

This week in history: October 13-19

13 October 2014

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25 years ago: US role exposed in failed Panamanian coup

On October 13, 1989, US President George H.W. Bush repeated a call for the overthrow of the regime of Gen. Manuel Noriega in Panama. Ten days earlier, on October 3, a coup attempt against Noriega ended in disaster, resulting in the roundup of scores of “rebels” and execution of many of the leaders. For months, Bush had been publicly urging Panamanian military forces to overthrow Noriega, declaring in May, “I would love to see them get him out.”

Even though it publicly disassociated itself from the failed coup attempt, the Bush administration came under increasing attack from the media and politicians of both Democratic and Republican parties for incompetence and indecision. Bush made a televised denial of what he called “rumors around that this was some American operation.” In the days following the broadcast, it emerged that:

- The US Southern Command as well as officers of the CIA, held extensive meetings with the coup plotters both before and during the coup.
- US Army units were deployed to block Panamanian roads in order to prevent troops loyal to Noriega from relieving the besieged headquarters of the Panamanian Defense Forces. Some reports said that the US also guaranteed air support from helicopter gunships, which never materialized.
- The commander of US forces in Panama, Gen. Maxwell Thurman, was authorized to covertly abduct Noriega and transport him to a US base during the coup. He was also instructed to develop a plan to march US troops into Panama City to capture the Panamanian ruler.

The public position of the US was that Noriega was a drug lord involved in narcotics trafficking and that US designs in Panama were exclusively in defense of democracy. Noriega’s involvement with drugs was bound up, however, with the CIA’s own use of a “guns down, drugs back” operation to fund the Nicaraguan contras.

In the aftermath of the failed coup, the US establishment began preparations for a direct military invasion of Panama.

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50 years ago: Khrushchev ousted as Soviet leader

On October 16, 1964, Communist Party First Secretary and Soviet head of state Nikita Khrushchev was deposed by the Stalinist bureaucracy in an internal power struggle and replaced by Leonid Brezhnev and Alexei Kosygin.

Khrushchev, a participant in Stalin’s murderous purges of the 1930s, became a full member of the Politburo in 1939. He took leadership of the Soviet Communist Party in 1953 following Stalin’s death, during a period of crisis for the bureaucracy. Forced to make a partial exposure of Stalin’s crimes in his “Secret Speech” of February 1956, he ordered the Red Army to crush the Hungarian workers’ revolution later that year.

Brezhnev, a former engineer, enjoyed a steady rise through the ranks of the bureaucracy during the purges and World War II, always moving up in tandem with his patron Khrushchev. He joined the Central Committee just before Stalin’s death, then vaulted into top leadership as a supporter of Khrushchev against Malenkov and other old-guard Stalinists, becoming nominal head of state in 1960, and Khrushchev’s deputy in the party leadership.

The bureaucracy was driven to remove Khrushchev as a growing economic crisis deepened worker discontent and strikes. These included the Novocherkassk massacre of 1962, in which 26 striking workers were shot to death and 90 more were wounded by Red Army troops. Such events pushed Khrushchev to call for a production policy that would have put consumer goods ahead of heavy industry.

Khrushchev’s dismissal followed the 1962 Cuban missile crisis in which the Soviet leader had backed down in the face of saber-rattling from the Kennedy administration; the failure of his agricultural policy to alleviate chronic food shortages; and the open rift between the Soviet and Chinese Stalinists.

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75 years ago: Cannon defends USSR in SWP internal discussion

On October 15, 1939, before the New York branch of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), the American Trotskyist leader

James Cannon gave a speech on “the Russian question”—whether or not the Soviet Union should be defended in the event of an attack by one or more imperialist powers.

Defense of the Soviet Union against imperialist attack was increasingly questioned by middle-class intellectuals in and around the party, especially after the signing of the Hitler-Stalin pact and the subsequent Soviet annexations in Poland and the Baltic states. These developments, which caused widespread revulsion, were combined with class pressures associated with American imperialism’s preparations for entry into the war on the side of the allies.

Cannon explained how the Russian Revolution, where the working class had seized power and the Bolshevik Party had demonstrated the decisive role of the Marxist vanguard in the revolution, had “drawn a sharp dividing line through the labor movement of all countries for 22 years. The attitude taken toward the Soviet Union throughout all these years has been the decisive criterion separating the genuine revolutionary tendency from all ... capitulators to the pressure of the bourgeois world.”

Cannon stated the Trotskyist position on the nature of the Soviet Union “(1) The Soviet Union, on the basis of its nationalized property and planned economy, the fruit of the revolution, remains a workers’ state, though in a degenerated form; (2) As such, we stand, as before, for the unconditional defense of the Soviet Union against imperialist attack; (3) The best defense—the only thing that can save the Soviet Union in the end by solving its contradictions—is the international revolution of the proletariat; (4) In order to regenerate the workers’ state we stand for the overthrow of the bureaucracy by a political revolution.”

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100 years ago: Lenin delivers anti-war lectures in Lausanne, Switzerland

This week in 1914, Vladimir Lenin, the Russian Marxist and leader of the Bolsheviks, delivered two lectures in Lausanne, Switzerland outlining a socialist and internationalist perspective in opposition to World War I, the imperialist world war that had broken out in August. Titled, “The Proletariat and the War,” the lecture he delivered on October 14 was a response to a speech given by Georgi Plekhanov three days earlier, which had outlined a perspective in support of the French and Russian war effort.

Plekhanov had played a crucial role in elaborating the theoretical foundations of the revolutionary movement in an earlier period, and had been dubbed the “father of Russian Marxism.” However, along with most of the leadership of the Second International, including its largest party, the German

Social Democrats, Plekhanov had responded to the outbreak of war in a national-opportunist manner, supporting the Tsarist autocracy’s participation in the war.

At his October 11 lecture, Plekhanov had denounced the imperialist character of Germany’s war aims, but had attempted to present the militarist activities of France, Russia’s most important ally, in a progressive light. In response, Lenin spoke from the floor, denouncing Plekhanov’s capitulation to imperialist militarism, and insisting that the war aims of all of the major powers were dictated by their pursuit of resources, markets and profits. He recalled that the sections of the Second International had anticipated the global conflagration at their Basel Congress in 1912, and had insisted on the necessity for an implacable struggle against imperialist war.

In a pointed response to the betrayal of those principles by the leaders of the Second International, Lenin concluded his comments at Plekhanov’s lecture by declaring,

“It is better to go to a neutral country and from there to tell the truth, it is better to make a free and independent appeal to the proletariat, than to become a Minister.”

At his October 14 lecture, Lenin placed the World War in its historical context, noting that whereas the wars of the 18th and early 19th centuries had been aimed at consolidating the nation-state, in opposition to the fetters of feudalism, the present war was an imperialist conflict waged by rival sections of finance capital, which threatened the entire culture of humanity. Lenin insisted on the necessity for new organizations that advanced the independent interests of the working class, rejected the claim advanced by the sections of the Second International that workers should support their “own fatherland,” and called for the imperialist war to be transformed into a civil war aimed at the socialist transformation of society.

The correspondent who covered the speech noted that, “Lenin’s lecture was held before a great concourse of people.”

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