

This week in history: October 22-28

22 October 2018

25 years ago: Massacres begin in Burundi after assassination of president

In the week following the assassination of Burundi's first Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye, in an unsuccessful coup by the Tutsi-dominated military, tens of thousands of Tutsis and Hutus were slaughtered. Ndadaye had been elected in June 1993 by an overwhelming margin of 65 percent to 32 percent, reflecting the large Hutu majority in the population, more than 85 percent. He defeated the incumbent president, Pierre Buyoya, a Tutsi.

Burundi and neighboring Rwanda, two small and densely populated countries in east-central Africa, had similar ethnic divisions between the ruling minority of Tutsis, who owned most of the agricultural land and dominated the military and government, and the Hutu majority, who constituted the bulk of the agrarian work force.

The Belgian colonial authorities manipulated and exacerbated these longstanding ethnic and cultural differences, maintaining the Tutsi monarchy that ruled the country, which was then displaced by a series of Tutsi military leaders, culminating in the dictatorship of Jean-Baptiste Bagaza, who was ousted by Buyoya in 1987. Buyoya implemented limited reforms, including appointing some Hutus to positions in his government, and permitting Hutu-based parties to compete in the country's first-ever free elections.

Ndadaye's electoral victory in June 1993, as the leader of the Front for Democracy in Burundi (FRODEBU), made him the first Hutu head of state. He appointed a Tutsi prime minister, Sylvie Kinigi, but a majority of his cabinet was Hutu. He allowed exiled former dictator Bagaza to come back to Burundi, and opened the country's borders for the return of hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees who had fled repression and land theft by the Tutsi military, a major driving force of the Tutsi coup against him.

When the coup began on October 21, 1993, Ndadaye, then 40 years old, Pontien Karibwami, the president of the National Assembly and Gilles Bimazubute, the vice-president of the National Assembly, were taken to an army barracks, where they were executed by bayonet, along with a number of other officials and cabinet ministers. The coup collapsed, however, and Prime Minister Kinigi, who had gone into hiding in the French embassy, was placed in power.

Fighting broke out across the country, with Hutus and Tutsis both carrying out and falling victim to massacres, depending on the circumstances. Observers described, "Rivers clogged by bodies with their hands bound, locked rooms crowded with the charred corpses of school-boys, homes left eerily empty. These are some of the nightmarish images of life in Burundi" since the

assassination of Ndadaye. The violence exploded into a decade-long civil war, exacerbated by the anti-Tutsi genocide in neighboring Rwanda 18 months later.

50 years ago: Nixon orders aides to block Vietnam peace deal before US election

On October 22, 1968, in an action that was not made public for many decades, Republican presidential candidate Richard Nixon ordered his top aide, H. R. Haldeman, to conduct secret contacts with the government of South Vietnam to insure that there was no peace deal worked out in the two weeks which remained before the US presidential election.

Nixon's poll lead had been narrowing, from 15 percentage points after the debacle of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, to only a single-digit margin over the Democratic candidate, Vice President Hubert Humphrey. Both candidates had well below a majority of the vote, because of the substantial support for the racist third-party campaign of Alabama Governor George Wallace, a Democrat who launched a nationwide campaign as an independent candidate defending racial segregation in the South.

Wallace made inroads in the north as well on the basis of right-wing populism, appealing to the disgust among the middle class and sections of the working class with both big business parties. The anti-labor character of the Democrats was demonstrated in the midst of the election campaign when President Johnson ordered east coast longshoremen back to work, using a strikebreaking Taft-Hartley injunction. Seventy-five thousand members of the International Longshoremen's Association had struck at the expiration of their contract.

In an attempt to court Democratic Party liberals, Humphrey tried to distance himself somewhat from the policies of Johnson. In a nationally televised speech in late September, Humphrey said he would stop the bombing of North Vietnam if elected. Discussions in Paris meanwhile continued between the US and North Vietnam over a US proposal to halt the bombing of the North in exchange for concessions from Hanoi. In particular, US imperialism insisted that the Paris negotiations be expanded to include the puppet regime in South Vietnam.

In 2016, after the Nixon presidential library made notes from Nixon's chief aide H. R. Haldeman public, it was revealed that Nixon had ordered Haldeman to persuade South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu to walk away from the Paris talks.

The new information provides further evidence that the Nixon campaign maintained a channel with the South Vietnam leadership through which they promised better post-war concessions if they held off making peace until after Nixon's election. After the 1968 talks stalled, the war in Vietnam continued for another five years.

75 years ago: Red Army offensive pushes Germans back across Dnieper River

On October 25, 1943, the Soviet Red Army forces crossed the Dnieper River and captured the city of Dnepropetrovsk in Ukraine. Six days later in the south the Red Army captured Chaplinka, trapping German armies in the Crimean Peninsula. To the north, the Red Army launched the heaviest artillery bombardment of the war against German forces around the Ukrainian capital of Kiev and later occupied the city after heavy street fighting. Moving west from Kiev, the Red Army captured Zhitomir and Korosten which resulted in the severing of rail links between German armies in the north and south.

German military spokesmen had publicly announced before the Red Army offensive that the Dnieper River would serve as the "winter line" where the German army would halt the Soviet advance. But the Red Army put into the battlefield greater numbers of troops and provided arms and equipment quantitatively greater and qualitatively better than that of Germany.

Two-thirds of the vast territory of the Soviet Union occupied by Germany during 1941-42 had now been recaptured since the German surrender at Stalingrad in February. This rapid advance erased all doubt that Soviet forces would sooner, rather than later, make their advance into Eastern Europe and caused consternation within sections of Allied imperialism.

As the *New York World-Telegram* commented: "Before the Red Army's rapid advance, the fact that Stalin frowned on an Anglo-American Balkan campaign and demanded an immediate western front could not move Churchill and Roosevelt. But now Washington and London are faced with the abrupt political question of whether they can afford to let the Red Army penetrate Poland and Romania, much less reach Germany, before Anglo-American forces approach the Rhine."

100 years ago: Czechoslovakia declares its independence from Austria-Hungary

On October 28, 1918, the Czechoslovak National Council in Prague declared the formation of a new state, dominated by speakers of Czech and Slovak, from the northernmost territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire or Austria-Hungary. This state ruled by the Hapsburg Monarchy was the second largest polity in Europe after Russia. It was comprised of peoples speaking at least ten languages, most with national aspirations, and dominated by

the Austrian (German-speaking) and Hungarian ethnicities. The Hapsburg Empire was one of the Central Powers that included Germany, Bulgaria and Turkey, fighting the Allies in the first imperialist war. The new Czechoslovak state, a capitalist republic, had been created with the acquiescence of France, Britain and the United States.

Under the impact of the Russian Revolution, both the Allies and the Czech and Slovak bourgeoisie were seeking any means to head off a revolutionary struggle by the working class. Returning prisoners of war from Russia had already been infected with revolutionary sentiments. A revolt of Czech units in May had been brutally suppressed by the military command, but by October, the Austro-Hungarian army, which was still in the field facing the Italians, was beginning to disintegrate along national lines.

The leader of the Czechoslovak National Council, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, had been visiting the Czech Legion in Russia, a unit made up of Czech and some Slovak prisoners of war organized into a unit by the Tsarist Regime, in November 1917. When the Bolshevik Revolution overthrew the bourgeois government of Alexander Kerensky that month, Masaryk quickly left the country by way of the Pacific port of Vladivostok and traveled to the United States, where his association with the Czech Legion, one of the linchpins of the anti-Soviet counterrevolution in the coming months, convinced the Allied imperialists of his reliability in maintaining capitalist rule in central Europe after the war. On October 18, 1918, Robert Lansing, the United States Secretary of State, sent a note to the Austro-Hungarian government in Vienna that the Allies were committed to the national interests of the Czechs, Slovaks and South Slavs.

The Czechoslovak secession was the beginning of the disintegration of the Hapsburg Empire, even before it had formally surrendered, or its last emperor, Charles I, had abdicated. Soon, Hungary declared itself an independent republic under the leadership of the Hungarian National Council of Count Mihály Károlyi. The Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians formed Yugoslavia.

None of the new polities alleviated the crisis of the national state in central Europe in the postwar period. Each had ethnic minorities who faced language discrimination and other oppressive measures from the new ethnic majorities—Hungarians, Germans and Ukrainians in Czechoslovakia, for example. In absence of working-class revolutions, the new array of small bourgeois states continued to be manipulated by imperialist great-power interests, with disastrous consequences in the Second World War.



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