

This week in history: September 7-13

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25 years ago: Gorbachev joins US line-up against Iraq

President Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev held a summit in Helsinki, Finland, on September 9, 1990, as the US prepared for war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the aftermath of its invasion of the oil sheikdom of Kuwait. The one-day meeting marked the absolute prostration of Stalinism before Washington's unrestrained drive to war against Iraq.

Only days after the unveiling of its "500 Days Program," the Stalinist bureaucracy's blueprint for the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union, the Helsinki summit recorded the Kremlin's complete repudiation of any connection, even ceremonial, between the Soviet Union and the anti-imperialist heritage of the October Revolution. As Gorbachev's groveling performance at Helsinki made clear, he would support the use of military power by the United States against a small, historically-oppressed country (and former Soviet ally).

The connection between these two events is not coincidental. The central goal of *perestroika* was the restoration of capitalism. The domestic policies of Gorbachev and Yeltsin expressed the strivings of a privileged bureaucracy, allied with the most reactionary sections of the intelligentsia, to transform itself into a new property-owning class.

To this end, they offered their services to international capital as agents and junior partners in the impending sell-off of the natural resources and vast industrial and technological assets of the Soviet Union. In the formulation of Gorbachev's foreign policy, the petty ambitions of these parasitical elements had found their most developed expression.

As he sat like a well-trained poodle besides Bush at an international press conference upon the conclusion of the Helsinki meeting, Gorbachev stated rather forlornly that the

Soviet Union "can't be bought for American dollars." The very fact that the Kremlin's occupant felt compelled to issue such an astonishing disclaimer was itself a devastating exposure of the depths of political degradation to which the Stalinist regime had dragged the Soviet Union.

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50 years ago: Hurricane Betsy slams New Orleans

On September 9, 1965, Hurricane Betsy hit New Orleans. It was the most financially destructive hurricane in US history to that point, causing 81 deaths in addition to \$1.42 billion in damage.

Betsy began as tropical depression north of French Guiana on August 27, strengthening as it charted a northwesterly course through the western Atlantic Ocean and the eastern reaches of the Caribbean Sea. On September 8 it crossed southern Florida, where it caused extensive crop damage and floods in the Florida Keys, and then reemerged in the Gulf of Mexico, before moving northeasterly toward the Gulf Coast.

On the night of September 9, just as it made landfall at Grand Isle, Louisiana, it reached its peak of intensity, equivalent to a Category 4 hurricane (until then, Betsy was technically a tropical cyclone), with winds of 150 miles per hour. The storm enveloped New Orleans and surrounding areas from 8 p.m. until 4 a.m., bringing gusts of 110 miles per hour and torrential rains into what was then the 15th-most populous US city.

Betsy killed one person and caused \$14 million damage to the Bahamas, where it was considered the worst storm since 1929. In Florida, where it was considered the worst since 1926, it killed five and caused \$139 million in damage. Louisiana, and in particular New Orleans, bore the brunt of the devastation—75 deaths and upwards of \$1 billion in damage.

The hurricane exposed the inadequacy of the several agencies involved in the US hurricane warning system, which, due to the storm's strange trajectory, had failed to

warn residents to evacuate in a timely manner. It also exposed the inadequacy of the New Orleans flood protection infrastructure. Multiple levees failed, sending flood waters into St. Bernard Parish, the Upper Ninth Ward, Gentilly, and the Lower Ninth Ward, where a number of residents drowned in their attics.

The Army Corps of Engineers renewed the levee system in the wake of Betsy. This same infrastructure, unimproved, was in place four decades later when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005.

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75 years ago: Germany begins “Blitz” bombing of Britain

On September 7, 1940, amidst the aerial “Battle of Britain,” designed to soften British air defenses sufficiently for a German invasion across the Channel, the German Luftwaffe shifted its tactical emphasis and began an extensive period of nighttime bombing raids of British cities and industry.

The intensification in the terror bombing of civilian targets came in the wake of the British Royal Air Force’s late August bombing attacks on Berlin. Hitler had threatened the British he would “erase their cities” in response, in a speech on September 4.

Beginning September 7, London was bombed for 57 consecutive nights, and then for 71 nights out of the next 267, with one million homes destroyed and 40,000 civilians killed. Between September 7 and October 31, 13,685 tons of high explosive and incendiary were dropped upon the capital.

Other British cities, especially those like Glasgow, Birmingham and Sheffield with heavy concentrations of industry, mechanical engineering, and port facilities, also suffered heavy damage.

During the war the killing of civilians through bombing raids was even more wanton among the “democratic” imperialist powers. In Germany alone some 500,000 civilians were killed by Allied campaigns, according to a post-war study carried out by the West German Federal Statistics Office.

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100 years ago: Mounting tensions between the US and Germany, Austria-Hungary

On September 9, 1915, US Secretary of State Robert Lansing announced the delivery of a note to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Vienna, asking for the recall of the Austro-Hungarian ambassador to the US, Dr. Konstantin Theodor Dumba.

The move was one of a series of incidents expressing growing tensions between the US and the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, and signaling the approach of direct US intervention into the First World War, which had broken out in August 1914.

The US charged Dumba with “conspiring” to instigate strikes for the purpose of preventing the manufacture of war munitions intended for the Allied powers. Washington alleged that he was guilty of a “flagrant violation of diplomatic propriety” in employing an American citizen to carry official dispatches to the government of Austria-Hungary.

In an alleged note to the Austrian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Dumba supposedly reported on plans to disrupt the Bethlehem Steel works and munitions production “in the Middle West.”

Coming in the midst of a strike wave by machinists against long hours of work, intolerable conditions, and low wages in the defense industry, the Dumba affair had the dual purpose of further whipping up public opinion against the Central powers, and slandering striking munitions workers as paid agents of foreign governments.

The press claimed that Detroit and Cleveland were the center of a conspiracy aimed at causing some 50,000 “Austrians”—almost all were immigrants from subject lands of the Hapsburg Empire, including Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Ruthenians, Croatians, Slovaks, and Slovenes—to walk out and cripple war production in auto factories, foundries and machine shops. It was reported that the employers had been successful in maintaining “industrial peace” through the use of private security agencies.

At the same time, diplomatic tensions between Washington and Berlin ran high over the sinking of the White Star steamship the *Arabic* by a German U-boat. The ship was hit by a torpedo, and two American citizens were among the casualties.

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