

This week in history: October 6-12

6 October 2014

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

[top]

25 years ago: Thousands of demonstrators confront East German police

On October 9, 1989, the streets and squares of East Berlin, Dresden and Leipzig and other East German cities were the scene of demonstrations by thousands against the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy. The previous evening, Security forces in East Berlin broke up a peaceful candlelight protest that called on the regime to make democratic reforms. Police beat protesters with truncheons while demonstrators chanted, “No violence, no violence!”

The East German (DDR) regime headed by Erich Honecker was notorious for maintaining the Berlin wall and the deathtraps at the East German border. In the weeks prior to the demonstrations, a mass exodus of East German citizens through Hungary into West Germany created a deep crisis for the regime. This movement became the harbinger of a mass movement inside the DDR against state repression and the worsening economy.

Two thousand baton-wielding police with Alsatian dogs were deployed against an October 8 protest, resulting in the arrest of hundreds and scores of injuries. The next day, popular anger over the state violence against peaceful protesters erupted in demonstrations that lasted for days, across the DDR. Hundreds of thousands took to the streets in all the major cities.

In a panic reaction, hundreds of Stalinist officials were sent into all large factories for on-the-spot discussions in order to appease the workforce and give them hope through a “dialogue” on “all problems.” The bureaucracy rightly feared that the demonstrations on the streets would be followed by mass strikes in the factories.

Honecker, who became General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party, (the official name for the East German Communist Party) in May 1971, was removed from office the following week.

50 years ago: Nasser releases Tshombe from jail

On October 9, 1964, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser released Congolese President Moise Tshombe from house arrest, after he had attempted to attend a gathering of the “nonaligned countries” held in Cairo. Meanwhile, the Congo allowed personnel of the Egyptian and Algerian embassies to leave the country, ending a three-day standoff in which the embassies had been sealed off by Congolese authorities.

Nasser had Tshombe detained in a palace guest house after he had refused appeals to stay away from the nonaligned conference, using the arrest as a gesture of protest against the open collaboration of the US-backed stooge with imperialism. Leaders of the 28 participating African countries, who sought to posture as independent from imperialism, voted unanimously to support the exclusion of Tshombe from the conference, declaring that his attendance would be “inopportune.” Flying to Paris after his release, Tshombe demagogically denounced Nasser for attempting to “dominate” Africa.

The US-backed puppet government in the mineral-rich Congo was carrying out a brutal counterinsurgency war against a nationalist-led uprising, employing American aircraft and technicians, as well as white mercenaries recruited from Rhodesia and South Africa. Despite the protests of the semi-colonial leaders, the imperialist-backed intervention continued to gain ground, as white mercenaries helped government troops retake the key rebel-held town of Ulvira on the border of Burundi. The capture of the city cut off the supply lines for the nationalist insurgents, who were receiving aid from the tiny central African nation.

See also: Fifty years since the murder of Patrice Lumumba [22 January, 2011]

[top]

75 years ago: Nazi Germany carves up Poland

On October 8, 1939, after the fall of Warsaw to the Nazi invaders days earlier, Hitler redrew Poland's borders. The western sector of the country, containing Danzig-West Prussia and East Prussia in the north, the Wartheland in the west and Upper Silesia in the south—all contiguous with German borders—were incorporated directly into the German Reich, part of the Greater Germany created by the annexation of neighboring Austria and Czechoslovakia. This section of Polish territory was to be filled with ethnic Germans from the Baltic states, Romania and elsewhere in the Balkans after Poles and Jews had been exterminated or expelled. The rest of what had been Poland, the central and southwestern sector, would be a prison-like reserve for the Polish inhabitants, joined by those expelled from the western sector.

In the Reich-controlled western sector, the Nazi authorities expropriated all commercial and financial enterprises together with major land entitlements. Industry producing arms and military equipment were taken over by the Nazi state, with smaller and less strategic industries sold to German capitalists. Nazi Einsatzgruppen carried out the merciless physical extermination of the local intelligentsia, Catholic clergy, bourgeoisie and political leaders. The Polish working class was terrorized, its leaders arrested or shot. Polish political prisoners were sent to a former cavalry barracks at Oswiecim, later renamed Auschwitz.

Stalinism shared the blame for the Polish tragedy. It was Stalin who, in 1933, betrayed the workers in Germany and allowed the Nazi ascent to power, through his order to the German communists of the KPD to oppose any united working class action, jointly with the social democrats, against the Nazis. It was under Stalin's orders that the Polish Communist Party was liquidated according to his "Popular Front" formula, leaving the Polish workers without political leadership. And finally, through the Hitler-Stalin pact, Poland was dissected between fascist and Stalinist control, with Stalin even assisting the Nazis in their deadly enterprise by providing military and economic aid.

[top]

100 years ago: Japan seizes German possession in the Pacific

On October 7, 1914, it was reported in the press that Japanese military forces had seized the island of Jaluit, a

German colony in the Marshall Islands situated in the western Pacific. Like other German possessions in the Pacific seized by Australia and New Zealand in the preceding weeks of the war, Jaluit was lightly guarded, and Japan took control of the tiny island without any reports of fighting. The island possessed considerable geopolitical significance, lying approximately midway between the Philippines and the Hawaiian islands.

The Japanese government assured its Western allies that the seizure of Jaluit did not contravene an agreement reached between Tokyo, London, and Washington at the outset of the war. That agreement had been based on a statement by the British Foreign Office, which declared that: "It is understood that the action of Japan will not extend to the Pacific Ocean beyond the China Seas except in so far as it may be necessary to protect Japanese shipping lines in the Pacific, nor beyond Asiatic waters westward of the China Seas, nor to any foreign territory except territory in German occupation on the Continent of Eastern Asia."

Both British and American imperialism were concerned about Japan flexing its muscles in an area on the trade route around Cape Horn and through the Straits of Magellan. The Japanese Embassy in Washington sent assurances that the occupation would be short-lived, pointing to the fact that Japanese forces had already destroyed German fortifications. In London, British officials made clear that they wanted Japan to stay far away from Australia, and that only Britain had the right to seize German possessions in Micronesia and New Guinea.

British and American consternation grew in the following days as it was reported that Japan had also seized the island of Yap in the Caroline group, located about 1,000 miles east of the Philippine island of Mindanao. Spain had sold the Carolines to Germany in 1899 in the wake of its defeat in the Spanish-American War.

[top]



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