

This week in history: September 17-23

17 September 2018

25 years ago: Yeltsin assumes dictatorial powers in Russia

On September 21, 1993, Russian President Boris Yeltsin disbanded parliament, suspended the constitution and assumed dictatorial powers, blowing to pieces the pretense that his regime represented the development of “democracy” in Russia after the dissolution of the USSR. The action was the first in a series leading up to the bombardment of the Russian parliament building in October.

Yeltsin made use of unexplained incidents in which unidentified gunmen fired shots at the headquarters of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) military command and the central offices of the GRU, the Russian military intelligence. A policeman and a civilian were killed in the first of these suspicious shootings. Who carried out these attacks and for what purpose was unknown, but they provided a convenient pretext for a bloody crackdown.

Troops were deployed in Moscow for a possible assault on the Russian White House, the headquarters of the parliament. The leader of an anti-Yeltsin military faction, the Union of Officers, was arrested together with several other opponents of the regime.

Yeltsin’s spokesman issued a statement describing demonstrators gathered at the White House in opposition to Yeltsin’s coup as “extremists, tramps, the mentally ill, criminals and the mafia gangs” and claiming that they were arming themselves. This language, so reminiscent of the days of the Stalinist terror, pointed toward bloody repression.

The Russian president’s dictatorial actions received the immediate and unconditional support not only of the Clinton administration in Washington, but of the governments of Germany, Japan, Britain, France and every other imperialist power.

The coup was carried out at the direct behest of Washington and the US-dominated international financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund. They demanded that his regime smash all remaining impediments to the plunder of Russia’s economy by the multinational banks and corporations. This required the rapid dismantling of what remains of the state economy, the privatization of industry and the resulting layoff of millions of workers.

It was significant that the first military action taken by Yeltsin was the deployment of troops around Russia’s Central Bank. This institution was seized precisely to cut off the flow of funds used by state enterprises to maintain production and pay workers’ wages. Yeltsin’s coup was designed to prepare the Russian state to suppress the social convulsions that such economic “shock therapy” would set off.

The claims by Washington that it only learned of the coup an hour before Yeltsin announced it on Russian television were transparent lies. Yeltsin was installed as the direct representative and most servile puppet of imperialism to carry through the drive to restore capitalism and assert imperialist control of Eastern Europe and the former USSR.

The coup followed visits to Moscow by US Treasury Undersecretary Lawrence Summers and by an IMF mission, both devoted to pushing Yeltsin to take more aggressive action against state industry and the Russian working class. During this same period, Yeltsin made a series of high-profile tours of Russian military bases, visiting elite paratroop, tank and interior ministry units in and around Moscow.

50 years: US, China in first contact on normalizing relations

On September 17, 1968, the US State Department sent a letter to the Foreign Ministry of the People’s Republic of China. The letter raised the possibility of normalizing diplomatic relations between the two countries, including the exchange of ambassadors. The Johnson administration took the action in the aftermath of China’s hostile response to the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia the previous month.

US imperialism had opposed the 1949 Chinese Revolution, backing the right-wing Kuomintang dictatorship until the bitter end, when Chiang Kai-shek and his defeated troops fled to the island of Taiwan, where the US Navy protected them from pursuit. The United States and China both intervened massively in the Korean War (1950-1953), with American and Chinese troops engaging in bloody battles against each other. In Vietnam as well, China gave significant aid to Hanoi regime, the target of US aggression.

In September 1968, following the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet bureaucracy’s issuance of the “Brezhnev Doctrine,” asserting the right of Moscow to intervene in the Stalinist-ruled states, Mao’s government feared that political or even military intervention against China could be next. Following a pattern of animosity between the Soviet Union and the PRC due to their diverging nationalist interests, the Maoist bureaucracy was looking for alternatives to strengthen their position in the region.

Two days after the US letter, China responded writing that the PRC seeks to “maintain friendly relations with all states, regardless of social system.” The PRC calculated that an ease in

tensions with the United States would relieve enough pressure to focus on resisting a possible military conflict with the Soviet Union. Soviet-Chinese tensions would reach a high point in 1969 during a seven-month-long border conflict.

Both the Soviet and Chinese policies are evidence that the foreign policy of two Stalinist regimes had nothing in common with genuine socialist internationalism. Instead they both followed a path of overseas diplomacy that served only the bureaucracies and ultimately imperialism.

The Brezhnev Doctrine sought to crack down on any political forces that threatened the Stalinist domination of the working class. Similarly, the Chinese Communist Party began to draw the conclusion that by opening the Chinese working class to exploitation by Western imperialism, they could be in a stronger position to defend their own privileges.

75 years ago: German troops massacre Italian soldiers

On September 20, 1943, German firing squads acting under orders from Adolf Hitler began executing Italian soldiers on the occupied Greek island of Kefalonia. By the end of the day 4,500 had been shot dead. This massacre was the outcome of actions taken by the Italian government to counter resistance within the Italian army.

On September 9, the day Italy surrendered to the Allies, the Italian regime issued orders that no hostile action be taken against the Germans. Glad to be done with the war, many Italian soldiers allowed themselves to be disarmed and taken prisoner by the Germans. Those who hesitated were machine-gunned.

Instead of being released and allowed to go home, 700,000 Italian soldiers were transferred to German prison camps, where 30,000 died under barbaric conditions. Sections of the Italian bourgeoisie welcomed Hitler's destruction of the army, which had been gravitating toward the revolutionary workers of Italy.

On the island of Kefalonia the troops of the Aquila Division had been infected with the revolutionary virus by the Greek partisans whom they were supposed to suppress. A soldiers' plebiscite demanded their general not surrender to the Germans but change sides and fight against the Nazis regardless of the odds.

After seven days of ferocious German air bombardment, the Italian resistance was overcome and the executions began. In all, 8,400 Italian soldiers on Kefalonia were killed. On the island of Corfu, after an equally determined resistance, a garrison of more than 7,000 Italian soldiers was annihilated.

In Rome a mere two divisions fought against overwhelming odds to defend the city against German troops. A call was issued to Rome's workers, and arms were distributed. For two days and nights workers and soldiers manned barricades against the German assault before an order was issued for the defenders to go underground and prepare for a guerrilla war.

100 years ago: British forces rout Turkish army in Palestine

On September 21, 1918, at the outset of what is usually known as the Battle of Megiddo, named after the ruins of the Bronze Age city in the vicinity, British aircraft bombed and machine-gunned the remnants of the Turkish 7th and 8th Armies near Nablus in Palestine as part of an offensive which opened the road to the Syrian capital of Damascus. The four-hour attack virtually exterminated the two armies.

The offensive, commanded by General Sir Edmund Allenby, was launched by the British on September 18. Allenby's regular forces attacked the Turks north of Jaffa and then wheeled inland, reaching Nazareth on September 20.

The British forces arrived at Beisan the same day, the 4th Cavalry Division having covered 70 miles in 34 hours. It was this which forced the Turks to attempt to escape eastward across the Jordan River and produced the debacle near Nablus.

In the meantime, Arab troops, commanded by Prince Feisal and Col. T. E. Lawrence, were proceeding toward Damascus east of the Jordan along the main Hejaz railway. On September 16 and 17 they blew up the railway lines north, south and west of Deraa, cutting off the Turkish supply route.

By September 27 all the key positions on the way to Damascus were in Arab and British hands. Political and diplomatic considerations now played the key role. Allenby's victories had already exceeded the provisions of the Sykes-Picot Agreement between British and French imperialism, effectively shutting the French out of Palestine. Lebanon and Syria, however, were slated to fall under French hegemony. If Feisal's Arabs entered Damascus first, the entire plan might be upset.

Two Arab contingents reached the outskirts of the city on September 30, but its surrender did not take place until the arrival of the 5th Australian Light Horse brigade the following day. Allenby met with Feisal and Lawrence on October 3. When Allenby informed Feisal that Palestine and northern coastal Syria were reserved for British and French military administrations and explained the terms of the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the latter objected. Lawrence claimed that he knew nothing of the British government's intentions regarding its Arab "allies." He left for Britain the following day.



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