

# This week in history: June 2-8

2 June 2014

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**50 years ago: South Korea imposes martial law**

## 25 years ago: Thousands killed in Tiananmen Square massacre

On June 4, 1989, the months-long conflict over control of Beijing's Tiananmen Square erupted with the shooting of hundreds of protesters by troops of the People's Liberation Army of China. Tanks and armored vehicles rolled into the square after lines of troops with automatic weapons fired indiscriminately into the crowds of protesting students and workers.

Though martial law had been declared by the regime of Deng Xiaoping and Li Peng, almost two weeks earlier, the Stalinist regime had been unable to enforce it due to the popular support for the pro-democracy movement that exploded onto the scene in late April. A shakeup inside the top echelons of the Chinese Communist Party was carried out to eliminate opposition to an all-out crackdown. The most reactionary elements in the Stalinist bureaucracy came to the fore, their position exemplified by General Wang Zhen, who declared, "We've got to do it or the common people will rebel! Anybody who tries to overthrow the Communist Party deserves death and no burial!"

On June 2, tens of thousands of troops were blocked from entering the square by thousands of Chinese workers and students. Teargas was used by troops to no effect, as protesters resisted, throwing rocks and bottles into the assembled soldiers. Witnesses described scenes of hundreds of young soldiers confused and many in tears. On the morning of the next day a systematic drive by the army to take over the square was met by an increasing influx of civilians from Beijing to prevent the takeover of the square. Military vehicles were captured and overturned to be used as barricades.

Troops attacked and arrested journalists to prevent news coverage of the events, seizing cameras and video equipment. Late Saturday, June 3, troops began firing into the crowds. By Sunday, files of tanks drove into the center of the square, sometimes over the bodies of protesters.

The massacre became a turning point for the regime in China. Despite massive international protests, bloody reprisals would be taken in the coming weeks and months against both students and workers. The actual number killed in the massacre is still not known. Estimates vary from 300 to 6,000 with up to 30,000 estimated injuries.

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On June 3, 1964, South Korean president General Park Chung Hee declared martial law after thousands of student protesters in Seoul overwhelmed police and overran the capitol complex. The same day in Kwaju 6,000 demonstrators fought through police barricades and tear gas grenades to storm government offices and the headquarters of the ruling Democratic Republican Party. After the martial law edict, thousands of demonstrators were arrested, newspapers were suppressed, college and universities were suspended for the year, and three divisions of the military were sent to Seoul, the capital.

The martial law order, which was first approved by US ambassador Samuel D. Berger and United Nations forces commander Gen. Hamilton Howse, did not immediately stop the protests, which spread from Seoul to at least a dozen other cities. On June 5, over 1,200 arrests were made in Seoul to preempt planned demonstrations, but protests took place regardless, in which one student, 20-year-old Lee Yoon Shik, was killed. In Inchon, 2,000 high school students, chanting "Lift martial law," overran police barriers before being forced back. In Pusan, thousands of students pushed past police and reached city hall, where they burned in effigy five figures they said represented government misrule.

The demonstrations began in March, 1964 as a protest against the regime's move toward normalizing relations with Japan, but soon wider layers of the youth joined the demonstrations, which proliferated across the country. As they grew, the focus of the protests shifted toward social grievances, including poverty, joblessness, inflation, and government corruption.

The regime made only symbolic concessions. June 6 saw the resignation of the chairman and founder of the Democratic Republican Party, Col. Kim Chong Pil. Party members in the national assembly on June 6 demanded the resignation of Chang Kyung Sung, Pil's main rival and vice speaker of the assembly, by a vote of 76 to 5 with 11 abstentions. The party, whose leadership were recruited directly from South Korea's Central Intelligence Agency, had been created the year before to provide a veneer of legitimacy to Park Chung Hee's presidency, which was in fact rooted in his domination over the military and his unswerving loyalty to the US, which maintained a massive occupation force in South Korea.

A similar wave of student protest had led to the resignation of the US stooge dictator Singman Rhee in 1960, after military violence only ignited further protests. Park Chung Hee led a military coup a year later, sweeping aside the Second Republic.

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## 75 years ago: Jewish refugee ship forced back to Europe

On the June 6, 1939, the Hamburg-Amerika ocean liner MS St. Louis, laden with 917 Jewish refugees, including 500 women and 150 children, was forced to head back to Europe after days of cruising aimlessly off the coasts of Cuba and then Florida. Spurned by the American, Canadian and Cuban governments, many of the passengers subsequently perished in the Nazi Holocaust.

Most of the refugees fleeing from fascist persecution were hoping to stay in Cuba while awaiting permission to enter the United States. Refugee organisations, in an attempt to provide financial security for the refugees, deposited funds with the Cuban government as a guarantee the passengers on board the ship would ultimately leave the island. In the meantime, overtures were also made to the Roosevelt administration for the refugees to disembark in the United States, but to no avail.

On June 6, the president of Cuba announced that the refugees would not be admitted to the Caribbean island state because the relief organisations had failed to meet certain conditions. The same day, the ship's captain Gustav Schroder sent a message to the Hamburg-Amerika offices in New York that he intended to sail back to Germany. The liner was due to begin a cruise from New York on June 30 and the company placed commercial considerations first and decided it could not delay any further.

Fearful of the public reaction to the fate of the victims of Nazi Germany, the Cuban government belatedly offered to accept the refugees if a \$500 bond was deposited for each refugee and their maintenance charges in a detention camp guaranteed. The ship had already sailed, however, and did not turn back.

The fate of the refugees was subsequently depicted in the book by Gordon Thomas and Max Morgan-Witt, *Voyage of the Damned*, and the motion picture of the same name, directed by Stuart Rosenberg and featuring Oskar Werner in his last role.

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## 100 years ago: Gunning down of protesters sparks mass upheavals in Italy

On June 7, 1914, police killed three demonstrators at an antiwar protest in the Adriatic port city of Ancona, in Italy. The police attack precipitated a semi-insurrectionary strike and protest movement of workers throughout Italy, dubbed "Red week."

Socialists, republicans and anarchists had called the rally in Ancona in opposition to the growth of European militarism, and the imprisonment of two young soldiers for their antiwar convictions. Italy was heavily involved in the deepening geopolitical tensions, having seized control of modern-day Libya from the ailing Ottoman Empire in 1911-12. In March, the liberal

cabinet of Giovanni Giolitti had fallen, and been replaced by a government led by Antonio Salandra, a conservative and enthusiastic militarist.

The Italian Socialist Party (PSI), and the major trade unions called a general strike on June 8 in response to the police shootings. In the following days, clashes pitting police and soldiers against striking workers and peasants erupted throughout Italy.

Mass demonstrations were held in cities around the country. In the province of Romagna, churches and official buildings were attacked by strikers and set on fire, while telegraph poles were felled in an attempt to cut the military's lines of communication. The cities of Ancona and Ravenna were effectively taken over by workers and peasants.

In Rome, troops charged strikers who had erected barricades in the street, and shots were exchanged, killing three strikers and eight troopers. Workers were also fired upon by troops in Naples and Florence.

Tens of thousands of troops were mobilized to regain control of towns and cities across the country. In response, the major unions, fearful of further revolutionary upheaval and with various connections to the state, called the strike movement off.

Antonio Gramsci, the Italian socialist, later explained that the defeat of the movement was a product of an absence of political leadership. This was typified by the role of Benito Mussolini, at the time one of the main leaders of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI). While occasionally given to ultra-radical rhetoric, Mussolini and the other leaders of the PSI did not provide a revolutionary perspective for the working class.

Their national-opportunism was most sharply expressed by the fact that with the outbreak of World War I, Mussolini would abandon his socialist pretensions, and become a nationalist demagogue in the service of Italy's war effort, before going on to found the Italian fascist movement.

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