

This week in history: July 8-14

8 July 2019

25 years ago: North Korean Stalinist leader Kim Il-Sung dies

On July 8, 1994, North Korean Stalinist ruler Kim Il-Sung died at the age of 83 from a heart attack. His death was officially announced by the government 30 hours later.

Kim's death moved the South Korean regime to place its military on red alert and provoked discussion among the leaders of imperialist countries that it would have a destabilizing impact on the region. US President Bill Clinton offered his "sincere condolences" to the North Korean people just weeks after Washington had portrayed Kim as a tyrant and maniacal aggressor.

The main fear was that a collapse of the North could lead to reunification of the Korean peninsula, depriving the US of the pretext for its military presence in the region while potentially strengthening an economic rival.

Kim, one of the few survivors of Stalin's purge of the Korean Communist Party in the 1930s, fought as a guerrilla against Japanese occupation as early as 1932. He returned to Korea a hero in 1945, just as the US and the Soviet bureaucracy were preparing to divide the country at the 38th parallel. In December 1945 he was installed as chairman of the North Korean branch of the Korean Communist Party and he established the Korean People's Army to solidify control of the region.

Forestalling a United Nations plan to conduct all-Korean elections, the Soviet bureaucracy conducted elections in August 1948 for a Supreme People's Assembly, and in October that year the Soviet Union recognized Kim's government as the sovereign government of the entire peninsula. The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 saw the country laid waste: Kim's forces overran the South, only to have the United States intervene and push north to the Chinese border, provoking Chinese intervention which pushed back the fighting line to roughly where it had begun, along the present DMZ. Three million were killed, the vast majority of them civilians, particularly in the saturation bombing of the north by the US Air Force.

Kim's regime aped the Stalinist bureaucracy's police-state repression, economic autarchy, and cult of infallible leadership, with the additional noxious feature of quasi-monarchical descent of rulership from Kim Il-Sung, dubbed the "Great Leader," to his son Kim Jong-il, the "Dear Leader," to his son Kim Jong-un, the current Stalinist chieftain, the "Great Successor."

During the Sino-Soviet split, Kim sought to maintain relations with both Stalinist powers while seeking maximum freedom of maneuver and pouring resources into the military, always the family's power base. Towards the end of his life, Kim came into direct conflict with American imperialism over North Korea's

nuclear program. The first Bush administration and then the Clinton administration seized on North Korea's nuclear program as a means of intensifying pressure on Pyongyang with a view to precipitating the disintegration of the regime, while Kim sought to use it as a bargaining chip to gain access to needed economic resources after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

50 years ago: "Soccer War" breaks out between El Salvador and Honduras

On July 14, 1969 El Salvador's president Fidel Sánchez Hernández ordered the invasion and bombing of neighboring Honduras. Honduras quickly responded by launching their own bombings of targets within El Salvador. The four days of military conflict became known as the "Soccer War."

The main cause of the war was the immigration of Salvadorans into Honduras and their treatment within the country. In 1969, 300,000 Salvadorans lived in Honduras, a country of 2.6 million. In 1967 Honduras began enforcing laws that allowed the government to take land occupied by Salvadoran migrants and redistribute it to Hondurans. Meanwhile, the United Fruit Company maintained ownership of 10 percent of the land in Honduras.

Salvadorans living in Honduras became subject to abuse from the Honduran government and were the victims of racial violence. The most dramatic of these events occurred in June, when Honduras and El Salvador faced off in three FIFA World Cup qualifying matches. Clashes broke out between Hondurans and Salvadorans in the aftermath of the matches.

After the final game on June 27, won by the Salvadoran team, El Salvador broke off diplomatic ties to Honduras. The Salvadoran government issued a statement saying, "the government of Honduras has not taken any effective measures to punish these crimes which constitute genocide, nor has it given assurances of indemnification or reparations for the damages caused to Salvadorans." El Salvador claimed that in the 10 days since the soccer matches began nearly 12,000 Salvadorans were forced to flee Honduras.

The majority of the war consisted of bombings by plane and artillery barrages. The Salvadoran army was able to occupy some areas of land within Honduras, even coming close to the capital of Tegucigalpa before the advance was stopped. Honduras responded to the invasion with bombings of its own, targeting mostly Salvadoran oil production facilities.

Estimates put the number of deaths in the war at about 4,000. The great majority of the losses were civilians. Hundreds of thousands more were forcibly displaced and made homeless. Notably, all planes used in the war by both sides were manufactured in the United States.

By July 18 the Organization of American States (OAS) had intervened to negotiate a ceasefire. Fighting had stopped, but Salvadoran troops were not withdrawn from Honduras until August 2 under the pressure of OAS economic sanctions.

75 years ago: Nazis liquidate Kovno Ghetto in Lithuania

On July 8, 1944, Nazi forces began the liquidation of the Kovno Ghetto in Lithuania, amid the approach of Red Army troops. The German occupiers deported thousands of Jewish people to the concentration camps of Dachau and Stutthof where they were murdered in the gas chambers of the Third Reich. Up to 2,000 others were killed at Kovno, as the Nazis destroyed the Ghetto with bombs and grenades and shot those who attempted to flee.

Kovno, now Kaunas, had been the capital of Lithuania and its most densely populated city. It was occupied by German troops in June 1944, amid the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. The Nazi forces, along with right-wing mobs that they encouraged and mobilized, immediately began to carry out pogroms against the city's Jewish residents, who they claimed had supported the Soviet occupation of the city.

The Nazis began to construct a Ghetto for the city's remaining Jewish population between July and August 1941. Workers, the elderly and children were rounded up and transported to two camps, which consisted of primitive houses without running water. The area was heavily guarded and was surrounded by barbed-wire fences. In October 1941, German troops destroyed the smaller of the two camps. Later in the same month, they murdered 9,200 Jews in a single day.

Prior to the war, Kovno had a Jewish population of almost 40,000, or a quarter of the city's total residents. After just six months of the German occupation, half of all Jews within the city had been killed. Those who survived the massacres were sent to workshops within the Ghetto, where they were forced to produce equipment for the German military.

In 1943, the Ghetto was placed under the direct control of the SS. The notorious German unit sought to stamp-out resistance groups that had emerged within the camp, and accelerated the deportation of its remaining prisoners to the gas chambers.

The liquidation of the Kovno Ghetto was one of a series of massacres carried out by German troops, amid Soviet offensives throughout 1944 and 1945 which expelled the forces of the Third Reich from Eastern Europe.

100 years ago: Red Army takes key Urals city of Zlatoust

On July 13, 1919, the Red Army's Fifth Army under the command of Mikhail Tukhachevsky took Zlatoust, a key town in the southern Urals, from the counterrevolutionary forces of Admiral Kolchak. The taking of the town was a major step in the Red Army's counteroffensive on the Eastern Front that pushed back Kolchak's Siberian White Army from the gains it had made during its spring offensive.

Kolchak's Siberian Army and his government were based in Omsk, on the eastern side of the Urals. The recapture by the Reds of centers such as Perm, Zlatoust, and, on July 15, the city of Yekaterinburg, not only opened the way to the Siberian plain and Omsk, but also provided the Soviet government access to major arms factories and mining operations.

Kolchak's forces were routed, despite desperate resistance by members of the former Tsarist officer corps. One historian notes: "That summer the cities of western Siberia fell like dominoes before the Red Army's advance. White soldiers surrendered by the thousands. Others fled before they saw the enemy. As they advanced, the Reds gathered priceless rolling stock, weapons and supplies."

Leon Trotsky, in the newspaper *En Route* published from his armored train, declared: "Our brilliant victories in the East are of immense importance to the whole country. Very rich grain-growing regions have been opened up. The industry of the Urals has been restored to the workers and peasants. The factories of Perm and Zlatoust—and soon this will be true of those in the Yekaterinburg area as well—are working in the interest of the Red Army."

The Whites did not retreat, however, without their accustomed brutality. Shortly before they evacuated Yekaterinburg, the Whites massacred over 2,000 Jews there in a pogrom.



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