

# This week in history: September 9-15

8 September 2024

## 25 years ago: Indonesian government allows international peacekeeping force

On September 12, 1999, the Indonesian government of President B. J. Habibie agreed to accept assistance from a United Nations Security Council resolution mandating the deployment of a multinational “peacekeeping” force in East Timor. American and Australian officials stressed that the Australian-led troops would operate in cooperation with the Indonesian military.

Not only did the UN resolution fail to call for the withdrawal of 26,000 Indonesian troops that were stationed in East Timor, it also made no mention of the role of the Indonesian military and government in the campaign of killings and expulsions that had devastated the province.

Typical were the remarks of Australian Minister of Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer, who, in an interview on US public television, stressed that the multinational force would “work closely” in a “cooperative effort” with the Indonesian army.

Such statements pointed to the overriding concern of the Western powers in the face of Indonesia’s assault on the East Timorese—to shore up the military apparatus responsible for the slaughter. Having committed themselves to independence for the province that was invaded and forcibly annexed by Jakarta a quarter century prior, the imperialist powers felt compelled to see the process of secession through. But their greatest priority was to ensure the continued domination of the military ruling elite over the Indonesian masses.

The Western governments that were ostensibly intervening for humanitarian reasons were at pains to demonstrate their continued support for a government that carried out one of the most thorough campaigns of ethnic cleansing in recent history. According to UN estimates, only 200,000 East Timorese, less than a quarter of the population, remained in their homes. Untold thousands were killed, and the rest were either hiding in the hills or languishing in concentration camps in West Timor and remote islands of Indonesia to which they were forcibly deported.

The very forces that posed as the saviors of the East Timorese—the US, Britain, Australia, the UN—were complicit in the tragedy that engulfed them. A number of human rights groups began warning the UN earlier the same year that the Indonesian military was arming militias in East Timor to intimidate pro-independence voters, and then destroy the province if it voted to break away.

## 50 years ago: Military coup in Ethiopia removes Emperor Haile Selassie

On September 12, 1974, the Provisional Military Administrative Council, a group of military officers known as the Derg, launched a coup to remove the US-backed Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I from power. The Derg arrested Selassie, announced the end of the empire, and proclaimed itself as the new government.

Since the beginning of the year, an intense political crisis had been unfolding in Ethiopia. Triggered by the global inflationary crisis caused by the end of the Bretton Woods system in 1971, prices in Ethiopia had skyrocketed, causing widespread hunger and inequality under the semi-feudal government.

In January, soldiers of the Negele Boran garrison mutinied against poor conditions and arrested their officers. The soldiers would eventually arrest one of the highest-ranking military commanders, Lieutenant-General Deresse Dubale, when he was sent to restore order.

The soldiers of the Negele Boran revolt eventually agreed to surrender. However, news of the rebellion sparked a revolutionary fervor throughout the country. In the months that followed, mutinies spread to other branches of the military, universities and high schools staged protests, and in March the trade unions called a general strike.

It became clear that the Selassie regime was rapidly losing all political authority and its ability to command the military. Unlike during an earlier revolt in 1963, Selassie could not rely on the United States to provide support to prop up his rule. In the aftermath of the Vietnam War and just one month after the resignation of President Richard Nixon, intervention into the African nation’s revolution risked sparking renewed upheavals within the US.

Dominated by Stalinism, the Ethiopian trade unions conceded all political leadership in the situation to the military, which included many generals who had been longtime backers of Selassie. Fearing above all the independent political intervention of the working class, the Stalinists worked to ensure that all state power would remain in the hands of the small military elite within the Derg.

In return, the Derg would proclaim itself to be “Marxist-Leninist” and seek the backing of Moscow in the civil war that followed the coup. This, however, was only after initial attempts were made by the generals to keep the imperial government intact.

Upon taking power and removing Selassie, the Derg initially declared that its intention was for Crown Prince Asfaw Wossen to lead a constitutional monarchy. Wossen, however, who was already in London for medical treatment, rejected the proposal and remained in exile.

Selassie, though removed from his position, was allowed to remain under house arrest in the Grand Palace. About one year later, on August 27, 1975, he would be assassinated by Derg officers.

The Derg would select Lieutenant General Aman Andom as its chairman and head of the new Ethiopian state. Andom would lead the Derg only until November 15 when he would resign his position amid deep political divisions within the ruling junta. Two days later, he

would be assassinated by his opponents within the military.

Andom, in turn, would be replaced by Mengistu Haile Mariam who became the leading military and political figure in Ethiopia until the Derg regime collapsed in 1991 alongside the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

### **75 years ago: Stalinist show trial of alleged Tito sympathizers in Hungary**

On September 10, 1949, eight senior Hungarian officials were indicted on accusations of plotting with the American and Yugoslavian governments to overthrow the Stalinist state and reestablish capitalism. The charges, drawn up in close collaboration with the Soviet Union, were a combination of outright lies and crude amalgams. The highest ranking defendant, László Rajk, was the Hungarian minister of interior and foreign affairs.

The indictments occurred in the context of the split between the Yugoslavian leadership of Josip Tito and the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union.

Over a number of years, tensions had developed on a range of issues. While Yugoslavia supported Greek insurgents, Stalin sought to suppress their struggle for fear that it would intensify tensions between the Soviet bureaucracy and the imperialist powers. There were also territorial disputes. The Tito leadership attempted to preserve a degree of independence, as the Soviet bureaucracy ensured total compliance from the Eastern European buffer states, such as Hungary. In 1948, an open and public split had occurred.

In an analysis of the indictment in its *Militant* newspaper, the Socialist Workers Party, then the American Trotskyist organisation, exposed the baseless character of the charges, for which there was no evidence. The Hungarian defendants were accused of a wild conspiracy involving Washington, the Vatican and the Tito leadership, directed against the Soviet Union. The defendants confessed and after a trial spanning just a week were found guilty and executed.

To the extent that the defendants had committed any “crime,” it was possibly expressing sympathy for the Tito regime. At the same time, they stood in as a placeholder for the Yugoslavian government, which the *Militant* noted was the main target of the trial. The Kremlin had “taken a long step toward bringing its cold war against Yugoslavia into the shooting stage.” It noted that the resort to terror followed unsuccessful attempts by Stalin to bring Tito to heel through diplomatic isolation and pressure.

The *Militant* also noted the domestic implications of the campaign, which included a barrage of hysterical coverage in the Soviet press. “The longer Yugoslavia successfully resists the dictates of the Moscow despots, all the greater may become the inclination to follow Yugoslavia’s example among the Soviet millions,” it explained. The stand by Tito also threatened to unleash similar tendencies in other countries of the Eastern bloc.

At the same time, the *Militant* explained that Tito politically remained a Stalinist. His regime was committed to the anti-Marxist and nationalist doctrine of “socialism in one country,” and continued to uphold the Soviet regime’s mass murder of Trotskyists, the genuine proponents of the socialist and internationalist perspective that had animated the 1917 Russian Revolution.

### **100 years ago: Imperialist powers deploy troops to China**

On September 9, 1924, the international press announced that 1,100 marines from Italy, Japan, Britain and the United States had landed in Shanghai and 22 imperialist warships had entered Shanghai’s harbor, ostensibly to protect the International Settlement in Shanghai as a civil war between two factions of warlords began in what is known as the Second Zhili-Fengtian War. (Shanghai’s International Settlement, established in 1862 by the US and the UK, conceded extraterritorial rights to foreign businessmen, government agents, and missionaries of more than a dozen European powers.)

Battles over the railways to the west of the city between the two factions had begun earlier in the week. On the one hand were supporters of the Fengtian clique, based in Manchuria and backed by Japan, and led by Zhang Zuolin and on the other, the Zhili clique based in Zhili province and led from Beijing by the president of the Chinese Republic (also known as the Beiyang government), Cao Kun. The Zhili Clique enjoyed the support of the United States and Britain.

Cao Kun had moved troops south and battles had erupted in railyards to the west of the city. The control of Shanghai, the largest port in China, was a strategic goal of each side. Both factions, nevertheless, had agreed to keep fighting away from the international settlement and out of the harbor.

By September 15, Zhang Zuolin had led his troops—which had detachments of White Russian emigres as well as Japanese volunteers—out of Manchuria toward Beijing. The largest battle of the war was fought over control of Tianjin, the port city to the south of Beijing, and on several other fronts until a coup against Cao Kun allowed the Fengtian Clique to gain the advantage and win a decisive victory by the end of October.

The dominance of the Japanese-supported Fengtian Clique caused enormous concern in the nationalist-held areas of south China, based in Canton (Guangdong), and helped to precipitate the Northern Expedition of Chiang Kai-Shek in 1926. This nationalist march through the North would stimulate peasant revolts throughout China and ultimately lead to the bloody suppression of the Shanghai Revolution of 1927, led by the Chinese Communist Party.



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