

This week in history: August 8-14

8 August 2016

[25 Years Ago](#) | [50 Years Ago](#) | [75 Years Ago](#) | [100 Years Ago](#)

25 years ago: Italy brutalizes and expels Albanian refugees

This week in 1991 saw the deportation of nearly 18,000 Albanian refugees from Italy. The event constituted one of the most massive forced expulsions of refugees seen in Europe since the fascist atrocities of the 1930s.

All but a few hundred of the refugees were loaded onto ferries and Italian air force planes and shipped back across the Adriatic Sea less than a week after having arrived aboard a commandeered freighter on August 8, 1991. Their deportation followed days of extreme brutality at the hands of Italian security forces and inhuman conditions in the makeshift concentration camps set up by the authorities.

When the ship reached the Italian coastal city of Bari, many of the refugees attempted to evade security forces by jumping overboard and swimming to shore. All of them were rounded up and herded into a soccer stadium or held on the docks.

At least 3,000 Albanians were held under cramped conditions on the Bari docks for nearly four days with little food, no restrooms, beds or shelter. By the end of the ordeal, many lay on the concrete dock, overcome by the sun and faint from lack of food and water.

Anger over conditions erupted into a bitter clash on Sunday, August 11, when dozens of youths hurled chunks of concrete at police distributing bread and water. The Italian security forces responded to this apparent protest over the meager rations with volleys of teargas canisters and gunfire. A firefighting boat was brought alongside the docks to turn its high-pressure hoses on the Albanians.

At the stadium concentration camp, the refugees, most of them unemployed young men, repeatedly attempted to break out, only to be met by baton charges and gunfire. At least three Albanians were taken to Italian hospitals after being shot by troops.

The refugees were given the absolute minimum amount of bread and water, while being kept without shelter or toilets under the sun in the blistering heat of the Italian summer.

The drive to restore capitalism in the states formerly ruled by Stalinist bureaucracies signified neither a flowering of

democracy nor a new prosperity, but the imposition of brutal deprivation and dictatorship, supported and enforced by the imperialist powers themselves. The extreme cruelty shown to the Albanian refugees was a calculated warning to others seeking to escape the conditions brought on by capitalist restoration.

[\[top\]](#)

50 years ago: Anti-riot bill passes house

On August 8, 1966, in response to the wave of ghetto uprisings by minority workers and youth, the US House of Representatives, by a voice vote, passed an amendment to civil rights legislation making it a federal crime to use interstate transportation to incite to riot. The amendment was supported by many northern liberal members of Congress. The final vote in the House was 389 to 25. It was attached to civil rights legislation supposedly designed to provide protection against racial violence and intimidation.

Supporters of the amendment claimed that the ghetto rebellions, sparked by conditions of poverty, racism and police brutality, were in fact the work of mysterious “outside agitators.” Typical of the demagoguery used to whip up hysteria in the middle class were the comments of Republican William C. Cramer of Florida, the sponsor of the amendment, who declared, “the people of this country are crying for Congress to take action [against] fires, looting, vandalism, violence and death that have become bywords of the American summer.”

Cramer said the measure would help stop the distribution of “inflammatory” literature. Roman C. Pucinski, a Democratic congressman from Illinois, waved a copy of a leaflet that he claimed had been distributed in Chicago before the rebellion and demanded the government “restore law and order.”

At the same time, a grand jury in Cleveland, Ohio issued a report making the claim that the recent disturbances in that city were the work of “trained and disciplined professionals,” including black nationalists and members and leaders of the Communist Party USA, the organization of aging Stalinists who were loyal handraisers for the Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

[\[top\]](#)

75 years ago: Congress extends military service

On August 13, 1941, the House of Representatives voted by a one-vote margin, 203-202, to amend the Selective Service Act to extend the period of military service for drafted soldiers from one year to 18 months. The bill also allowed peacetime draftees to be sent outside the western hemisphere, for the first time.

The bill passed one day after Japan had invoked war powers allowing the government to conscript the nation's resources for the coming war against US imperialism in the Pacific. Spokesmen for the Pentagon warned that failure to extend the term of service would be a "national disaster" and lead to a "virtual disbandment of two-thirds of our trained enlisted strength."

The congressional debate on the bill was carried out under a storm of protest from both draftees and the general population, with polls indicating fully three-quarters of the people opposed US involvement in World War II. So intense was the outcry that the War Department and the Roosevelt administration introduced measures to divert some of the anger, such as \$10 bonuses, early release for draftees on account of domestic responsibilities and a promise that 200,000 soldiers would be released by Christmas.

Sections of the capitalist press expressed fear that opposition to the war buildup would impede Roosevelt's plans to enter the war directly in order to defend the economic and strategic interests of US imperialism. There were published comments lamenting the fact that the soldiers "do not want to fight because they do not see any reason for fighting ... the men have no faith in the officers who command them." Another commentary pointed to the fate of the French imperialist military in 1940, warning that because of the collapse of morale, "battalions, companies, entire regiments, surrendered en masse. The world was astounded."

[top]

100 years ago: Russian offensive in World War I grinds to a halt

This week in August 1916, the Russian army's World War I offensive against the Central Powers on the eastern front suffered a major setback. Austro-Hungarian and German troops successfully repelled a Russian attempt to take the strategically critical town of Kovel in northwestern Ukraine. The defeat ground the so-called Brusilov offensive, launched in June, to a halt.

The Russian army had launched an assault on Austro-Hungarian positions to the south of Koval on July 23, involving the Seventh and Ninth armies. On July 28, the Eighth and Third armies joined the assault on the village, approaching from the north. The Russian attack was hampered by difficult terrain and strong resistance from German and Austro-Hungarian troops. Russian casualties were high, and the attempt to take the town of Koval was defeated by August 10. While Russian troops would subsequently make some advances, and the Brusilov offensive was not terminated until September, the defeat at Koval was in marked contrast to the dramatic gains of the earlier "June advance."

Named after its commander, the Brusilov offensive began on June 4. It had followed appeals from France for a Russian move on the Eastern Front, aimed at forcing the Central Powers to divert troops from Verdun and other battlefields on the Western Front, where French troops were suffering heavy casualties. The move was initially successful, with Russian troops breaking through Austro-Hungarian lines in present-day Ukraine within days, following a massive artillery bombardment. The Russian command also made use of shock troops and other innovative tactics.

The offensive was considered a Russian success because it succeeded in dealing a major blow to the Austro-Hungarian army, and disrupting the operations of the Central Powers on the Western Front. However, it was also one of the bloodiest chapters of the war.

By the end of September, the Russian army had suffered 440,000 casualties, dead or wounded, with another 60,000 men taken captive. The Austro-Hungarian Army lost 567,000 casualties, wounded or dead, and the German army another 350,000. In total 1,357,000 men were either killed or wounded on all sides during the offensive, and an additional 408,000 Austro-Hungarian men were taken captive by the Russians.

[top]



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