

This week in history: October 21-27

20 October 2024

25 years ago: Gunmen storm Armenian parliament, killing prime minister

During the evening of October 27, 1999, an armed band of Armenian nationalists stormed the country's parliament building in Yerevan, the capital, killing Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkisyan and several other officials in a bid to topple the government.

Nairi Unanian, a former journalist and member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, led the attempted coup. Entering parliament, the gunmen approached Sarkisyan, accusing him of "drinking the blood of the people," before opening fire only several meters away, killing him instantly. An additional seven people were killed in the attack: Karen Demirchyan, National Assembly Speaker; Yuri Bakhshyan, Deputy National Assembly Speaker; Ruben Miroyan, Deputy National Assembly Speaker; Leonard Petrosyan, Minister of Urgent Affairs; as well as three members of parliament, Henrik Abrahamyan, Armenak Armenakyan, and Mikayel Kotanyan. A total of 30 people were injured.

After Unanian had gained control of the building, he proclaimed over local television that the attack was intended to spark a popular uprising across the country: "In this country, it is not possible to create a political organization," he said. "The people have no way to go... The country is in a catastrophic situation. People are hungry and the government doesn't offer any way out." The broadcast also stated the intended target was supposed to be only Sarkisyan, and the other killings were a "mistake."

Armenian President Robert Kocharyan, who had appointed Sarkisyan as prime minister, directed the response of military and police units after the killings. A standoff ensued for 18 hours, with the gunmen holding 50 people as hostage. After an agreement revolving around safe passage and a fair trial, Unanian and his accomplices surrendered. On December 2, 2003, the gunmen were sentenced to life in prison.

The crisis in Armenia was, at root, the product of the Stalinist betrayal of the October Revolution and its restoration of capitalism throughout the former Soviet republics, which had taken place less than a decade before Unanian's failed coup. The imperialist powers, led by the US, now fought over access to oil, raw materials, and geopolitics in regions wracked by political intrigue, economic turmoil and social deprivation. Within this context, the coup expressed right-wing nationalist sentiment, nurtured by sections of the Armenian ruling class, surrounding the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region, a largely Armenian-populated area controlled by neighboring Azerbaijan, another former Soviet republic. War between the states had only concluded with a 1994 ceasefire after an estimated 35,000 deaths on both sides.

Sarkisyan had been a long-time member of Armenia's nationalist movement, advocating for the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh

from Azerbaijan, and had served as commander of the Nagorno-Karabakh volunteers. But just two hours before he was assassinated, Sarkisyan and Kocharyan had met with US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott to reach an agreement over the territory with Azerbaijan.

50 years ago: Georgios Papadopoulos, former dictator of Greece, arrested

On October 23, 1974, the recently deposed Georgios Papadopoulos and four of his closest political allies were arrested by the new ruling military government in Greece. Papadopoulos had ruled Greece as the head of a military dictatorship that took power in a CIA-backed coup in 1967.

The others arrested alongside Papadopoulos were Stylianos Pattakos, Nikolaos Makarezos, Ioannis Ladas and Michael Roufogalis. The men all held top positions in Papadopoulos' government and had carried out political repression against thousands of Greek workers and students.

Pattakos had been Papadopoulos' First Deputy Premier and right-hand man. Makarezos was tasked with overseeing economic concerns for the regime. Ladas was the fascist head of the Military Police who believed in Greek racial superiority, having once remarked that "Human civilization was wholly fashioned by our race." Roufogalis served as the head of the Greek Intelligence Service, which operated as the local office of the American CIA.

The five men were exiled to the island of Kea until after new parliamentary elections were held. From the time they seized power in a 1967 coup to their own removal in 1974, the Papadopoulos dictatorship imprisoned over 10,000 people for their political views and activities.

In particular, Papadopoulos targeted trade unionists, left-wing and socialist political leaders, and student dissidents. Thousands were victims of brutal violence and torture. The military police would routinely beat prisoners with hoses, shock them with electricity, and subject them to sexual violence and other horrific crimes.

All of these activities were carried out with the full backing and sanction of the United States under both the Democratic administration of Lyndon Johnson and that of his Republican successor, Richard Nixon. One agent of the Greek dictatorship known as one of the most ruthless torturers reportedly told his victims, "Behind me there is the government, behind the government is NATO, behind NATO is the US. You can't fight us, we are Americans."

Papadopoulos began his military career in the Second World War working as a collaborator with the Nazi regime to hunt down left-wing

partisan resistance fighters. During the civil war in Greece immediately following the end of the war, he joined the Intelligence Service and made his first connections with the CIA, eventually becoming the lead point of contact between the fascists in the Greek military and American imperialism. After the war he continued his persecution of left-wing political opponents, including playing a role in the execution of Communist Party leader and Nazi resistance fighter Nikos Beloyannis in 1952. Under the post-war Greek monarchy, the Communist Party had been made illegal.

The 1967 coup was launched amid a contest over control of the state between King Constantine II and the civilian government. With the support of the CIA, Papadopoulos exploited the crisis of rule to take power, abolish the civilian government, and establish his military junta.

Papadopoulos' rule would last until November 1973 when his government killed over 30 students during an uprising at Athens Polytechnic University. Fearing that outrage over the killings could spark a movement for power by the working class, other sections of the military intervened to remove Papadopoulos from power on November 25, 1973.

His arrest came amid concerns that Papadopoulos might make an attempt at returning to power ahead of the parliamentary elections scheduled for November 17, 1974. Once in power, the newly elected government of Konstantinos Karamanlis, leader of the New Democracy party, would become responsible for bringing charges and carrying out the trial of Papadopoulos and the other junta leaders.

In 1975 the junta trials would find Papadopoulos and his allies guilty of treason and would sentence them to death, later commuted to life in prison. Papadopoulos remained in prison until 1996, and then was hospitalized for three years before his death in 1999.

75 years ago: Kuomintang establishes base in Taiwan after defeat in Chinese Revolution

This week in October 1949, the Kuomintang (KMT) consolidated its hold over Taiwan. The right-wing bourgeois party retreated to the island after its defeat in the Chinese Revolution, which had led to the proclamation of the People's Republic of China at the beginning of the month.

Between October 25 and 27, the KMT successfully repulsed an attempt by the Communist Party-led People's Liberation Army (PLA) to retake Taiwan. The PLA offensive involved a stealth operation with small boats that departed from the mainland and traversed the Taiwan Strait.

The element of surprise was lost, however, by a chance detection by a KMT soldier. The KMT rapidly alerted all of its troops, who were able to prevent about 10,000 of the 19,000-strong PLA contingent from landing. Anticipating that an attack was likely, the KMT had over the previous weeks fortified approaches, including the laying of sea and land mines and the construction of garrisons overlooking possible approaches. The PLA lost 9,000 soldiers, with almost 4,000 killed and over 5,000 captured.

Despite having routed the KMT over previous months in the Chinese Civil War, largely due to mass popular hostility to the right-wing party which had committed numerous crimes against working people, the PLA was still at a technological disadvantage. The KMT,

which had been sponsored by the major imperialist powers, including the US, had an air force and a major arsenal at its disposal.

When it became clear that their defeat on the mainland was a certainty, the KMT had begun a mass relocation to Taiwan in August. This involved the relocation of the air force to the island, as well as a naval armada of 26 vessels, and the leadership and surviving cadre and armed forces of the organization. As many as two million KMT troops would eventually arrive in Taiwan, in an operation that extended into December with the final defeat of KMT forces on the mainland.

The KMT would institute a brutal military dictatorship that remained in place for decades, support by the imperialist powers which used Taiwan in the Cold War against China and the Soviet Union.

100 years ago: Coup d'état in Beijing

On October 23, 1924, Feng Yuxiang, a general in the Zhili warlord clique, which ran Beijing and the internationally recognized Beiyang government, revolted and forced out Zhili leader Cao Kun. The coup occurred during the Second Zhili-Fengtian War, a civil war between two factions of warlords, the Zhili clique, who were oriented toward American and British imperialism, and the Fengtian Clique, who were proxies of Japanese imperialism.

Feng's troops, who were charged with the defense of Beijing, seized public buildings, utilities and the roads leading into the city. Cao Kun was detained and stripped of the presidency.

The coup was unexpected and injected a mood of uncertainty in the imperialist powers, who had already sent troops to guard their interests in Shanghai. The Associated Press reported from Shanghai that Peking [Beijing] "was suddenly completely cut off from telegraphic communication this morning."

The Fengtian clique's forces went on the offensive and defeated Zhili forces outside of Tianjin.

Feng Yuxiang reconciled with Zhang Zuolin, the leader of the Fengtian clique, who supplied him with 1.5 million yen of Japanese funds, but he also attempted to orient himself to the nationalist government of Sun Yat-sen in Guangzhou. Sun was able to return to Beijing. Feng appointed a new president and, with Zhang Zuolin, sponsored elections that put the pro-Japanese Duan Qirui in power.

Subsequent efforts by Feng, Zhang, Duan and Sun Yat-sen to reconcile were unproductive and war broke out again between Feng and Zhang in November, which ended in a defeat for the Zhili clique.

The civil wars exhausted the warlord armies and prepared the way for the successes of the Northern Expedition of Chiang Kai-Shek in 1925. The Northern Expedition would create a revolutionary ferment in the countryside and cities, including the Shanghai revolution of 1926-27, which Chiang, brutally suppressed after Stalin gave instructions to the Chinese Communists to welcome him.



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