

This week in history: December 9-15

8 December 2024

25 years ago: Yeltsin makes nuclear threat against US during the Second Chechen War

On December 9, 1999, the first president of post-Soviet Russia, Boris Yeltsin, used a press conference in Beijing to issue a nuclear threat over US support for Islamic separatists in the Second Chechnya War. Flanked by Li Peng, the head of China's legislature, Yeltsin rejected US President Bill Clinton's admonitions that Russia cease its military operations in the former Soviet Republic. "President Clinton permitted himself to put pressure on Russia," Yeltsin said, "but it seems he has forgotten that Russia has a full arsenal of nuclear weapons."

The war had begun that summer and had already caused a flood of refugees estimated at 233,000 people, as the Kremlin turned to ever more ferocious tactics. Over 4,500 civilians had been killed, and 1,000 Russian soldiers, many of whom were young, raw recruits between the ages of 18 and 27, had perished.

The US supported the Chechen separatists, including by holding meetings with rebel leaders. Both Al Qaeda, a creation of the CIA, and US ally Saudi Arabia came to play a central role in the arming and financing of the Islamist forces in Chechnya.

But the Kremlin's intervention in Chechnya was provoked by a whole series of recent developments, including: the acceptance into NATO in March of 1999 of the former Eastern Bloc countries Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary; the US-NATO bombing of Serbia, a traditional ally of Russia; US preparations to establish a missile defense system and its demands for a revision of the 1972 US-Soviet anti-ballistic missile treaty; and the previous month's signing of a treaty for the construction of a US-backed oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea to Turkey, which skirted Russian territory.

Yeltsin's nuclear threat demonstrated that, far from ushering in a new era of peace and prosperity as promised by "free market" propagandists, the restoration of capitalism in the former USSR plunged the world into a new and dangerous era of militarism provoked by the imperialist powers, especially Washington. Yeltsin articulated the standpoint of the dominant section of the post-USSR oligarchy, which sought to maintain its control of the resources of the world's largest country against the threats of Russia's dismemberment posed by Washington and the other imperialist powers.

50 years ago: Ceasefire called in Rhodesia

On December 11, 1974, a ceasefire was declared that temporarily halted fighting in the Zimbabwean War of Independence, also known as the Rhodesian Bush War. The white supremacist Rhodesian government made an agreement with the black nationalist organizations, principally the Zimbabwe African Peoples Union (ZAPU) and the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), that in exchange for the cessation of fighting the government would release political prisoners. Among those released included the heads of both groups, Joshua Nkomo of ZAPU and Ndabaningi Sithole of ZANU.

The ceasefire would last only about one month after the government failed to release the agreed-upon number of political prisoners. ZAPU and ZANU military operations began again in January 1975.

In announcing the ceasefire, Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith made clear that his government would never accept that the country would ever be ruled by the black majority. Addressing the white Rhodesian section of the population he said, "No doubt there will be some among you who feel concerned at the implication of these developments. However, let me reassure you all firstly that it is the intention of your government to maintain law and order in Rhodesia. Secondly, we are not prepared to deviate from our standards of civilization."

The "standards of civilization" Smith was determined to defend referred to the racist apartheid state and the brutal exploitation of black workers. Within a total population of about six million, the 250,000 white citizens were granted automatic control over the parliament with 50 seats reserved for white voters while the black masses of the population were awarded just 16 seats, with only 8 chosen directly by voters. Even then, those permitted to stand in the elections were carefully selected by the government. The black nationalist parties were made illegal and banned from holding office.

75 years ago: Stalinist show trial of Bulgarian Communist Traicho Kostov concludes with death sentence

On December 14, 1949, a leading member of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BKP), Traicho Kostov, was found guilty and sentenced to death on phony charges of treason by the Bulgarian Supreme Court. The sentence was carried out two days later.

The “Sofia Trial,” named after Bulgaria’s capital city where it was held, lasted from December 7 to 14. Ten other BKP members were tried, with their sentences ranging from 12 years to life imprisonment. It took place only a few months after a similarly conducted show trial in Hungary.

Kostov, the President of the Council of Ministers and former secretary of the BKP, was arrested months prior, on June 20. The Stalinist-aligned BKP had been the ruling party of Bulgaria since the regime was formed as a satellite state of the Soviet Union in 1946.

Among the accusations levied against Kostov were: spreading anti-Soviet sentiment within the BKP, informing to the police, acting as an “agent of imperialism,” aiming to violently overthrow the Bulgarian government and “conspiring” with Tito, the Stalinist leader of Yugoslavia who had had a rupture with Moscow over competing nationalist aims.

Kostov denied almost all these charges and retracted his written “confession” submitted to the trial. The only charge he admitted to was that of holding a “hostile attitude toward the Soviet Union,” which was bound up with his refusal to sign trade agreements with Moscow on Stalin’s terms.

Nevertheless, Kostov was found guilty and executed two days later. *The Militant*, the US Trotskyist newspaper of the time, wrote on the trial and explained the political calculations behind the Stalinist regime. Kostov had publicly proclaimed his support for a united federation of Hungary, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. Such a proposal went against the decisions of the Kremlin, which sought to “ensure that the satellite countries remain economically confined within their respective borders and subjected to the ruthless exploitation for the exclusive benefit of the Soviet bureaucracy,” in the words of *The Militant*.

It was not until 1956, after the death of Stalin, that the BKP central committee would reassess the trial and restore the party memberships of all those convicted, including Kostov. A decision of the Bulgarian Supreme Court in November that year legally annulled the sentences carried out in the Sofia trial.

100 years ago: Samuel Gompers falls mortally ill

On December 10, 1924, American newspapers announced that Samuel Gompers, the president of the American Federation of Labor, had fallen mortally ill in Mexico City. He had collapsed on December 6 at a congress of the Pan-American Federation of Labor.

Gompers was born to a Jewish family of cigar makers in London in 1850, which immigrated to New York City because of poverty. He worked as a cigar maker from his teenage years when he encountered socialist ideas, which he later rejected and against which he became a ferocious opponent. He became an official in the Cigar Makers' International Union Local 144 in 1875 and helped found the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions of the United States and Canada in 1881, later renamed the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Gompers had been the head of the AFL for 43 years, during which it had emerged as the main trade union federation in the United States. He helped to orient the unions to the upper layer of skilled workers. An American nationalist and a racist, Gompers was an advocate of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1881 and bragged that the AFL “was the first national organization which demanded the exclusion of coolies from the United States.” He supported American imperialist intervention in Cuba and war with Spain in 1898.

After 1913, Gompers helped purge the AFL of socialists, when they were able to control a third of the delegates at the AFL convention.

He was an enthusiastic proponent of the entry of the United States into the First World War in 1917. During the upsurge of American workers in 1919, Gompers attempted to mediate between the capitalist state and strikers in some cases, as with the coal miners, who belonged to the AFL, and in the Boston police strike. The AFL’s hostility to unskilled immigrants, and its insistence on keeping craft union divisions among steelworkers, were major factors in the isolation and defeat of the Great Steel Strike of that year.

The AFL under Gompers was instrumental in helping to pass the reactionary Immigration Act of 1924. A summary of the man and his influence was made by James P. Cannon, who would later found the Trotskyist movement in the United States, in a memorandum to the Communist International in 1922:

“The organized labor movement as a whole is firmly controlled by a vicious and reactionary bureaucracy which is typified by Samuel Gompers, President of the AF of L, who exceeds most of the capitalist statesmen in his virulent attacks on Soviet Russia and radical policies generally.”

Gompers’ last request was that he die on American soil. He was sent by special train to San Antonio where he died on December 13.



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