

This week in history: June 27 - July 3

27 June 2011

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

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25 years ago: World Court condemns US involvement in Nicaragua

On June 27, 1986, the International Court of Justice at The Hague, commonly referred to as the World Court, handed down a series of decisions condemning the US dirty war against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

The Reagan administration promptly dismissed the rulings, calling the court “not equipped” to judge US actions in the region. The US had the previous year backed out of the case, asserting that the court had no jurisdiction over ongoing conflicts, a position rejected by the World Court as well as by scholars of international law.

In all, the US was cited for 15 counts of violations of international law. By 12 to 3 votes, the court rejected US claims that it was acting in self-defense in funding the Contra rebels; asserted that in arming, training and equipping the Contras, the US was intervening in the affairs of a sovereign nation and thereby violating international law; that certain US military operations in Nicaraguan territories were attacks and were therefore in violation of international law; that by mining Nicaraguan harbors, the US was repeating all of these crimes and also blocking maritime commerce, another violation of international law; and that the US was required to pay reparations to Nicaragua for these crimes.

By a 14 to 1 margin, the court ruled that the dissemination of a torture manual published in the US, entitled *Psychological Operations in Guerrilla warfare* (*Operaciones psicológicas en guerra de guerrillas*), had “encouraged the commission by [the Contras] of acts contrary to general principles of humanitarian law.”

Ruling with the majority on each count were judges from India, France, Italy, Senegal, China, Poland, Argentina, Nigeria, Algeria and Norway. The US drew support only from

the United Kingdom and Japan.

At the time of the ruling, the Democratic Party was in the process of dropping any genuine opposition to the war. The previous week had seen 51 House Democrats break ranks to support a \$100 million aid package to the Contras, supplying just enough votes to ensure passage of the measure out of the House. On July 2, the Democratic Party released a new position paper on foreign policy prepared by Congressman Les Aspin, chair of the House Armed Services Committee, and backed by the party chairman, Paul Kirk. In contrast to the party platform in the 1984 presidential election, which criticized Reagan’s war, the new program omitted any reference to Nicaragua.

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50 years ago: Hemingway commits suicide

On July 2, 1961, the American novelist and short story writer Ernest Hemingway took his own life with a shotgun blast to his head at his home in Ketchum, Idaho.

Born in 1899, as both a writer and historical figure Hemingway was shaped by the calamitous changes of the first half of the 20th century. An adventurous middle class youth from the Chicago suburb of Oak Park, Hemingway volunteered as an ambulance driver with the Red Cross in Italy during World War I. He witnessed the carnage of the Austro-Italian front and was himself seriously injured. These experiences provided the inspiration for the short story *Big Two-Hearted River* and the novel *A Farewell to Arms*.

Returning to Chicago after the war, Hemingway befriended the writer Sherwood Anderson. Upon Anderson’s advice, Hemingway moved to Paris, where he associated with expatriate American writers grouped around Gertrude Stein, an informal circle that came to be called the “Lost Generation.” He also came to know leading European artists residing in Paris, including Picasso and James Joyce, to whom he was introduced by his friend and sponsor, the poet Ezra Pound. The *Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway’s first novel, is inspired by the expatriates in Paris.

Trained as a journalist, Hemingway’s style is characterized

by an economy of language and understatement. These traits mark Hemingway as perhaps the apotheosis of what critics refer to as literary modernism, in juxtaposition to the writing of the Victorian age and its elaborate verbosity. Here too style was at least in part a response to the horrors of the 20th century.

As Henry James wrote in 1915: "The war has used up words; they have weakened, they have deteriorated like motor car tyres." A man of the left, Hemingway tended to apply his sparse style to a broad historical panorama through the 1920s and 1930s, most notably in his work on the Spanish Civil War, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

Hemingway wrote less after World War II, but he won the Nobel Prize and published the memorable novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. He suffered from clinical depression, for which he was subjected to electroshock therapy at the Mayo Clinic.

In certain respects, Hemingway was alone in the post-war period. Many of his contemporaries had died in the 1940s (Joyce, Anderson, Stein and his longtime friend and rival F. Scott Fitzgerald), while American literature itself had declined from the levels attained in the first half of the century, a retreat to which the post-war anti-communist hysteria contributed.

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75 years ago: Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie addresses the League of Nations

After the overrunning of his country by Italy's fascist military forces in early May, on June 30, 1936 the absolute monarch of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, took the previously unprecedented step of addressing in person the Assembly of the League of Nations. Selassie and his royal entourage were forced to flee Ethiopia only days before Mussolini's forces overran the capital of Addis Ababa. Sailing from Djibouti across the Red Sea onboard a British naval vessel, Selassie made his way to Geneva, Switzerland, the home of the League of Nations.

Selassie, though fluent in French, then the international language of diplomacy, addressed the Assembly in his native Amharic. After waiting for the whistles and cat calls of a mob of Italian journalists and diplomats to be silenced, Selassie told the League of the crimes committed by the Italian military.

He described to the delegates how mustard gas had been utilized to kill humans and cattle indiscriminately in both rural and urban areas. He explained how Italy had four times the population of Ethiopia and how his armory of single-shot rifles and his horse-mounted cavalry were no match for Italy's mechanized army and air force. He warned the League "of the doom that awaits it if it should bow before the accomplished fact."

In vain Selassie appealed to the body to condemn Italy's violation of the League's Article X, which required the League to protect against aggression the territorial integrity of member states. The League of Nations had been established in 1920 as part of the Treaty of Versailles by a covenant of the victor states in the world war.

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100 years ago: Strike wave in Mexico

This week in 1911 a strike wave swept across Mexico, only one month after long-time ruler Porfirio Diaz had fled for France. The Mexican Revolution, the events made clear, had not ended with the consolidation of power by Francisco Madero. The new president sought to put in place a series of modest democratic reforms, while leaving untouched the Mexican ruling elite's control over the land and the economy.

The strike wave, led by metal workers, was bound up with grievances over the lack of significant change in the personnel of the state. "The discontent that has centered in recent weeks on newly appointed officials has shifted to employers," the New York Times reported July 2.

"Strikes are reported from nearly every section," the newspaper continued. "Nearly every smelter in the country is tied up."

By the count of the Times, some 20,000 smelter workers were involved. In addition, street car workers struck in a number of regional cities and in Mexico City, choking off movement in the nation's sprawling capital. Miners struck in Chihuahua and Aguascalientes.

As the Times noted, under Diaz, Mexico had no "labor troubles." If workers attempted to strike, "they were in danger of being lined up against stone walls and shot," the newspaper wrote, adding that the "middle-class people will begin to realize they were formerly much better off."

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