

This week in history: December 9-15

9 December 2019

25 years ago: Yeltsin launches First Chechen War

On December 11, 1994, Russian President Boris Yeltsin ordered troops into Chechnya, a province in the Caucasus that had been part of the Russian Federation but had declared independence in 1991 amidst the breakup of the Soviet Union. By the end of the evening, Russian forces had advanced against several thousand Chechen defenders to the outskirts of the capital, Grozny, population 400,000. Thousands of civilians were killed in the initial week-long artillery and bombing campaign.

The invasion sparked the First Chechen War, which lasted nearly two years. Today, various figures estimate total civilian deaths between 30,000 and 100,000, with another 200,000 injured. Over 500,000 civilians were displaced and turned into refugees after the decimation of cities and villages across the republic. Several thousand Russian soldiers were also killed in the fighting.

The western media portrayed the Chechens as freedom fighters, but there was no progressive side in the conflict. At the time of the restoration of capitalism in the Soviet Union just three years prior, the Chechen regime of Jokar Dudaev—a former Soviet general—sought to challenge the monopoly of former Stalinist bureaucrats in the sell-off of assets of the nationalized economy to imperialism. Once in power, Dudaev stoked a civil war pitting Chechnya's majority Muslim population against its minorities, including Russians, Georgians, Armenians, and Jews.

Yeltsin justified the slaughter in Chechnya by declaring the nationalist clique which had assumed power in the North Caucasus a group of “bandits” and “gangsters.” However, he could make no popular appeal to people of the Caucasus, and the stated aim of preserving Russian unity by suppressing Chechen secessionism had no progressive element. The war was the basis for the rise to power of Vladimir Putin, who represented a faction of the Russian ruling class that promoted Russian nationalism and favored maintaining a credible military presence for purposes of negotiating with the Western imperialists.

The bloodbath in Chechnya exposed the hypocrisy of the imperialist attitude toward national minorities. What concerned the capitalist powers was not the abstract right to national self-determination, or concern over minority Muslim groups, but concrete strategic interests: the control of natural resources, markets and sources of cheap labor. The events laid bare the class nature of the Yeltsin government as a reactionary capitalist state erected on the ruins of the former USSR. While promoted by Western governments as a champion of “democracy,” Yeltsin headed a regime which repeatedly resorted to armed violence against its political opponents and civilian populations.

50 years ago: New fighting between Israel and Arab neighbors

Starting on December 9, 1969 a series of skirmishes on the borders of Israel's occupied territories took place. The fighting continued the prolonged “War of Attrition” that had been fought mostly between Israel and Egypt for control over the economically important Suez Canal zone. The conflict began after the 1967 Six-Day War, when Israel massively expanded its territory by invading and occupying the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights region of Syria, as well as the West Bank region, seized from Jordan.

Egyptian forces defeated Israel in an aerial fight, shooting down several Israeli fighters with the assistance of recently arrived military equipment from the Soviet Union, including an advanced radar system for tracking and detecting aircraft. On Israel's northern border fighting also broke out after Syrian tanks fired on Israeli bulldozers in the occupied Golan Heights area. Israel was attempting to build a road along the border designed to buttress their control of the occupied territory.

Just before leaving on a trip to the United Kingdom to seek an increase in advanced military technology, the Israeli defense minister Moshe Dayan told the press that “from now on we have a score to settle with Syria.” Over the next two days Israel responded to the attacks on the bulldozers by launching artillery attacks into Syria. Israel also sent fighter jets into Syria and engaged in a dogfight with the Syria Air Force near Damascus. The US-supplied F-4s used by the Israeli military shot down three Soviet-made MIG fighter planes used by the Syrians.

Such skirmishes continued along the border until the Yom Kippur War in 1973 when Syrian forces failed in an attempt to recapture the territory by launching a large military offensive. While the Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights was declared to be illegal by the United Nations, and the territory is officially recognized as part of Syria, much of the region remains under Israeli control.

In March of 2019, the Trump administration broke with international law and announced that it would officially recognize Israeli rule over the Golan Heights.

75 years ago: Battle of Mindoro in the Philippines

On December 13, 1944, the US military launched an amphibious invasion of Mindoro, the seventh-largest island in the Philippines

and a crucial launching base for further incursions into the country's north. The action took place amid heavy fighting between US army, navy and air force divisions, and the Japanese troops who occupied the Philippines. The fighting included the use of kamikaze attacks by the Japanese, massive bombing campaigns by the Americans, and what would become the largest naval battle to that point in history.

The US had begun an invasion of the Philippines in October, amid a crisis of Japanese and Axis forces around the world. The aim was to retake Washington's first Asian colony, which it had surrendered to Japan in 1942, and to secure control of strategically crucial shipping lanes that would allow it to disrupt Japanese operations throughout the Asia-Pacific.

In the days preceding the offensive on Mindoro, the US struck a number of blows against Japanese forces throughout the Philippines, with the destroyer *Yezuki* sunk northeast of Cebu by American aircraft and the destroyer *Uzuki* torpedoed and sunk in Ormoc Bay by US motor torpedo boats.

This followed a bombing campaign by the US Air Force in Mindoro early December aimed at taking out Japanese planes that could be used in kamikaze operations. This operation destroyed as many as 700 light planes. However, on December 13, kamikazes hit the naval force tasked with bringing a landing party to Mindoro, killing 130 sailors aboard the USS *Nashville*.

On December 15, the landing, involving a naval armada with six battleships and a host of supporting ships, began. They were aided by a parachute division. The force rapidly overwhelmed the estimated 1,000 Japanese troops who remained in Mindoro. Some 200 were killed, with only a handful captured. Those who survived escaped into the dense Filipino jungle where they remained until the end of the war. Mindoro would serve as a base for US troops to press ahead into Luzon.

100 years ago: Seventh Congress of Soviets held in Petrograd

On December 9, 1919, the Seventh All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers, Peasants, Red Army and Working Cossack Deputies closed in Petrograd after four days of sessions. The Soviets, or Councils, were the highest legislative body of the young Soviet Republic that had been established by the October 1917 revolution.

The Congress was comprised of 1,366 delegates from across Russia, most of them members of the Communist Party. On its agenda was a political report by the All-Russia Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars, elections to the executive committee, and discussion of the several crises confronting the workers' government, including the advance and ebb of the world revolution, and food and fuel shortages within Soviet Russia.

This was the first congress held after the Red Army and the workers of Petrograd, the capital of the revolution, had beaten back the counterrevolutionary White Guard armies of General Yudenich, which had threatened the city in October and

November. For over a year, the Soviet republic had been engaged in a brutal civil war on six fronts against bourgeois armies supplied with weapons and other aid by British, French and American imperialism. These powers had also sent their own troops to crush the first workers state along with the Japanese and several smaller countries.

Famine and disease had swept the country and whole communities were destroyed, often in anti-Semitic pogroms conducted by the counterrevolutionary forces. Through a combination of the politically conscious motivation of millions of workers and poor peasants, and political leadership by the Bolshevik Party, above all by the Commissar of War, Leon Trotsky, a workers and peasants Red Army had been built up to repel the counterrevolution. Trotsky gave a major report to the Congress on the foreign policy of Soviet Russia over the preceding year.

The resistance of the Soviet Republic had inspired workers around the world and the planet was rife with strikes, general strikes and workers uprisings. Above all, it was the defense of Red Petrograd in the autumn of 1919 that showed to the world the enormous social power and determination of the working class to defend what it had conquered.

As the Bolshevik leader and Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, V. I. Lenin, noted in his opening report to the congress: "But when a critical hour struck, Petrograd showed itself to be remarkable, as Comrade Zinoviev justly said, it proved to be a town that seemed able to give birth to new forces. Workers, who had no experience in politics or government, who were considered below the average in political consciousness, drew themselves up to their full stature, provided the huge forces for propaganda, agitation, organization, and performed new miracles. We still have a great deal of this source of new miracles."



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