

This week in history: October 2-8

1 October 2023

25 years ago: Russian protesters demand Yeltsin resignation

On October 7, 1998, one to two million people marched in cities and towns across Russia demanding President Yeltsin's resignation and the payment of unpaid wages and pensions. It was thought to be the largest demonstration against the Yeltsin regime since the liquidation of the Soviet Union in 1991. Workers also held strikes and stoppages.

Protests had been held on October 7 annually, but the numbers swelled because some 57 percent of Russian workers were owed back pay. Soaring prices for food and other essential items devastated millions, with inflation hitting 67 percent since the collapse of the ruble and Russia's financial markets the previous month.

Those participating in the rallies included industrial workers and miners, students, pensioners and politicians. They were watched by thousands of riot police. The Interior Ministry said 157,600 people joined in meetings and rallies in 157 places across the Far Eastern, Central and Volga regions. However, Yeltsin's deputy chief of staff Oleg Sysyuyev said about 1 million protested.

A diverse range of organizations joined the marches, with the red banners of the Stalinists of the Communist Party intermingling with the blue flags of the Federation of Independent Trade Unions. Among them were banners of smaller unions, as well as those promoting fascists. Some carried photos of Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, while others had flags from the czarist era.

In the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, the extreme nationalist and former military general Alexander Lebed made himself prominent on the march. Lebed, who was briefly Yeltsin's security adviser and was the governor of the mineral-rich territory of Krasnoyarsk, backed calls for Yeltsin to step down on the grounds that Yeltsin had lost the confidence of both the people and the financial markets. "Today Yeltsin is alone," he said. "People are pushed to the extreme. Western investors have become fierce and are angry with him."

In order to bring together such a lowest-common-denominator protest, the protest organizers limited the slogans of the marches to Yeltsin's departure and the payment of wages. Nevertheless, expressions of intense hostility to the social disaster created by the restoration of capitalism in Russia were common. "Yeltsin made a beggar out of me," read one banner tied to a hangman's noose near the Kremlin. Students in Moscow burnt a portrait of Yeltsin and in the early evening young protesters scuffled with police, also near the Kremlin, but were soon dispersed. Russian media reported that police detained about 20 people.

50 years ago: Yom Kippur War begins in Middle East

On October 6, 1973, Egypt and Syria launched a joint military offensive against Israel to retake lands that had been lost in the 1967 Six-Day War. The war was a significant turning point in the balance of power in the Middle East with the Arab forces demonstrating that a military defeat of Israel was possible.

At the same time, the war expressed the logic of the bourgeois nationalist politics of the Arab regimes. The purpose of the war for the Arab bourgeoisie, represented by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, was not the revolutionary defeat of the Zionist state of Israel, but rather was to create conditions that would force Israel and its US backers to enter into negotiations and cut a deal. Only four years later, Sadat was to travel to Jerusalem, effectively recognizing the state created through the dispossession of the Palestinian population.

When the offensive was launched, Egyptian and Syrian forces made rapid progress overcoming the stalemate lines that had held since 1967. Crossing the strategically important Suez Canal, the Egyptian Army in the first two days of the war broke up Israel's defenses, retaking the east bank of the canal, and establishing a new front line deeper into the Sinai.

Similarly, the Syrian military made a rapid advance early on, retaking much of the Golan Heights. Initial counteroffensives by Israel failed, with the Arab militaries proving to be much better organized, trained, and armed than in the previous wars with Israel.

Much of the success of Egypt and Syria was owed to military aid provided by the Soviet Union. Particularly important was the provision of Soviet-made fighter planes and anti-air weaponry. Israel no longer maintained overwhelming air force superiority, as was the case in the Six-Day War.

However, by mid-October the Israeli counteroffensive began to gain traction, retaking much of the Golan Heights and advancing towards the Syrian capital, Damascus. The Egyptian forces were also pushed back from their farthest advances in the Sinai Peninsula but still maintained control over both sides of the crucial Suez Canal.

A decisive role in turning the tide was massive US military resupply of Israel. The Nixon administration on October 19 authorized sending \$2.2 billion in military aid. In response, the members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) declared an embargo on the United States, sparking a major energy crisis.

The front of the war became fractured after Israeli forces managed their own crossing of the canal and landed on the Egyptian heartland. By October 24, the Israeli army had cut off the main road between Cairo and Suez City, placing them only 40 miles from the Egyptian capital. The situation was immensely explosive and threatened to develop into a major bloodbath.

After discussions between the United States and the Soviet Union, a ceasefire was declared by the United Nations on October 24. Shortly afterwards, Sadat would send a message to the United States calling for negotiations to be opened.

The war created the conditions for the 1978 Camp David Accords

where the Sinai Peninsula and full control of the Suez Canal were returned to Egypt. In return, Sadat became the first Arab leader to officially recognize the state of Israel and abandoned all support to the oppressed Palestinians.

75 years ago: Western European military alliance set up to target Soviet Union

This week in October 1948, the major European imperialist powers activated a military alliance they had been preparing for much of the year, clearly targeted against the Soviet Union. They appointed senior military commanders to oversee the new body, named the Western Union Defence Organisation.

The countries involved were Britain, France, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The inclusion of the latter three was aimed at broadening the organisation, and also providing it with a democratic veneer, given that these smaller states had been subjected to Nazi occupation during World War II. The alliance, however, was dominated by Britain and France and established in close conjunction with the United States.

The military pact formed part of a broader agreement, dubbed the Western Union. Plans for its establishment had been made in March 1948, with the signing by the future members of the Treaty of Brussels. It provided for mutual defence, declaring: "If any of the High Contracting Parties should be the object of an armed attack in Europe, the other High Contracting Parties will, in accordance with the provisions of Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, afford the Party so attacked all the military and other aid and assistance in their power."

The defence organisation was essentially a Cold War entity, aimed at furthering the US-led campaign against the Soviet Union. In 1947 and 1948, the US administration of President Harry S. Truman had openly adopted an aggressive foreign policy directed against Soviet influence around the world.

A particular aim was to assert Washington's control over Western Europe. This was directed not only against the foreign policy of the Stalinist regime but above all against mass movements of the working class that erupted at the conclusion of the war. The Western Union Defence Organisation was viewed in US ruling circles as a potential springboard for a broader US and European alliance directed against the Soviets.

On October 4, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery of the British army was installed as head of the defence organisation. He had a decades-long record in the military, dating back to service in World War I. A notorious reactionary, Montgomery also had extensive experience in the suppression of the struggles for self-determination in Ireland. The command of the organisation included another top British general and two French military leaders.

Notably, its command structure was modeled on that of the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, which had led much of the Western European operations of the Allied powers during World War II.

100 years ago: Imperialist powers evacuate Constantinople

On October 2, 1923, British, French, and Italian troops left the Turkish capital of Constantinople (Istanbul) in a military ceremony and to the cheers of the Turkish population. The withdrawal was in accordance with the Treaty of Lausanne signed in July.

The treaty turned over the Anatolian peninsula in Asia and Eastern Thrace in Europe to the Republic of Turkey, which had been founded in the Turkish War of Independence led by the Turkish National Movement of Kemal Ataturk. Turkish troops entered the city on October 6.

British, French, Italian and Greek military forces had occupied the Turkish capital and other parts of Turkey since the Armistice of Mudros in 1918, which ended the war between the Allied powers and the Ottoman Empire. The Allied imperialists gained control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which divide Turkey between Europe and Asia, which allowed them to control passage from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean.

In the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres the Ottoman Empire ceded large swaths of its territory, particularly in the Middle East, to the imperialist powers. British and French imperialism would keep control of areas such as Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon for decades.

Parts of Anatolia were also to become spheres of influence under the British, French and Italians. The Greeks seized control of coastal cities with large ethnic Greek populations. Constantinople was placed under the military administration of the French and British, who sent Turkish military officers, administrators and intellectuals into exile on Malta.

After 1919, the military forces organized by the Turkish National Movement inflicted defeats on the French and Greeks in Anatolia and threatened Constantinople itself during the Chanak Crisis of 1922, which threatened to become a full-scale war between Britain and Turkey.

The loss of Constantinople and exclusive control of the passages between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea was a serious blow to world imperialism, which had already suffered another setback in the region at the end of the Russian Civil War in 1922, when much of the coastline of the Black Sea, including Crimea, had fallen to the Soviet Republic.



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