

This week in history: October 3-9

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

2 October 2022

25 years ago: Congo rebuffs massacre probe

On October 6, 1997, a team of United Nations investigators sent to probe the reported massacre of civilians in the eastern Congo (formerly Zaire) returned to New York after being expelled by the government of President Laurent Kabila. It was the second such team which the UN had been forced to recall.

Kabila had replaced former dictator Mobutu Sese Seko the previous May following a military campaign backed by the Tutsi-led government of Rwanda. In the course of this operation, the Rwandan military unleashed a campaign of ethnic violence against Rwandan Hutus who had taken refuge inside the Congo. Hutu militia used the Congo as a base to attack Rwanda. According to some estimates, tens of thousands of civilians were slaughtered in the Rwandan incursion.

Until 1997, Kabila had enjoyed at least the tacit support of the US Clinton administration in defying United Nations investigators. Just months prior, in August 1997, a leaked Pentagon report exposed the fact that Washington was directly involved with, and implicated in, the bloody events of 1997, as it had sent US Army trainers to prepare the Rwandan forces who participated in the Congo campaign.

The US had announced the dispatch of Andrew Young, US representative to the UN from 1977-1979 during the Carter administration, as a special envoy with the aim of patching together another agreement between the UN and Kabila. UN officials told Kabila that a lack of coordination with international organizations would mean reduced assistance. The UN had been attempting to investigate reports of violence for over four months. But, being confined to Kinshasa, it had been unable to carry out its work.

Kabila's assumption of power and the ouster of Mobutu were hailed by a number of middle-class radical and Stalinist tendencies as a triumph of "armed struggle" and even as a popular revolution. In reality, Kabila was little more than a stooge for American imperialism.

50 years ago: Henry Kissinger holds secret talks with North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho

On October 8, 1972 Henry Kissinger, US national security advisor and close confidant of President Richard Nixon, met in a private backroom discussion with Le Duc Tho, a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Vietnam and North Vietnam's representative to the Paris peace talks. The details of their meeting were kept secret for several weeks, but it was widely speculated that a ceasefire agreement was near.

The Paris talks began in 1968, but remained in deadlock. Initially, representatives from the North demanded that Nguyen Van Thieu, the US puppet President of South Vietnam, be removed from power and that representatives from the National Liberation Front, the communist guerrilla forces fighting in the South, be given a seat at the negotiations and their political wing legalized. The US insisted that the North recognize the southern government and come to an agreement that would keep the country divided.

By October 1972, major military advances by the North, coupled with the massive anti-war movement in the US, put immense pressure on Nixon to make progress towards an agreement before the American presidential election approaching that November. There was also pressure on the North Vietnam government to reach an agreement coming from both the Soviet Union and China, whose competing Stalinist leaders had just held separate, high profile meetings with Nixon. Fearing that Moscow and Beijing would abandon their support for the North in favor of reaching trade agreements with the US, the Vietnamese Communist Party moved closer to conceding the South.

In the backdoor discussions Kissinger offered the complete withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam in exchange for recognition of the South Vietnamese government. Tho agreed to Kissinger's offer, with the provision that the Communist Party be legalized in the South and allowed to participate in the government. South Vietnam President Thieu initially refused to agree to these terms, which would, in one form or another, lead to his ousting from power. He relented only after assurances from the US that it would continue with massive amounts of aid.

On January 27, 1973 the Paris Accords would be signed, with the final agreement close to the terms hashed out in the October 8 secret meeting, including the withdrawal of US forces. But when the American military finally abandoned its catastrophic war in Southeast Asia, the Saigon government rapidly collapsed, leading ultimately to complete northern victory and the unification of the country.

75 years ago: Palestinians stage general strike against planned partition

On October 3, 1947, the Arab population of Palestine staged a massive one-day general strike to oppose the plans, being spearheaded by the US, for the partition of their lands and the creation of separate Jewish and Arab states.

A contemporaneous newspaper account reported: “The strike paralyzed all Arab sections of transport, and Arab pickets prevented Arabs from riding in Jewish buses.” The British authorities, who still controlled Palestine, dispatched officers throughout the country, including in Jerusalem. “Barbed wire blocked the old walled city’s seven gates in case the Arabs tried to storm from the mosques to demonstrate in modern Jerusalem.” Strikes and protests were also held in Beirut, Lebanon, Damascus in Syria and other major hubs of the Arab world.

The turn to partition was bound up with the crisis of British imperialism, which had emerged from World War II in a greatly weakened position. It responded by relinquishing direct rule over some of its colonial possessions, while ensuring that they remained under imperialist domination.

In Palestine, the British mandate had been challenged since 1944 by a Zionist insurgency demanding the creation of a Jewish state. Irgun and other Zionist organisations had waged a far-ranging terrorist campaign, assassinating British officials, murdering hostages, and blowing up essential infrastructure. By February 1947, Britain announced its intention to relinquish its Palestinian mandate. The future of the territory was referred to a working committee of the newly established United Nations.

American imperialism, which was consolidating its position as the preeminent world power, viewed the Zionist movement as a useful means of achieving greater influence throughout the Middle East. Under US pressure, the UN duly recommended a partition of then Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. The Palestinian population was fearful of being forced out of its homes and of being reduced to the status of second-class citizens, having had decades of experience with brutal British colonial rule.

The various Zionist organizations hailed the UN proposal. Some of the most right-wing, however, expressed dissatisfaction that it fell short of their aspirations for the complete displacement of the Palestinians.

On October 5, 1922, the fascist leader Benito Mussolini delivered a speech in Milan in which he threatened a coup d’état. “In Italy there exists two governments, a fictitious one run by [Prime Minister Luigi] Facta and a real one run by the Fascists,” he declared. “The first of these must give way to the second.” Mussolini continued, “In December, elections must take place. If the government will not do this, the Fascists will do it.”

There was no secret about the fascists’ preparations. The party had set up a military organization that brought together hundreds of armed fascist bands across the country. The *New York Times*’ headlines blared, “Coups in Rome is Expected,” and speculated that Fascists would mass in the Italian capital after their national congress in Naples at the end of October. This is exactly what happened on October 28 during the infamous March on Rome.

On October 1, the Fascists had already staged a trial “March on Bozen,” the predominantly German speaking city now known as Bolzano, in the alpine South Tyrol region that Italian imperialism had acquired from Austria Hungary in the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. By the time of Mussolini’s speech, the new Fascist government in Bolzano had already begun suppressing ethnic German organizations, making Italian the official language, and closing German-owned businesses. The day after Mussolini’s speech, bands of Fascist squadristi seized the South Tyrolean city of Trento.

Fascism had emerged as a movement that sought to suppress the organized working class in the aftermath of the Biennio Rosso, the “two red years” of 1919-1920, when the Italian working class seized factories and other workplaces and was on the verge of power throughout the country—but did not take it because of the betrayal of the trade unions and the Socialist Party.

In those two years in Italy, Leon Trotsky would remark, “The dictatorship of the proletariat was an actual fact; all that was lacking was to organize it and draw from it all the necessary conclusions. The social democracy took fright and sprang back. After its bold and heroic exertions, the proletariat was left facing the void. The disruption of the revolutionary movement became the most important factor in the growth of fascism.”



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100 years ago: Fascists prepare to seize power in Italy