

This week in history: September 13-19

12 September 2021

25 years ago: Sham elections held in Bosnia

On September 14, 1996, American-controlled elections were held in Bosnia. The vote was a cynical exercise aimed at providing the illusion of progress towards peace and democracy, while the reality was one of deepening ethnic polarization, which set the stage for a new round of civil war in the former Yugoslav province.

In this supposedly “free” election, no candidates were allowed to publicly oppose the Dayton Accords, which had sanctioned the partition of Bosnia along ethnic lines. US officials who supervised the elections under the Dayton terms made little attempt to disguise their determination to have an election that would be labeled a success for the Clinton administration’s foreign policy in the run-up to the American presidential elections.

Half of Bosnia’s population became refugees as a result of the war, and only a handful crossed the ceasefire lines patrolled by NATO troops to vote. Just 20,000 out of an estimated 300,000 displaced Muslims and 4,000 out of 250,000 displaced Serbs took buses to vote under NATO escort. One of the conditions of the vote was that those who came to their former homes to cast ballots had to reboard the buses and return immediately to their new places of residence—in many cases, refugee camps.

The de facto partition of the country into Serb, Muslim and Croat-dominated entities was accentuated by the election campaign. Candidates opposed to the three major nationalist parties—the Serb Democratic Party, the Croatian Democratic Union, and the Muslim-based Party of Democratic Action—were subjected to intimidation, censorship, loss of jobs and physical violence.

On the eve of the vote, the Clinton administration dispatched an envoy to the region to compel the rival ethnic bosses to comply with US dictates. Richard Holbrooke, the diplomatic thug who retired after the Dayton Accords for a high-paying stint as an investment banker, returned to the Balkans on special assignment for the State Department.

The rigged and undemocratic vote was more than just a trophy for Clinton’s reelection campaign. It also demonstrated the true attitude of imperialism toward democracy and the rights of small nations.

50 years ago: Chinese leader Lin Biao killed in plane crash

On September 13, 1971, Lin Biao, the first vice chairman of the Chinese Communist Party and second in command only to Mao Zedong, was killed in a plane crash over Mongolia. Lin was in the process of being purged from the CCP by Mao and was apparently attempting to flee China before the crash.

A hardline Stalinist, Lin had been a leading general during the Chinese revolution and had played a key role in the military defeat of the Kuomintang by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. Once the Communist Party had come to power, Lin had been one of Mao’s most ardent supporters. In 1966, at the outset of the “Cultural Revolution” Lin was promoted to be the sole vice chairman of the CCP when other long-term members were being purged. Three years later, Mao officially named Lin as his successor and had Lin’s position enshrined in the party’s constitution.

The details surrounding his death have never been fully explained. The official narrative provided by the Chinese government was that Lin had launched a coup against Mao and ordered several assassination attempts, which all failed. Then, after realizing the coup had not come to fruition, Lin attempted to flee to the Soviet Union but crashed when his plane ran out of fuel.

There is every reason to distrust the official narrative. While some differences emerged between Mao and Lin in the year leading up to his death, it is unlikely that Lin, who had been a longtime supporter of Mao personally and was one of the most experienced Chinese military commanders, would make such a hasty and ill-conceived attempt at a power grab.

Mao’s claim of a coup attempt was to provide cover for the complete purge of Lin and his supporters from the CCP. Despite promoting Lin to second in command to ensure he had strong supporters in high-ranking positions, Mao had become increasingly suspicious of conspiracies to remove him from power, real or imagined. Further, Lin’s death and the supposed coup plot were used as the pretext for a major purge within the Chinese military. All those known to be close to Lin or sympathetic to him were removed from their positions, amounting to the majority of the military high command. Within one month of the plane crash, over 1,000 Chinese military officers were removed from their positions and 93 arrested.

75 years ago: Underground archive of the Warsaw Ghetto unearthed

On September 18, 1946, a massive tranche of documents detailing the Nazi persecution of the Jewish population in the Warsaw Ghetto was discovered in 10 metal boxes beneath the ruins of a school in the Polish capital.

While suffering water damage, most of the documents were ultimately restored. Together with a second section of the archive, discovered in 1950, the material spans some 30,000 pages in 6,000 separate documents, providing an unparalleled record of the fascist annihilation of Polish Jewry. A third section, believed to have been deposited somewhere in the city, has never been discovered.

The archive was compiled and maintained from the beginning of World War II, in September 1939, until the liquidation of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943. It was the work of Oyneg Shabes, a collective of Jewish intellectuals, teachers, rabbis and historians. The group was established and coordinated by Jewish-Polish historian Emanuel Ringelblum, who was also an avowed socialist and internationalist.

The archives documented conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto, the open-air prison in which the city's Jewish population was confined beginning in late 1940. Oyneg Shabes gathered diaries and accounts of the Nazi persecution in Warsaw, as well as throughout Poland and Europe. They carried out thousands of interviews with the residents of the Ghetto and even conducted several surveys on the composition of the population. The research and archival work was carried out clandestinely, with members of the Oyneg Shabes constantly threatened by the Gestapo and faced the prospect of death if they were caught.

Up to July 1941, some 100,000 people in the Ghetto had died of hunger. As part of its genocidal "final solution," the Nazi regime began the physical liquidation of the Ghetto in July 1942, with mass deportations of its residents to the gas chambers in Treblinka. In the space of a month, an estimated 265,000 Warsaw Jews were murdered.

As it became clear that the Nazis were preparing to destroy the Ghetto entirely, Oyneg Shabes buried the archives in April 1943. The same month, many of its members were involved in the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, a heroic struggle against the Nazis, that inspired the anti-fascist struggle throughout Europe. Ringelblum was murdered by the Nazis in March 1944.

100 years ago: Japan proposes modifications to its occupation of China's Shandong province

On September 15, 1921, a diplomatic note by the Japanese government was made public in which Japan suggested limitations to its occupation of the Shandong Peninsula in the northeast of China. Although the Japanese proposed returning nominal control of the region to the Chinese, Japan would maintain its economic domination of the region.

Japan had seized the key German-controlled area of Shandong, the Jiaozhou (Kiautschou) Bay Leased Territory, which included the city of Qingdao (Tsingtao), at the outset of World War I in 1914, and strong-armed China into accepting its continued occupation in secret negotiations in 1915.

The League of Nations had awarded the area to Japan in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles in the aftermath of the war, sparking mass opposition in China to the settlement, including the eruption of the May Fourth Movement, the mass student radicalization that contributed powerfully to the founding the Communist Party of China in 1921.

At the American-sponsored Naval Conference of 1922 in Washington D.C., the United States brokered a deal by which Japan returned the peninsula to Chinese control, specifically to the Zhili clique of warlords based in Beijing. The Zhili clique was backed by the Japanese government. The Japanese kept control of some of the main railways in the province and maintained a considerable presence of Japanese nationals.

In 1928 the troops of Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek would come into conflict with Japanese troops in the Shandong provincial capital, Jinan. The Japanese military would invade the province again in 1937 and hold it with great brutality until 1945.



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