

This week in history: June 30-July 6

30 June 2014

[25 Years Ago](#) | [50 Years Ago](#) | [75 Years Ago](#) | [100 Years Ago](#)

50 years ago: US Civil Rights Act signed into law

25 years ago: Political crisis deepens in Poland

On June 30, 1989, Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski announced he would step down from the Polish presidency in the vote to be held by the newly elected National Assembly. The June 4 parliamentary election had been a rout for Communist Party candidates, with Solidarity winning 99 of 100 seats in the Senate, and all the contested seats in the lower house. Communist Party candidates won only one of the 35 seats reserved for country-wide voting. In a runoff June 18 to fill those seats still vacant, voter turnout plunged to only 25 percent, and those voting still refused to give any support to the Stalinists.

The election results created a crisis of rule for the regime, as Solidarity candidates held 46 percent of the 560 seats in the National Assembly (under an agreement reached in the so-called Round Table talks, the Stalinists and allied parties were allotted a narrow majority despite their dismal showing in the popular vote). Demonstrators shouting “Jaruzelski must go!” clashed with police in Warsaw as they marched toward the building where the Central Committee was meeting.

In his televised statement, Jaruzelski said “I do not plan to be a candidate,” adding, “Permit me to propose Gen. Czeslaw Kiszczak for the post.” Kiszczak had been interior minister since 1981. Jaruzelski said, “I know well that public opinion associates me more often with martial law ... I must take into account social reality.”

Just days after Jaruzelski’s announcement, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, the newspaper of the Solidarity movement, in a front-page article written by editor Adam Michnik, called for a coalition government. The article said that a Solidarity prime minister and a Communist Party president would provide stability for a Poland that was facing economic catastrophe and a popular “explosion.” Solidarity spokesman Janusz Onyszkiewicz refused to comment, saying the proposal was unofficial.

US President George H. W. Bush was scheduled to visit Poland July 9, so the National Assembly vote for president was postponed until after that date.

[\[top\]](#)

On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act, which banned racial segregation in most public facilities. The votes in the House and the Senate played out largely along regional lines, with the bitter opposition of southern Democrats overcome by a combination of northern Democrats and Republicans.

Segregation had been a pillar of capitalist rule in the US for decades, and it was only relinquished in the face of a mass working class movement in the South and in the northern urban centers. Demonstrations continued this week in 1964 in the face of a racist terror across the US South. With the support of the Democratic Party-controlled Southern state governments, violence by the Ku Klux Klan and right-wing vigilantes became epidemic. The racist terror was directed especially at civil rights demonstrators seeking to test out provisions of the new legislation.

In Atlanta, the future Democratic governor of Georgia, Lester Maddox, drew a pistol on blacks seeking service at his restaurant, openly defying the new law. In Selma, Alabama, Sheriff Jim Clark sent deputies to attack a voter registration rally organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), hospitalizing two. Afterward the deputies patrolled black working class neighborhoods, imposing a curfew. In Texarkana, Texas, three black youth were wounded by a shotgun blast as they participated in an attempt to integrate a swimming beach. Police arrested 16 integrationists, including the three wounded youth. In St. Augustine, Florida, five blacks, including a woman and a child, were beaten by a gang of racists wielding bicycle chains.

[\[top\]](#)

75 years ago: Mussolini makes overtures towards Moscow

On July 4, 1939 an article appeared in the Italian press which seemed to offer Stalin and the counterrevolutionary bureaucracy in Moscow an olive branch. Clearly authorized by Mussolini, the article was in response to the resumption of negotiations between the Soviet Union, Britain and France on

the possibilities of a mutual assistance pact. British and French ambassadors met with the Soviet Prime Minister Molotov at the Kremlin on July 2-3, 1939.

Falsely identifying Stalinism with Bolshevism, the article in the *Gazzeta del Popolo* noted that “many reasons might induce Russia – even the Russia of Stalin – to approach the nations of the Axis and those others which are attaching themselves ever closer to the Axis.” It acknowledged the nationalist counter-revolutionary role of the Stalinist bureaucracy with what the *Times* of London described as a “not unfriendly appreciation of Stalin’s internal policy.”

Indeed, Stalin had by this stage butchered almost the entire Bolshevik leadership responsible for the 1917 October Revolution. Only Leon Trotsky, who together with Lenin led the Russian Revolution and who remained an implacable enemy of the Stalinist perversion of Marxism, remained alive.

The Stalin-led Communist International had betrayed workers struggles across the world, culminating in the defeat of the Spanish Revolution, which strengthened both Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, and made the outbreak of full-scale continent-wide warfare nearly inevitable.

Earlier that same month, in an article about the physical liquidation of the Bolshevik leadership by Stalin’s counter revolutionary clique in Moscow, Trotsky asserted that Stalinism and Bolshevism were not “one and the same,” but that Stalinism was the “negation of Bolshevism consummated in blood.” He concluded, “Stalinism and Bolshevism are mortal enemies.”

[top]

100 years ago: Germany backs Austro-Hungarian preparations for war against Serbia

On July 5, 1914 Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany pledged his country’s unconditional support for any action Austria-Hungary would take against Serbia. Existing tensions in the Balkans had dramatically escalated the previous week with the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo.

The Austrian Foreign Ministry responded to the assassination by sending diplomat Alexander Graf von Hoyos to Berlin carrying a memorandum from the office of the Austrian foreign secretary, Leopold Berchtold, and a letter from Emperor Franz Josef calling for action in the Balkans region. The memorandum warned of growing Serbian and Russian aggression and advocated the elimination of Serbia as “a factor of political power in the Balkans.”

After meeting with the Austro-Hungarian ambassador to Germany and receiving both letters, Wilhelm promised Germany’s “faithful support” for Austria-Hungary in whatever

action it chose to take towards Serbia, including the prospect of a military confrontation with Russia, Serbia’s key ally.

Later on the afternoon of July 5, Wilhelm called a meeting of Germany’s senior ministers, including German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg, Foreign Secretary Arthur Zimmermann, and War Minister Erich von Falkenhayn. When asked if Germany was ready for a war against both Russia and France, Falkenhayn gave a “curt affirmative.” From this meeting, a consensus emerged backing the Kaiser’s decision as Germany’s best policy, which Bethmann-Hollweg subsequently reported to the Austrian representatives and Hoyos triumphantly carried back to Vienna.

An official government publication outlined the strategic imperialist interests underlying German support for Austrian aggression. The document warned that Serbian assertiveness, backed by Russia and France, would risk the stability of the Austro-Hungarian regime, thereby depriving Germany of one of its key allies. It noted that these considerations were being made in the context of deepening geo-political tensions between Germany and its major imperialist rivals “to the East and West,” an oblique reference to developing conflicts with France, Britain, and Russia.

The Kaiser’s pledge, which historians have referred to as the “blank check” assurance, marked a decisive moment in the events leading up to the outbreak of the world war, emboldening Austro-Hungarian policy and inflaming existing tensions with the other major powers.

[top]



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