

This week in history: July 1-7

1 July 2013

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

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25 years ago: US shoots down Iranian airliner, killing 290

All 290 passengers and crew, including 66 children, were killed on July 3, 1988 when a US guided-missile cruiser shot an Iranian airliner out of the sky over the Persian Gulf. Iran Air Flight 655 was a regularly scheduled 150-mile flight between Bandar Abbas in Iran to Dubai, crossing the Strait of Hormuz.

The *USS Vincennes*, an AEGIS-equipped cruiser, was part of Operation Earnest Will, the provocative campaign which deployed the largest US fleet since World War II, under the pretext of escorting Kuwaiti oil tankers the length of the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war. The *Vincennes* was in Iranian waters, engaged in a skirmish with Iranian gunboats when it launched two missiles at the airliner.

US President Reagan issued a public statement claiming that that while he was “saddened” by the loss of life, the shooting down of the aircraft was a “proper defensive response.” He, along with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William Crowe, promoted the lie that the *Vincennes* mistook the Airbus 300 for an attacking F14 Tomcat supersonic jet fighter. Civil aviation authorities confirmed that Flight 655 was blown out of the sky seven minutes after takeoff while on its normal flight path, having ascended to 14,000 feet.

The *USS Sides*, a nearby US guided-missile frigate, determined that the unknown aircraft was non-hostile and turned its attention elsewhere only seconds before the *Vincennes* launched its missiles.

The Pentagon and the US media disseminated several falsifications about the event, but failed to answer how with all the electronic surveillance in place—AWACS-equipped spy planes, satellites and sea and ground-based radars—such a “mistake” could be made. The claim that the aircraft was mistaken for an attacking F14 is belied by the facts. Attack speed of an F14 is 1,400 miles per hour. The airbus was ascending at a speed of 300 miles per hour.

Vice President George H. W. Bush declared a month later, “I will never apologize for the United States of America, ever. I don’t care what the facts are.” *Vincennes* Captain William C. Rogers, who was responsible for taking his ship into Iranian waters to pick a fight with Iranian gunboats, and Anti-Air-Warfare Commander Scott Lustig were awarded Navy Commendation medals in 1990.

50 years ago: Sino-Soviet rift deepens

This week in 1963 relations between the Stalinist bureaucracies of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China reached a new low.

On July 6 a Chinese delegation headed by Communist Party Secretary General Deng Xiaoping was sent to Moscow, ostensibly for the purpose of repairing deeply frayed relations. Instead the negotiations turned into an opportunity for full-fledged propaganda attacks on both sides. By the end of the week hundreds of Chinese university students were leaving the Soviet Union and the Beijing regime had withdrawn Chinese entries from the Moscow film festival.

The previous week, several Chinese diplomats had been expelled by the Soviet Union after they allegedly distributed a Chinese manifesto attacking the Soviet Union for its emphasis on “peaceful coexistence” with the West and de-Stalinization under Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev and the official Soviet Communist Party organ *Pravda* in turn launched broadsides against the Chinese communists, under Premier Mao Zedong, as “mad men” intent on world war.

The dispute was in fact totally unprincipled. Both bureaucracies were steeped in Stalinism, favoring their own national interests at the expense of the international proletariat. China, with its rhetoric of war against imperialism, sought to appeal to the decolonizing nationalist movements of the “oppressed nations,” as an editorial in the CCP central organ put it.

The Chinese’ greatest crime, from the standpoint of the Moscow regime, was that it appealed directly to the most reactionary sections of the Soviet bureaucracy disaffected by Khrushchev’s alleged de-Stalinization. The nervousness in Moscow highlighted the sharp political crisis in the Soviet Union and its threat to spread to the Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe.

For its part, China found itself in the throes of a deep economic crisis. The National People’s Congress scheduled for June had been delayed because the third five year plan was not ready for launching. A sharp contraction in industrial production had taken place between 1960 and 1961, with steel production falling to 8-11 million tons from 18 million in 1960. China remained a food importer, with plans to mechanize agricultural production stymied by a lack of heavy industry, which, driven in part by a chronic coal shortage, was operating at only 60 percent capacity.

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75 years ago: Evian Conference on fate of German Jews opens

On July 6, 1938 the Evian Conference opened in the French spa-town of Evian-les-Bains on the shore of Lake Geneva, with delegates from 32 countries and representatives of many international relief organizations. The conference was called by American President Franklin Roosevelt over the issue of the fate of German Jewish refugees seeking to flee persecution and pogroms organized by Nazi Germany.

Roosevelt, betraying his government's lack of seriousness over the plight of Germany's Jewish population, chose not to send a high profile representative to the proceedings at Evian. Instead he sent a personal friend, businessman Myron C. Taylor. The political purpose of the conference for Roosevelt's administration was to placate the public outcry created by the Nazi suppression of the Jews without actually increasing the quota for Jewish migration to the US. Taylor was allocated the ludicrous title of "Ambassador Extraordinary Plenipotentiary" for the duration of the conference, but the grandiosity of his title could not conceal the perfunctory nature of his mandate.

During the course of the nine-day conference, one delegate after another rose on behalf of their governments to condemn the persecution of German Jews by the Nazi regime. But the majority of those present, including the US and UK governments, refused to allocate substantially higher quotas for Jewish immigrants. Claiming to be saturated with refugees from the Spanish Civil War, the French government, host of the conference, pleaded it could not receive any more refugees. The only country to offer to take substantially more Jewish refugees was the tiny Caribbean state of the Dominican Republic, which offered to accept 100,000 German Jews.

The Évian Conference established the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees (ICR) as a sop to public demands for decisive action. The purpose of the Committee was supposedly to "approach the governments of the countries of refuge with a view to developing opportunities for permanent settlement." The Committee was stillborn, receiving little by way of authority or support from the member state signatories.

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100 years ago: Rioting miners shot dead by police in South Africa

On July 5, 1913, white miners rioting in Market Square in Johannesburg were fired upon by police, killing 25 people, including bystanders. The night before, Johannesburg police killed 40 people when they fired at a crowd of protesters who refused to disperse.

The Worker, newspaper of the South African Labour Party, described the police attack as "the most indescribable scene of cold-blooded brutality ever perpetrated in an industrial conflict ... defenceless individuals, including women and children...were picked off at pleasure, sometimes without sufficient or any warning."

The strike began in May in response to demands for increased productivity and the loss of the Saturday half-day holiday at the New Kleinfontein Mine near Benoni. Five underground mechanics struck on May 10, 1913 and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers ordered union members to leave the positions vacant. The new manager, however, replaced the five strikers with non-union workers. On May 26 miners at New Kleinfontein facing similar conditions refused to work. Supported by the majority of white workers at the mine, the miners declared a strike and appointed a committee. Management refused to deal with the strike committee and on June 11 reopened the mine, employing strikebreakers. Strikes soon spread to other mines.

On June 22, General J. C. Smuts, Minister of Defence, Finance and acting Minister of Justice, failed in his attempt to resolve the dispute between strikers and mine-owners. Fearing that the police force was inadequate to deal with the escalating tensions, Smuts called on the imperial garrison of South Africa to protect power and railway stations, mines, city buildings and private properties from possible attacks. Close to 5,000 policemen and special constables, almost 3,000 imperial troops and 670 citizen force members were dispatched to Witwatersrand.

By July 1913, 19,000 workers from power stations and the gold mines were on strike and every mine on the Witwatersrand ceased operations. On July 4, crowds began stoning police and Royal Dragoons who were attempting to disperse them. Buildings and railways sheds were attacked and burned, shops were looted and guns and ammunition were distributed. The police responded with brutal repression.

Unnerved by the rapid spread of the movement, Botha, Chamber of Mines representatives and Smuts met with strike leaders, agreeing on a settlement. All strikers were reinstated and a judicial committee established to address workers' grievances. Strikebreakers were dismissed with a year's salary at government expense.

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