

# This week in history: July 16-22

16 July 2018

## 25 years ago: Record flood waters devastate the American Midwest

This week in July 1993 marked a high point in the great Midwest flood of that year, as states across the upper-Midwest experienced the highest rainfalls and the highest flood waters on record. On July 17, 1993, for example, 12 inches of rain fell on Baraboo, Wisconsin in a three-hour period, while two inches of rain in one hour fell on Montgomery, Iowa.

The swollen Raccoon River, a tributary to the Mississippi, flooded the Des Moines, Iowa, water treatment facility from July 11 to July 22, forcing its temporary shutdown, ending the supply of running water to the metropolitan area. The Army National Guard and American Red Cross set up water stations, and water distribution continued until the supply of potable running water was reestablished in early August.

Low-lying areas all along the Missouri River and the upper Mississippi River were under water, with the greatest impact on working class neighborhoods and suburbs in Kansas City and St. Louis, the two largest urban centers in the region. Tens of thousands of farmers lost their crops, as flood waters inundated fields.

The Clinton administration responded with a combination of indifference and token gestures to this monumental social disaster. Federal agencies did almost nothing during the two months of heavy rains leading up the widespread flooding, despite ample warning from weather satellites and meteorological forecasts.

One the dimensions of the tragedy became obvious. Clinton travelled to the disaster zone, visiting Des Moines and St. Louis to make a show of concern, but promising only \$2.5 billion in federal aid, a drop in the bucket for a cataclysm whose eventual cost was estimated at 30 times that much.

Democratic House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt, whose St. Louis congressional district was hard hit by the flooding, declared that his constituents “know the government can’t solve all these problems.”

The US Department of Agriculture demonstrated the cynicism of Clinton’s pretense of sympathy, by reporting

that as a result of the flood federal support to Midwest farmers would actually decline rather than increase, since rising grain prices, driven up by the estimated damage, would reduce crop supports paid to farmers by more than the total Clinton pledged for the disaster.

Meanwhile, major capitalist newspapers like the *New York Times* openly condemned federal flood insurance—which was entirely inadequate to begin with—as “subsidizing behavior that is getting more and more expensive.”

## 50 years ago: The July 17 Revolution in Iraq brings Ba’ath Party to power

On July 17, 1968, the Iraqi government of Abd al-Salam Arif fell in a coup known as the July 17 Revolution. The coup was launched by the Baa’th Party, whose leading figures were Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein.

The Baa’th Party was an Arab nationalist organization that focused much of its rhetoric and foreign policy on anti-imperialism. The Baa’thists claimed to be “Arab socialist” but they rejected Marxism and based themselves on nationalist slogans calling for the freeing of the “Arab Nation” from colonial influence. Those in Iraq who actually called for socialism and claimed allegiance to Marxism (albeit mainly Stalinists) became the targets of bloody repression under Ba’athist rule.

After being outlawed by the Arif government in 1963, the Baa’thists began to organize for a seizure of power. In 1967, Arif’s popularity began to decline rapidly following the Six-Day War between the Arab states and Israel, in which Iraq participated although lacking a common border with the Zionist state. The Baa’th party criticized Arif for not doing more to support other Arab countries during the conflict. Al-Bakr and Hussein seized on the opportunity and convinced several high-ranking members of the Iraq military to support their bid for power.

The coup was launched on the morning of July 17th, when Baa’thist forces stormed the palace of President Arif. At the request of some officers who joined the coup, Arif was not

harmed. He surrendered and agreed to leave the country, living in Turkey for over 20 years before he was able to return to Iraq.

Al-Bakr was chosen to serve as president by a Revolutionary Council, with Hussein as vice president. The new government then carried out purges of the military, forcing thousands of officers suspected of political opposition to retire. In addition to purging the military the Baa'thists targeted other political parties, killing thousands of members of the Iraqi Communist Party, and waged war against Kurdish nationalists.

### **75 years ago: Major protests in Nazi-occupied Athens**

On July 22, 1943, a major political strike broke out in Athens against Nazi occupation forces. Over 100,000 protesters took part in the action organized by the Communist Party of Greece (KKE) and National Liberation Front (EAM). The strike in Athens was brutally suppressed, with German, Italian and Greek collaborationist forces killing at least 22 workers.

The strike was one in a series of escalating acts of resistance to the Axis occupation. In February and March of 1943, a wave of rolling strikes had been successful in temporarily halting German plans to send Greek workers to forced-labor for the Reich. A senior Italian envoy, General Giuseppe Pieche, noted at the time in a report to Rome: "The Greek situation is continuously worsening. Enemy propaganda ... is developing with great intensity, assuming a tone of extreme violence and making itself available in all possible ways."

Since the Axis conquest in 1941, Greece had been subject to a reign of terror and plunder. The Germans and the Italians had requisitioned raw materials and foodstuffs as well as anything of value. Such policies would provoke a major famine in the country, killing an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 Greeks throughout the period of occupation. Bulgarian authorities, working with the Nazis, would subject occupied Eastern Macedonia and Western Thrace to a program of "Bulgarization," expelling hundreds of thousands of Greeks.

The KKE rapidly grew into a mass movement commanding the allegiance of broad layers of the working class and peasantry. But the party's Stalinist program led its betrayal of the working class. In the name of "national unity" against fascism, the Stalinists subordinated the interests of the working class to the EAM, a popular front of bourgeois republicans and pro-capitalist social-democratic

parties.

### **100 years ago: Russian Tsar Nicholas II executed**

On the orders of the Bolshevik regime, the deposed tsar of Russia, Nicholas II, along with his family and entourage, were executed in Ekaterinburg in the Urals.

Deposed and arrested in March 1917, the Romanovs were at first held at Tsarskoe Selo, near the Finnish border. In order to protect them against the radicalized masses, the Kerensky regime shipped the tsar and his family to Tobolsk, a small town in Siberia, in August 1917.

In April 1918, the new Bolshevik authorities had the former rulers transferred from Tobolsk, with its strong monarchist sympathies, to Ekaterinburg, where the Regional Soviet of the Urals, strongly pro-Bolshevik, held sway.

On July 1, 1918, an Anglo-French expeditionary force landed at Murmansk. These troops proceeded to capture a section of the Murmansk railway. In the Urals, the Czech legions, acting on the instruction of the imperialist powers, continued their offensive against the Red forces, capturing Syzran on July 10.

The Bolsheviks were determined that the Romanovs should not fall into the hands of the counterrevolution and become a symbol around whom the most backward layers of the population could be rallied.

Lenin had written in 1911, "If, in such a cultured country as England, which had never known a Mongol yoke, bureaucratic oppression or the tyranny of a military caste, it was necessary to behead one crowned brigand in order to teach kings to be constitutional monarchs, then, in Russia, it is necessary to behead at least 100 Romanovs."

At approximately 2:45 a.m. on July 17, with the White artillery audible in the distance, a detachment of guards carried out the execution of the Romanovs. In fact, the Whites entered the city on July 25.

Trotsky wrote of the measure, "The execution of the tsar's family was needed not only to frighten, horrify and dishearten the enemy, but also in order to shake up our own ranks, to show them that there was no turning back, that ahead lay either complete victory or complete ruin. This Lenin sensed very well."



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