This week in history: August 19-25

19 August 2013

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

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Burmese military regime totters

In response to the continuing mass demonstrations across the country, a civilian, Dr. U Maung Maung, was appointed president on August 19, 1988. The biographer of longtime military strongman Ne Win, Maung Maung was known to be closely aligned with the military government.

Hundreds of thousands continued to demonstrate in major cities across Burma, demanding the resignation of the newly-appointed president—the third in less than a month. In the capital of Rangoon, 200,000 to 300,000 surged through the streets, bringing the city to a standstill. The country's second largest city, Mandalay, saw a demonstration of 250,000 people—half the city's population. Transport was shut down as train and bus workers went on strike.

In other major cities, marches of hundreds of thousands occurred, exposing the total inability of the military to contain the massive opposition by means of savage repression, with thousands of protesters shot to death up to that point.

Maung Maung announced plans for a referendum and the release of selected political prisoners, admitting that the regime retained only tenuous control over its own troops, saying soldiers "find it extremely repugnant to confront the people who are their parents."

He announced that an extraordinary congress of the ruling Burma Socialist Program Party would be convened on September 12 to approve the referendum and pave the way for multiparty elections.

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50 years ago: Washington issues secret order for removal of Diem

On August 24, the US Department of State sent Telegram 243 (or DEPTEL 243) to the newly installed ambassador to the American puppet regime of South Vietnam, Henry Cabot Lodge, calling for the removal of President Ngo Dinh Diem in the wake of another bloody crackdown against the nation's majority Buddhists.

Events had come to a head in the early morning hours of August 21, 1963, when Diem and Nhu launched a series of raids against Buddhist temples, killing hundreds and arresting over 1,400. Then, at 6:00 a.m., Diem declared martial law throughout South Vietnam, which included shoot-to-kill orders for violations of a 9 p.m. curfew. The attacks were carried out by South Vietnamese army Special Forces disguised as army regulars in a clumsy attempt to shift blame away from Diem to the generals.

The secret cable, which was approved by President Kennedy and other top administration officials after some debate, essentially called for a coup d'état against Diem. It asked that Diem be told to remove his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, who dominated the US-supplied Special Forces as well as the militarized police. But the cable warned that if Diem did not adhere to this demand that he too should be forced from power. Lodge, in turn, cabled back that it was inadvisable to raise the matter with Diem at all, and that the communication should only be shared with top generals.

The "US Government cannot tolerate situation in which power lies in Nhu's hands," Cable 243 read. "Diem must be given chance to rid himself of Nhu and his coterie … If, in spite of all your efforts, Diem remains obdurate and refuses, then we must face the possibility that Diem himself cannot be preserved."

Lodge was also told to approach South Vietnam's Army generals and tell them that "if [Diem] remains obdurate, then we are prepared to accept the obvious implication that we can no longer support Diem. You may also tell [the] appropriate military commanders [that] we will give them direct support in any interim period of breakdown [of the] central government mechanism."

Lodge cabled back, the "chances of Diem's meeting our demands are virtually nil. At the same time, by making them we give Nhu [a] chance to forestall or block action by [the] military…. Therefore, [we] propose we go straight to [the] Generals with our demands, without informing Diem."

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75 years ago: French troops used as scab labor at port of Marseilles

The French government ordered soldiers to work the docks at the port of Marseilles on August 21, 1938 in a bid to break a six-week-long strike of longshoremen for higher wages, shorter hours, and better conditions. That evening Labor Minister Paul Ramadier delivered a decree prepared by the Ministry of Public Works provisionally regulating the functioning of the port of Marseilles and the work rules of the master-stevedores and longshoremen. The decree, he announced, would remain in place until an agreement had been reached.

M. Fanucci, the secretary-general of the French federation of all trade unions, declared "Arbitration has the force of law, but the dockers do not care a hoot for arbitrations and laws. What we want is a salary increase. The Minister begged us to come to him. We designed to go to him, but as he proposed only that we should apply the arbitral award we could not take it into consideration."

On August 22 the government made an improved offer, and as a sop to the striking workers Ramadier was also forced to resign. The government offered a six hours and forty minute working day, with night shifts, Sundays, and some holidays to be paid 75 percent more than the normal rate.

By the close of the week workers' action in solidarity had spread to Paris, the North of France and to the Algerian ports of Oran and Bone. On August 26 four ships had to leave Oran without taking on board most of the cargo waiting for them. The London *Times* noted that the dockers involved in the stoppages at the Maghrebian ports were of both Arab and European ethnicity but with the majority being Arab speakers. It also noted the international and cosmopolitan nature of the Marseilles port workforce: "The 7,000 Marseilles dockers consist of 1,500 Frenchmen by birth, 1,500 Frenchmen by naturalisation, 1,500 French colonial natives and 2,500 foreigners."

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100 years ago: Leo Frank convicted in anti-Semitic frame-up

On August 25, 1913, Leo Frank, a Jewish-American engineer, was convicted of the rape and murder of Mary Phagan and sentenced to death. Phagan was a 13-year-old worker in the National Pencil Company in Atlanta where Frank was superintendent. Her body was found in the factory cellar on April 26, 1913, and Frank was reportedly the last to see her alive.

In the South, Frank was cast as the epitome of Northern "Yankee" capitalism in sensationalist and blatantly anti-Semitic coverage of the highly publicized case.

Two different people had been arrested on suspicion of the murder; however they were both released without charge. Testimony from factory employees, who claimed that Frank had flirted with Mary, caused investigators to turn their attention to Frank.

Evidence began to emerge that Jim Conley, the African-American factory sweeper, was responsible for the murder, but police did little to investigate. A grand jury sought to indict Conley, but solicitor Hugh Dorsey convinced them that the state's case against Frank would be jeopardized.

Phagan's murder took place under conditions of a sharp escalation of industrial and political militancy in the working class. The political establishment, and the media actively sought to channel popular anger into the reactionary channels of racism, while right-wing movements were fostered to be mobilized against struggles of the working class.

Despite indications that key prosecution witnesses, including Conley, had lied, Frank was convicted and sentenced to death. His lawyers sought clemency, and Frank's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment on June 21, 1915.

On August 16, 1915, a mob of 25, including prominent members of the Georgian establishment, lynched Frank in Phagan's home-town. Former governor Joseph Mackey Brown was among the ringleaders of the murder. The political conditions for the lynching had been prepared by politicians such as Thomas E. Watson, formerly a prominent figure in the Populist Party, who had infamously warned that, "If Frank's rich connections keep on lying about this case, SOMETHING BAD WILL HAPPEN."

Shortly after, members of the Knights of Mary Phagan formed the new Ku Klux Klan of Georgia, while the Anti-Defamation League was formed in response to the lynching, to combat anti-Semitism and racism. In 1986 Frank was posthumously pardoned.

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