This week in history: September 23–29

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

22 September 2024

25 years ago: Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's extradition hearing begins in London

Former Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet's extradition hearing had started at Bow Street Magistrates' Court in London, 11 months after Spanish Judge Baltazar Garzon issued an arrest warrant for crimes against humanity. Pinochet remained under armed police guard at his rented mansion in Surrey, UK.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), representing Spain, disclosed grisly human rights abuses of electric shocks, beatings, burnings, and torture. The five-page indictment detailed 35 charges and incidents of torture against named citizens of Spain, then resident in Chile, and a single charge of conspiracy to torture when Pinochet was president and commander in chief of the Chilean Army. Alun Jones, QC, had said that this indictment reveals "some of the most serious allegations of crime ever to come before the English criminal courts." It included "inflicting severe electric shocks causing the eventual death" of Wilson Fernanado Valdebenito Jucia and repeatedly beating Dolorez Paz Cautivo Ahumada and threatening to rape her sister.

The purview of this hearing, as Jones said, was "to determine whether Pinochet is or is not guilty of these charges and we are not here to determine whether or not there is evidence of his guilt. Your limited function under the European convention on extradition is to determine whether he is accused of these extraditable crimes.'

The previous March, the House of Lords ruled that General Pinochet was not entitled to immunity as a former head of state, but the charges must be restricted to the events after 1988 based on a newly ratified law, the Criminal Justice Act 1988, which adopted the United Nations Convention Against Torture. Of the 35 charges, the most notorious crime became known as the "Caravan of Death," in which 10 high-ranking army officers executed over 70 political prisoners and then buried the bodies in secret locations in October 1973.

Pinochet's dictatorship and reign of terror and murder started when pseudo-left Salavador Allende was deposed in a US-backed military coup on September 11, 1973 and would last until 1990. Pinchoet's extradition to Spain never materialized. Home Secretary Jack Straw released Pinochet on failing health grounds to the glee of Margaret Thatcher and George H.W. Bush.

US Trotskyists hold rally demanding justice for boy killed by police

On September 28, 1974, the Workers League, the US predecessor to the Socialist Equality Party, held a rally in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn to advance a fight against police violence that had recently killed 14-year-old Claude Reese. Speakers at the rally included Helen Halyard and Terry Delgado, who were running as Workers League candidates for Congress in the 14th and 12th districts of New York state.

Claude Reese was murdered on September 15th. He was shot in the head by New York Police officer Frank Bosco after Bosco had broken into a basement where several children were setting up the room for a birthday party. Bosco claimed he had been investigating a robbery before he and his partner, Arnold Tamaroff, burst into the basement.

Surprised and terrified by the attack on their party the children attempted to flee the basement and run up the stairs. Tamaroff grabbed and held down two girls while five boys ran. Bosco chased after them into a courtyard where he encountered the young Reese and then fired on him, striking him in the head and killing him instantly.

Reese was one of several children killed by New York police in those years. In August 1972 police murdered 11-year-old Ricky Bodden; in January 1973, 16-year-old Rita Llyud was shot and killed; and in April 1973, police shot and killed Clifford Glover, just 10 years old.

The murder of Reese was met with massive opposition from the residents of Brownsville. A funeral march was attended by thousands who came out to protest police killings. Police responded to the march with open hostility and organized a force of 300 cops to attack the crowd.

Reports from the march recall that police used their cars to ram crowds of youth, attacked marchers with clubs, and that the police

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wore bands over their badges to prevent being identified for their criminal attacks.

In the face of the protests the city government ignored demands that Bosco be placed under arrest and made to face charges. Not even suspended from the police force, Bosco was only given a temporary desk assignment. No charges were ever brought against him and in December he was restored to regular police duties.

The Workers League rally was called to advance the struggle against police terror and insisted that the working class itself must take action. A Workers League statement published ahead of the rally stated, “An investigation into the killing of Claude Reese cannot be left in the hands of the very police who are responsible for his death.”

At the rally Helen Halyard responded powerfully to black nationalists like Amiri Baraka, who cited race as the lone issue in the killing and called for an all-black police force in Brooklyn. Halyard said, “We say that it is not black against white but the working class against the ruling class and the Baraka’s proposals for an all-black police force will only be a cover for more repression.”

75 years ago: Soviet Union confirms that it has atomic weapons

On September 25, 1949, the Soviet Union confirmed for the first time that it possessed atomic weapons through its official TASS news agency. That announcement followed a declaration by US President Harry S. Truman that the American government assessed that the Soviet regime had tested one of the devices in the recent past.

The Soviet Union had on August 29 detonated a 4.6 ton nuclear bomb, dubbed RDS-1 or “fast lightning.” The device, similar in design to the US “fat man” bomb, had been exploded at a testing facility in Kazakhstan, and produced an explosive yield equivalent to 22,000 kilotons of TNT.

The Soviet nuclear program had developed with extraordinary rapidity. The Stalinist regime had only begun intensive research and development in the field after the 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union by Hitler’s Nazi Germany. The program was further accelerated at the end of the war, when the US dropped nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. That attack had nothing to do with the military necessities of the war, given Japan’s already-vanquished state. It was instead intended as a threat to potential adversaries, above all the Soviet Union, and a declaration of untrammeled US military dominance.

The speed of the Soviet project was in part due to its possession of some documents of the Manhattan Project, American imperialism’s own nuclear weapons blueprints. The Soviets also utilized the expertise of German scientists, whom they compelled to provide assistance after the defeat of the Nazis. With the successful August 1949 test, the Soviet Union rapidly expanded its production of atomic weapons as well as their testing.

Politically, the Stalinist bureaucracy hoped that the atomic weapons would enable it to bargain and come to a favorable arrangement with the imperialist powers, including the US. In practice though, the Truman administration responded to the first test by calling for a review of US military preparedness, which would lead to a massive expansion of the American military build-up.

100 years: Assyrian Christians forced out of Turkey

On September 28, 1924, the Turkish military forced thousands of Assyrian Christians into Iraq ending a revolt sometimes called the Assyrian Rebellion.

In July, thousands of members of the religious and cultural minority of Christians from a range of denominations including the Assyrian, Syriac and Chaldean churches, speakers of Neo-Aramaic languages, had returned from exile in Iraq to their home region of Hakkari in southeastern Turkey, now ruled by the newly founded Turkish state of the nationalist movement led by Kemal Ataturk.

The Ottoman Empire had begun an ethnic cleansing of Christians in the Hakkari region near Lake Van shortly before it entered World War I in November 1914, out of concern that they would support the forces of Russia’s Tsarist Empire. This marked the beginning of the Sayfo or Assyrian genocide, that reached a peak in 1915, alongside the Armenian genocide, with the mass killing of Assyrian civilians by Ottoman irregulars. An estimated 275,000 Assyrians were killed in the genocide.

In 1915 an exodus of as many as 50,000 Assyrians from Hakkari to Urmia in Iran, an area contested by Ottoman and Russian forces, took place, which included many deaths from hunger and exposure. Further pogroms against Assyrians took place there, and thousands fled again under the most brutal conditions toward the end of the war.

Others fled to northern Iraq, where, although it was a part of the Ottoman Empire at the time, there was a substantial local Assyrian population and the refugees were not subject to the same levels of violence. In the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, the victorious Allied imperialist powers denied the Assyrians their own state. Many Assyrians volunteered or were conscripted into British forces in Iraq after the country was placed under a British mandate by the League of Nations.

In 1922 Assyrians began to return to the Hakkari region without the permission of Turkish authorities and by July 1924 military engagements between the government and Assyrian militias were occurring. Promised British aid to the Assyrians never arrived and Turkish troops were able to force them back to Iraq where the British demanded they remain.

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