

This week in history: August 3-9

3 August 2020

25 years ago: Croatia launches ethnic cleansing of Serbs

On August 4, 1995, the Croatian Army launched Operation Storm, one of the last major campaigns of the Bosnian War. It was orchestrated by Croatian President Franjo Tudjman against the Serbian-inhabited Krajina region, which in 1991, during the initial breakup of Yugoslavia, had declared its independence from Croatia.

Beginning with a predawn bombardment of civilian population centers, the attack turned virtually every inhabitant of Krajina—as many as a quarter-million civilians—into homeless refugees fleeing for their lives.

United Nations observers described Serb villages in Krajina as a “living hell,” with 80 percent of homes torched and looted. Mass graves for the victims of the attack were discovered, and many trying to reach safety were shelled by artillery or stoned and beaten by mobs of Croat nationalists.

From the outset of the civil wars provoked by the dismemberment of the former Yugoslavia, Washington had portrayed its own involvement as a disinterested defense of moral principles. Claiming to base its policy on “human rights” and the “right to self-determination,” it declared its opposition to ethnic cleansing and military aggression.

Washington welcomed Croatia’s success. The US and Germany had been engaging in a huge buildup of the Croatian military, funneling an estimated \$1.3 billion worth of weaponry into the country over the previous two years—much of it taken from the stockpiles of the former German Democratic Republic and the ex-Soviet military forces withdrawn from eastern Germany. Other arms were brought in from CIA-connected traffickers.

For three years the US government, backed by a ceaseless propaganda barrage from the media, claimed the defense of Bosnian sovereignty to be the main US objective in the former Yugoslavia. Washington had repeatedly torpedoed UN and European peace proposals on the grounds that they would “reward Serb aggression.”

Bosnia served as a pawn in the drive by German and US imperialism to create a new relationship of forces in the region which would prove more favorable to their own economic and geopolitical objectives. Germany was seeking to re-forge its sphere of influence in Slovenia and Croatia, while solidifying its economic grip over the whole of Eastern Europe. Washington’s interests were bound up with maintaining military hegemony in Europe while simultaneously strengthening its strategic position in the Adriatic.

In April 2011, the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia in The Hague found two Croatian military leaders, General Ante Gotovina and Assistant Interior Minister Mladen Markac, guilty of war crimes for their role in Operation Storm. A third defendant was acquitted.

50 years ago: Egypt-Israel “War of Attrition” ends

On August 7, 1970, the governments of Egypt and Israel accepted a ceasefire agreement that brought an end to the War of Attrition stalemate along the Suez Canal. The war had begun following the 1967 Six-Day War after Israel invaded and occupied several significant Arab territories, including the Sinai Peninsula, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights.

The ceasefire plan was proposed by the US Secretary of State William P. Rogers and supported by the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. The agreement was strictly a ceasefire and did not offer a settlement of control over the Sinai Peninsula or any other territory.

The agreement was a victory for Israel, which was able to hold onto the occupied territories. Egypt’s president Gamal Abdel Nasser initially opposed the agreement because it might legitimize Israel’s claim to the invaded land. However, in a recent diplomatic visit to Moscow, Nasser was pressured by the Stalinists into accepting the agreement, a move that was met with great hostility from the Arab masses. Large demonstrations against the ceasefire were held in Baghdad and Amman. In Jordan workers took a general strike action against the ceasefire. The opposition of workers to the ceasefire forced some leaders of other Arab countries to make empty remarks criticizing Nasser. But they took no serious political action and fell in line behind Nasser and Moscow.

The Stalinist strategy was to undermine the Palestinian and other Arab guerilla movements who were also carrying out operations against the Israeli occupation. Regarding the agreement *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party, wrote, “In taking this peaceful initiative, extremist sentiments in the Arab world had to be overcome... Great political courage was needed to launch criticism of these sentiments as President Nasser has done.”

What the Stalinists called “political courage” was the betrayal of the struggle by Arabs against the US-backed Israeli invasion. Nasser’s capitulation was an example of the bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalist politics. Nasser, often portrayed as the Middle East’s bulwark against imperialism, had become dependent on Soviet support and was powerless to resist the demands of Stalinism to crush any independent revolutionary movements in return for a temporary pause of the imperialist advance.

Responding to the announcement of the ceasefire, the American Trotskyist newspaper *The Bulletin* wrote, “There are only two roads for the Middle East. The workers and peasants either face betrayal through the United Nations and the intrigues of the Stalinists and bourgeois nationalists, or the struggle against Zionism and imperialism will be taken forward through a struggle for a socialist Middle East in which the rights of all minorities will be guaranteed.”

75 years ago: US drops atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

On August 6 and 9, 1945, the United States military detonated nuclear bombs over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively, in the first wartime use of atomic weapons. The war crime resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands.

Plans for the development of nuclear weapons had been underway for several years, centering on the activities of the US government's Manhattan Project. The deployment of the devices was preceded by the massive use of conventional bombs which were dropped on some 67 Japanese cities, largely after mid-1944. These aerial raids involved incendiary devices, dropped by the thousands of tons, which triggered massive firestorms in Japan's densely populated cities. The firebombing of Tokyo in May 1945 had claimed up to 100,000 lives.

By early 1945, it had become apparent that the Japanese regime had lost any ability to militarily repulse the Allies and that World War II in the Pacific was coming to a conclusion. The Japanese government increasingly lost its legitimacy, and amid fears of military catastrophe and domestic social opposition, it began discussing the terms of surrender in April and May 1945. The Soviet Union was about to join the war against Japan in Manchuria. Despite this, the US onslaught intensified.

The August 6 attack on Hiroshima was carried out by the 393rd Bombardment Squadron of the US Air Force. In the morning, the Enola Gay, a B-29 bomber, set out from the island of Tinian, carrying a single nuclear device. The "little boy" bomb, containing some 64 kilograms of uranium-235, detonated around 1,900 feet above the city. Residents described a flash of light followed by a massive booming sound. Some 80,000 inhabitants were killed by the explosion and its immediate aftermath, including huge firestorms, while another 70,000 or more suffered injuries.

The attack shocked the world's population, but US President Harry Truman hailed "providence" for ensuring the US had first developed nuclear weapons. He warned of a further "rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth."

Three days later, a second nuclear device was detonated over Nagasaki. There were massive losses throughout the city, especially among its many industrial workers. Because of the scale of the destruction, the number of deaths is unknown, with estimates ranging from 39,000 to 80,000. Another 60,000 were injured. Thousands more would die from the effects of radiation over the following years.

Within days, on August 14, the Japanese imperial government would issue a capitulation notice, leading to its surrender.

The nuclear bombings were intended as a signal to US rivals, and the world's population, that it would brook no challenge to its hegemony at the conclusion of the war. The attack was particularly intended as a threat to the Soviet Union, and a demonstration of what destruction the US military could inflict if the Stalinist regime obstructed its plans to construct a post-war order that advanced the limitless interests of American imperialism.

100 years: Soviets reject Allied truce terms with Poland

On August 8, 1920, the Soviet republic refused to grant a 10-day truce to the nationalist Polish government in fighting outside Warsaw,

on the conditions proposed by British and French imperialism.

The Allied powers had been thrown into a crisis by the drive of the Red Army into Poland in response to the Polish invasion of Soviet territory in April. A conference of French and British premiers "assumed a very warlike" aspect, according to the Associated Press. The Soviet Red Army was a mere 36 miles from Warsaw, and the imperialist powers began to discuss resumption of a blockade of the Soviet Republic. They received assurances from American diplomats that the United States would support this action.

The French also proposed sending troops into Poland and sought to mobilize Romanian and Czechoslovak forces for this purpose. Germany was warned that any effort to cooperate with the Bolsheviks would result in the occupation by Allied troops of the Ruhr Valley and other parts of Germany.

The Red Army had begun to bombard fortifications on the outskirts of Warsaw and to make appeals to the Polish working class and peasantry to turn against the Pilsudski government.

Over the next few days, the imperialist powers were forced to back down from intervention in the Polish-Soviet war by massive opposition from the working class. On August 9, the British Trades Union Congress issued a statement that "the war being engineered against Soviet Russia on the issue of Poland ... would be an intolerable crime against humanity" and warned the government that "the whole industrial power of the organized workers will be used to defeat this war."

Anti-war meetings were held by workers in London—where former soldiers also participated—Liverpool, Glasgow and Manchester and calls were made for a general strike in the event of British participation in war against the Soviet Republic.



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