party leader F. W. de Klerk, and, in the longer term, to prepare the way for the entry of the black elite into joint rule via the still-illegal African National Congress (ANC).

The election results demonstrated the growing hostility among white South Africans to apartheid, the system of racial exclusion and segregation aimed at the country's black majority and its multi-racial working class. Nearly 70 percent of white voters backed parties advocating reforms of the apartheid system. The National Party actually saw a decline in its support, but this was offset by growth in the more vocally anti-apartheid Democratic Party. The hardline pro-apartheid Conservative Party gained the votes of 31.5 percent of the white electorate.

Votes were also held for the House of Delegates for South Africa's Asian-origin population and the House of Representatives, reserved for South Africa's "coloured" population, a designation given to those of mixed European, African, and Asian ancestry. Only about a fifth of eligible voters among each group turned out, whereas turnout among whites was nearly 70 percent. "Coloureds" and "Indians" had been allowed to vote for separate, and impotent, parliamentary bodies only since 1984; the majority of Africans classified as "blacks" remained disenfranchised.

[top]

50 years ago: US leftist Elizabeth Gurley Flynn dead at 74

Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, the "Rebel Girl" of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), died September 5, 1964 at the age of 74 in Moscow, where she was visiting in her capacity as

chairman of the Communist Party USA, a position she had held since 1961.

Though she lived the last four decades of her life as a diehard Stalinist, in her youth, as an organizer for the IWW, Flynn figured prominently in mass struggles of the American working class. Born in Connecticut in 1890 into an Irish socialist family that later moved to the Bronx, at the age of 17 Flynn became an agitator for the IWW or "Wobblies," a radical union that sought to organize workers that the AFL disdained, including unskilled factory workers, immigrants, blacks, and women.

Flynn was at the famous IWW-led strikes in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912 and Paterson, New Jersey, in 1913, and lent her oratory to struggles of miners, loggers, textile and silk mill workers in states stretching from Oregon to New York, where her activities led novelist Theodore Dreiser to dub her the "East Side Joan of Arc." The working class balladeer Joe Hill immortalized Flynn with his song "Rebel Girl" in 1915.

Arrested ten different times, including in IWW free speech fights, her most notorious imprisonment came during Minnesota's bitter Mesabi Iron Range strike of 1916, when she was framed for the killing of a US Steel hired gunman alongside her lover, the Italian immigrant syndicalist Carlo Tresca, who would later serve on the Dewey Commission that exonerated Leon Trotsky. Flynn was released before the case went to trial.

Inspired by the 1917 Russian Revolution, the most politically minded elements of the IWW joined the left wing of the US Socialist Party to form the early communist movement. But not Flynn, who became absorbed with work in the newly formed liberal organization, the American Civil Liberties Union, as well as in the birth control movement. It is notable that she joined the Stalinist CPUSA only in 1936, just as the Moscow show trials were in the process of killing off all the revolutionists who remained from 1917, with Trotsky being the prime target *in absentia*.

Flynn followed every twist and turn of the Moscow bureaucracy, through the Stalin-Hitler pact, the suppression of the class struggle during World War II, to the support for the bloody Stalinist suppression of workers' revolts in East Germany in 1953 and Hungary in 1956. As a result, she was accorded a massive state funeral in Red Square, with upward of 25,000 in attendance; half the front page of *Izvestia* was dedicated to her passing. Her ashes were sent back to Chicago's Waldheim Cemetery, the resting place of the Haymarket

Martyrs.

[top]

75 years ago: Nazi invasion of Poland begins WWII

On September 1, 1939, the world was plunged once more into imperialist barbarism, just 21 years after the end of the First World War, when Nazi Germany invaded Poland, and Britain and France declared war on the Third Reich two days later.

Citing “Polish aggression” near the town of Gleiwitz on the Silesian border, which had been staged by the SS, killing concentration camp prisoners dressed in German military uniforms, Hitler ordered a general advance of German troops across the entire border with Poland.

The first shots were fired by the German navy near Danzig (Gdansk). The SMS Schleswig-Holstein, a veteran of the Battle of Jutland in 1916, quietly slipped from its moorings in Danzig harbor, drifted out into the water, focused its heavy artillery on the fortified Polish munitions depot at the Westerplatte and opened fire with its 280mm artillery.

A company of Kriegsmarine assault troops, who had been hidden aboard the ship, later stormed ashore but were repelled. In Danzig volunteers rushed to defend the central post office on the Heveliusplatz, but stood little chance against the storm troopers, SS men and soldiers smuggled in over previous weeks.

The Nazi invasion was a stark demonstration of the advances made in aerial bombardment since World War I. According to one historian, “By the end of 1 September the Polish air force had largely ceased to exist, many of its aircraft having been caught on the ground and destroyed by the Luftwaffe, which also bombed Polish headquarters, communications and cities.”

Given the disparity in size and industrial strength between the two countries, the strategic position of Poland was impossible from the beginning. This was compounded by the absorption of most of Czechoslovakia into the Third Reich earlier in the year, which effectively outflanked Polish defenses along a long southern border.

Moreover, Poland faced not merely a hopeless struggle against Nazi Germany, but an impending attack from the rear by the Soviet Union, under terms of the Stalin-Hitler Pact.

[top]

100 years ago: First Battle of the Marne ends German offensive

On September 6, 1914, British and French forces

counterattacked against the German army and brought to a halt its month-long offensive against France, which had reached the outskirts of Paris. What became known as the First Battle of the Marne, September 5-12, 1914, was an unprecedented bloodbath in which the rival armies suffered a combined 500,000 casualties.

When the German army invaded Belgium on August 3, its advance was swift and in accordance with the Schlieffen plan, which had been devised in 1905 by the then-chief of the German General Staff, Count Alfred von Schlieffen. Based on the premise that the most decisive area in a war in Europe would be the Western sector, the Schlieffen Plan identified France as Germany’s most dangerous opponent on the continent.

Russia was not as technologically or organizationally advanced as France, and Schlieffen believed that Russia would take six weeks to mobilize its forces. He envisaged a swift march through Belgium and France that would result in defeat of the French army within six weeks. His plan called for Germany to then move the bulk of its forces towards Russia, thus avoiding a simultaneous war on two fronts.

In accordance with the Schlieffen Plan, the German Army had dealt with the Belgian Army with relative ease and sent the British and French Army into retreat. As the German army approached Paris, the capital prepared for a siege and the French government left for Bordeaux. On the sixth of September, the French Army launched a counteroffensive, the first major battle on the Western Front, which came to be known as the Battle of Marne. The British army also halted its retreat and turned to join the attack on the German army.

By the 9th of September, with inadequate communications and a wedge driven between sections of their forces, the German commanders, fearing defeat, retreated to an area near the River Aisne where the German army dug trenches and prepared to defend their positions. From a strategic standpoint, the First Battle of the Marne had decisive significance, marking the end of the Schlieffen Plan and the six-week “war of movement,” and setting the stage for three years of trench warfare, with hundreds of thousands of young men losing their lives to gain half a mile or even a few yards of territory.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact