This week in history: September 12-18

11 September 2022

25 years ago: Local elections along communal lines in Bosnia

On September 14, 1997, municipal elections were held in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and declared a "success" by "international organizers." It was the second election held following the implementation of the Dayton Accords, signed in 1995.

Approximately 2.5 million people were registered to vote for the 136 municipal and district councils at stake, with about 20,000 candidates competing for 4,830 seats. Around 400,000 people cast absentee ballots and a further 35,000 were, for the second year in a row, supposed to go back to their home areas to vote, in spite of their status as displaced refugees.

US troops deployed as part of the NATO-led peacekeeping force had taken an increasingly aggressive posture in the weeks leading up to the election, directly intervening in the ongoing political conflicts between rival Serb factions. The night before the elections, US warplanes were deployed in the area to back up a threat to jam or even bomb radio and television stations supporting the faction led by former Bosnian Serb President Radovan Karadzic.

The reality was that the US-led intervention in Bosnia only solidified the partition of the former Yugoslav republic between Muslim, Croat, and Serb statelets, each of which were run by dictatorial ethnic nationalist regimes. The US was increasing its military pressure to assure the subservience of these entities to Washington and thereby assert its hegemony over a strategically important area of the globe. The elections were crucial to creating an illusion of peace and democracy.

Revelations which appeared in the Croatian press earlier in September underscored Washington's complicity with some of the worst offenders of the region. A former Croatian militiaman chillingly recounted his activities in officially sponsored death squads which operated during the Croat separatist war in 1991, killing, torturing, and raping ethnic Serbs. He implicated top officials in the regime of President Franjo Tudjman, Washington's principal ally in the region. The US provided direct military support for an even larger Croatian campaign of "ethnic cleaning," which drove out hundreds of thousands of Serbs in 1995.

50 years ago: "Cod War" fisheries conflict begins between Britain and Iceland

On September 12, 1972, the Icelandic Coast Guard ordered its ships to begin cutting the nets of British fishing boats in Iceland's newly claimed territorial waters. The move would provoke a response from Britain, which would eventually send warships into the disputed waters.

The conflict was the second of three phases of the so-called "Cod Wars." The first, lasting from 1958-1961, ended with an agreement that Iceland would have exclusive rights to fishing 22 kilometers off its shore. At the start of September 1972, Iceland extended its claim on exclusive fishing grounds to 93 kilometers, encompassing waters that contained the largest quantities of fish.

The British government refused to recognize Iceland's new claim. While British fishermen had often sailed to the abundant fishing waters near Iceland for catches, going as far back as the 14th century, in more recent years over-fishing had depleted fish populations closer to British shores and forced British ships to rely on the Icelandic waters.

Fearing that the increased competition from the British boats would harm Icelandic fishermen and deplete the fisheries, the Icelandic government issued its new claim. Initially, the Icelandic Coast Guard only escorted British boats out of their waters, usually allowing them to keep the supplies of fish already caught. But some began to refuse to obey Iceland's orders, and a few attempted to defend their claim on the waters by ramming their boats into the Icelandic Coast Guard ships. The British ramming attacks prompted the Icelandic Coast Guard to use net cutting devices to sever the British fishing nets from their ships.

The situation continued to deteriorate. In May, the Icelandic Cost Guard began firing non-explosive cannon shots at the British fishing boats. This prompted British warships to enter the waters. In June through August 1973 there were several collisions between Royal Navy Ships and the Icelandic Coast Guard. On one of these occasions an Icelandic engineer was killed.

A year after the conflict began, in September 1973, Iceland threatened to withdraw from NATO if British ships did not respect their claim to exclusive fishing rights. Iceland's withdrawal from NATO might have forced the removal of the US military presence on the island, a significant strategic point in the Cold War with the Soviet Union.

Under this pressure the British government eventually relented and agreed to respect the territorial claim in return for permission to catch 150,000 tons of fish per year in Icelandic waters. The decision would devastate thousands of British small fishermen unable to continue their operations. In 1975, a third phase of the Cod War would begin when Iceland further expanded its territorial waters claim.

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75 years ago: Typhoon Kathleen kills thousands in Japan

On September 15, 1947, Typhoon Kathleen made landfall in Japan, touching off several days of devastation that would claim thousands of lives. The storm is considered one of the worst to have hit the island nation, killing more and causing greater damage than almost any other precipitation-based natural disaster.

Kathleen made contact with Japan in the Kanagawa Precinct, near the southern outskirts of Tokyo. At the time, winds from the storm were estimated at around 185 kilometers per hour. Tokyo's often flimsy wooden structures were ill-prepared, with estimates that more than 9,200 structures were razed by the initial barrage, including dwellings, workplaces and official buildings in and around the capital city.

Even more devastating was the resulting flooding from massive rainfall caused by the storm, which had a central barometric pressure of 28.34 inches at landfall. The unprecedented deluge affected all water systems in northern Kanto (the greater Tokyo region), with catastrophic results.

Several dikes were overwhelmed, the biggest of them at the Tone River, only seven kilometers from Tokyo. That failure led to the inundation of a densely populated area just three kilometers wide but home to some 300,000 people. The breaches also caused flooding within metropolitan Tokyo itself. In the Tohoku region, the Kitakami River flooded, leading to substantial damage in Ichinoseki City's Iwate Prefecture.

The total area that was submerged has been estimated at 440 square kilometers, with some 600,000 people affected and as many as 150,000 buildings either damaged or destroyed entirely. In urban areas that flooded, narrow streets accentuated the water build-up, trapping many. The economic damage was estimated at more than $US 800 million.

The number of victims remains unknown. At least 1,100 people were confirmed dead. But contemporaneous reports indicated that over 800 more were missing. According to some estimates, as many as 4,000 people may have perished.

At the time, Japan remained under effective US military occupation and rule, following its 1945 defeat in World War II. The US authorities presided over an authoritarian regime, which suppressed political opposition and collaborated with sections of the Japanese state and military apparatus implicated in its militarist crimes during the war. In the year preceding the flood, there had nevertheless been repeated mass demonstrations over food shortages and high prices, overseen by the American authorities.

The impact of the flooding was undoubtedly exacerbated by the widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure in the final US blitzkrieg of Japan, which had included the firebombing of Tokyo and the dropping of atomic weapons on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

100 years ago: Tens of thousands die in fire in Turkish city of Smyrna

On September 13, 1922, a massive fire began in the western Anatolian city of Smyrna that would kill between 10,000 and 100,000 civilians, most of them ethnic Greeks and Armenians. Turkish troops had entered the city on September 9 as Greek forces withdrew. The occupation of the city effectively ended the war of national liberation against the British, French, Italians, and Greeks, waged by the Turkish nationalist movement led by Kamal Ataturk.

Thousands of refugees had swelled the population of this historically multiethnic city, many of them on the docks awaiting evacuation by British and French forces. The imperialist navies had at least 21 ships in Smyrna's harbor, including the British battleships HMS Iron Duke and King George V as well as the American destroyers USS Litchfield, Simpson, and Lawrence.

Although the Turkish forces initially observed discipline, Turks began a series of pogroms against Armenians, looting shops and raping women. A Greek cleric was murdered in full view of a group of French soldiers who were prevented from intervening by their commanding officers.

Turkish soldiers, according to eyewitnesses, began to set fire to Greek and Armenian property and soon the whole Greek and Armenian quarters of the city were ablaze. Thousands began a desperate stampede toward the docks as the fire spread throughout the city. Thousands died from smoke inhalation and the intense heat. Many dived into the sea in attempts to reach the ships.

Military bands played on Allied ships to stifle the screams of those who drowned. Only a Japanese freighter came to their aid, dumping its cargo to take on refugees.

By September 22, large parts of Smyrna were destroyed and its Greek and Armenian populations were either killed or forced out.

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