

This week in history: June 29-July 5

29 June 2015

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

25 years ago: Stalinist congress endorses capitalist restoration

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union opened its 28th congress on July 2, 1990 under the shadow of a growing economic and political crisis within the USSR and the threat of an open split within the ruling party. The congress date was moved up by a year from the traditional five-year schedule due to fears within the Stalinist bureaucracy that the Soviet state was on the brink of collapse.

The congress was convened to endorse a program of capitalist restoration based on the auctioning off of state enterprises to private investors and new laws protecting private property and endorsing capitalist exploitation.

Divisions within the ruling party over these issues had emerged, behind which were conflicting material interests within the privileged and parasitic bureaucracy which ruled the Soviet Union. At the same time, the systematic sabotage of the Soviet economy by this commanding stratum, together with the attempt by the Gorbachev bureaucracy to restore capitalist property relations in the USSR under the slogan of *perestroika* (restructuring), threatened a clash with the powerful Soviet working class. Fear of such a revolutionary confrontation and tactical disagreements over how to forestall it sharpened divisions between party factions.

Both the Soviet bureaucracy itself and the bourgeois media in the West presented the party as divided between “radicals” and “conservatives” or “reformists” and “hard-liners.” Yet the reality was that all factions within the bureaucracy feared an uprising by the working class in the USSR.

The frankest statement to this effect was delivered by Vladimir Kryuchkov, the head of the KGB. Speaking as one in a position to know, the secret police chief declared himself an advocate of *perestroika* and stated that “each year of delay before the beginning of renewal was fraught with the danger of an unpredictable social explosion.” He continued by declaring: “A shadow economy has formed in the country; the stratification of wealth is growing; an entire stratum of millionaires now exists—there are tens of thousands of them

already. ... At one pole we have luxury, and at the other difficulties and deprivation. Must we not think about where all this will lead us? If we don’t catch ourselves in time, then at the present rate of the growth of social distortions, will we or our children not find ourselves on the threshold of a new version of the October Revolution?”

Speaking in favor of an accelerated pace of capitalist restoration, Gorbachev declared in his opening report: “The issue today is this: either Soviet society will continue along the path of the profound changes we have begun ... or else forces opposed to *perestroika* will gain the upper hand. Then let us face the facts squarely, dismal times are in store for the country and the people.”

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50 years ago: CORE convention rescinds antiwar plank

On July 5, 1965, delegates attending the convention of the Congress of Racial Equality in Durham, North Carolina responded to the appeal of National Director James Farmer and voted to rescind a resolution calling for the withdrawal of US troops from Vietnam and the Dominican Republic.

The pullout resolution had been passed on the fourth day of the five-day convention in response to remarks made the previous week by Southern Christian Leadership Conference President Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In a speech in Petersburg, Virginia, King had called for an end to the Vietnam War and a negotiated settlement with the “Viet Cong,” the National Liberation Front.

Farmer, while claiming he was personally opposed to US intervention in Vietnam, demanded that the antiwar resolution be rescinded in order not to offend bourgeois public opinion. The middle class civil rights leader justified his stand on the grounds that for the organization to adopt an open position against US imperialist foreign policy would “risk losing the sympathies of many people.”

As the convention ended, CORE delegates sought to further distance themselves from the more left-wing elements in the civil rights struggle, rejecting by a vote of 120-4 any suggestion of support for black self-defense organizations.

Farmer was not alone in rejecting King’s pacifist opposition

to US imperialist intervention in Vietnam. Disassociating himself from King, SCLC Assistant Rev. Andrew Young claimed that many supporters of the civil rights struggle backed Johnson's foreign policy, adding, the SCLC "is not about to switch purposes." Meanwhile, NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins declared in a television interview that mixing Vietnam into the civil rights struggle would "confuse the issue."

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75 years ago: British forces sink French fleet

On July 3, 1940, British naval forces confronted the French fleet in the harbors along the English Channel and the Mediterranean Sea, forcing its ships to surrender, or bombarding and sinking them, to prevent them from coming under the control of Nazi Germany.

Since the surrender of France to Germany on June 19, British and American imperialism feared that the French Navy would come under Hitler's control and shift the balance of naval power in the Atlantic Ocean toward Germany.

The new French government under Marshal Petain had broken an agreement with Britain that neither side would submit to a separate armistice with Germany. Under pressure from French right-wing and fascist elements, the Petain government was rapidly throwing itself into the arms of their former imperialist opponent, Hitler.

Reassurances from France that their fleet would not come under German control failed to impress the British. In British harbors at Plymouth and Portsmouth, where some French naval ships had sailed to avoid German attack, British armed patrols stormed aboard during the early morning hours of July 3, overpowered the sailors on watch and seized control.

At Alexandria, Egypt, French ships surrendered after negotiations. But at Mers-al-Kabir in Oran, Algeria, the French naval commander refused British terms for protecting the fleet from Germany. In the evening, British forces launched a naval massacre that destroyed all but one ship, killing 1,297 French sailors and wounding 351. In retaliation, Petain sent French bombers against the British at Gibraltar. There were also calls for a French declaration of war against Britain.

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100 years ago: German troops suffer defeat in southwest Africa

On July 1, 1915, German troops suffered a strategically critical defeat to British-backed Union of South Africa forces at

the Battle of Otavi. The German defeat marked a decisive turn in the campaign of South African troops to gain control of Berlin's colony of German South-West Africa, in the area comprising modern-day Namibia.

Established in 1884, the colony had at one time been the largest of Germany's limited colonial possessions. It was the scene of the famous Hottentot uprisings of native Africans in 1893-94, which were brutally suppressed, and genocidal campaigns by German forces against widespread opposition to colonial rule in the first decade of the 20th century.

With the outbreak of World War One in August 1914, German colonies became targets in the worldwide inter-imperialist struggle. South African troops acting under the authority of Britain, launched a series of assaults on German colonial outposts in South-West Africa.

By mid-1915, German colonial troops were beleaguered and faced the prospect of defeat. The Battle of Otavi is considered the final conflict in the South-West Africa campaign of the First World War.

The bulk of German troops had been moved to Tsumbe, in an attempt to establish fortified positions. German Major Hermann Ritter was assigned the task of conducting a holding operation aimed at staving off the advance of South African forces in the mountainous ranges of Otavi. Severely outnumbered, his troops, unable to establish sufficiently wide defensive lines, were rapidly defeated, with the bulk of German troops carrying out a hasty retreat. The loss was the signal for a general surrender of German South-West African forces a week later.

The head of the South African army, Louis Botha, who secured the German defeat, had earlier fought in the Boer War against Britain at the turn of the 20th century. He rapidly made his peace with British imperialism, and served as the first prime minister of the Union of South Africa when it was formally established as a British dominion in 1910.

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