

This week in history: October 3-9

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25 years ago: Yugoslav civil war deaths reach 2,500

On October 7, 1991, the Croatian capital of Zagreb sustained surface-to-surface missile attacks and the presidential palace was rocketed by warplanes, nearly killing the republic's president and other leaders. Fighting continued in Yugoslavia despite the announcement of the eighth cease-fire in less than four months.

Croatia, the center of the fighting, was turned into a bloody war zone. Adriatic coastal cities like Dubrovnik, Zadar and Split were subjected to sea blockades and bombardments from both naval and army units.

Near the historic city of Dubrovnik, mortar fire, aerial bombardment and shelling by navy gunboats leveled outlying villages and set off uncontrollable fires. Electricity, the waterworks and telephone service were been knocked out by the attacks.

The death toll in the fighting was estimated at 2,500 since June, when the Yugoslav republics of Croatia and Slovenia declared their independence.

The eruption once again of full-scale civil war in the Balkans—the historic tinderbox of unresolved national questions that ignited the First World War in 1914—was the sharpest indication of the breakdown of the post-World War II order.

Despite the latest cease-fire, accepted under the threat of an embargo by the capitalist powers of the European Community, there was no indication that the crisis would be resolved peacefully under the auspices of imperialism and the leadership of the ex-Stalinists and aspiring capitalists who head up both the central Yugoslav government and the various republics.

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50 year ago: Hoffa fraud and conspiracy conviction upheld

On October 4, 1966, the conviction on fraud and conspiracy charges of Teamster President James R. “Jimmy” Hoffa was upheld by the US Court of Appeals in a 2-to-1 decision. The court action cleared the way for the jailing of Hoffa, who had remained free on bail since sentencing in 1964.

Hoffa was still appealing a 1963 conviction for jury tampering. The combined sentences for the two convictions carried a total prison term of 13 years. He and six associates were convicted of defrauding the Teamster pension fund of millions of dollars in order to finance speculation in real estate.

Hoffa's attorneys claimed the state failed to provide sufficient evidence to uphold a guilty verdict. The court decision came three months after the gangster-ridden Teamster bureaucracy unanimously reelected Hoffa to a third five-year term as international president. The bureaucracy simultaneously voted to create the position of executive vice president to be filled by a Hoffa appointee should the union head be sent to prison.

While the government sought to strengthen its control over the Teamsters by jailing its top leader, strikes mounted throughout the US against the erosion of wages due to inflation fueled by the cost of the Vietnam War.

On October 3 over 20,000 production workers at General Electric went on strike in five cities over local issues, despite pleas by both union bureaucrats and President Lyndon Johnson that a walkout would hurt “vital war production.”

Johnson called together leaders of the IUE and 10 other GE unions for consultations after the walkouts were squelched. Contract talks were resumed at the Pentagon after IUE officials pledged that there would be no interruption of the flow of munitions to the US forces in Vietnam. Johnson threatened the use of the strikebreaking provisions of the Taft-Hartley Act if further strikes erupted.

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75 years ago: Nazi armies advance upon Moscow

On October 3, 1941, Hitler made his first address to the German public since the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, known as Operation Barbarossa. Speaking at the Berlin Sportpalast, Hitler claimed that the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union had been a preventive measure designed to preempt the supposedly imminent plans of Stalin to invade Germany.

With the German Wehrmacht making rapid advancements upon Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union, but with the onset of the Russian winter only days away, Hitler felt hubristic enough to tell his audience, "I can say today that this enemy is already broken and will not rise again."

The Nazi plan to destroy Moscow, entitled Operation Typhoon, involved 78 German divisions, comprising almost two million troops and 2,000 tanks, with substantial Luftwaffe tactical support.

The preliminary phase of Operation Typhoon had begun days earlier on September 30 when the Second Panzer Army advanced upon the city of Orel to the south of Moscow. The sudden Nazi attack created bedlam in the Russian countryside. Confronted by previously unprecedented scenes of mass panic, the seasoned Soviet writer and journalist Vassily Grossman was moved to exclaim, "I thought I'd seen retreat, but I've never seen anything like what I am seeing now ... Exodus! Biblical Exodus!"

On October 2, after a brief bombardment the Third and Fourth Panzer Groups broke through either side of the reserve front of the Red Army commanded by Marshal Budenny. Red Army lines of communications collapsed and within days the two Panzer groups had linked up at Viazma and surrounded five Soviet armies. A further encirclement of Red Army troops ensued almost simultaneously further south at the Bryansk front.

The conditions for the Red Army within the military encirclements at Bryansk and Viazma were nothing short of hellish. The Luftwaffe used Stuka dive bombers, fighter planes and bombers, while the Wehrmacht encirclement maintained a constant barrage upon the hundreds of thousands of trapped troops. Red Army soldiers were forced to slaughter and eat their horses, wounded troops perished amidst the chaos and corpses piled up all around.

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100 years ago: New Japanese cabinet formed amid international tensions

On October 4, 1916, the Emperor of Japan, Taisho, requested that Lieutenant General Count Seiki Terauchi, former minister of war and a previous resident general in colonial Korea, form a new cabinet to replace the government that had been headed by Marquis Okuma. The move took place amid mounting tensions between Britain and the United States on the one hand, and Japan on the other.

Okuma's resignation brought to a head an intense power struggle within Japan's ruling elite and official political parties. Okuma had assisted Baron Kato in his efforts to form a new government, amalgamating the three groups composing the government's majority into one party.

The selection of Terauchi was viewed as a victory for the army party. His appointment was expected to be followed by a more aggressive and expansionist foreign policy, especially towards China. Senior naval and military figures had urged a rapid development of the armed forces, insisting that the question of military preparedness be considered in the next Diet, which was due to convene in December. They argued that Japan had been falling behind in naval construction, particularly in comparison to the United States.

Spokesmen for US imperialism were expressing nervousness over Japanese designs on China, which the US itself coveted, even before the formation of the new government. This came despite Japan's status as nominal ally of Britain and France in World War I, which Washington was soon to enter on the same side.

At the same time, the British press was expressing alarm at "sharp trading" by Japanese firms. The British accused the Japanese of "moving in" on India, utilizing the inability of British and German manufacturers, due to war conditions, to fill orders. Representatives of Japanese exporters had considerable success, particularly in lines such as hosiery, piece goods, silks, glassware, rubber, matches and umbrella fittings, and had reportedly made a careful study of the Indian market before making inroads there.

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