

This week in history: August 22-28

22 August 2016

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

25 years ago: Gorbachev purges cabinet after failed “August putsch”

On August 22, 1991, after the failure of the coup against him, Soviet President Michael Gorbachev conducted a wide-ranging purge of his cabinet. Gorbachev and his family had been held captive in Crimea by the plotters during the attempted putsch.

Because Russian Federation President Boris Yeltsin was not arrested during the coup, he was able to play up his role as Gorbachev’s savior and after its collapse, in turn, pushed through federation decrees asserting the domination of his faction over the USSR.

The coup was an act of desperation by a faction of the Stalinist bureaucracy revealing deep divisions within it. The main aim of its organizers within the bureaucratic apparatus was to merely strengthen their position against an emerging Russian bourgeoisie, rather than actually to destroy it. It was little more than an attempt by the Stalinists to compel the comprador bourgeoisie to accept a leading position for the Stalinist bureaucracy in the impending division of the spoils from the dismantling of the Soviet economy. But they lacked any coherent aims and had no viable program, leading to the rapid collapse of the coup.

Meanwhile, the imperialists responded with triumph, perceiving the failure of the coup as the last obstacle to restoring capitalism in the Soviet Union. The *New York Times* published an August 27 editorial advising the bureaucracy to proceed with the restoration of capitalism at a rapid pace: “Stop printing rubles ... When stores and factories close, tens of millions would, at least temporarily, lose their jobs.”

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50 years ago: First clash between South African forces and Namibian fighters

On August 26, 1966, a combined attack by South African Police and South African Defense Forces on a unit of the People’s Liberation Army of Namibia (PLAN) at Ongulumbashe marked the first battle of the Namibian War of Independence.

The PLAN was badly overmatched in the South African ambush, which was likely set up by a well-placed informant among the ranks of the guerrillas. Only 17 ill-equipped soldiers faced off against the South African force of approximately 40 soldiers and eight helicopters. In the wake of the skirmish several PLAN leaders were arrested and sentenced to life in prison on Robben Island.

At this stage, the nationalist armed units could not take on superior South African military forces directly. The primary goal of the guerrillas was to force the diplomatic intervention of those elements of western imperialism, including the United Nations, which sought to forestall the emergence of a revolutionary struggle among Africa’s masses by turning over nominal independence to the native elite in the process of “decolonization.” This was the basis for conflict with the white South African elite, whose Apartheid rule was based on a strict racial hierarchy and which had its own designs to dominate the southern part of the African continent.

In October 1966, the United Nations General Assembly revoked South Africa’s mandate over Namibia, which had been awarded in 1920 after South African troops seized the former German colony in World War I. The war of Namibian independence and the related civil war in Angola would continue throughout the 1970s and 1980s, supported materially by the Soviet Union and with troops by Cuba. Arrayed against the faction-ridden independence movement were South Africa, the colonial ruler of Angola, Portugal, and, covertly, the United States.

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75 years ago: Paris workers fight Nazi occupation

On August 27, 1941 two of the leading French collaborators with the Nazis, Pierre Laval and Marcel Deat, were wounded in a terrorist attack in Paris after weeks of growing sabotage by sections of French workers and the middle class against Hitler's occupation of France.

For a full year after the defeat of France in 1940, Germany had plundered French agriculture and industry with little resistance. But after German imperialism attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, the Stalinist parties around the world, which had largely blocked working-class action against Nazism during the period of the Stalin-Hitler Pact, reversed themselves.

Activity began in the 11th Arrondissement, a historic center of radical activity dating back to the 1871 Paris Commune. Many tons of illegal leaflets were distributed, despite extreme penalties to both those who dispersed propaganda and those receiving it. German officers and soldiers were attacked and military vehicles overturned. In a short period of time there were more than 100 cases of railway sabotage, as French railroad workers sought to block all food and industrial products being shipped back to Germany to sustain the Nazi blitzkrieg against the Soviet Union.

Hitler and the French Vichy authorities dropped all pretenses that they held mass support for their rule. Twenty thousand German troops along with armored cars were dispatched to

patrol Paris streets. Sanctions were issued against rail workers and workers suspected of sabotage on track maintenance crews were arrested.

Thirty to forty thousand workers and youth were arrested and held hostage, many thousands being accused as "communist" Jews. Nazi authorities threatened that prisoners would be shot in random numbers corresponding to acts of sabotage. Marshal Philippe Petain, Prime Minister of Vichy France, set up death courts and shot workers before firing squads. Three workers were executed at the guillotine.

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100 years ago: Romania enters World War I on the side of the Allies

On August 27, 1916, the Kingdom of Romania entered the imperialist First World War on the side of the Allied powers, including Britain, France and Russia. The Romanian

government declared war on the Austro-Hungarian Empire and immediately launched a surprise assault against positions of the Central Powers in Transylvania, then under Hungarian rule, now part of in modern-day Romania.

Romania's military intervention followed two years of formal neutrality in the global conflagration that had erupted in August 1914, despite the fact that the Kingdom had longstanding ties to the Central Powers. In 1883 it had established a defensive military alliance with Germany, which had been renewed by King Carol I in 1913. The Romanian ruling line also had familial ties to the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and German ruler, Kaiser Wilhelm II.

At the outbreak of the war, King Ferdinand II, Romania's new monarch, declared that the country was only obliged to fight alongside Germany in the event of a defensive conflict. Like the bulk of his governing cabinet, Ferdinand initially favored remaining outside the war. The Romanian government, however, came under increasing pressure from Russia and the other Allied powers to enter the conflict, and to cut off rail supply lines that ran between Germany and the Ottoman Empire. Divisions emerged within the ruling elite, and the Allies appealed to Romanian aspirations to seize Transylvania, long part of Austro-Hungary but with a majority ethnic Romanian population.

Announcing their entrance into the war, Ferdinand appealed to Romanian nationalism, declaring, "Today we are able to complete the task of our forefathers and to establish forever that which Michael the Great was only able to establish for a moment, namely, a Romanian union on both slopes of the Carpathians."

The initial stages of the Transylvania offensive saw Romanian troops sweep across large areas of that territory. The Allied Powers had hoped that Germany would be unable to aid the Austro-Hungarian defense, because of the heavy fighting taking place on the Western Front. This proved to be mistaken, with eight divisions of the German Alpine Corps joining the defense. Over the following weeks, Romanian forces were pushed back, and were forced to halt the offensive on September 15. The Central Powers launched a counter-offensive. By the end of the conflict, 220,000 Romanian soldiers had been killed.

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