

# This week in history: September 3-9

3 September 2018

## 25 years ago: US helicopter gunships murder hundreds in Somalia

On September 9, 1993, two US Cobra helicopter gunships swooped down on a large crowd of Somali civilians protesting at a checkpoint in Mogadishu, the capital city, mowing down hundreds with gunfire from 20 millimeter cannons, whose rounds are powerful enough to destroy armored vehicles and soldiers in fortified bunkers.

Scores of corpses littered the 21 October Road, where the attack took place, while hundreds of dead and wounded were taken to hospitals throughout the city. Dozens of the dead and wounded were children, gunned down along with their parents, as they sought to block the advance of a Pakistani tank column accompanied by US ground troops, on a well-publicized raid on the forces of the Somali National Alliance of General Muhammad Farah Aidid.

The gunships were ordered to attack after the Pakistani troops, part of the United Nations peacekeeping force in Somalia, reported they had come under fire from Somali gunmen at a roadblock. A US military spokesman maintained that unarmed men, women and children were engaged in storming UN vehicles when the gunships opened fire. "We saw all the people swarming on the vehicles as combatants," he claimed. "We've seen this before. If they reach our soldiers, they tear them limb from limb."

Other officials sought to disguise the popular resistance to the US and UN forces, claiming that Aidid's forces were using women and children as "human shields" in attacking UN troops.

The massacre followed a series of public statements by Defense Secretary Les Aspin, defining the Clinton administration's aims in Somalia. In a speech August 27 at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Aspin made it clear that Washington now viewed the Somali operation as an open-ended military occupation.

He said that the US would only begin withdrawing its nearly 5,000 troops if three conditions were met: Somali "warlords" gave up their heavy weapons, "credible police forces" were established, and, most importantly "the security issue in south Mogadishu must be settled." The last was a reference to the elimination of Aidid, who was now being demonized by Washington and the corporate media as the evil genius of the

Somali resistance to foreign occupation.

## 50 years ago: US casualties escalate in Vietnam

The Pentagon announced on September 5, 1968 that US casualties in Vietnam totaled 408 for the last week in August, the highest weekly figure in three months. The combat losses reflected a renewed offensive by the National Liberation Front coinciding with the opening of the US presidential campaign. It was the second major wave of attacks since the end of the Tet Offensive in February. The NLF launched another series of assaults in early May.

The August fighting centered in Tayninh Province, northwest of Saigon. Thirteen cities in the Mekong Delta were shelled, along with Saigon itself. Several days later the NLF launched a second wave of attacks in the northern provinces targeting Danang, the center of US military operations, and the provincial capital of Hue, scene of the heaviest Tet fighting. Eighteen other cities and military bases were also attacked. In Danang the NLF shelled two US airfields with mortars and rockets. Several commando units infiltrated the center of the city and engaged in a fight with South Vietnamese troops. Sniper fire was also reported near the US Marine supply depot.

Despite the announcement by President Johnson on March 31 that he would not seek reelection and would pursue negotiations with North Vietnam, American deaths reached record levels during the spring and summer. By the end of August the casualty toll for 1968 stood at 11,487. US troop strength reached its all-time peak, 538,500 men.

Meanwhile in Paris the negotiations between the United States and North Vietnam, which began in May, dragged on with no substantive results. North Vietnam continued to demand that the US agree to halt all bombing as a precondition for further talks while Ambassador-at Large Averill Harriman and Cyrus Vance, the US delegates, called for the North to evacuate the demilitarized zone, Laos and Cambodia.

## 75 years ago: Allied forces invade Italy

On September 3, 1943, the Allied powers began a full-scale invasion and occupation of Italy with large detachments of British and Canadian troops landing at Reggio Calabria in the south of the island. The Italian regime, recognizing that the days of the fascist Axis powers were numbered, had resolved the previous month to align with the Allied powers in the ongoing Second World War, and offered no resistance to their military forces.

Preparations for the invasion had been taking place for several months. The routing of Italian and German troops in North Africa had created a base from which an attempted occupation of Italy by the Allied powers could be launched. The German Nazi regime, suffering a series of defeats on the Eastern Front, had rebuffed Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's appeals for substantial troop numbers to be sent to Italy to repel any attempted invasion.

The landing of Allied troops came amid a major political crisis of the Italian regime. On July 24, Mussolini had summoned the fascist Grand Council, following Allied landings on the island of Sicily, which were recognized as the opening shot of a full-scale invasion of the mainland. The council voted no confidence in the dictator, and he was removed and arrested.

General Giuseppe Castellano was appointed prime minister by King Victor Emmanuel III. As had been agreed upon by the council, Castellano, a hardened fascist, immediately offered an armistice to the Allied powers on September 3, having already signaled that Italian troops would not resist the invasion.

On September 8, Castellano announced the armistice to the Italian population and it was published by the Italian powers. Fighting ensued between German troops, who had occupied sections of the north of the country, the Allies and the Italian forces loyal to them.

The Allied intervention, and the palace coup to remove Mussolini, took place amid the emergence of a mass movement of the Italian working class against fascism and the war. Over the previous months, factory committees had been formed in crucial industries and mass strikes were organized. The Italian generals, the Allied powers and the Stalinist Communist Party would do everything they could to prevent the upsurge leading to the overthrow of Italian capitalism.

## 100 years ago: Red Army launches attack on Kazan

On September 7, 1918, the Red Army began shelling Kazan, the most important city held by the counterrevolutionary forces opposed to the Bolshevik regime, and the nearest White-held city to the capital, Moscow. Kazan had been taken by the troops of the counterrevolutionary Komuch government and the Czech Legion on August 7.

The battle at Kazan had been preceded by several weeks of

fighting by the stubborn and heroic Soviet resistance at the small railway junction in the town of Sviazhsk, 20 miles west of Kazan, that barred the entry of the White armies to central Russia. The action at Sviazhsk was led by Leon Trotsky personally, from his soon to be famous armored train.

Larissa Reisner, an intelligence officer of the Red Flotilla at Kazan and one of the great memoirists of this period, reports, "Trotsky's organizing genius now became apparent. Across railways that were openly sabotaged he could get to Sviazhsk not only fresh artillery but everything that was needed for resistance and offensive." Also playing a leading military role at Sviazhsk was the old Bolshevik and later Left Oppositionist I.M. Smirnov.

The Red Flotilla bombarded Kazan from the Volga. The Flotilla, the embryo of the Red Navy, was under the command of F.F. Raskolnikov, an officer who had played a prominent role during the revolution among the sailors of Kronstadt, the navel fortress outside of Petrograd.

A workers' uprising in Kazan on September 8 was put down with great brutality by the Komuch government and the Czech Legion. At 3:30 a.m. on September 10, Red Army soldiers under the command of Ioakim Vatsetis assaulted the city walls from the north, south and west, and the city was taken later that day, the first major Soviet victory of the Civil War.

Sviazhsk and Kazan were the first successes in what came to be known as the Volga Campaign. Two days after the fall of Kazan, Tukhachevsky's First Army took Simbirsk, 100 miles to the south. One historian observed: "A command structure was forged that would lead the Red Army to victory. It was in these battles that the pattern of the Red Army was worked out on the Volga. Trotsky's regular army was proven."



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