This week in history:

5 February 2018

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

25 years ago: Clinton moves to scuttle peace effort in Bosnia

In a bid to create conditions for US military intervention in the Balkans, the Clinton administration this week announced its opposition to a Bosnia peace plan put forward by UN mediator (and former US Secretary of State) Cyrus Vance and European Community representative David Owen.

On February 8, 1993, the administration leaked to the press that it would announce its own plan that would essentially support Bosnian Muslim positions in all details, and that it would entail the stationing of as many as 15,000 US troops for up to 10 years. The US scheme being prepared, in other words, was not a "peace plan" at all, but an ultimatum designed to elicit a rejection by Bosnia's Serbs, and their backers in what remained of Yugoslavia, thus paving the way for US war.

Clinton Defense Secretary Les Aspin mooted the proposal a week earlier at a gathering of his NATO counterparts, who reportedly expressed their opposition. Aspin delivered a dinner toast to the European ministers, declaring that NATO should bring "the full force of our influence to bear." Among ideas being discussed in the Clinton administration were the arming of Bosnia's Muslims, the imposition of a no-fly zone, and the launching of bombing raids on Serbia itself.

Both the US position and the European position, as reflected in the Vance-Owen proposal, demanded the ethnic fragmentation of Bosnia. The Vance-Owen plan called for carving Bosnia into 10 largely autonomous provinces, each dominated by one or another of the three warring ethnic groups—Muslims, Serbs, and Croats. It was accepted by the Croats and the Serbs, in principle, while the tiny nation's Muslim bourgeoisie, encouraged by the US, rejected it.

With a further ethnic break-up guaranteed by both proposals, Bosnia's three nationalist cliques attempted to change facts on the ground, with Serbs, backed by Yugoslavia, gaining territory at the expense of the larger Muslim population. Serbian militia continued the shelling of the multi-ethnic capital, Sarajevo, drawing international condemnation.

Seizing on this, the Clinton administration, assisted by the *New York Times*, was beginning to pitch its imminent involvement as a "humanitarian war." Tellingly, the *Times* now charged Serbs—but not the rival ethnic militias—with "ethnic cleansing." According to a ProQuest search, the term had never been used in the *Times*, in 140 years of publication, until it appeared in a column by Balkans correspondent Chuck Sudetic on April 15, 1992. Between that date and February 18, 1993, the term made its way into the pages of the *Times* 310 more times.

[top]

50 years ago: US, South Korean troops massacre Vietnamese villagers

In the midst of the Tet Offensive, US and South Korean soldiers, acting on explicit orders from US commanders, carried out massacres in several south Vietnamese villages.

On February 8, 1968, Company B, 1st Battalion, 35th Infantry, came on a nameless hamlet near its position in Hoi An in Quang Nam province, where it had recently lost five men to National Liberation Front attackers. Infantrymen recalled their commands. "The order of the day was to search and destroy and kill anything in the village that moved," one soldier told army investigators. Another said that the commanding officer said he "did not want to see anything walking when he came through." A third remembered the instruction, "kill everything that breathed."

After a number of the soldiers gang-raped a teenage girl, the entire village was brought together and gunned down. It is not known how many were killed, but as many as 19 such US mass murders took place in the period in Quang Nam alone.

Four days later, troops of the Republic of South Korea—part of the American "coalition" to drown the Vietnamese Revolution in blood—carried out another massacre in nearby Phong Nhi and Phong Nut, brutally killing perhaps 80. Writer Nick Turse describes what American soldiers found in the village when they followed the Koreans in: "clumps of corpses, burned houses, a woman—still alive—whose left breast had been hacked off, a ditch filled with the bodies of women and children."

[top]

75 years ago: Soviet victories over German armies worry imperialism

On February 8, 1943, the Soviet Red Army captured Kursk. It was the first of a string of battles over a 10-day period that threw Hitler's armies back to the west along a line running through the cities of Bryansk, Orel, Kharkov, Voroshilovgrad and Rostov.

These victories, which followed rapidly on the heels of the shattering defeat of the German Sixth Army at Stalingrad, were greeted with rallies and parades by workers in countries throughout the world and renewed the determination of partisans and underground fighters in their struggle against fascism.

But among the imperialist allies of the Soviet Union these Red Army victories were hardly welcomed. As the *New York Times* commented, "Swiftly, inexorably, the Russian armies continue to drive toward the west. One supposedly impregnable Nazi stronghold after another falls before their assault … But as the Red Armies plunge forward, they are also raising many questions in many minds as to what other order they have written on their banners."

The concern of the imperialists was not simply about territorial conquests by Stalin. The greatest nightmare was that the Red Army's advance beyond the USSR's borders and into the cities of central Europe would inspire revolutionary insurrections by the working class.

British and American imperialism had aided the Soviet Union only insofar as it fought the defensive battles that exhausted both the German and Red armies, while the Anglo-American military machine stood aside and conserved its strength. This outlook was most crudely put by US Senator Harry S. Truman, who said in 1941, "If we see that Germany is winning the war, we ought to help Russia; and if that Russia is winning, we ought to help Germany, and in that way let them kill as many as possible."

Up until 1943, Churchill and Roosevelt had refused to launch an assault across the English Channel into France, in spite of Stalin's pleading, which would place the German armies between them and the USSR. Instead it connived at the using North Africa as a base to invade Italy and the Balkans, which would put them in a position to secure colonial possessions and then move northward and intercept the advance of the Red Army.

[top]

100 years ago: Trotsky declares: "No War, No Peace" at Brest-Litovsk

On February 10, 1918, Leon Trotsky, the head of the Bolshevik delegation at the Brest-Litovsk peace talks with the Central Powers (Germany, Austria, Turkey, Bulgaria), declared that the Soviet delegation considered the war to be over, but found the German-Austrian peace terms unacceptable.

He told the conference:

> "We are removing our armies and our people from the war. Our peasant soldiers must return to their land to cultivate in peace the fields which the revolution has taken from the landlord and given to the peasants. Our workmen soldiers must return to the workshops and produce not for destruction but creation....
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> "At the same time we declare that the conditions as submitted to us by the governments of Germany and Austria-Hungary are opposed in principle to the interests of all peoples ... We cannot place the signature of Russia under these conditions which bring with them oppression, misery and hate to millions of human beings."

The question of the Soviet government's signing a peace treaty with Germany and its allies, on the most humiliating terms, was an issue of internal debate within the Bolshevik leadership.

Under conditions in which the German revolution was not imminent and the Russian army was completely shattered, Lenin was unequivocally in favor of signing a treaty. The "lefts," led by Bukharin, were in favor of fighting a "revolutionary war" to the death.

Trotsky's position was to stall as long as possible—in the meantime encouraging opposition in Germany and Austria—and to sign a treaty only "at the point of a bayonet. The situation will be clear to all the world." His position was ultimately adopted by the Bolsheviks. In Petrograd, the Soviet Central Executive Committee unanimously approved "the action of its representatives at Brest-Litovsk."

On February 16, Germany announced that as of midnight, it would consider itself in a state of war with Russia. The German armies began an offensive and the Bolsheviks signed the peace treaty on March 3.

[top]