

This week in history: July 2-8

2 July 2018

25 years ago: Aristide signs US-brokered deal in Haiti

July 3, 1993: In the first of what would become many capitulations, deposed Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide signed an agreement brokered by the US State Department granting a full amnesty to the military thugs responsible for the coup of September 30, 1991 and the subsequent murders of some 3,000 Haitian political activists, workers and peasants.

The accord, far from restoring “democracy” to the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, maintains Haiti’s status as an object of manipulation by Washington. The ten-point deal was based upon the military’s acceptance of Aristide’s return to power, set for October 30, in return for amnesty for the officers who took part in the coup. The coup leaders agreed to step down, but their replacements were to be chosen from within the military according to its own rules of promotion.

General Raoul Cedras, in a televised address to the nation, boasted, “All the changes will be done according to the Constitution and army regulations. I have not accepted, and will not accept, that one single member of the army be removed.”

The crimes for which the Cedras junta was responsible, besides the thousands murdered, included arbitrary detention of 28,000 people, the forcing out of their homes of 350,000 people, of whom 80,000 fled either across the border into the Dominican Republic or on open boats across the sea to the Bahamas or the United States.

In reality, it would take more than a year for the agreement to be implemented, as the military and the Haitian ruling elite put up one obstacle after another to delay the return of Aristide to Port-au-Prince. Even then, he was to do nothing more than provide a democratic face to the continued domination of the country by US imperialism and its corrupt Haitian stooges.

It was revealed during that time that Cedras and police chief Michael Francois were on the payroll of the American Central Intelligence Agency from the mid-1980s, underscoring that the 1991 coup and subsequent bloodbath were directly ordered by Washington.

50 years ago: Israel artillery barrages kill 31 Egyptian civilians and wound 58

July 8, 1968: Artillery shells fired by Israel across the Suez Canal landed in a populated area of Suez city, killing 31 Egyptian civilians and wounded another 58. The atrocity was one of the worst days of the so-called “War of Attrition” in which Israeli and Egyptian forces traded barrages across the waterway, which was the de facto line of demarcation after the Six-Day War of June 1967.

Nasser sought to retake land lost to Israel and regain full control of the Suez Canal, the principal source of revenue for his bourgeois-nationalist regime. The War of Attrition, as the name would suggest, did not consist of direct infantry combat. Instead the two sides attempted to drain the resources of their opponents with a drawn-out artillery campaign. The bombings were aimed at targets along both sides of the Suez Canal. The Egyptian military mainly focused on targets along the Bar Lev Line, an Israeli fortification built after their takeover of the Sinai Peninsula.

Both sides operated with disregard for civilian casualties, but the Israeli doctrine of “asymmetrical response” meant that the superior Israeli military forces inflicted disproportionate casualties. Reports differ widely, but estimates of total deaths of Egyptians soldiers and civilians ranges from 2,800 to as many as 10,000. Israel reported the deaths of about 1,000 soldiers and 227 civilians.

During the War of Attrition, Nasser used the politics of the Cold War to his advantage. He persuaded the Soviet Union to provide military support to his campaign, including 15,000 personnel as well as military equipment and arms. Some 58 Soviet soldiers would be killed as well as 40 Soviet planes destroyed during the three years of sporadic conflict, until a ceasefire was agreed in 1970.

75 years ago: Nazi Germany launches Kursk offensive

July 5, 1943: German Armed Forces launched a major

offensive code-named Operation Citadel, aimed at encircling and destroying Soviet forces in the Kursk Salient. The offensive was a desperate gamble by Nazi Germany to reverse its increasingly dire situation on the Eastern front, and it unfolded into the largest tank battle in history, and a defeat even more significant than the catastrophe at Stalingrad early in the year.

In the collapse of German resistance at Stalingrad, the Wehrmacht had been pushed 600 km out of the Caucasus and South Russia to the borderlands of Ukraine. The all-out conflict with the Soviet Union left the Nazi empire vulnerable on other battlefields: North Africa had been recaptured by the Allies and an invasion of the European mainland looked increasingly likely.

By destroying the large section of Red Army forces in the salient, Hitler hoped to cripple Soviet offensive capacity and reverse the course of the war. In a communique to German troops on the eve of the battle, the Nazi dictator stated, “you are to take part in an offensive of such importance that the whole future of war may depend on its outcome.”

Against 1.3 million Soviet soldiers and 3,600 tanks and assault guns, the Germans arranged 900,000 soldiers and 2,700 tanks. The offensive quickly became a debacle for the Germans. The Soviets had known about its preparations well in advance. They constructed 4,900 kilometres of trenches in the salient. Two hours before the offensive was launched, they opened up a massive artillery barrage on German positions, blunting the initial attack. Facing fierce Soviet resistance, which culminated in a major tank battle near Prokhorovka, Hitler decided to call off the battle on July 14. The offensive had lasted only a little over a week.

Fighting would continue for two more bloody years, but the German army would never again launch a major offensive on the Eastern Front.

100 years ago: Left Social Revolutionaries assassinate German ambassador in Moscow and stage revolt

On July 6, 1918, two members of the Left Social Revolutionary Party (Left SRs) assassinated Count Wilhelm von Mirbach, the German Ambassador in Moscow. The assassination was a provocation meant to foment a war with Imperial Germany, with whom the Soviets had signed a humiliating peace treaty in the city of Brest-Litovsk (in what is now western Belarus). The assassins, Iakov Blumkin and Nikolai Andreev, were also both members of the Soviet All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution, Profiteering and Corruption (Cheka).

The left SRs had entered into a coalition with the Bolsheviks in the Soviets after the October Revolution on the basis of opposition to the war, support for land reform, and the agreement on the need to combat the bourgeois Provisional Government. The party had split from the majority of SRs who supported the Provisional Government and wanted to keep Russia in the war on the side of French and British imperialism. The SRs had their roots in the tradition of the radical peasant populists (Narodniks) who had assassinated Tsar Alexander II in 1881 as well as Tsarist officials in subsequent decades.

The Brest-Litovsk treaty was a humiliating peace which ceded large parts of the former Russian Empire to German control, including most of what is now Ukraine. Lenin and Trotsky saw no alternative: what remained of the Russian Army was disintegrating at the front. They also anticipated the rapid development of the socialist revolution in Western and Central Europe, particularly in Germany itself.

The Left SRs, who wanted to conduct a revolutionary war with Germany, resigned from the Council of People's Commissars after the signing of the treaty in March but remained in other parts of the Soviet government. They also opposed the requisitioning of grain from the countryside and the formation of Committees of Poor Peasants. On July 5, at the Fifth All-Russian Congress of the Soviets, when it became clear to the Left SR leadership that the body would endorse Bolshevik policies, preparations began for the assassination of Mirbach.

On the day of the shooting, Felix Dzerzhinsky, the Bolshevik head of the Cheka, was arrested at the headquarters of the Left SRs. Military and Cheka units under their influence briefly occupied the central post office and telephone exchange. They were suppressed the next day by units of the new Red Army and pro-Bolshevik Latvian Riflemen. This episode, which more than one historian has referred to as the “suicide” of the Left SRs, marked their effective disappearance as a political force.



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