

This week in history: October 17-23

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.

16 October 2022

25 years ago: Castro regime canonizes Che Guevara

On October 17, 1997, 30 years after his death in a guerrilla fiasco, the remains of Ernesto “Che” Guevara were laid to rest in Santa Clara, Cuba. The long dead Argentine-Cuban guerrilla was interred together with six of his comrades, whose bodies were also discovered the previous summer in an unmarked grave in the Bolivian jungle.

The Castro regime turned the occasion into a major state event, with quasi-religious overtones. The boxes bearing the remains were presented for a public viewing in Havana’s Plaza de la Revolucion, and their interment in a specially constructed mausoleum in Santa Clara was accompanied by military parades, hymns and a speech by Cuban President Fidel Castro.

For its own purposes, the Castro regime joined in an international effort to mythologize Guevara, turning him into an icon which had little to do with the views he espoused in life. But the ceremonies in Cuba were noteworthy for the virtual absence of those forces from throughout Latin America who sought to emulate Guevara’s guerrilla war strategy.

The Cuban government had long ago renounced the conception of a continental-wide guerrilla war, which Guevara had insisted was the only means of liberating the continent from US imperialist oppression. This thesis, which insisted that the road to revolution lay through the formation of bands of guerrillas in the countryside, served to divert a generation of Latin American youth into suicidal adventures. By isolating some of the most militant and self-sacrificing elements of the younger generation from the masses, it likewise solidified the grip of Stalinist and bourgeois nationalist parties over the working class, thereby helping pave the way to the terrible defeats and military dictatorships of the 1970s.

Many of those who followed Guevara’s example ended up like him—hunted down, tortured and murdered by US-backed military forces. Others moved on in their political careers, abandoning “armed struggle” for parliamentary seats for its leaders or positions in capitalist business for selected members, like the Chilean MIR, Nicaragua’s Sandinistas and the FMLN in El Salvador.

The attempts at reviving the Guevara myth, not only by the Cuban government but also various middle class left groups and even commercial ventures seeking to market his well-known image, served to block a serious reexamination of his politics and their bitter legacy.

50 years ago: Military dictatorship established in South Korea

On October 17, 1972, South Korean President Park Chung-hee declared martial law and dissolved the National Assembly. In the weeks that followed, Park established a new government with all power concentrated in the executive.

Park first came to power in a 1961 coup launched to preempt a revolutionary movement of the working class and youth, known as the April Revolution. Park, who had served in the Imperial Japanese military during World War II and alongside the Americans during the Korean War, established a military junta that eventually gave way to the Third Republic in 1963. Presented to the public as a liberal democracy, the Third Republic maintained Park as the president through a series of narrow election victories. Just before the 1971 election, in which Park should have been unable to run due to constitutional term limits of the president, the National Assembly, stacked with his supporters, amended the constitution to allow his candidacy.

During Park’s “democratic” phase there was a massive push from the South Korean bourgeoisie to rapidly industrialize the country. Often referred to as an “economic miracle,” the breakneck industrial development was achieved only by the most brutal exploitation of the working class.

Facing major opposition to his regime and scraping by in the 1971 presidential election with just 53 percent of the vote, Park feared a new mass movement of workers would emerge that would threaten both his rule and the development of South Korean capitalism. Following the example of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, Park and the South Korean ruling class, supported by their American backers, deemed that dictatorship was the most prudent course for defending the profits of Korean and US

capitalism.

Once Park's new military dictatorship was established, no time was wasted in crushing strikes, protests and all political resistance. Park used the Korean Central Intelligence Agency to arrest, torture and execute any known political dissidents and established large forced-labor prison camps. Repression especially targeted communist and left-wing movements.

75 years ago: HUAC launches anti-communist witch-hunt in Hollywood

On October 20, 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), an investigative body of the House of Representatives, began hearings supposedly aimed at uncovering "communist influence" in Hollywood.

The launching of the witch-hunt followed a media campaign, initiated the previous year, in which the *Hollywood Reporter* named a series of prominent actors, directors and other film personalities as members of the Communist Party. This right-wing effort was taken up by HUAC, under conditions in which the Truman administration was sharply escalating the Cold War against the Soviet Union, having overturned the alliance between American imperialism and the Stalinist bureaucracy in World War II.

The first week of HUAC hearings heard from "friendly witnesses," who served to legitimize the new focus of the committee. Animator and film producer Walt Disney was among the first, railing against the existence of unions among Hollywood employees. Asked about the Communist Party, Disney said: "I don't believe it is a political party, I believe it is an un-American thing" before voicing support for "un-American things" to be "outlawed." Disney named several film professionals who he claimed were likely communists.

Future American president and then head of the Screen Actors' Guild Ronald Reagan gave similar testimony, asserting that a "clique" within the guild involved unnamed Communist Party members or those under its control. Actor Adolphe Menjou declared: "I am a witch-hunter if the witches are Communists. I am a Red-baiter. I would like to see them all back in Russia."

Later in October, 10 hostile witnesses were called and were instructed to confirm whether they were in the Communist Party and to "name names." The ten were Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Edward Dmytryk, Ring Lardner Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz, Samuel Ornitz, Adrian Scott and Dalton Trumbo. The group initially included exiled German playwright Bertold Brecht, but he fled to Europe.

After the 10 refused to provide testimony, they would be found in contempt of Congress in November, with punitive sanctions and an effective blacklist imposed. This set off what would become hundreds of artists placed on blacklists.

100 years ago: Sugar industry heir assumes presidency of Dominican Republic

On October 21, 1922, the American High Commissioner of the Dominican Republic, Sumner Welles, selected Juan Bautista Vicini Burgos to become the country's acting president. The American military had occupied the Caribbean nation since 1916, sparking armed resistance by Dominicans from 1917 to 1921. The occupation resulted in American control over the political and economic life of the nation, whose finances were managed by the National City Bank of New York. American companies purchased large tracts of land on which to cultivate sugar under near-slave labor conditions by workers brought across the border from Haiti.

Welles had been sent by American President Warren G. Harding, a Republican, to implement "the Harding Plan," which sought to replace direct American military control with US domination of the police, American supervision of elections and a \$2.5 million loan to develop the country's infrastructure.

The shift in imperialist policy occurred not only because American public opinion had increasingly opposed the occupations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, but also because the direct entrance of American imperialism into European affairs after World War I required that American rule take a more indirect form in the Caribbean and in Latin America.

The Harding Plan, nevertheless, was rejected by much of the Dominican population and a round of negotiations between the American secretary of state, Charles Evans Hughes, and the Dominican ambassador to Washington, Francisco J. Peynado, resulted in the appointment of Vicini, the son of a sugar magnate, as acting president. Vicini's government was constrained by the presence of American occupation forces. When US soldiers finally withdrew in 1924, the American favorite, Horacio Vásquez, defeated Peynado in the presidential elections.



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