

This week in history: October 20-26

20 October 2014

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25 years ago: People's Republic of Hungary officially ends

On October 23, 1989, acting President Matyas Szuroes declared that Hungary was no longer a Soviet-bloc country. He proclaimed the country would no longer be called the "People's Republic of Hungary."

"As of today," he announced, "our nation's name is the Republic of Hungary." The previous week, Parliament voted to change the name, which had been in effect since 1948. Szuroes added in his televised address, "We continue to view the uninterrupted development of our ties to the Soviet Union as in our nation's interests. At the same time, we also seek to improve (contacts) with the other superpower, the United States of America."

The announcement was made on the 33rd anniversary of the anti-Stalinist uprising known as the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, which was brutally suppressed by Soviet forces. Hungary was one of the six countries that comprised the Eastern Bloc along with East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Bulgaria.

Hungary had dismantled its 150-mile border barrier with East Germany in May of that year, allowing a flow of East German citizens through Hungary into West Germany for the first time since the postwar redivision of Europe.

The announcement by Szuroes was another milestone in the collapse of the influence of the USSR. One month earlier, Poland became the first of the Eastern Bloc countries to have a government which was not aligned with the Soviet Union.

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50 years ago: African leaders protest US Congo intervention

Leaders of the African Conciliation Commission, representing nine colonial countries, called on the United States to remove its military equipment and advisers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where civil war was raging between the forces of imperialist-backed stooge Moise Tshombe and bourgeois-nationalist rebels.

Five nations, Kenya, Ghana, Guinea, Nigeria and the United Arab Republic (Egypt), announced that representatives would travel to Washington where a direct appeal would be made to President Johnson to pull out US arms and personnel.

Backed by US-supplied aircraft and white mercenaries recruited from South Africa and Rhodesia, Tshombe's forces were reversing earlier setbacks received at the hands of the nationalists who had taken one-sixth of the country, including the key city of Stanleyville.

One faction of the insurgents, led by Christophe Gbenye, had recently proclaimed a "People's Republic of Congo" in Stanleyville. Gbenye was minister of the interior in the cabinet of Patrice Lumumba, first president of the Congo, which gained independence from Belgium in 1960. Lumumba, a bourgeois nationalist, was kidnapped and assassinated in January 1961, in a plot orchestrated by the CIA. (See: Fifty years since the murder of Patrice Lumumba)

In a radio broadcast earlier in the week, Gbenye accused the US and the United Nations of conspiring to "massacre the Congolese people." He charged that the United Nations was smuggling "murderous devices" under the name of food and medicine into the Congo.

The Johnson administration showed no sign of interest in the Commission's proposal for a ceasefire, intent on having Tshombe crush the rebellion. Tshombe had already refused the Commission's appeal for negotiations with the rebels whom he claimed were backed by "the Chinese Communists."

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75 years ago: Stalinists hold rigged poll in conquered Poland

After the annexation of Eastern Polish territory by the Red Army and western Polish territory by Nazi Germany, the Stalin government in Moscow staged National Assembly elections in the Soviet-controlled sector of Poland on October 22, 1939, in a bid to legitimize their military occupation.

The elections were a crude attempt by the Stalinist bureaucracy to provide a democratic veneer to a military dictatorship. The elections consisted of 2,411 delegates hand-picked by the NKVD (Stalinist secret police) and one candidate per region elected by the “spontaneous will of the people.” These so-called elected officials would be used to rubber-stamp the crimes of Stalinism against the Polish population.

Rather than local people with knowledge of issues confronting Polish workers and peasants, the delegates were all Stalinist henchmen parachuted in from Russia and Ukraine. Red Army soldiers coerced Poles to vote by going door to door compelling residents to cast their vote for the sole Kremlin-ordained candidate in their area

The delegates were organized into two national assemblies: the northern Soviet-controlled district petitioned Moscow to be incorporated into the White Russian Soviet Republic, while the southern district joined the Ukrainian Soviet Republic.

These arbitrary geographical divisions were enacted even though Poles, Jews, White Russians and Ukrainians were dispersed throughout both regions. The Stalinist bureaucracy sought to play these ethnic groups against each other in order to maintain its dominant role in the region.

While forcing delegates upon the Polish people, the Red Army mercilessly pursued Polish trade unionists, socialists and intellectuals who might organize worker opposition to the Stalinists, imprisoned them en masse, and frequently executed the most influential. At the top of NKVD extermination lists for supposed “anti-Soviet” crimes were the Polish supporters of Leon Trotsky and the Fourth International.

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100 years ago: The first Battle of Ypres

This week in October 1914, the First Battle of Ypres began in Belgium. This was one of the battles in the early stages of World War I which saw Franco-British and German forces attempt to outflank each other in the northern parts of France and Belgium, attempting to block their rivals in a process that led to the extension of the battle lines to the sea.

The commencement of the First Battle of Ypres marked the end of the “race to the sea”. Ypres was an ancient fortified Flemish city that provided access to the North Sea. It was a strategically important town, with Britain seeking to secure the English Channel ports as well as the supply lines of the British Army. German troops had already occupied Antwerp, the most important Belgian port city.

Field Marshall John French, commander of the British Expeditionary Force, directed BEF and French-Belgian forces to Ypres, falling back from Antwerp. Fierce combat between the opposing forces commenced on October 19, when the Germans began their Flanders offensive. The Allies resisted and sought to attack wherever possible. Both sides suffered heavy losses, with fighting continuing until November 22, when the winter weather made fighting extremely difficult. There were about 210,000 total casualties in the fighting.

The region from Ypres on the British side to Roulers and Menin on the German side, which was the focus in this battle, became known as the Ypres Salient, an area that would be the scene of some of war’s most brutal and bitter fighting. Ypres is the setting of a number of WWI poems that dramatize the horrors of war.

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