

This week in history: July 22-28

22 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: Student protests force out Burmese strongman

Ne Win, the Burmese military ruler who seized power in a 1962 military coup, resigned on July 24, 1988 after months of massive student demonstrations. He admitted that he was “indirectly responsible” for the “March and June affairs” in which hundreds were killed in clashes with the army and police.

Ne Win’s resignation as leader of the chairman of the ruling Burmese Socialist Program Party (BSPP) was accepted by the party’s congress, but it rejected his proposal for a referendum to decide whether to scrap the BSPP’s political monopoly as the only legal party. Since coming to power in 1962, the regime used the slogan the “Burmese way to socialism” as an excuse for a nationalist rampage, expelling from the country most merchants, technicians and industrialists, who were mainly of Indian and Chinese origin.

The student demonstrations in March and June followed similar demonstrations against the military regime, the most recent being in September 1987. They were all brutally suppressed.

The BSPP appointed a close associate of Ne Win, General Sein Lwin, who was directly in charge of the ruthless suppression of all opposition to the military regime since 1962, to replace him. Win’s farewell speech warned that if the “disturbances” continued, the “army would have to be called and I would like to declare from here that if the army shoots it has no tradition of shooting into the air. It would shoot straight to hit.”

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50 years ago: US, Soviet Union agree to partial nuclear test ban

On July 25, 1963 the governments of the US, the Soviet Union, and the United Kingdom announced that they had agreed to a partial nuclear test ban treaty, an agreement portrayed as the first significant attempt to lessen the possibility of a global nuclear conflagration. The chief negotiators were US undersecretary of state Averell Harriman and Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko.

The agreement, subsequently dubbed the Partial Test Ban Treaty (PTBT), banned atmospheric and underwater nuclear tests, but exempted underground tests, which in any event could not be effectively monitored at that time because their seismic effect was not distinguishable from earthquakes. The treaty was officially signed on August 5 by Gromyko, Lord Home of the UK, and US Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and went into effect on October 10, 1963.

In part the nuclear treaty was an initial attempt to dissuade other nations from joining “the nuclear club.” Powers in the process of acquiring nuclear arsenals or the technology to develop them, including France, the People’s Republic of China, and Israel, did not initially sign the treaty.

The Khrushchev government had sought to tie the ban to a non-aggression pact, but the US and UK refused. The US remained the only nation to have used nuclear weapons in war when it incinerated the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs at the end of World War II, killing hundreds of thousands.

In the recent Cuban missile crisis the world had come to the precipice of nuclear war when the Kennedy administration imposed a naval blockade against Soviet shipments to Cuba. Elements in the military brass,

including Air Force chief of staff Curtis LeMay, had advocated war. Ultimately Khrushchev backed down, dismantling Soviet missiles in Cuba, in exchange for a promise from Washington that it would remove missiles from Turkey.

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75 years ago: Spanish Republican army launches Ebro offensive

In a surprise attack coming after months of military setbacks, the Spanish Republican army advanced swiftly across the Ebro River on July 25, 1938. The Battle of Ebro, which ended in Republican forces being repulsed and thrown back to their original positions, turned out to be the bloodiest and longest battle of the Spanish Civil War.

The attack had three main aims— to relieve the military pressure exerted by Italian troops upon the Republican capital city of Valencia by forcing Franco to withdraw forces, to reconnect the two Republican-held zones separated by Franco’s military advances, and to prevent the political collapse of the Republican government.

On July 25 Republican troops first crossed the river at a major bend between Fayon and Benefollet, taking the Nationalist 50th Division by surprise and capturing 4,000 prisoners. By the next day the Republican army occupied some 800 kilometers and reached the outskirts of Gandesa, about 25 kilometers west of the Ebro. However, a second arm of the Republican advance, by the XIV International Brigades near Amposta, was beaten back after intensive fighting and huge losses of the volunteer force. The inability of Republican forces to take Gandesa, mainly because of superior fascist air power, would lead to the fight quickly descending into a First World War trench-style battle of attrition.

Even as its military power waned, the bourgeois Republican “Popular Front” government intensified its effort to suffocate the Spanish Revolution in Catalonia and other Republican-held areas, unleashing murderous repression against Trotskyists and other opponents of the regime, with Stalinist agents playing the leading role. In addition to suffocating the working class, the Madrid government had from the beginning rejected land reform or colonial independence for Morocco, measures that would have undermined Franco’s basis of support.

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100 years ago: Copper miners strike begins in Michigan

On July 23, 1913, workers organized in the Keweenaw chapters of the Western Federation of Miners (WFM) voted to begin a strike against the major copper corporations on Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. Workers demanded improved pay and conditions, as well as union recognition. The strike, which involved around 15,000 workers in the “Copper Country,” continued until April 1914.

Workers in the Upper Peninsula, many of whom were European migrants, especially from Finland, Italy, Slovenia, and the Cornwall region of Great Britain, had only been unionized in 1912 and early 1913, and the region had a history of industrial quiescence. The major mines controlled virtually every aspect of workers’ lives, including their housing, education, health care, and local shops.

Grievances were fuelled by the introduction of a one-man drill for the mining of copper, as opposed to earlier two-man, and three-man drills. The change broke up family groups who had worked in the mines together, raised unemployment, and exposed workers who operated the drill on their own to greater danger and a lack of help in the event of an accident. Workers also increasingly expressed opposition to long working days, and the use of child labor.

Once it began, the strike rapidly led to violent confrontations between workers and company thugs, along with local police. Within days, militia troops were dispatched to the mines by the state government, while the mining companies sought to continue operations with the use of scab labor. The union leaders made a futile appeal to the Democratic Party governor of Michigan, Woodbridge Nathan Forrest, calling on him to arbitrate.

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