

This week in history: October 14-20

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

13 October 2024

25 years ago: CIA deliberately bombed Chinese embassy in Belgrade, report shows

On October 17, 1999 the British *Observer* and the Danish *Politiken* newspapers published a damning investigative report revealing that the CIA had deliberately targeted the Chinese embassy in Belgrade earlier that year during the NATO bombing of Serbia. On May 7, 1999, a US stealth bomber, operating outside NATO's command structure according to France, dropped JDAM precision bombs on the embassy, killing three Chinese journalists and injuring 20 diplomats.

CIA Director George Tenet had previously admitted in congressional testimony that this was the only attack directed by his spy agency in the brutal bombing campaign by NATO against Serbia, triggered by civil strife in the province of Kosovo.

The authors of the report—John Sweeney, Jens Holsoe and Ed Vulliamy—claimed that the US targeted the embassy for allegedly rebroadcasting communications of the Yugoslav army and monitoring NATO missile attacks on Belgrade. The report cited three NATO officers, a flight controller operating in Naples, an intelligence officer monitoring Yugoslav radio traffic from Macedonia and a senior headquarters officer in Brussels.

The intelligence officer was quoted in the newspapers: “NATO had been hunting the radio transmitters in Belgrade. When the President’s [Milosevic] residence was bombed on 23 April, the signals disappeared for 24 hours. When they came on the air again, we discovered they came from the embassy compound.”

The US and NATO conjured up several different versions of the events ranging from pilots mistaking the embassy for a legitimate target nearby, the Yugoslav Federal Directorate for Supply and Procurement; error in the targeting selection process; and “stale” information from the CIA. US Defense Secretary William Cohen said, “One of our planes attacked the wrong target because the bombing instructions were based on an outdated map.”

In other words, the bombing was a pure accident even though the embassy’s location had been known for years and was publicly available. Such a novice “mistake” with precision “smart bombs” was difficult to sell to the public, coming from the experienced warmongers and spooks in NATO and the CIA.

The *Observer*’s revelations vindicated the stance taken by the *World Socialist Web Site* in the immediate aftermath of the NATO embassy bombing. We wrote on May 10, “After two days of varied official accounts, the least credible explanation for Friday night’s NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade is that it was a pure accident.”

In its reckless pursuit to assert control over the Balkans and rubber-

stamp US hegemony in the region, the US-NATO attack against what was under international law sovereign Chinese territory was not only a war crime, but had had the potential to provoke a military response from the Stalinist regime.

50 years ago: US President Gerald Ford testifies on Nixon pardon

On October 17, 1974, President Gerald Ford appeared before the US Congress to answer questioning regarding his pardon of former president Richard Nixon who resigned in August. By resigning and then receiving a sweeping pardon from Ford, Nixon avoided impeachment and prosecution for his role in the 1972 break-in and spying operation against the Democratic National Committee headquarters located in the Watergate complex in Washington DC.

That Congress would call a sitting president to testify is highly unusual and has only happened three times in American history, all during periods of immense political crisis. Abraham Lincoln was called in 1862 amid the Civil War to answer questions regarding a White House report that had been prematurely leaked to the press. Woodrow Wilson testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in 1919 as part of his failed campaign to convince Congress to ratify joining the League of Nations in the aftermath of the First World War.

When Ford appeared before the House Judiciary Committee, the members sought to know his motivations for and the circumstances around his decision to pardon Nixon. In particular the main question posed was whether Ford had made a deal with Nixon to grant him the pardon in return for his resignation.

“There was no deal, period.” Ford told the Committee, “I assure you that there was never at any time any agreement whatsoever concerning a pardon to Mr. Nixon if he were to resign and I were to become President.” Ford insisted that his motivation to block a full investigation into Nixon and the Watergate scandal was to “shift our attention from the pursuit of a fallen President to the pursuit of the urgent needs of a rising nation.”

For Congress the purpose of the hearing was not to investigate Ford for what was clearly the last-ditch effort of the Watergate cover-up. It was to allow Ford to move ahead as president and continue Nixon’s policies, while appeasing the widespread popular outrage over the Nixon pardon. During the hearing Ford was never required to testify under oath.

He admitted that he had met with Alexander Haig, Nixon’s Chief of Staff, the week before Nixon resigned, to discuss the administration’s options, including the use of the president’s pardon powers. Ford insisted that the two never discussed specifically that Ford should grant Nixon a

pardon, but that Nixon might use the pardon power to stop the prosecution of all the conspirators, including himself, before resigning.

It was evident from his testimony that Ford's intention in granting the pardon was to block Congress from obtaining all the information surrounding Watergate and to make the work of the congressional investigation a dead letter. The Democratic-controlled Judiciary Committee was more than happy to assist him in this endeavor to prevent the working class from becoming aware of the full extent of the White House crimes.

The most critical concern for both the Democratic and Republican Party was to ensure that the Watergate conspiracy and the resignation of Nixon did not spark a major explosion in the working class, which was already in a major strike wave triggered by inflationary prices. There was wide agreement in the American ruling class that the issue should be put to bed to focus on their chief concern of suppressing any independent political action from the working class.

75 years ago: US Communist Party leaders sent to jail in Cold War witch-hunt

On October 14, 1949, eleven leaders of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) were sentenced to prison terms after being found guilty of violating the Smith Act in a New York trial. The convictions were the sharpest expression, to that point, of the witch-hunt against political opposition associated with US imperialism's turn to an aggressive Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union.

The CPUSA leaders were condemned for having "advocated the violent overthrow of the US government." In the course of the trial, the prosecution asserted this did not need to consist of any concrete plan, but could include discussion of ideas suggesting the overthrow of the existing governmental system.

Ten of the defendants were sentenced to a decade in prison and another to three years, based on his wartime military record. Immediately after those sentences, the right-wing judge declared that all five defense attorneys were guilty of contempt of court, sentencing them to jail terms of up to six months.

In its newspaper the *Militant*, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), then the Trotskyist organization in the US, branded the convictions "a hammer-blow against the democratic liberties of the whole working-class." It condemned the Smith Act as a violation of the Constitution and especially the First Amendment, describing it as the first piece of legislation since the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts to include criminal penalties merely for the exercise of political speech.

In addition to the use of police informers, the prosecution had relied on quotations from socialist literature, including the writings of Marx and Lenin, which it claimed advocated the overthrow of capitalist governments and whose dissemination was thus in violation of the Smith Act. "[T]he essence of the frame-up as an indictment of Marxist socialism as a 'criminal conspiracy'" the *Militant* warned.

At the same time, it explained that the CPUSA had long abandoned socialist internationalism, in line with its character as a Stalinist party. It had supported the betrayal of the Russian Revolution by the Soviet bureaucracy, including the mass murder of genuine socialists. Within the US, the CPUSA was bitterly hostile to a revolutionary perspective and sought to subordinate opposition to the Democratic Party.

In 1941, when SWP leaders were prosecuted under the Smith Act for their socialist anti-war positions, the CPUSA had backed the frame-up in line with its wartime alliance with the Roosevelt administration.

100 years ago: First Manifesto of Surrealism published in Paris

On October 15, 1924, the first Manifesto of Surrealism was published in Paris by *Éditions du Sagittaire*. Written by the founder of the surrealist movement, French poet André Breton, it marked the beginning of one of the most significant artistic movements of the 20th century.

In it Breton gave the following definition of surrealism:

Pure psychic automatism by means of which one intends to express, either verbally, or in writing, or in any other manner, the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, free of any aesthetic or moral concern.

As the *International Workers Bulletin*, one of the predecessors of the *World Socialist Web Site*, noted in 1997:

From the point of view of historical development, it no doubt expressed the position of social layers whose confidence in the stability of the existing order and its self-satisfied outlook had been deeply shaken by the calamitous world war and its political consequences, including the Russian Revolution.

Breton himself had seen first-hand the physical and mental impact of World War I when he worked in a psychiatric hospital during the war. The conceptions of surrealism inspired a movement that included writing, theater, music and the visual arts. Some of its most notable practitioners, at one time or another, were Breton himself, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Max Ernst, Salvador Dalí, Luis Buñuel, Man Ray, Hans Arp, Alberto Giacometti, and Antonin Artaud.

The surrealists, and Breton in particular, were profoundly impacted by the struggles of the working class as the crisis of capitalism in Europe deepened in the next fifteen years. Fascism and Stalinism had destroyed artistic freedom wherever they could, and the great slaughter of the Second World War was impending.

Breton identified surrealism with revolution and rejected the conciliation of the Stalinist Communist parties to the ruling class. This turned Breton and others toward collaboration with Leon Trotsky, the leader of the Russian Revolution with V.I. Lenin and the greatest revolutionary strategist of the era.

In 1938, Breton, Trotsky and Mexican muralist Diego Rivera produced the famous Manifesto for a Free, Revolutionary Art whose lines remain relevant:

True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and mankind in its time—true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

