

# This week in history: October 1-7

1 October 2018

## 25 years ago: Yeltsin orders bombardment of Russian parliament

On October 4, 1993, Moscow was a scene “of carnage, squalor and hideous destruction,” according to press reports, after Russian President Boris Yeltsin ordered the military storming of the Russian White House, the seat of the Russian Duma or parliament. The result was the bloodiest clashes in the streets of the capital city since the Russian Revolution.

Nearly 200 people were killed and more than 400 wounded, according to self-serving official figures. Non-government sources estimated the death toll as high as 2,000. The parliament building was virtually destroyed by bombardment and most of those inside were arrested and savagely beaten if they survived the assault.

Yeltsin’s attack on the Russian parliament gave a graphic refutation of the claims that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the moves to restore capitalism in the former USSR meant the establishment of democracy. Since capitalist restoration entailed a frontal assault on the social position of the working class, and the transformation of a section of the former Stalinist bureaucracy into a new capitalist class, the methods of violence and dictatorship were necessary.

In the Western media, not a single dissenting voice was heard to point out this elementary fact. There was no place on the airwaves for anyone who would dare to expose the cynical lies of both Yeltsin and his supporters in Washington, although the televised scenes recalled nothing so much as General Pinochet’s coup in Chile in 1973. Instead, CNN announcements depicted the tank shells slamming to the parliament building as blows for “democracy.”

Yeltsin’s principal political opponents, who had occupied the parliament building in protest against his September 21 decree dissolving the legislature, were thrown into prison. More than 1,500 people were rounded up and placed in detention centers, which included a stadium. Many of them were savagely beaten, including such liberals as Boris Kagarlitsky, a prominent “left-democratic” opponent of the Stalinist bureaucracy who later reconciled with the Yeltsin regime.

He described his treatment after October 4 as worse than anything that happened to him under Brezhnev in the 1980s.

One publication of and for the ruling elite, the *Financial Times*, the authoritative voice of the British ruling class, did not pull any punches in its description of the scene, writing on October 5:

“It looked bad. The parliament building ringed by tanks, firing shell after shell at its plate glass windows. Inside, a huddled rump, the elected representatives of the people. Outside, a president who

tears up the constitution, uses the army to impose his authority, and suspends opposition newspapers, egged on by the leaders of the ‘free world.’ It is bad, but that does not mean that Mr. Yeltsin or his western backers are wrong.”

## 50 years ago: Mexican police and soldiers open fire on student protesters

On October 2, 1968, more than 10,000 students and other supporters gathered in Tlatelolco Square in Mexico City. At approximately 6:00 p.m. the police surrounded the demonstration and opened fire on the crowd.

Panicked youth and onlookers attempted to flee but found themselves blockaded. In an interview with NPR’s “Radio Diaries” one participant recalled, “the shooting was so strong we had to stop and lay down on the floor ... I saw two or three people fall and drop.”

The demonstration was organized as part of the student movement that had begun months earlier and had seen crowds with as many as 500,000. Though smaller, the Tlatelolco demonstration came just 10 days before the opening of the Olympic Games being hosted in Mexico City.

Mexican President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz wanted to suppress the movement before the beginning of the games so his government could present itself as a modernized country worthy of investment from industrialized countries. Díaz Ordaz was a main target of the student movement, who opposed his government as authoritarian and anti-democratic.

Immediately after the event the Mexican state-controlled media reported that the students had fired first on the police and that only four people had died. They also blamed the demonstrations themselves on “foreign communist influencers.” All these were blatant lies.

While there has still never been a comprehensive investigation on the massacre, firsthand accounts and new evidence have shed more light on the truth of the event. Due to the scale of the massive cover-up, an accurate death count has never been established, with estimates ranging from 200 to as many as 2,000. Following the killing, witnesses also reported seeing the military load bodies onto trucks, regardless of if the victims were still alive, and drive them away never to be seen again.

Some official government documents have been released since the killing. The most remarkable revealed that the Presidential Guard had posted snipers in the buildings surrounding the square.

These snipers were ordered to fire at the police on the ground to provoke them into shooting at the demonstration.

## **75 years ago: Soviet armies conclude successful Smolensk offensive**

On October 2, 1943, the Soviet Union concluded its successful Smolensk offensive, having, over the previous months, liberated numerous strategically important cities, including Roslavl and Smolensk, from the invading forces of Nazi Germany.

The Smolensk offensive was waged as part of a broader push by the Red Army to retake territory conquered by the Third Reich, including through the Lower Dnieper Offensive. The overall advance was initiated in August and carried out through three strategic offensives, from August 7 to 20, August 21 to September 6 and September 7 to October 2.

The offensive was characterized by dogged fighting, with Soviet advances often involving only a handful of miles or less per day. After initially moving towards Smolensk in August, Soviet troops were bogged down in a protracted stalemate, encountering well-prepared defensive German lines and a series of counterattacks.

A renewed offensive at the end of August had forced a substantial German retreat. Further attacks in September created a gap over 40 kilometers long in German defensive lines. Soviet troops then captured Smolensk on September 25 after heavy fighting that including pitched street battles.

The Smolensk offensive deepened the crisis of German forces, which had been graphically revealed in the crushing defeat in the battle of Stalingrad in January-February 1943, and then in the huge tank battles of Kursk-Orel in the summer. The Smolensk offensive aided the broader Soviet pushback by drawing in as many as 55 German divisions that otherwise would have been committed to countering Soviet troops at the Battle of the Dnieper.

## **100 years ago: New German government proposes an armistice to Woodrow Wilson**

On October 4, 1918, in its first public acknowledgement of the impending collapse on the Western Front, the newly formed German government headed by Prince Max von Baden telegraphed to American President Woodrow Wilson appeals for an armistice and the opening of negotiations for an end to the First World War. Germany's principal ally, Austria-Hungary, did the same.

The diplomatic reversal, after four years of the bloodiest fighting ever seen in history, came after the piercing of the Hindenburg Line by the Americans in the Meuse-Argonne offensive in northern France and the push by the British in Flanders at the end of September. German General Eric Ludendorff, the leading strategist of the German army, collapsed from stress on September

28 at the German headquarters in Spa, Belgium, as he received intelligence that German forces were in retreat everywhere. That day, Germany's ally Bulgaria sued for peace with the Allies.

On September 29, the British also broke through the Hindenburg Line, and Ludendorff and his superior Paul von Hindenburg—who had been the de facto rulers of the country since 1914—agreed that the war could not be won and that Germany must sue for an armistice before complete disaster ensued. Ludendorff informed the Kaiser.

Because they felt that they could get better terms from American imperialism, as President Wilson had issued his famous Fourteen Points for peace and postwar stabilization in January, the German generals dictated that an approach to Wilson should be made as soon as possible.

The Foreign Minister, Paul von Hintze, arrived at the headquarters and persuaded the high command that the government must also be liberalized—that is, that the pro-war Social Democrats must be brought into power to prevent revolution in Germany. Strikes had been erupting with greater frequency and the revolutionary and internationalist Spartakusbund had been growing in membership and influence. On October 1, the Spartakusbund and the associated Left Radicals held a joint conference in which they agreed on a common revolutionary program and decided to fight for the formation of workers' and soldiers' councils everywhere.

The conservative Chancellor Georg von Hertling resigned and was replaced by Prince Maximilian of Baden, a relative of the Kaiser but a "liberal." Astonished Reichstag members, who had largely been kept in the dark, were informed of the real military situation on October 2. On October 4, Prince Max formed a new government that included the Social Democratic leader Philipp Scheidemann, one of the men who would be responsible for the murders of the revolutionary leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg only three months later.

Under great pressure from the high command, Prince Max sent a telegram on the same day to Wilson suing for peace. Wilson did not reveal the contents of the German telegram to the British or French and did not respond until October 8, when he demanded that Germany must quit all occupied territories. The Allied offensive had begun to stall by then, and the German high command had decided to fight on for better terms.



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