

This week in history: January 9-15

9 January 2017

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25 years ago: European Community moves to dismember Yugoslavia

On January 15, 1992, the European Community formally opened diplomatic ties with the two northern Yugoslav republics Croatia and Slovenia. Germany was first to announce ties with the two republics earlier in the week, declaring that the EC's 12 member states would soon follow suit, moving toward the dissolution of Yugoslavia as a federal state.

These actions took place as the United Nations deployed the first contingent of a "peacekeeping force" which was expected to grow to as many as 10,000 troops. Meanwhile, the crumbling Stalinist bureaucracy in Belgrade, with its main base in the republic of Serbia, denounced the EC decision as a violation of international law and "the sovereign rights of Yugoslavia."

The move to dismember Yugoslavia, a state which had existed since 1918, followed a bitter civil war which claimed thousands of lives and created nearly 600,000 refugees. This war was provoked by rival cliques in the various Yugoslav republics as they attempted to preserve their interests under conditions of the disintegration of the ruling bureaucracy. All of them, both those like Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic, who claimed to be preserving national unity, and those such as Croatian President Franjo Tudjman, who posed as a champion of self-determination, worked to foment national chauvinism in order to divide the Yugoslav working class and carry through their program of restoring capitalism.

The EC decision to follow the lead of Berlin in recognizing Croatia and Slovenia was the outcome of the most open assertion by German imperialism of its interests and ambitions in Europe since the fall of the Third Reich. The French government reportedly offered initial opposition to the recognition of Croatia on the grounds of concern over the rights of ethnic Serbs, but finally gave in to pressure from Germany.

Recognition of the two republics was opposed by the United Nations, which was in turn acting as an instrument of the US, with former US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance acting as the chief UN negotiator in Yugoslavia. The US both feared that the breakup of Yugoslavia could destabilize much of Europe and

viewed with unconcealed hostility the new assertiveness of Germany.

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50 years ago: Johnson promises "more agony" in Vietnam

In the face of growing domestic and international opposition to the bloody war in Vietnam, President Lyndon Johnson used his State of the Union address, delivered on January 10, 1967, to promise that the US would "face more cost, more loss, and more agony" in a war that had already killed thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese.

"For the end is not yet," Johnson said. "I cannot promise you that it will come this year—or come next year. Our adversary still believes, I think, tonight, that he can go on fighting longer than we can, and longer than we and our allies will be prepared to stand up and resist." Johnson noted that US troop levels in Vietnam were then nearing 500,000.

To justify the bloodshed and treasure spent, Johnson trotted out the tired propaganda that in Vietnam the US was fighting the "communist aggression" of "an adversary who is committed to the use of force and terror to settle political questions." However, as the list of US atrocities grew longer, it became increasingly apparent that it was in fact the US and its allies that waged aggressive war against the people of Vietnam, typified by the counterinsurgency methods of collective punishment—massacres of villages and mass aerial bombardment of civilian targets in the North—as the Johnson administration sought to prop up its corrupt stooge dictatorship in South Vietnam against a popular insurgency.

In his speech, Johnson clung to his "guns and butter" politics—combining massive military spending abroad and, domestically, support for the spate of social reforms dubbed the Great Society. He pointed to reforms already achieved: the implementation of the Medicare health care system for the aged; a recent increase of the minimum wage; expanded funding for public and college education; the pre-school Head Start education program; new environmental safeguards; urban renewal and a jobs program called the Neighborhood Youth Corps; and, in a reference to the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, that the US had "struck down legal barriers to equality."

To pay for the war in Vietnam, Johnson said he would request from Congress “a surcharge of 6 percent on both corporate and individual income taxes.”

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75 years ago: Roosevelt sets up War Labor Board

On January 12, 1942, US President Franklin Roosevelt established the War Labor Board, a 12-man committee comprised of corporate heads, pro-big-business professionals, and labor bureaucrats aimed at suppressing the class struggle in America for the duration of the Second World War. Roosevelt declared, “the national interest demands that there be no interruption of any work which contributes to the effective prosecution of the war.”

The War Labor Board emerged after the collapse of its predecessor, the National Defense Mediations Board (NDMB), which was discredited when it backed the open-shop steel corporations against the United Mine Workers. The miners’ defiance of the NDMB forced the CIO representatives on the board to resign, thereby leaving it without any authority.

CIO leader Sidney Hillman, who served in Roosevelt’s Office of Production Management and was instrumental in helping the war industries rake in profits while holding down the living standards of the working class, had written to Roosevelt in December 1941, urging, “A way must be found to stop defense strikes.”

At an industry-labor conference that same month, nine top CIO officials, including CIO president Phillip Murray and UMW leader John L. Lewis, agreed to surrender the right to strike for the duration of the war, to settle all disputes through mediation and arbitration, and to serve on the War Labor Board in an effort to lend it credibility in the eyes of the workers. Business representatives flatly refused to consider incorporating a fig leaf statement by the AFL and CIO that workers should have the right to a living wage during the war.

Six of the members of the newly constituted War Labor Board had been members of the previous NDMB, including William H. Smith, who chaired the old body, and Walter C. Teagle, chairman of Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company.

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100 years ago: Leon Trotsky arrives in New York

On January 14, 1917, Leon Trotsky arrived in New York as a political exile, having been deported first by France and then by Spain for his anti-war writings and activities.

Well known by socialists in New York for his intransigent opposition to war and as the leader of the 1905 Russian Revolution, Trotsky was greeted by a large crowd mainly made up of European emigrants as his ship docked in Manhattan.

Trotsky immediately joined the editorial board of the Russian language daily paper *Novy Mir* (*New World*). Trotsky later wrote in his autobiography, “The paper was the headquarters for internationalist revolutionary propaganda. In all of the national federations of the Socialist party, there were members who spoke Russian, and many of the Russian federation spoke English. In this way the ideas of the *Novy Mir* found their way out into the wider circles of American workers.”

Trotsky arrived in New York as the United States was preparing to play a more direct role in the First World War. His central preoccupation during his time in New York was the attitude of the socialist movement to the war and America’s entry into it. In articles and at meetings Trotsky publicly insisted on the imperialist nature of war and his opposition to all of its combatant governments.

He immersed himself in the struggle against war and insisted that the fight could only go forward through a frontal assault on capitalism. Under his guidance, the members of the revolutionary left wing of the Socialist Party decided to establish a militant Marxist weekly in order to build the revolutionary anti-war movement amongst American workers. Trotsky spoke at packed meetings and wrote articles and columns that appeared in numerous newspapers.

On hearing the news of the February revolution in Russia, Trotsky immediately set about organizing his return to Russia. At the end of March, on the night before they sailed, more than 800 people showed up to say farewell to Trotsky and his family.

According to notes made by a police spy who was present, Trotsky’s final words in his farewell speech were, “I am going back to Russia to overthrow the Provisional Government there and to stop the war with Germany. I want you people here to organize and keep organizing until you are able to overthrow the damned rotten capitalistic government of this country.”

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