

This week in history: October 9-15

8 October 2023

25 years ago: Former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet arrested

On October 10, 1998, acting on a warrant originating in Spain, British police arrested General Augusto Pinochet at the London Clinic, shortly after he underwent an emergency back operation. His arrest was issued under international human rights law on “charges of genocide and terrorism that include murder” for actions taken during fascist coup he led in 1973 against the government of Salvador Allende and the bloody, US-backed dictatorship in Chile that he headed until 1990.

The Chilean dictator’s visit to the UK was made with the full knowledge and sanction of Tony Blair’s Labour government. The British ambassador in Santiago, Gwynne Evans, was informed of the trip long in advance. Pinochet traveled to Britain using a diplomatic passport and was given VIP treatment when he arrived at the London airport. A statement from his solicitor claimed that “permission for him to enter and stay in this country was stamped in his diplomatic passport. Over recent years General Pinochet has traveled without hindrance to the UK on several occasions with the approval of Her Majesty’s Government.”

General Pinochet had been a regular visitor to Britain and often met with Margaret Thatcher. He had been a frequent guest of arms and defense manufacturers who were eager to sell their wares. In 1994, British Aerospace staged a special demonstration of their rocket launchers for his benefit and the National Army Museum received him with honors. He was entertained for a week by British Aerospace again in 1995, after they clinched a big contract with the Chilean defense firm Fimea.

An official entry in the Chilean embassy logbook recorded his October 1997 visit to Britain. This occurred during the Labour Party conference and involved ongoing contracts with UK defense manufacturers, which he had established as commander-in-chief of the Chilean armed forces. In an interview with the *New Yorker* magazine a week prior to his arrest, Pinochet said the visit was one of his “regular trips” to Britain. He indicated that he was in the country as Chile’s “armed forces purchaser.”

The arrest and extradition proceedings disrupted diplomatic and political relationships both across the Atlantic and within Europe, with Britain and the US tacitly opposing the Spanish action, which was supported by major European powers. A public trial for his actions in 1973 and afterwards threatened to unleash a broader social movement against those in Chile who had gone unpunished. Washington could not look favorably at interference in what it traditionally regarded as its “backyard” in Latin America.

Later in October, Britain’s High Court in London upheld Pinochet’s claim to enjoy diplomatic immunity. Lord Bingham, the Lord Chief Justice, said, “The applicant is entitled to immunity as a former head of state from the criminal and civil process of the English courts.”

During the hearing, Pinochet’s lawyer, Clive Nicholls, argued that arrest of a former head of state was not legally justified and both the original warrant and a second warrant from Spain were “fatally flawed.” He further argued that a United Nations court would be the proper forum to take action against Pinochet, as a British court had no power to intervene in internal matters regarding Chile.

The British and American ruling classes’ coddling of the bloodstained Pinochet will forever be juxtaposed to their savage persecution of journalist Julian Assange.

50 years ago: Spiro Agnew, Nixon’s VP, resigns

On October 10, 1973, US Vice President Spiro Agnew resigned from office shortly before pleading “no contest” to charges related to tax evasion while he was serving as the governor of Maryland. In addition to the tax fraud charges, Agnew had been accused of widespread corruption, mainly in the form of taking bribes both while serving as governor and as vice president.

The charges stemmed from a 1972 federal investigation led by US Attorney George Beall into corruption in Maryland involving engineering and construction contracts. The investigation found that while serving as the governor of Maryland Agnew received kickback payments from firms that were awarded lucrative contracts with the state.

Initially, Beall was hesitant to pursue charges against the vice president and believed pursuing a prosecution would not be possible as the statute of limitations had expired. However, as the investigation continued it gathered overwhelming evidence that bribery and kickbacks were not only a routine operation during Agnew’s tenure as governor, but that he continued to receive payments while serving as vice president. As just one example, one of Agnew’s benefactors, Lester Matz, gave the vice president \$10,000 in cash during a visit to the White House.

Despite the daily news coverage reporting on new corruption allegations and scandals in the Nixon administration, the resignation of Agnew was somewhat unexpected. In the weeks leading up to his indictment, Agnew insisted upon his innocence and fervently declared that he would never resign the office, even if charges were brought against him.

The sudden change was undoubtedly connected with the Watergate scandal. Powerful sections of the national-security apparatus and the ruling class were concerned that as the investigation moved closer to Nixon himself, his prospective replacement was a completely untested and discredited politician with none of Nixon’s experience in managing imperialist foreign policy.

In both his court appearance and in his official letter of resignation

to President Nixon, Agnew claimed he had resigned only because staying in office during a trial would “seriously prejudice the national interest.” Nixon replied to Agnew’s letter stating that resignation was “advisable in order to prevent a protracted period of national division and uncertainty.”

Before Agnew set foot into the courthouse, a deal had been worked out between Judge Walter E. Hoffman and Attorney General Elliot Richardson, on behalf of the Nixon administration. In return for agreeing not to contest the single charge of tax evasion, Agnew was placed on unsupervised probation for three years and ordered to pay a fine of just \$10,000, a tiny fraction of the sums he received in bribes.

75 years ago: Israeli offensive more than doubles Gaza refugee population to 230,000

On October 15, 1948, the Israeli military launched Operation Yoav, a seven-day campaign aimed at inflicting a defeat on Palestinian and Egyptian army forces and securing control of the Negev Desert. The assault occurred in the context of the first Arab-Israeli war, precipitated by the imperialist-backed declaration earlier in 1948 of a Jewish state established through the violent dispossession of the Palestinians.

In the months leading up to Operation Yoav, there had been unstable ceasefires brokered by the United Nations, temporarily halting some of the hostilities between the Israeli army and a coalition of Arab states opposed to the formation of Israel.

Israeli command, however, was determined to secure substantial territorial gains to consolidate the new state. The immediate aim of Yoav was to drive a wedge between the Egyptian forces near the coast and the Beersheba–Hebron–Jerusalem road. The more fundamental goal, however, was to secure control of the entire Negev Desert, including through the forcible removal of its Palestinian inhabitants.

On October 15, Israel launched its attack with an aerial bombardment of Gaza, al-Majdal, Beersheba and Beit Hanoun that would last for two more days. Beginning October 21, Israeli land forces launched a coordinated assault on Beersheba, eventually overrunning an Egyptian garrison stationed there. Over the following weeks, Israeli troops would continue a bombing campaign, even as the Egyptian military retreated, and the Israelis took a series of villages including Iraq Suwaydan.

On October 28, Israeli troops carried out a massacre in the Hebron town of Al-Dawayima, indiscriminately murdering up to 200 women and children. That was only the most infamous of a series of onslaughts against Palestinian villagers associated with Operation Yoav. The United Nations Refugee Relief Project would report that the campaign had resulted in an increase in the Gaza Strip’s refugee population from roughly 100,000 to around 230,000.

The onslaught was a continuation of the activities by Zionist organizations to establish Israel. They had carried out terrorist attacks on Palestinian forces, as well as against the British, to secure the most favorable terms when British imperialism relinquished its colonial mandate in 1947. The Zionist groups had then carried out a campaign of ethnic cleansing, killing thousands of Palestinians and forcing thousands more from their homes, in order to lay the basis of a state explicitly founded on Jewish racial supremacy.

100 years ago: Old Bolsheviks send “Platform of the 46” to Russian Communist Party leadership

On October 15, 1923, 46 leading members of the Russian Communist Party sent a letter to the Political Bureau of the party, its leading body, to outline a crisis in the Soviet economy and inner-party democracy and the need for immediate action to remedy the situation. All of the 46 were leading cadre who had joined the party in the years of its underground existence before the October Revolution of 1917 that had established the world’s first workers’ state. The letter’s main author was probably Evgeni Preobrazhensky.

A dire economic situation had arisen in the gap between high prices for industrial goods and lower prices for agricultural goods, and especially the lack of systematic planning and development in the industrial sector to lessen these price differences.

Such planning was hampered, however, by the development in the party of a bureaucratic regime of appointment to responsible posts, as opposed to direct election by party members. All significant decision in the party about the economy and much else were taken by the “troika” of Lev Kamenev, Gregory Zinoviev, and Joseph Stalin, which articulated the interests of this bureaucracy, not the needs of the workers and peasants.

The Platform stated, “The party has, to a significant degree, ceased to be a living, independent collective which is sensitive to the changes in living reality ... instead of this we observe an ever progressing, barely disguised division of the party into a secretarial hierarchy and into ‘laymen,’ into professional party functionaries, chosen from above and the remaining party masses who take no part in social life.”

Although Leon Trotsky was not a signatory to the letter, and while it is likely he did not know of it in advance, it was Trotsky who had taken the lead in the struggle against the bureaucracy a week earlier on October 8 in his sharp and comprehensive letter to the Central Committee and Central Control Commission on the same issues:

“Secretarial bureaucratism must be ended. Party democracy ... must come into its own. The rank-and-file party members must indicate, within the framework of party-mindedness, what they are dissatisfied with, and they must receive the real opportunity ... to create its organizational apparatus.”

Lenin had been paralyzed by his third stroke in March and was unable to participate in any of these discussions. But both the Platform of the 46 and Trotsky’s letter had continued where Lenin had left off in his final articles in January, in which he began the fight against bureaucratization.

Both the Platform of the 46 and Trotsky’s letter of October 8 laid the basis for the Left Opposition.



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