This week in history: August 20-26

20 August 2018

25 years ago: Jury convicts two Detroit cops in murder of Malice Green

On August 23, 1993, a Detroit jury returned verdicts of second-degree murder against two white policemen for the beating death of Malice Green, a young black worker. Walter Budzyn and Larry Nevers smashed in Green's skull with heavy flashlights while seven other policemen stood around them and allowed the savagery to continue without interference. At least one of these accomplices, Robert Lessnau, kicked and punched Green during the beating, as he put handcuffs on the dying man.

While the police maintained the "blue wall" of silence about the case, residents of the southwest Detroit neighborhood and emergency medical technicians who were on the scene gave extensive testimony about how the police carried out their unprovoked attack. The defense attorneys were unable to shake this testimony, which was decisive in proving the case against Budzyn and Nevers.

The defense case was further undermined by the desperate decision to have the two cops take the stand. Budzyn claimed he had seen and done nothing, despite the eyewitness testimony about how he repeatedly smashed his flashlight into Green's head. Nevers claimed that Green had reached for his, the policeman's, service revolver, the first time this claim had been made by anyone, and a charge also belied by the eyewitnesses.

The case aroused national as well as local attention, since it demonstrated that the protracted rule of an African-American mayor in Detroit, Coleman Young, then in his 20th year in office, had done nothing to change the racist and anti-working-class character of the notorious Detroit Police Department, one of the most brutal in the United States.

Judge George Crockett III dismissed charges against Robert Lessnau and granted bail to both Budzyn and Nevers, pending their sentencing hearing, an action unheard of in a murder case where those found guilty were not policemen. He cited the "long years of service" by the two cops, and said that the authorities needed time to prepare the proper conditions for their incarceration, since they were likely to face the danger of retaliation from other prison inmates.

The brutal murder of Malice Green became a major political problem for the Young administration and to the African-American Democratic Party establishment in Detroit. From the case's inception, when Detroit Police Chief Stanley Knox, an African-American, described Green's death as an "embarrassment," the main concern was the possible political repercussions among workers in Detroit.

The decision was made to present the case as purely white cops versus a black victim, using racial politics to obscure the class character of the police force, which defends the property of the wealthy and the corporations against the working class. For that reason, charges were dropped against the supervising officer at the scene, Sergeant Freddie Douglas, because he was African-American, although he had command responsibility for what took place.

50 years ago: Democratic Party convention opens in Chicago

On August 26, 1968, the crisis-torn Democratic Party opened its presidential nominating convention in Chicago amid a massive security build-up. Party officials ordered barbed wire barricades erected around the convention hall to block antiwar protesters. Mayor Richard Daley prepared a 26,000-strong security force of Chicago police and Illinois National Guard troops.

Over the next few days, this massive force was thrown against no more than five or six thousand protesters. Hundreds were arrested and injured in the ensuing police riot, including journalists of the mainstream media and even several convention delegates. During one police charge, 800 demonstrators were injured within a few minutes.

In the "Walker Report," an official investigation of the violent clashes, it was found that the conflict was caused by "unrestrained and indiscriminate police violence on many occasions." And that "violence was inflicted upon persons who had broken no law, disobeyed no order, made no threat. These included peaceful demonstrators, onlookers, and large numbers of residents who were simply passing through, or happened to live in, the areas where confrontations were occurring."

Democratic Party officials defended the police response and attempted to prevent reporters from photographing the beatings. Infamously, Dan Rather, a CBS correspondent, was roughed up by the police after attempting to interview a Georgia delegate who was being escorted out of the convention. In a symbolic gesture of support for the police repression, Daley, the leader of the Illinois Democratic delegation, was given a front row seat at the convention.

But there was considerable sympathy for the protesters among rank-and-file delegates: more than a thousand took part in a candlelight march down to the park where the demonstrators were encamped. In one particularly notorious incident, when Senator Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut began speaking from the platform to condemn "Gestapo tactics" in the streets of Chicago, Daley jumped to his feet, screaming anti-Semitic curses at the senator, who was Jewish.

Inside the convention hall, Vice President Hubert Humphrey won the presidential nomination on the first ballot, defeating Senator Eugene McCarthy, the self-proclaimed "peace" candidate. Both McCarthy and Humphrey were fervent defenders of US imperialism. The platform debate boiled down to a mere tactical dispute between those who favored a "conditional" halt to the bombing of North Vietnam versus those who favored "unconditional" cessation.

Despite the repression ordered by Democratic Party officials, which

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included a raid on McCarthy's own headquarters and the arrest and beating of his campaign workers, McCarthy urged his followers to remain loyal to the party. In a speech to supporters following the convention, the senator claimed his campaign had "won a great victory to this point, one which should reassure us about the system itself."

75 years ago: Greek partisans oppose moves to restore monarchy

This week in August 1943, a delegation of partisans battling the Nazi occupation of Greece held talks in Cairo, Egypt, with British officials and the government in exile of King George II. They informed the British that they opposed the return of the king to Greece at the head of an Allied-installed government.

One partisan told the British, "Our forces are capable of further development ... We will soon be 200,000 .... We will then be strong enough to liberate ourselves. You will have no need to come to Greece."

The British treated the Greek partisans with outright hostility. King George II, who endorsed the coming to power of the right-wing dictatorship of General Metaxas in 1936, was universally hated by the Greek masses. But British Prime Minister Winston Churchill saw him as a reliable instrument for restoring Greece to its previous semi-colonial standing and protecting British lines of communication in the Mediterranean with the rest of the empire. Further, Greece would be a bulwark against the advance of the Red Army into the Balkans.

Britain's fears were revealed in a letter to Churchill: "In the inflamed conditions of public feeling, not only in Greece but also in other Balkan countries, chaos may ensue after the Allied occupation unless a strong hand is kept on the local situation. With politics let loose among those peoples, we may have a wave of disorder and wholesale communism set going all over those parts of Europe ... The Bolshevization of a broken and ruined Europe remains a definite possibility, to be guarded against by supply of food and work and interim Allied control."

Within the partisan movement the Stalinists of the Greek Communist Party acted to restrain the revolutionary strivings of the masses and insisted, after the expulsion of the Nazis, on the establishment of a bourgeois democratic government acceptable to Britain.

100 years ago: Battle of Baku begins

On August 26, 1918, the Islamic Army of the Caucasus, under the military leadership of the Ottoman Empire, which was allied with imperialist Germany in the First World War, began an assault on the oil center of Baku in Azerbaijan.

Refineries in Baku, on the western shore of the Caspian Sea, processed the largest oil reserves in the world known at the time. Most of its inhabitants were Russians and Armenians, although many were Muslim Azeris who spoke a language closely related to Turkish. Because of its large industrial proletariat, Baku had become a center of Bolshevism during the months of revolution in the Caucuses in 1917, although various nationalist parties still wielded substantial influence, such as the Armenian Dashnaks, who politically stood close to the Social Revolutionaries. Also active was the Musavat (Azeri: Equality Party) an Islamic party of the Azeri and Tartar bourgeoisie. In the aftermath of the 1905 revolution, reactionary Islamist parties had led pogroms against Armenians, and the forced deportation and massacre of Armenians in 1915 by Ottoman troops was fresh in the minds of many inhabitants.

In April 1918, combined Bolshevik and Dashnak forces suppressed an abortive rising led by the Musavat. The Bolsheviks, led by the extraordinary Armenian Bolshevik Stepan Shaumian, "the Lenin of the Caucasus," established the Baku Commune, a workers' republic based on the Baku Soviet, which began shipments of oil to the Soviet Republic.

Shortly afterward, the Menshevik government in Georgia in Tbilisi, 450 km (280 miles) to the northwest, invited German troops to occupy Georgian territory. Because of its great oil wealth, the region remained a focus of imperialist attention. The Ottomans were happy to comply when the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, the bourgeois state that surrounded Baku, sought Turkish aid after the Baku Red Army, which had repulsed Turkish troops in June, began an advance on Ganja, its capital.

The 14,000-man strong Islamic Army of the Caucasus was made up primarily of Azeris but with about 30 percent of its soldiery coming from the Ottoman regular army. Its leaders had promised that, after taking the city, 25 percent of Baku oil would be supplied to Germany.

The Dashnaks, fearful that the Bolsheviks would not be able to defend Baku, turned to British imperialism for aid, over the strenuous objections of Shaumian. They invited in the British expeditionary force located in northern Persia (modern Iran) under the command of General Dunsterville. The Baku Commune was dissolved by a coup of Dashnaks, Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks on July 26.

The Bolshevik leadership was obliged to quit the city. But Shaumian and his "26 commissars" were not able to reach the safety of Soviet-controlled territory. They were captured by the successor regime in Baku, imprisoned, rescued by the Red Army but arrested by counterrevolutionaries again and shot on September 20.

The Islamic Army of the Caucasus took Baku on September 15, causing the withdrawal of the British and a mass exodus of Armenians.

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