

This week in history: July 15-21

15 July 2013

25 years ago: Moscow announces crackdown on Armenian protest

On July 18, 1988, the presidium of the Supreme Soviet, in an emergency meeting, unanimously rejected the July 13 vote by the Nagorno-Karabakh legislature for secession from Azerbaijan. General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev called the previous five months of demonstrations in the region “unacceptable,” adding, “democratic rights and the new conditions opened up by *perestroika* are being clearly misused for anti-democratic purposes.”

On July 20, Soviet authorities announced that one of the best-known spokesmen for the national grievances of the Armenians, Paruir Airikyan, who had been in jail since March for nationalist activities, was being stripped of his Soviet citizenship and expelled from the USSR.

The recently elected leader of Nagorno-Karabakh, Genrikh Pgosyan, stated that the promises of economic improvements in the region were not enough. “It must not be allowed in a socialist state, that one people decides the fate of another,” he said. He accused Azerbaijani leader Suleyman Tatliyev of whipping up anti-Armenian sentiments, which led to the killing of at least 32 people in the city of Sumgait the previous February.

The defense of its use of troops by the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow and its decision to repress working class unrest in the region portended the bloody ethnic conflict which was to emerge.

50 years ago: Failed pro-Nasser coup in Syria

On July 18, 1963, a pro-Nasser coup d'etat was attempted and put down in Syria. Colonel Jassem Alwan led the coup, which was supported by President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and which aimed at the

reunification of Syria with Egypt in the United Arab Republic (UAR). The UAR had been dissolved by another coup in Syria in 1961.

The failure of the coup strengthened the hand of the Baathist military regime in Syria and virtually eliminated Nasser’s influence. Baathist Interior Minister Amin al-Hafiz led the counterattack against the coup plotters. Ensuing battles resulted in hundreds of deaths, including 27 officers who were shot by firing squad after the revolt was put down. Alwan was later captured and sentenced to death, but was granted exile in 1964 after the intervention of several Arab states, including Egypt and Algeria.

Between 1961 and early 1963, the Nasserist and Baathist military officers had been distrustful allies in a series of coups and counter-coups, some successful and others failed, against the secessionist, anti-Nasser military bloc. A similar combination had toppled the nationalist, anti-Nasser Quasim regime in Iraq on February 8, 1963. A successful coup on March 8, 1963, finally brought down the Syrian government, but Baathist military officers quickly turned on their Nasserist allies, removing dozens of officers from the military, and stepped back from a proposed unification with Iraq and Egypt. This led to mass demonstrations across Syria—the population overwhelmingly in favor of a Pan-Arab state—which encouraged Nasserists to orchestrate yet another coup.

In terms of their proclamations, there was little to distinguish the Nasserists and the Baathists. All purported to be in favor of a Pan-Arab state, to be anti-imperialist and opposed to Israel, and all claimed to be “socialists.” This posturing aimed to appeal to the popular aspirations of the Syrian and Arab people, but neither the Baathists nor the Nasserists had deep support in the population. They instead represented rival factional interests of the bourgeois ruling elite—the Baathists tending to represent Syria’s religious minorities and secularists— that played out through sections of the officer corps.

75 years ago: Spanish Civil War enters third year

On July 17, 1938 the Spanish Civil War entered its third year of conflict. Fascist-controlled Spain was decked out in red and gold for the first of a three-day holiday called to celebrate the anniversary of the outbreak of hostilities. In Republican Spain commemorations were much more restrained and only indoor ceremonies allowed, with the exception of the swearing in of new military recruits and other specially authorized events.

The fascist side officially entitled the July 17 anniversary “Day of Africa” in reference to Franco’s proclamation to the Army of Morocco on that date in 1936. July 18, 1938 would be commemorated as the “Day of National Rising” to mark the spread of the military-fascist revolt to the Spanish mainland and islands. And the third day of the holiday was marked as “Day of National Revolution” to make clear that the aim of his movement of reactionaries, monarchists, generals and fascists was not just a crushing victory in the theatre of war but more profoundly paving the way for the reconstruction of Spain within a fascist framework similar to that in Italy or Germany.

The anniversary was marked by further military successes for Franco’s army. While the expected fall of Valencia did not materialize, the Nationalist mood was consoled by news from the Teruel front. The fighting occurred at a key crossroads near Albentosa. After brutal hand to hand combat Franco’s army seized and fortified two railway stations in the vicinity. The Nationalists took over one thousand Republican prisoners. The retreating remnants of Republican troops in that area were virtually cut off and faced annihilation.

100 years ago: Kuomintang rebellion against the Chinese government

On July 15 1913, the Kuomintang (KMT) led a rebellion against the government of President Yuan Shikai. Yuan, who controlled the Beiyuan army, the most powerful military force in China, had been a prominent figure in the Qing dynasty. He played a key role in negotiations between republican forces who led the revolution of 1911, and the dynasty which was deposed by that rebellion, leading to the establishment of a

Republic.

Nationalist leader Sun Yat-Sen became the first Provisional President in January 1912, but power was centered in Beijing under Yuan’s armies. Sun, whose forces lacked an army, ceded to Yuan’s demands for a united China. In March 1912, Yuan became the second Provisional President.

Yuan quickly assumed dictatorial powers including revising the constitution. Tension increased between the Kuomintang and Yuan’s government in February 1913, when the Kuomintang achieved a significant victory in the elections for the bicameral parliament, winning a majority of seats. The KMT’s founder Song Jiaoren sought to curtail the influence of the office of the president on China’s parliament. In response, Yuan ordered the assassination of Song and other figures in the KMT.

Animosity to Yuan increased when in April, without consulting parliament, Yuan secured a 25 million pound loan from Russia, Great Britain, France, Germany and Japan, which was used to finance the army. In May, a deal struck with Russia restricted China’s rights to station troops in Outer Mongolia, angering the KMT.

Yuan also fueled discontent by disbanding the Revolutionary armies in several provinces. Many soldiers and officers felt that their role in the ousting of the Qing dynasty went unrecognized and without compensation. These layers argued that Yuan and Vice-President Li Yuanhong had acquired their positions through KMT maneuvers rather than through participating in the revolution. In July, the KMT launched its rebellion, dubbed the “second revolution,” which was eventually crushed by Yuan’s forces.



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