

# This week in history: September 8-14

8 September 2014

## 25 years ago: Hungarian Stalinist regime breaks with Soviet bloc

On September 8, 1989, the Hungarian People's Republic opened its borders to allow some 10,000 citizens of the German Democratic Republic (GDR, or East Germany) to emigrate to West Germany via Austria, over the protests of the Stalinist government in East Berlin. Two days later, Hungary requested the withdrawal of two Soviet tank battalions, proclaimed its intention of eventually becoming a neutral state, and announced the unilateral demilitarization of a stretch of its borders with Austria and Yugoslavia.

From these first acts taken in Budapest the liquidation of the Eastern European regimes began, to be followed in two years with the dismantling of the Soviet Union itself. Beginning with Hungary, factions of the Stalinist bureaucracies led and profited from the dismantling, privatization, and out-and-out looting of the state property that had been established in Eastern Europe in the aftermath of the victory of the Red Army over Nazi Germany in World War II. The living conditions of the working class were thrown back decades.

With the promise of automatic West German citizenship, the East German émigrés began to arrive in Hungary earlier in the year after it said it would open its border with Austria. Negotiations continued until September, during which time the émigrés were housed by the right-wing Catholic Order of Malta charity in Budapest.

Driving the crisis of Stalinism was the increasing indebtedness of the East European regimes—Hungary, which had oriented its economy to the West more than the rest, was the most indebted to Western finance, more than doubling its sovereign debt between 1980 and 1989 from \$9 billion to over \$20 billion. In allowing the emigration, Hungary violated treaties with its Warsaw Pact neighbors in order to improve relations with the West. “Existing bilateral agreements among socialist countries, most of them agreed in the 1960s, damaged Hungary’s interests,” said Foreign Minister Gyula Horn. “I don’t understand how they were accepted.”

The Soviet bureaucracy, too, made clear its acquiescence and that the “Brezhnev Doctrine” of enforcing Pact obligations would not be invoked in the case of Hungary. “Naturally this is of some concern to us, but it does not affect us directly,” said Soviet Foreign Ministry spokesman Gennady Gerasimov.

Hungarian officials said that the decision to open the border had been discussed with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. “The Soviet Union was fully in the picture,” said Istvan Foldesi, national security adviser to the Hungarian Communist Party. “Our impression is that they regard Hungary as a laboratory experiment.”

## 50 years ago: Attempted coup in South Vietnam

On September 13, 1964, the puppet regime in South Vietnam of Major General Nguyen Khanh survived a coup led by former Interior Minister Lam Van Phat. Rebel troops occupied key positions in Saigon without resistance, taking over Khanh’s office and arresting several officers. General Phat, a Roman Catholic, had been sacked from Khanh’s cabinet a week earlier after rioting by Buddhists opposed to the repression of the military regime.

However, the rebel generals failed to win the support of top military leaders, including Air Force commander Nguyen Cao Ky, as well as the vital backing of US imperialism. In a joint news conference with Ky, rebel officers agreed to peacefully terminate their coup and return their units to the front. None of the conspirators were arrested.

The Johnson administration was thrown into momentary crisis when news reached it that the coup had apparently been successful. It wished to maintain the appearance of order in South Vietnam while the US presidential election campaign reached its climax.

The coup represented the third major crisis for the Saigon regime in 10 months. It followed the US-backed assassination of Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963 and the coup of January 1964 that had brought the Khanh regime to power. Johnson administration officials admitted that the continuing Saigon power struggle between corrupt factions of anticommunist generals represented a setback for US attempts to establish a viable pro-imperialist regime in South Vietnam capable of waging an effective war against the National Liberation Front.

The preparations for a new US strategy—bombing of North Vietnam and the deployment of US ground forces in the South on a massive scale—had been signaled by the US Senate passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in August 1964.

## 75 years ago: Nazi terror in Poland

This week in 1939 saw the full-scale rout of the Polish army before the German invasion that had begun on September 1. France, Poland's nominal ally, failed to open a second front by refusing to attack Nazi Germany from the west.

Poland's defensive scheme had been based on the presumption of a World War I defensive fight. Once the Wehrmacht broke through its defenses, Polish forces were forced to fall back rapidly. By September 8, 1939, German tank divisions, "Panzerkorps," arrived at the outskirts of the Polish capital Warsaw, and on September 13 the city was put under artillery bombardment, on top of the Luftwaffe's terror bombing that had begun in the first days of the invasion.

The chief Polish commander, Marshal Edward Rydz-ŹmigŹy, ordered a retrenchment to the southeast at what was called "the Romanian bridgehead," because it bordered on that Balkan country, the only possible line of retreat for the defeated Polish forces.

The German military command aimed to terrorize the population. During the course of the invasion at least 500 towns and villages were destroyed, their inhabitants either forced to flee or summarily exterminated. Over 20,000 Poles were executed by gunfire during the invasion and dumped into some 760 mass graves.

Hitler's former personal bodyguard, the SS Leibstandarte Adolf Hitler division, committed some of the worst atrocities against civilians. But much of the killing was carried out by the SS Einsatzgruppen, the Security Police and the Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz militia (Ethnic German Self Defence). The Luftwaffe bombed cities indiscriminately, and its pilots strafed fleeing columns of refugees with machinegun fire. Estimates of the Polish dead during September 1939 range from 150,000 to 200,000.

## 100 years ago: German chancellor outlines war aims in secret "September program"

On September 9, 1914, German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg sent to his deputy in Berlin a secret document outlining Germany's aims in the war that had broken out the previous month. Dubbed the "September program," the document prepared in German military headquarters in Koblenz advanced a perspective of German dominance in Central Europe, amidst German hopes of a swift victory over France.

The introductory section of the document stated, "The

general aim of the war is security for the German Reich in west and east for all imaginable time. For this purpose France must be so weakened as to make her revival as a great power impossible for all time. Russia must be thrust back as far as possible from Germany's eastern frontier and her domination over the non-Russian vassal peoples broken."

The program went on to outline a policy of subordinating France and permanently placing Belgium and Luxembourg under direct German control. The program called for the development of a "central European economic association," to be established through a series of common customs treaties with a number of European states, including a defeated France. While the association would be founded on nominal "equality," the document stated that it would be "under German leadership," in order to "stabilize Germany's economic dominance over Mitteleuropa."

The document also called for new "colonial acquisitions" flowing from the war, specifically referring to the aim of creating a "continuous Central African colonial empire," and referring obliquely to plans for the colonization of Russia.

The September program was not discovered until the 1960s, when German historian Fritz Fischer embarked on a monumental study of Germany's role in World War I, which established the continuity between the imperialist aims it pursued in the first global conflagration and those later advanced by Hitler's Third Reich.

While Britain and France sought to use German crimes in Belgium and France to justify their own military activities, predatory and imperialist interests dominated their plans no less than those of their adversaries. Trotsky wrote at the time, "While the simpletons and hypocrites prate of the defense of national freedom and independence, the German-English war is really being waged for the freedom of the imperialistic exploitation of the peoples of India and Egypt on the one hand, and for the imperialistic division of the peoples of the earth on the other."



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