This week in history: August 9-15

8 August 2021

25 years ago: Yeltsin begins second term in Russia after Chechen military debacle

On August 9, 1996, Boris Yeltsin was inaugurated for his second term as Russian president. His win in the presidential runoff election the month before was widely viewed by the population as fraudulent. The inauguration took place in the midst of a stunning military defeat for Moscow's forces in the breakaway Caucasian republic of Chechnya.

A large force of Chechen fighters seized control of much of Grozny, the capital city, overrunning and killing hundreds of Russian soldiers and surrounding other units. The Russian press denounced Yeltsin and his cabinet for the slaughter of ill-trained and poorly equipped young conscript soldiers. The fighting was compared with the 1968 Tet offensive of the Vietnam War, which gave the lie to Washington's claims that it controlled South Vietnam.

The Chechen war was part of a battle for control over what was the largest undeveloped source of oil in the world. Chechnya occupied a key stretch of a planned pipeline for oil that the US and other oil conglomerates had struck deals to pump out of the Caspian region. Moscow engineered a coup in Azerbaijan, made military threats against Georgia, and exerted pressure on Kazakhstan to ensure its control over the flow of oil in the region. Oil companies which had struck deals with Moscow had a vested interest in a speedy resolution of the Chechen conflict. Meanwhile, Russian officials who had directly profited from these deals had no desire to share their payoffs with the leaders of a newly "independent" Chechnya.

There was also raging factional warfare within the Yeltsin regime itself. Yeltsin's national security chief Alexander Lebed, who was sent to Chechnya as the president's personal envoy, charged that he had been given the assignment because "somebody wants me to break my neck."

The right-wing former paratroop general was brought into Yeltsin's cabinet after winning 15 percent of the vote in the first round of presidential elections, running on a program of Russian nationalism and law-and-order. He repeatedly had proclaimed himself as Yeltsin's legitimate successor, denounced Interior Minister Anatoly Kulikov as "one of the main culprits for the tragedy in Chechnya," and demanded that Kulikov be immediately dismissed.

At the same time, the Russian regime was also confronting demands from workers for fulfillments of Yeltsin's election promises to pay wages that had been withheld for months. Coal miners threatened a nationwide strike unless they received payment in full. The International Monetary Fund and international banks were insisting on tight budget control.

50 years ago: British government suspends democratic rights in Northern Ireland

On August 9, 1971, the British government began a major military operation in Northern Ireland to round up and arrest hundreds of suspected members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In what was dubbed "Operation Demetrius," the British Army and the Northern Irish police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), arrested and imprisoned 342 people without trial. Waves of violence in the coming days would result in 24 people, mostly Irish civilians, being killed.

Operation Demetrius was planned at the highest levels of the British government with UK Prime Minister Eduard Heath meeting with Northern Ireland Prime Minister Brian Faulkner to discuss and approve the mass internment of Northern Irish Republicans. The internment efforts would rapidly expand with continuous police raids. None of those arrested was given a trial or any kind of due process of law.

While the crushing of the IRA was the official purpose of the internment, the police forces also arrested the leadership of the non-violent Catholic Civil Rights movement, from organizations like the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and People's Democracy. The raids were essentially the official approval for a campaign of state-backed terror against the Catholic population of Northern Ireland.

Those detained in the raids were tortured and interrogated by means of beatings, sleep deprivation, starvation, and other barbaric methods. The operation also encouraged and turned a blind eye to violence from the fascistic Ulster paramilitary groups who carried out terrorist attacks against Catholics. In the violence that came in the following weeks and months, over 7,000 people in Northern Ireland would be displaced from their homes.

A handful of the raids turned into mass shootings of civilians by the military. The bloodiest of these was the Ballymurphy massacres, August 9-11, where nine people were killed by the British Army. While the British solders claimed that they had been fired upon, witness reports and investigation into the killings found that all had been unarmed. Some were shot in the back and another while waving a white cloth attempting to surrender. The youngest killed was 19-year-old Francis Quinn, shot while attempting to give aid to a wounded man.

© World Socialist Web Site

The results produced a state of rebellion in many of the Catholic districts in Northern Ireland. Protests against the internment would be attacked by Ulster fascist groups and turn into violent Catholic-Protestant clashes, with the police looking on or participating in the repressions.

Particularly in the Bogside area of the city of Derry (Londonderry), barricades were erected, and armed defenses organized to keep military and police forces out of Catholic neighborhoods. The policy of internment would last until December 1975, with the total number put into camps estimated at nearly 2,000.

75 years ago: South African mine workers strike brutally suppressed

This week in August 1946, South Africa's authorities launched a brutal campaign of repression against a heroic strike of super-exploited black mine workers.

On August 4, over a thousand of the mine workers gathered in Johannesburg's Newtown Market Square to decide a plan of action to take forward their fight for improved wages and conditions, amid the intransigence of the mine bosses and South Africa's authorities. They issued an ultimatum for a ten shilling per day wage, and greater workplace rights.

The terrible conditions in the mines, in which fatalities were common, and a massive racial pay gap, had been the source of discontent for years. In 1941, the South African Mine Workers Union was established. Despite various petitions to government and protests, the pay disparity remained, with white miners earning 848 rand per year, while their black counterparts earned just 78 rand annually.

When the August 4 ultimatum was rejected a week later, 60,000 workers walked off the job at the mines in the Witwatersrand field, while thousands more joined the strike at other sites. The next day, a peaceful procession of miners from East Rand to Johannesburg was set upon by police, who fired live ammunition, killing an untold number of strikers.

Over the following days, trade union meetings opposing the state attack were dispersed under the Riotous Assemblies Act. In one incident, a pregnant female worker, marching in solidarity with those who had been shot, was bayoneted by a police officer. At some mines, workers were forced down the shaft at gun point, only to begin sitdown strikes. They were violently dragged out and beaten.

The stoppage would end on August 16, without any increase in wages or improvement in conditions. According to the understated official figures, over 1,200 miners were wounded and nine were killed. Hundreds more would be arrested and hauled before kangaroo courts at the conclusion of the struggle.

100 years ago: Soviets release American prisoners in exchange for aid

On August 10, 1921, the Soviet Republic released six American prisoners into Revel, Estonia. The prisoners were a mixture of civilians accused of various crimes against the Soviet government, including one who had been sentenced to death, and members of the American military such as a private who had been captured near Vladivostok.

On the same day, Soviet diplomat Maxim Litvinov met with Walter Brown, the European director of the American Relief Administration (ARA) in Riga, Latvia, to discuss the release of the prisoners and prepare for future negotiations of shipments of food and medicine to Soviet Russia.

The Americans had already prepared a shipment of 8,000 tons of food but had withheld its release until Herbert Hoover, the Secretary of Commerce, in Washington gave assent. The Americans were concerned that Litvinov, who was Deputy Commissar of Foreign Affairs, came from the highest levels of the Soviet government to assure that concessions could be given in exchange for aid.

Mass starvation in the Soviet Republic in 1921-22, which killed over five million people, was the product of over four years of imperialist-sponsored civil war, which included direct military intervention by the British, French, Americans and Japanese, in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. The civil war itself, in which a critical factor had been imperialist support in money and arms to the counterrevolutionary armies, had destroyed much of agriculture, industry, and distribution infrastructure, especially the railways.

Hoover insisted that the ARA have complete autonomy in Soviet Russia and that Russia turn over $18 million in gold reserves. The ARA established 21,000 kitchens throughout Russia and fed millions of children. American medical relief also reached 16,000 Soviet hospitals.

The prisoners released by the Soviets returned with lurid reports of the hardships in the Soviet territories and the *New York Times* used the occasion to deluge the American public with anti-communist propaganda, though it conceded that there was not now any political or military force in Russia that could overthrow the Soviet government.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site