

This week in history: August 27-September 02

27 August 2012

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

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25 years ago: Philippines in turmoil after national strike and coup attempt

On August 28, 1987, a major coup attempt against the Philippine regime of Corazon Aquino unfolded across the islands. The military revolt followed an attack by Aquino's troops on a protest near Manila days earlier. Troops opened fire on the protest, wounding six, and arrested more than 125 people. The demonstration was part of a nationwide movement against increasing fuel prices.

The coup attempt, led by Col. Gregorio Honasan, was ostensibly in response to the release of Jose Maria Sison, the Maoist leader of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Aquino had released Sison as part of "national reconciliation."

Television studios were overrun by mutineers who subsequently announced on the air that the military coup had national support and called for Aquino's removal as president. There was fighting outside the presidential palace and Aquino's son, Benigno Aquino III, was ambushed and badly beaten. Honasan and his men entered the general headquarters of the military at Camp Aguinaldo with little resistance.

In Cebu City, 350 miles south of Manila, the local mayor and governor were placed under house arrest and television stations ordered off the air by another group of soldiers under Gen. Edgardo Abenina. The same day, troops loyal to Aquino under Gen. Fidel Ramos countered the mutineers as Ramos dismissed Abenina. By the evening, government troops were completing "mopping up" operations.

The coup attempt was an embarrassment for the Reagan administration, which had embraced the Aquino government—firmly based in the same landed aristocracy that gave rise to the Marcos dictatorship—as a political safety valve. After initial hesitation over whether the "people power" campaign against Marcos might open the door to a more radical mass movement from below, Washington decided that Aquino was the best option for the defense of imperialist interests in the

Philippines. Earlier in the summer, Secretary of State George P. Shultz said the Philippine example was so important to the cause of freedom around the world that "every man is a Filipino."

Less than two weeks after the coup attempt, the mass resignation of the Aquino cabinet—more than two dozen officials—signaled a major rightward shift of the administration.

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50 years ago: Cuba, Soviet Union sign military aid pact

On September 2, 1962, the Soviet Union announced that it would supply the nationalist Cuban regime of Fidel Castro with military supplies and training in response to "threats" from "aggressive imperialist quarters," a reference to persistent US efforts to topple the three-year old regime.

Only three days earlier, Havana had been shelled by Cuban exiles operating out of Florida. The US had also failed to bring down the regime in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961 and the assassination program called Operation Mongoose launched in November the same year.

The agreement, negotiated by Cuban economics minister Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, also called for a dramatic increase in Soviet economic aid to Cuba. Moscow promised to increase three-fold, to 350,000 tons, Cuban steel production, and to send Soviet agronomists to improve Cuban yields.

It was publicly acknowledged that there had been an increase in Soviet shipments to Cuba since July, likely including military goods. However, it was not yet clear that these included nuclear weapons, as Moscow moved to counter Washington's stationing of medium range nuclear weapons in Turkey and Italy.

Guevara arrived in the USSR on August 27, his second visit, and met with Leonid Brezhnev, then a top aide to Khrushchev, before traveling on to the Black Sea resort of Yalta, where the Communist Party leader was vacationing. Guevara sought a public treaty between the Soviet Union and Cuba guaranteeing Soviet assistance in the event of a military attack by the United States, which he regarded as more valuable than specific weaponry.

The Cuban emissary also warned Khrushchev that the stationing of Soviet nuclear weapons on Cuban soil could not be kept secret for very long, because of the activities of the CIA and Cuban right-

wing exiles who had extensive contacts inside the island.

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75 years ago: Photo sparks revulsion against Japanese invasion of China

On August 28, 1937, photographer and newsreel producer H.S. Wong (Wong Hei Sheng) captured the image of a traumatized Chinese baby amidst the bombed-out remains of Shanghai South railway station immediately after a Japanese bombing raid. Fought between Chinese and invading Japanese troops, the Battle of Shanghai had begun a couple of weeks earlier.

When the attack came Chinese civilian refugees were crowded at the railway station awaiting trains to evacuate them from the urban maelstrom. The rawness, agony and sheer horror of the photo would subsequently make the image an icon of anti-militarist sentiment. The symbolic image is known by a number of monikers—“Motherless Chinese baby,” “Chinese Baby,” or “The baby in the Shanghai Railway station,” amongst others.

Historian and journalist Harold Isaacs, author of *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, called the photo “one of the most successful propaganda pieces of all time.” The image was voted by readers of *Life* magazine one of the top ten images of 1937. In 1944 Frank Capra used Wong’s newsreel images from the incident in his movie *The Battle for China*. More recently the photo appears in the *Time-Life* publication *100 Photographs that Changed the World* published in 2003.

Working at the time for Hearst Metrotone News, Wong used his Leica camera to capture still images at the scene and also filmed the surrounding human and infrastructural carnage. Later Wong recollected, “It was a horrible sight. People were still trying to get up. Dead and injured lay strewn across the tracks and platform. Limbs lay all over the place ... I noticed that my shoes were soaked in blood. Then I saw a man pick up a baby from the tracks and carry him to the platform. He went back to get another badly injured child. The mother lay dead on the tracks.” It was then that Wong took his famous photograph.

The newsreel footage shot by Wong was flown to the United States where cinema-going audiences numbering millions viewed it. The still image was published in Hearst Corporation publications across the US. The exposure of the image to a mass public audience created an international wave of revulsion for the military designs of Imperial Japan.

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100 years ago: Woodrow Wilson opens presidential campaign

On September 2, 1912, Woodrow Wilson began his presidential campaign with a Labor Day speech in Buffalo, New York. Wilson had been nominated on July 2 by the Democratic National Convention to run as the Democratic Party candidate, following a heated contest with House Speaker Champ Clark, which required 46 ballots to establish a winner.

Much of Wilson’s speech was an attack on the program being advanced by Theodore Roosevelt, who had split from the Republican Party, and was running as a presidential candidate for the Progressive “Bull Moose” Party. Roosevelt, who was closely identified with Progressivism, a political tendency that advocated reforms to the worst excesses of capitalism to forestall the danger of socialism, had recently called for a “new nationalism,” and a powerful central government.

Wilson invoked Jeffersonian ideals against the dangers of a large government, and criticized the Republican Party’s ties with “combinations,” the massive corporations of the day, commenting, “I know that these monopolies are so many cars of Juggernaut which are in our very sight being driven over men in such ways as to crush the life out of them.” He said that the combinations had been “more inimical to the interests of organized labor than any other industry.”

Wilson’s denunciation of the combinations was aimed at promoting illusions in the Democratic Party, a party equally committed to the defense of the capitalist system. It also reflected fear in the political establishment of possible social upheaval. In his speech, Wilson warned that a Republican presidency could provoke social unrest: “God forbid that we should bring about a state of politics in which open revolt should be substituted for the Ballot Box!”

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