This week in history: August 29-September 4

29 August 2016

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

25 years ago: Gorbachev, Yeltsin move toward dissolution of Soviet Union

At a September 2, 1991 session of the Congress of Peoples' Deputies (the Russian parliament), Soviet President Michael Gorbachev and Federation President Boris Yeltsin presented a series of proposals aimed at devolving the Soviet Union into a collection of federated republics.

After the failed coup attempt by a faction of the Stalinist bureaucracy, the Supreme Soviet banned the activities of the Soviet Communist Party on August 29. Gorbachev led the party until August 24. Emerging politically weakened, Gorbachev refused to resign from his post as Soviet president and worked with Yeltsin to push their agenda against Stalinist hardliners, many of whom backed the August 16 coup attempt.

Thirteen suspected coup plotters were charged with high treason on August 28, while the Russian Federation prosecutor general stated that there were many more who were involved that would be prosecuted.

The Gorbachev-Yeltsin proposals put before the Congress of Peoples' Deputies was aimed at routing the hard-liners. In an impromptu television press conference after the second day of the session, Gorbachev asserted that if the body did not accept the proposals, he would do away with it, saying, "Then, the Congress will have exhausted itself." The Congress of USSR People's Deputies was created in 1989 as the centerpiece of Gorbachev's supposed democratization of the Soviet regime under his "glasnost" program.

Eduard Shevardnadze, former Soviet foreign minister, was reported by Tass news agency to describe the situation in the USSR was "gradually worsening" and warn that masses of people "flooding the streets" was within the realm of possibility.

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50 years ago: Egypt executes Muslim Brotherhood leader

On August 29, 1966, Egypt executed the leading intellectual figure of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb. The 59-year-old Qutb was convicted on trumped-up charges that he had conspired to assassinate Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. He was tortured during imprisonment prior to his hanging.

The son of a prominent landowner, Qutb embraced a fundamentalist brand of Islam in reaction to the influence of Western culture and "materialism" on Egypt and other predominantly Muslim societies. He joined the Muslim Brotherhood in 1953 after two years of study in the United States, where he claimed to have been horrified by jazz music and the sexuality of American women. Along with the rest of the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb initially collaborated with Nasser after the officers' coup against King Farouk in 1952. But he soon split with Nasser over the latter's promotion of certain social reforms—including government land confiscations and abolition of Sharia courts.

Qutb and a number of other leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood were first imprisoned in 1954 on the charge of conspiracy to assassinate Nasser. He was released in 1964, but was soon arrested again, a detention that culminated in his execution. Heavily influenced by the French fascist Alex Carrel, Qutb wrote many of his reactionary tracts while in prison. These centered on virulent anti-Semitism, the subordination of women and society, and opposition to all forms of secularism. He advocated the imposition of Sharia law, whose structures would ultimately be determined by Sunni Muslim clerics and mystics such as himself. Qutb professed opposition to American imperialism, but Washington in fact welcomed—and later directly supported—Islamism wherever it suited its purposes as a counterweight to socialism and out-of-favor nationalist regimes.

Nasser's fears over the influence of ideas of Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood arose in the context of the crisis of Pan-Arab nationalism. Nasser, along with the Baathists of Syria and Iraq, had proven incapable of resolving the most basic tasks confronting the Arab masses, including overcoming the region's many ethnic and religious divisions, and the borders imposed on the Middle East by British and French imperialism.

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75 years ago: Red Army begins Yelnya offensive

Beginning on August 30, 1941, the Yelnya offensive by the Soviet Red Army brought about the first recapturing of Soviet territory since the beginning of the massive Nazi invasion, Operation Barbarossa, on June 22. The offensive was part of the large-scale Battle of Smolensk. Yelnya itself was retaken on September 6. The counteroffensive ended on September 8.

The temporary success of the Soviet counteroffensive was the first significant reversal for the Wehrmacht since the invasion of the Soviet Union, and indeed since the beginning of the war in Europe. It provided a much needed propaganda boost for the Stalinist regime in Moscow, whose criminal policies had left the workers' state totally unprepared for the German invasion.

The Battle of Smolensk had been raging since July 11 around the industrial city of Smolensk located on the Dnieper River. Yelnya is an industrial town located some 40 miles from Smolensk close to crucial high ground, where the German 4th Army had established a staging post for an offensive upon the administrative center of Vyzma and ultimately Moscow.

Threatened with encirclement by Red Army troops, by September 3 German troops were ordered into a retreat after Hitler gave permission for the Wehrmacht to abandon the Yelnya salient. By September 6, Yelnya was back under Red Army control. A further two days of advancement by Soviet forces was halted by newly formed German defensive lines. The defense of Yelnya cost the German army 23,000 dead.

Yelnya itself had already been destroyed. The Russian-born British journalist and BBC war correspondent Alexander Werth described in his 1964 book *Russia at War 1941-1945* how the town of Yelnya, with a pre-war population of 15,000, was totally destroyed and all the able-bodied adults had been forced during German occupation into labor battalions and transported behind German lines. Werth witnessed the few survivors emerging to greet the liberating Red Army from cellars and rudimentary dugouts.

Writing years later about the events he had seen as one of the handful of foreign journalists allowed to visit the front lines, Werth explained, "Here was not only, as it were, the first victory of the Red Army over the Germans; here was also the first piece of territory, perhaps only 100 or 150 square miles in the whole of Europe reconquered from Hitler's Wehrmacht. It is strange to think that in 1941 even that was considered an achievement."

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100 years ago: Pro-Venizelos military coup in Greece

On August 30, 1916, Greek military officers staged a successful coup in Thessalonika, in opposition to the royal government in Athens. The action had been tacitly backed by well-known Greek politician Eleftherios Venizelos. The conflict was part of the so-called "national schism" which pitted those, such as Venizelos, who favored intervention in World War I on the side of the Allies, with the central government in Athens, which had maintained a neutral position on the war.

Venizelos had been Greece's prime minister until February 1915. He resigned the position after King Constantine blocked his efforts to pledge Greek forces to the Gallipoli offensive that was being planned by the Allies—France, Britain and Russia. He was reelected in August 1915, before again being forced by the king to resign in September. Venizelos, however, continued to agitate against the official position of neutrality, winning support among sections of the army.

The August coup had been sparked by anger in the officer corps over a series of major concessions to the Central Powers—Germany and Austria-Hungary—by the national government. In May 1916, the Athens government surrendered the Roupel fortress, a strategically critical outpost in Macedonia, to German forces and their Bulgarian allies. Greece and Bulgaria had been antagonists during the Second Balkan War, fought between June and August 1913.

In August 1916, the Bulgarians also launched an invasion of Macedonia. The intervention was met with virtually no resistance by the Greek government, which was fearful of provoking a clash with Germany. Six thousand Greek troops were taken as prisoners of war, and there were fears that sections of Greece, including Thessaloniki, would fall to the Central Powers.

In late August, clashes took place in Thessaloniki between officers loyal to Venizelos and those that backed the royal government. They provoked a blockade of loyalist military headquarters by 600 pro-Venizelos troops. The successful coup resulted in the establishment of a National Defense Committee and the disarming and internship of loyalist troops.

On September 25, Venizelos arrived in Thessaloniki and within days established a new provisional government, in direct opposition to the authorities in Athens. In November, the provisional government declared war on the Central Powers, and set out to enter the war on the side of the Allies.

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