

This week in history: June 22-28

22 June 2015

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

25 years ago: US space program hit by twin debacles

The US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) suffered two major setbacks this week in 1990, as a crippling flaw was discovered in the \$2.5 billion Hubble space telescope sent into orbit two months earlier, and the space shuttle program had to be grounded because of unexplained hydrogen leaks in two of three shuttle vehicles.

NASA disclosed the flaw on June 27, admitting that fuzzy images produced by Hubble were a result of flawed mirrors, the “eyes” of the giant instrument. The surface of the mirrors had an imperfection called spherical aberration. While the defect was tiny in ordinary terms—less than 4 percent of the diameter of a human hair—the effect on the precise measurements required for astronomical observations was devastating. The mirror was supposed to be engineered to a tolerance of one-sixtieth of a wavelength of light, but the actual deviation was one-third of a wavelength, exceeding the required tolerance by a factor of 20.

Two days after NASA’s announcement of the Hubble flaw, the agency grounded the space shuttle program after hydrogen leaks were discovered on the shuttle Atlantis, which was scheduled to launch a secret spy satellite on June 16. This was the second of the three shuttles that was leaking hydrogen, as the shuttle Columbia had been hangared weeks before when the first leak was detected.

The two failures interacted with each other, as the Hubble space telescope was virtually useless until repairs could be made in its imaging equipment, but these repairs required the maintenance or acceleration of the schedule of shuttle launches. Officials projected that the repairs to the space telescope would not be possible for three years.

The valve on the shuttle where the leak was detected had been found faulty in testing during the early 1980s. In the face of tests that failed all but two of eight costly valves being built for the four space shuttles, NASA responded by redesigning the testing procedure, not the valves, and approving all of them for use, including two later found to be leaking.

The failure of the Hubble telescope also involved testing

errors dating back many years. The mirrors were manufactured by Perkin-Elmer Corporation, then owned by a subsidiary of General Motors, Hughes Danbury Optical, according to specifications provided by NASA. Either the specifications or the machining were defective, and an investigation was begun to determine the exact source of the error. Tests on the mirrors over the previous decade never detected the flaw, which first became evident when NASA scientists attempted to focus the giant telescope.

[top]

50 years ago: US ground troops launch first Vietnam offensive

General William C. Westmoreland, US commander in South Vietnam, ordered the first offensive action by American ground units in the rapidly expanding war. The “search and destroy” operation, as it was called by the US State Department, began on June 28, 1965, and continued for three days.

Paratroopers from the 183rd Airborne Brigade joined troops from the South Vietnamese puppet army and one Australian battalion in an attack in “Zone D,” a dense jungle area controlled by the liberation forces, 20 miles northeast of Saigon. “Zone D” had been a stronghold for the National Liberation Front since the defeat of the French imperialists in 1954. Parts of the area had not been penetrated by government troops in 20 years.

American commanders were frustrated by the same problems that would plague all future offensives. The NLF refused to directly engage the superior imperialist forces, instead falling back into the jungle, inflicting casualties on the advancing US units with mortar and sniper fire. Soldiers moving through the heavy brush suffered casualties caused by simple but effective booby traps, which often consisted of no more than a hand grenade linked to vines and bent twigs. Most importantly, the guerrilla fighters could fade into the population, which was overwhelmingly hostile to the US and its puppet government.

Officers heading the Strategic Air Command meanwhile admitted that earlier saturation bombing by B-52s, which leveled entire square miles of jungle in “Zone D,” did not inflict a single casualty on the enemy, while costing one aircraft

shot down.

Westmoreland claimed that the sweep by US forces into “Zone D” came at the request of the South Vietnamese government. He cited the recent decision of President Johnson to officially sanction a combat role for American troops in support of the puppet army as the justification for the operation.

[top]

75 years ago: Executions spearhead Nazi terror in Poland

On June 26, 1940, Nazi SS forces in Poland shot Social Democratic leader Mieczyslaw Niedzialkowski, and Maciej Rataj, president of the Peasant Party of Poland. The two men were murdered side by side in Palmiry Woods, near Warsaw.

Niedzialkowski, an executive committee member of the Polish Socialist Party and editor of its central organ, *Robotnik*, played the leading role in the heroic defense of Warsaw against the Nazis and refused to sign the surrender terms when the city was overrun. He was active in the organization of the workers battalions and his daily editorials in *Robotnik* played an important role in mobilizing the working class against the Nazi invasion.

The Nazis intended that this joint execution serve to terrorize the workers and peasants who comprised 90 percent of the Polish population. It was accompanied by many other torture-style executions of Polish worker and peasant leaders, combined with public mass executions of workers and peasants.

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One month before the execution of Niedzialkowski and Rataj, Hitler met with Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, to discuss the fate of the 23 million Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, White Russians, Gorals, Lemkes and Kashubs in occupied Poland. Himmler proposed tests to extract the “racially valuable elements,” along with methods to turn the remainder into “substandard human beings.”

To accomplish this, he said, the youth would be educated for only four years. “The aim of this primary school,” said Himmler, “should be to teach the pupil solely: how to count up to a maximum of 500, how to write his name, that it is God’s command that he should be obedient to Germans, honorable, industrious, and brave. I regard reading as unnecessary.” In 10 years, the Poles would be reduced to a “leaderless labor force, capable of furnishing Germany with casual laborers.” Eventually, the various peoples would “disappear as racial entities.” Hitler endorsed Himmler’s proposals.

[top]

100 years ago: German authorities censor social-democratic newspaper

On June 26, 1915, German authorities suspended publication of *Vorwärts*, the main daily newspaper of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in Berlin, over an appeal for peace published in its pages. The SPD, which had been based on a socialist and internationalist program prior to the war, had responded to the outbreak of global conflagration in August 1914 by betraying the working class and supporting the militarist efforts of the German ruling elite.

The SPD’s statement, shot through with hypocrisy, combined criticism of the war as a “catastrophe” and claims that the SPD “has worked unceasingly for a good understanding among the nations, for the cause of our common civilization, and for the welfare of mankind,” with a reminder to the German ruling class of its past services in supporting war credits in 1914.

It read in part: “When the Czar’s Cossacks came across the border, pillaging and burning, the Socialists made good the promise that had been given by their leaders—they put themselves at the service of the Fatherland and voted for its defense ... In the name of humanity and civilization, and recognizing the favorable position which our troops have won, we urge the Government to try to end the struggle.”

The decision to shut down the SPD publication reflected the extreme nervousness of the German state over the growth of opposition to war, and divisions within the government and the army over how to prosecute the conflict. While reports indicated that the German Chancellor, Bethmann-Hollweg, was considering a settlement with the Allied Powers over Belgium, General-Admiral Von Tirpitz called for a more thorough prosecution of the conflict, including the retention of Belgium, the taking of Calais, and war with the United States.

Throughout the first half of 1915, opposition to the war had grown in the working class. On May 28, over a thousand women had marched on the Reichstag calling for an end to the conflict. At the same time, the course of the war increasingly dispelled any conception of a speedy German victory. In the first months of 1915, The German state had responded by attempting to suppress the revolutionary internationalists who had opposed the war and attacked the SPD’s pro-war stance, sending Karl Liebknecht to the front and jailing Rosa Luxemburg. The SPD did nothing to oppose the attacks on these revolutionary leaders.

[top]



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