

This week in history: June 20-26

20 June 2016

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25 years ago: Secession sets stage for civil war in Yugoslavia

The declarations of independence by Slovenia and Croatia on June 25, 1991, signaled the long-developing political crisis in Yugoslavia exploding into open civil war. Both declarations were preceded by the consolidation of nationalist forces in the two countries, which were constituent republics of the Yugoslav federal states.

Non-Slovenians living in Slovenia—Yugoslav citizens of Serb, Croat and other ethnic groups—suddenly became disadvantaged minorities in the new country. A similar status befell non-Croats living in Croatia, including in the heavily Serb-populated Krajina region on the border between Croatia and Bosnia.

The disintegration of the federal state and the eruption of civil war were the outcome of the policies pursued by all sections of the Stalinist bureaucracy to restore capitalism in Yugoslavia and offer their services as agents for the various imperialist powers. Whatever political labels they had given themselves—“democratic” or “socialist”—the leaderships of the Yugoslav republics were made up of rival cliques of bureaucrats and capitalists seeking to establish their own sphere of operations.

All of them traced their political careers back to the leadership of the Stalinist Yugoslavian Communist Party of Tito and all of them played the same card of petty nationalism in the attempt to preserve their own power and privileges and stifle any independent movement of the Yugoslav workers.

The leaders of the Serbian republic in the capital Belgrade, under president Slobodan Milosevic, are not “Marxists” or “socialists” but Serbian nationalists, whose program for capitalist restoration is based on the fight for a “greater Serbia.”

While the Serbian Stalinists and budding capitalists fought to retain the federal state structure of Yugoslavia as the best means for advancing their interests in the struggle to secure imperialist investments, the emerging national cliques in the republics of Croatia and Slovenia considered that their most advantageous road to capitalist restoration and integration into the imperialist world market was a break from the federation.

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50 years ago: High tide of Great Society reformism

During this week in 1966, a Democratic-controlled Congress and the Johnson administration put in place social and democratic reforms that brought Johnson’s Great Society program near to its apogee, even as the war in Vietnam and the declining position of American capitalism undermined it.

On June 20, US House of Representatives passed by a unanimous vote of 307 to 0 the Freedom of Information Act. The bill mandated that all federal agencies make “promptly available to any person” any records that are not formally published in the Federal Register when “any request for records [that] reasonably describes such records” is made in accordance with “a general philosophy of full agency disclosure.” The bill further required agencies to publish in the Federal Register rules, policy statements, interpretations, staff manuals and instructions. It allowed a number of exemptions, most notoriously government documents related to “interest of national defense or foreign policy.” President Lyndon Johnson signed the bill into law on July 4, 1967.

On June 22, Johnson signed into law the Bail Reform Act of 1966, which had passed Congress with near-unanimous support. The law, which aimed to make it so that accused could not “be needlessly detained” in prisons prior to trial in federal courts, provided that any individual accused of breaking federal law must be released from custody without having to post bond with the court, except in cases where the government could show that the accused was likely to flee in order to avoid prosecution. Defendants could not be held solely on claims that they could pose a danger to the community. Furthermore, magistrates could impose a bond only if other conditions likely to secure the defendant’s return to court were not present.

On June 24, 1966, the Senate voted 76-0 to impose the most sweeping safety regulations on cars in US history, including the requirement of safety belts for all seats, collapsible steering columns, rear-view mirrors, rupture-resistant fuel tanks, doors that stayed closed in accidents, and safer seats, panels, and glass, in the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act. In later signing the bill into law, Johnson noted that over 1.5 million people had been killed on US streets and highways in the 20th century, “nearly three times as many Americans as we have lost in all our wars.” US automakers had opposed the bill, and their lobbyists had succeeded in weakening it.

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75 years ago: Nazi Germany launches Operation Barbarossa upon Soviet Union

During the early hours of June 22, 1941, Hitler's fascist regime launched the most destructive and barbaric war in the history of mankind upon the Soviet Union. The German invasion force consisted of 3,600 tanks, 600,000 motorised vehicles, 7,000 artillery pieces, 2,500 aircraft, 625,000 horses and three million troops. Nazi propaganda boss Josef Goebbels uneasily noted that it was on exactly the same date when Napoleon's Grand Army had marched on Russia in 1812.

In 1925 Hitler had vowed in *Mein Kampf* to destroy Marxism and the USSR, with the "Jewish Bolshevik" occupying a central role in his fascist anti-Semitism. In March on orders from Hitler Reinhard Heydrich assembled Einsatzgruppen commanders, whose troops were to accompany the invading army into the Soviet Union. Heyder informed them they must be prepared to wage in the words of Hitler a "war of annihilation" against Communists (activists, intellectuals, commissioners), Jews, Gypsies, saboteurs and agents who were all deemed to be "Partisans" and therefore to be executed forthwith in the field.

The utter barbarity of the Nazi campaign was prepared earlier by the mass slaughter in occupied Poland by both the SS and Wehrmacht in 1939 and 1940. But the events in the Soviet Union would greatly exceed even that butchery. Indeed, the beginning of Operation Barbarossa signified a turning point in the Holocaust and was closely linked to the decision to implement the "final solution"—the near-total destruction of European Jewry.

Historians estimate that 1,400,000 Soviet Jews met their death at the hands of the invading Wehrmacht over the course of Barbarossa. Millions more Soviet citizens and soldiers would also meet violent deaths during the ensuing conflict.

Soviet intelligence had provided a plethora of detailed information on German plans for an invasion of the Soviet Union, including one from the German ambassador in Moscow, Graf Friedrich von der Schulenberg. Still Stalin retained his faith in Hitler and the Hitler-Stalin pact. Stalin refused to believe that Hitler would invade the Soviet Union.

When in the hours before the start of Barbarossa a communist German deserter crossed the lines to warn Soviet troops of the imminent invasion, Stalin had the soldier shot for disinformation. Not even the rapid departure of German naval ships from Soviet ports and the evacuation of Embassy staff in the days preceding Barbarossa roused Stalin from his torpor.

Regardless of Stalin's unshakeable faith in Hitler, at 3.15 a.m. Berlin time a heavy artillery bombardment signalled the beginning of the invasion. German troops and vehicles poured over the 1,800-mile-wide frontier. Within hours of the invasion Soviet organisational military command and control was destroyed.

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100 years ago: Roger Casement tried for involvement in Irish uprising

On June 26, 1916, Sir Roger Casement was brought to trial in England on the charge of treason for his involvement in the

preparations of the Easter uprising in Dublin. Casement was a British diplomat of Irish extraction and a strong supporter of Irish nationalism.

After his retirement from the British Colonial Service in 1913, Casement became involved in the Irish separatist movement. He helped form the Irish Volunteers. In July 1914 he travelled to the US to promote and raise funds for the Volunteers, which were used to arm the Irish Volunteers.

Following the outbreak of World War 1, Casement was active in a plan to secure weapons from Germany for the Irish nationalists. He sailed for Europe in October 1914 in order to negotiate with the Germans. Knowing that a rebellion in Ireland would be useful in diverting both British forces and attention from the war with Germany, the German government agreed to give limited assistance to the Irish nationalist movement.

As part of the agreement with Germany, between December 1914 and February 1915, Casement visited a number of German prison camps where he sought to recruit Irish soldiers to the Irish nationalist forces. In April, Germany offered the Irish nationalists rifles, machine guns and ammunition.

The weapons were transported by the German navy to Ireland. Casement travelled to Ireland in a German submarine at the same time. He arrived in Ireland on April 21, three days before the Easter uprising was to begin, and was captured and arrested on the charges of treason, sabotage and espionage. The ship transporting the weapons was then intercepted by the British navy. Its German commander scuttled the ship.

Unlike the summary trials of those who led the fighting in the Easter uprising, Casement's trial was conducted before a full bench and jury, with both the prosecution and defence resting on the interpretation of the Treason Act of 1351. Casement's actions had all taken place on foreign soil and the wording of the act allowed for the interpretation that the definition of treason involved only acts taking place on British soil.

Copies of alleged excerpts of Casement's personal diaries were secretly circulated by government figures, including the chief prosecutor. The excerpts portrayed Casement as a homosexual. The smear campaign was deliberately aimed at dissuading influential people from demanding clemency and preventing Casement from becoming a martyr.

Casement was convicted and sentenced to death. After an unsuccessful appeal he was hanged on August 3.

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