

# This week in history: July 1-7

1 July 2019

**25 years ago: Rwandan Patriotic Front captures Kigali**

On July 4, 1994, the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) captured the country's capital city of Kigali, a major advance during the Rwandan Civil War. Taking control of Kigali allowed the RPF to advance further west into the country and take back the remaining third still occupied by the Hutu extremists responsible for widespread slaughter of Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

Within minutes of the capture, the RPF seized key government installations. The capture was seen by humanitarian aid groups as a means by which support and aid could finally be provided to victims and refugees after months of slaughter in the genocide. "There's still a few pockets where the government troops are battling with the rebels but the city has fallen to the Rwandan Patriotic Front and they now control all the city's checkpoints," Emery Brusset, spokesman for the United Nations Rwandan Emergency Office in Nairobi, told United Press International.

France, however, which was in alliance with the Hutu-led regime ousted from Kigali, ordered its troops on the ground not to allow the RPF into an area in the southwest of the country set up as a "safe zone" for people fleeing the violence, as part of an ongoing attempt to retain its semi-colonial influence in the region.

The genocide in Rwanda remains one of the most horrific crimes against humanity in history. The systematic extermination of hundreds of thousands of the country's Tutsi ethnic population began almost immediately after the assassination of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana in April.

Largely ignored or downplayed in the media, which attributed the slaughter simply to longstanding ethnic tensions between the Tutsis and the Hutus, the role of imperialism in the conflict was most significant.

German imperialism exacerbated and institutionalized the divisions that existed between the tribes. Germany first colonized Rwanda and Burundi in 1899 and introduced racial theories about supposed Tutsi superiority over the Hutus in an attempt to exploit them as colonial administrators. Belgium took over the two colonies as a result of Germany's defeat in World War I, and ruled them for nearly half a century, alongside the Belgian Congo.

Following the move toward Rwandan independence in 1962, a Hutu-dominated regime came to power, running a system similar to apartheid in which tribal identity cards and an ethnic quota system were put into place limiting Tutsi participation in society.

**50 years ago: Kenyan leader Tom Mboya assassinated**

On July 5, 1969, Tom Mboya, Kenya's Minister of Justice, was shot and killed when leaving a store in Nairobi. Mboya had been a leading figure in the Kenyan independence movement and in creating the country's capitalist government.

The assassin, Nahashon Isaac Njenga Njoroge, was arrested 16 days later after the murder weapon was found in his home. Njoroge was tried, pled guilty to the murder, and was hanged. But immediately after Njoroge was arrested it is reported that he asked police, "Why don't you go after the big man?"

The comment added to the existing suspicion that the assassination was part of a plot to eliminate the political rivals of Kenya's President Jomo Kenyatta. Mboya was popularly regarded as a strong candidate for the presidency in the next election.

In the days after Mboya's murder, riots broke out between the Kikuyu and Luo ethnic groups, including at Mboya's funeral procession. When Jomo Kenyatta's car procession arrived at the funeral, supporters of Mboya protested the president's attendance and blamed Kenyatta for the killing. The protests turned into clashes with police who killed two people in the crowd.

Mboya had started his political career by working his way through the trade union bureaucracy, eventually becoming secretary general of the Kenya Federation of Labour. In 1961 he helped form the Kenya African National Union into Kenya's dominant political party.

While building the independence movement, Mboya made close ties with several figures in the United States, including John F. Kennedy. Mboya and Kennedy organized the "Africa Airlifts" to bring Kenyan students to the United States to study and be indoctrinated with bourgeois ideology. Barack Obama Sr., father of US President Barack Obama, was famously a participant in the program.

Mboya's class role was to oversee the implementation of a capitalist government in Kenya and to open the doors for the imperialist powers to exploit the country's resources and labor. His clash with Kenyatta was not of a principled character. They were political rivals and made appeals to different ethnic groups, Mboya being a Luo and Kenyatta a Kikuyu. Both were committed to capitalism and the defense of the interests of a narrow stratum of "native" capitalists linked to British and American imperialism.

**75 years ago: Red Army captures Minsk**

On July 3, 1944, the Red Army captured the city of Minsk, the last major German stronghold on Soviet territory. The defeat of the Nazi troops, after months of losses, paved the way for the expulsion of German invaders from Eastern Europe over the following year.

The seizure of Minsk was the outcome of a major Soviet offensive against Nazi positions in Belorussia, in modern-day Belarus, launched in late June. Dubbed Operation Bagration, the forward movement involved a campaign of partisan warfare, followed by a massive artillery bombardment of German defensive lines, beginning on June 23.

The attack had the advantage of surprise, with German military commanders having anticipated a new summer offensive centered on the southern part of the front, directed through the Ukraine into Romania, where the Third Reich's main oil production was based.

Within weeks, the offensive had dealt a shattering blow to German forces. German troops seeking to abandon the city of Vitebsk in northern Belarus were encircled, leading to tens of thousands of casualties. Strategically important towns and cities, including Orsha, Mogilev and Bobruysk, were captured within the space of two weeks. These advances made possible a major assault on Minsk.

The Soviet Second Guard Tank Corps was the first to enter the city, in the early hours of July 3, followed by a number of other divisions. Heavy fighting ensued in the center of Minsk, which Hitler had forbidden Nazi troops to abandon. Over the following 24 hours, amid thousands of casualties, the German positions were overtaken. The German Fourth Army, and what remained of the Ninth Army, was encircled by the Soviet 65th Army and 5th Guards Tank Army.

Over the course of the week, the section of the city still controlled by German troops continued to shrink, before Soviet troops secured control of all of Minsk. Most of the 100,000 German forces in the city were captured or killed. In the course of the offensive, the Third Reich had suffered an estimated 300,000 military casualties, and lost the bulk of 25 divisions, in one of its worst defeats during the war.

The Red Army pushed forward, with the Belostock, Šiauliai and Vilnius offensives launched just days after the capture of Minsk, along with an attack on the city of Polotsk. At the same time, the Polish Home Army launched an armed uprising against Nazi invaders in Wilno.

### **100 years ago: Journal publishes Claude McKay poem in defense of blacks**

On July 1, 1919, *The Liberator*, the left-wing journal edited by Max Eastman, published the iconic poem of the resistance of the oppressed, "If We Must Die," by Claude McKay. It was written in response not only to the Jim Crow lynching of blacks in the South, but to the outbreak of racist violence across the United States in the spring and summer of 1919, known as the Red Summer, which included pogroms of entire black communities, notably in Jenkins

County, Georgia, Charleston, South Carolina, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Illinois, Longview, Texas, Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Knoxville, Tennessee.

The violence had been whipped up by the authorities preying on the social tensions caused by the Great Migration of blacks to northern cities to work in wartime industries and escape the brutal racial oppression in the South.

The Red Summer was characterized by the determination of blacks, many of whom had served as American soldiers in Europe, to defend themselves. The sonnet, which does not name a specific race or people, but speaks in the name of all the oppressed, characterized the fighting mood of the working class in the United States and around world in 1919 in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, including the Great Steel Strike in the US, and general strikes in Seattle, Winnipeg and Glasgow, and the anti-colonial struggles in India and the Middle East.

McKay wrote the poem while he was working as railroad waiter. He was a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance and author of many poems as well as novels such as *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), and the memoir, *A Long Way from Home* (1937). McKay attended the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in 1922.

#### **If We Must Die**

*If we must die, let it not be like hogs  
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die,  
So that our precious blood may not be shed  
In vain; then even the monsters we defy  
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!  
What though before us lies the open grave?  
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!*



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