

This week in history: August 15-21

15 August 2016

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

25 years ago: “August putsch” attempt fails in USSR

On the morning of August 19, 1991, a group of Soviet political, military and KGB officials led by Vice President Gennady Yanayev carried out a coup to oust President Mikhail Gorbachev and impose a state of emergency. Tanks and armored personnel vehicles flooded the streets of Moscow around the parliament building.

Gorbachev himself was nowhere to be seen and the plotters announced that he was “in a safe place but needed some time to feel better.”

Boris Yeltsin, president of the Russian Republic of the Soviet Union, who was not detained by the coup conspirators, issued a declaration from the front of the parliament building that a reactionary, anti-constitutional coup was taking place.

Every one of the coup conspirators had been appointed to the Kremlin leadership by none other than Gorbachev. Yanayev and his cohorts in the military and KGB feared that Gorbachev had lost control of the situation, and that a coup was required in order to preempt a rebellion by the working class, outraged over the drastic deterioration of its living standards.

Just weeks before, Gorbachev made a humiliating and futile display of groveling before leaders of the G7 in London seeking financial support for the “market reforms” in the USSR.

Having been hand-picked by Gorbachev as accomplices in his restorationist program, the conspirators were unable to claim they were acting to rally the working class in the defense of socialism and the heritage of the 1917 October Revolution.

Every action taken by the putschists reflected their indecision, inner divisions and weakness. On the one hand, they were terrified of taking any action which would antagonize the imperialists. The Russian parliament was left untouched and no attempt was even made to cut Yeltsin’s telephone connections. He was able to maintain a constant and direct contact and collaboration with British Prime Minister John Major, US President George Bush and other leaders of world imperialism.

On the other hand, Yanayev and the coup leaders were desperately frightened of provoking an uncontrolled reaction in the Soviet working class. The first pronouncements made by the eight-man State Emergency Committee were to outlaw all strikes and demonstrations, and to impose a curfew.

In an assurance to the imperialist powers that they had no

intention of abandoning the pro-capitalist policies of perestroika, they declared that all previous treaties and obligations remained intact and that the emergency measures “in no way” implied “renunciation of the course towards profound reforms in all spheres of life of the state and society.”

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50 years ago: “Cultural Revolution” begins in China

On August 18, 1966, Chinese Communist Party Chairman Mao Zedong organized a mass rally in Beijing to show support for the so-called “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” which had been formally set into motion on August 8, 1966, when the Central Committee enacted a document titled “Decision Concerning the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,” also called the “Sixteen Points.”

About 1 million Red Guards gathered at the Tiananmen Square demonstration, marking a sharp escalation of the bitter factional struggle raging within the Stalinist bureaucracy in China. Mao and Defense Minister Lin Biao wore military fatigues as they stood on the reviewing stand, to boost their demagogic claims to be men of the people appealing for the support of the popular masses to fight the corrupt “capitalist roaders” within the bureaucracy.

Simultaneously, radio broadcasts announced that Lin was being installed as the top deputy to Mao, while chief of state Liu Shaoqi was demoted to seventh place in the bureaucratic hierarchy. Premier Chou En-lai rose to third place. The elevation of Lin followed the purge of several top leaders of the Chinese Communist Party who were declared to be “revisionist.” Within the next several days, 100 members and alternates to the Central Committee were removed without public explanation.

The Cultural Revolution was an ultra-Stalinist purge centered on the academics, scientists, artists, technicians, intellectuals, and military officers, its stated goal “to struggle against and crush those people in authority” accused of “taking the capitalist road” and “to transform education, literature and art, and all other parts of the superstructure that do not correspond to the socialist economic base, so as to facilitate the consolidation and development of the socialist system.” It came months after the bloody defeat of the Indonesian Communist Party in the Suharto coup and amid conflicts between China and the Soviet Union for influence over the Vietnamese Revolution.

A communiqué issued by the CCP denounced the Soviet Stalinists as “scabs” and called for a struggle against “rightists”

within the People's Republic. The struggle within the Chinese bureaucracy was accompanied by the continued buildup of tensions with the Soviet Union, reflecting the rival national interests of the Stalinist bureaucracies in the two states, each based on the reactionary program of "socialism in one country." Troops were deployed on both sides of the Soviet-Chinese border, as Mao pressed demands for territory claimed by Moscow. The Chinese CP meanwhile moved closer to a complete break with the Stalinist parties allied with the Kremlin.

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75 years ago: Reuther attacks socialists in the UAW

On August 16, 1941, the twelve-day convention of the United Auto Workers concluded with the adoption of an amendment backed by the right-wing, pro-war faction of Walter Reuther which barred any "communist" from elective or appointive office in the UAW. This amendment marked the first infringement on the basic democratic principles originally written into the UAW constitution, which provided equal rights of membership for all workers covered by the UAW charter, regardless of political views.

Reuther's move came in the aftermath of several explosive UAW strikes at plants holding military contracts from the administration of Franklin Roosevelt. Communist Party (CP) supporters had played an important role in leading the strikes, which were ignited by low pay and poor working conditions while the companies raked in superprofits.

Up until the June 22, 1941 Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the Stalinist CP had opposed Roosevelt's military policies and attempts to prevent strikes in the defense industry. By the time of the convention, however, the CP had shifted its line completely, and was even more rabidly opposed to carrying out a class-struggle policy in military plants than Reuther himself. The result was that the CP, now discredited among militant workers, capitulated to Reuther's anti-communist witchhunt, going along with the denunciation of the defense strikes and allowing the convention to discipline and remove UAW local leaders who had carried them out.

Despite the CP's sabotage of its own position, some 1,062 delegates, more than one-third of the convention, voted against the amendment, recognizing that Reuther was giving the green light to the auto bosses to launch a purge in the auto plants not just against members of the Communist Party, but against all militant workers and the broadly-shared belief in worker control of industry.

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100 years ago: US seeks to control Dominican Republic

This week in August 1916, the administration of President

Woodrow Wilson sought to blackmail the newly-elected government of the Dominican Republic into accepting the same type of financial protectorate that the United States had recently imposed on Haiti. The US government withheld recognition of the new Dominican president, Frederico H. Carvajal, pending his acquiescence in giving the American ruling elite control over the country's internal revenue and government expenditure.

The US had launched an occupation of the country beginning in May 1916, initially on the pretext of ensuring the safety of US officials amid political upheaval. Over the ensuing months, US authorities would take effective control of all of the key political and military levers of government in the Dominican Republic.

The move to direct intervention followed longstanding US economic and political intervention. The US government had taken control of customs collections for the Dominican Republic under the Convention of July 25, 1907, which established the American Customs Receivership.

The American General Receiver of Customs in the Dominican Republic, Clarence H. Baxter, advised the suspension of payments to Dominican officials under instructions from Washington, until an understanding was reached regarding certain articles of the 1907 Convention, or the recognition of the present government by the US. William Worthington Russell, the American minister to Santo Domingo, sought to extract the changes from the new regime.

The justification given for the financial stranglehold in Washington was that the collection of customs dues and internal revenue should be sufficient to make the Dominican Republic "self-supporting." Behind this, the apologists for US policy explained, was the desire to prevent, if possible, the need for the Dominicans to seek loans from foreign bankers and thus piling up a debt that would lead to complications.

In reality, the Wilson administration's aggressive stance toward the Dominican Republic was one of a series of moves aimed at shoring up US dominance in the geo-strategically critical region of the Caribbean, particularly against Germany, as the Wilson administration prepared for the eventual entry of the United States into World War I on the side of Britain and France. The recently concluded treaty with Haiti had provided for US control over the collection of internal and customs revenues and the regulation of Haitian disbursements. It also mandated a complete reorganization of the country's military force, through the creation of a "native" constabulary commanded by American navy and marine officers.

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