

This week in history: July 15-21

15 July 2019

25 years ago: Synagogue bombing kills 85 in Argentina

In the worst terrorist attack in the history of Argentina, a bomb blast on July 18, 1994, killed at least 85 people. A suicide bomber drove a Renault van loaded with 600 pounds of ammonium nitrate fertilizer and other explosive additives into the Jewish Community Center building in Buenos Aires. The explosion produced the near-total collapse of the building, which contained the offices of the major Jewish groups in the Argentine capital.

President Carlos Menem immediately closed the country's borders, suggesting that the bombing was planned from abroad, and invited Israel to send intelligence and military experts to join in the investigation of the blast. Several visitors from Morocco, Iran and other predominately Islamic countries were detained for questioning.

However, there was no evidence that the atrocity was carried out by Islamic fundamentalists coming from the Middle East, rather than by the numerous fascist and anti-Semitic elements within Argentina, dating back to the influx of Nazi war criminals after World War II, including Adolf Eichmann, kidnapped from Argentina by Israeli agents in 1960 and eventually tried and executed in Israel. An army intelligence agent, Alejandro Sucksdorf, had been arrested in May after the discovery of Nazi literature and explosives at his country estate.

The attack on the Jewish center coincided with negotiations between Argentina and Iran on a resumption of nuclear cooperation, raising suspicions that the bombings were carried out with the aim of disrupting Argentine-Iranian relations. Subsequent investigations revealed that the Argentina intelligence agency SIDE—which was never purged or even significantly reformed after the collapse of the military junta in 1983—had received warnings from the Brazilian intelligence service, as well as Argentine consulates in Milan and Beirut, that an attack was in the works and allowed it to happen. In the aftermath of the bombing, SIDE was reconfigured as an “anti-terrorist” agency, assuming greater powers with restored funds.

The 1994 attack became the subject of endless intrigues and provocations within Argentine capitalist politics. Right-wing groups linked to the CIA repeatedly charged that the “left” Peronist governments of Nestor Kirchner and his widow, Christina Fernandez de Kirchner, were covering up Iranian responsibility for the attack in return for trade and other economic considerations. A SIDE official assigned to re-investigate the case, Alberto Nisman, was found shot to death under questionable circumstances in January 2015, although his death was ruled a suicide.

50 years ago: Mary Jo Kopechne killed in accident at Chappaquiddick

After leaving a party on the night of July 18, 1969, on Chappaquiddick Island off the coast of Massachusetts, Senator Edward “Ted” Kennedy drove his car off a bridge and into the water, resulting in the death of his passenger Mary Jo Kopechne. Immediately following the incident, a cover-up took place in an attempt to save Kennedy's political career.

Kopechne had been one of the six “Boiler Room Girls,” a group of young women who had worked as secretaries on Robert F. Kennedy's presidential campaign before his assassination in June 1968. The party was a reunion for the women who remained personally and politically close to the Kennedy family.

Ted Kennedy left the party to drive Kopechne back to her hotel room. As they drove down a dirt road that approached a narrow bridge Kennedy lost control of the car and sent it into the water. Kennedy was able to escape the car and reached the shore while Kopechne was still trapped in the car underwater.

Kennedy returned to the party and brought Joe Gargan and Paul Markham back to the scene of the crash where they claimed to have made attempts at diving into the water to rescue Kopechne. In later testimony of the events Gargan and Markham said that they advised Kennedy to return to his hotel and call the police. The police were not called until the following morning when a fisherman discovered the car still submerged.

Before turning himself into the police, Kennedy had made several calls to friends and lawyers for advice and assistance. Within the next day a cabal of political insiders had assembled to provide Kennedy with assistance and help pull strings. The group included former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, as well as Ted Sorensen, Richard N. Goodwin, Lem Billings, Milton Gwirtzman, among others.

On July 25, Kennedy pleaded guilty to leaving the scene of an accident causing bodily injury. He was sentenced to two months in jail, but the judge suspended the sentence, citing an “unblemished record” and that Kennedy “has already been and will continue to be punished far beyond anything this court can impose.”

In 1970 an inquest was held to further investigate the incident. John Farrar, captain of the Edgartown Fire Rescue unit, had been the one to dive down to the car using scuba gear and retrieve Kopechne's body. He testified at the inquest into Kopechne's death, “She didn't drown. She died of suffocation in her own air void. It took her at least three or four hours to die ... Had I received a call within five to ten minutes of the accident occurring ... there is a strong possibility that she would have been alive on removal from the submerged car.”

The inquest found probable cause that Kennedy had acted negligently to cause Kopechne's death and could be charged with manslaughter, but no charges were ever issued.

Kennedy was widely regarded to be a contender for the White House in the 1972 elections. But following the incident he pledged not to run. In 1980 Kennedy challenged incumbent President Jimmy Carter for the Democratic Party nomination but was defeated. He

remained a senator from Massachusetts until his death in 2009.

75 years ago: Hitler escapes assassination attempt by military officers

On July 20, 1944, German military officers unsuccessfully sought to assassinate Nazi dictator Adolf Hitler as part of a failed attempt to overthrow his regime. The plot was hatched amid a growing crisis of the Third Reich, including sweeping military defeats at the hands of the Soviet Union's Red Army, and mounting social and political opposition from the German population.

Claus von Stauffenberg, one of the conspirators, entered a military conference in East Prussia being presided over by Hitler in the early afternoon. He was carrying a briefcase that contained a bomb. Stauffenberg placed the explosive near the table where Hitler was sitting, and then left the room to take a pre-arranged phone call.

The ensuing blast killed Colonel Heinz Brandt, who was standing next to the Führer. Twenty of those in the room were injured, three critically. Hitler's trousers were singed and his eardrum was perforated, but he survived the explosion.

The failure of the assassination derailed the coup attempt. Under the plan, dubbed Operation Valkyrie, the coup was to have proceeded with an announcement of Hitler's death. A warning was to have been issued, declaring: "A treacherous group of party leaders has attempted to exploit the situation by attacking our embattled soldiers from the rear in order to seize power for themselves." This would have provided the pretext for the mobilization of sections of the Reserve Army to secure military installations, communications facilities and government offices.

Friedrich Olbricht, a German general involved in the plot, sought to mobilize troops against the regime. In a number of areas, troops went into action, seizing government buildings. The attempt was thwarted, however, when it became clear that Hitler had survived. This led a number of vacillating officers, who had considered supporting the overturn, to abandon it.

In the aftermath of the coup attempt, the Gestapo carried out a massive round-up of anyone suspected of involvement in the plot. In total, some 7,000 people were arrested, and almost 5,000 were executed.

While some of those involved in the coup stated that they were hostile to the war crimes committed by the Nazi regime, many were conservative nationalists whose primary motivation was the failure of the German war effort. Some of the plotters wanted a new regime that would immediately appeal to the Allied powers for an end to the war. They were to demand that Britain and the US recognize a number of German annexations, including of Austria, Alsace-Lorraine, Sudetenland, and sections of Poland.

100 years ago: Woodrow Wilson begins campaign for US ratification of Treaty of Versailles

On July 16, 1919, American President Woodrow Wilson invited 15 leading Republican senators to the White House for a series of

discussions on the Treaty of Versailles and the establishment of the League of Nations, which many of them opposed. Most members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee were asked to come, including Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, who led a bloc of "irreconcilables." Others in the Senate, both Democrats and Republicans, had reservations as well. Ratification of the treaty required a two-thirds majority in the Senate.

The Treaty of Versailles, a humiliating peace for Germany, had been signed in an equally humiliating ceremony by victorious French and British imperialism at the recently concluded Paris Peace Conference. The conference also founded the League of Nations and divided the spoils of the World War among the victorious imperialist powers and their allies.

American imperialism under Wilson's leadership had played a decisive role in winning the war and in setting up the post-war settlement. Nevertheless, various senators had objections to clauses or formulations in the League of Nations charter, especially Article X, by which the League could make war before a vote by the US Congress. It was clear that sections of the American bourgeoisie sought to limit foreign "entanglements," more concerned with how to put down a growing movement of the working class at home.

Others who opposed Wilson, while not necessarily against projecting American power abroad, were critical of specific elements of his foreign policy, particularly an agreement with Japan (which had sided with the Allies in the war), that gave it control over the former German concessions in China's Shandong province. This had sparked wide opposition among the Chinese intelligentsia and masses, and some American strategists foresaw a conflict with Japan in East Asia. The American military intervention in Soviet Siberia in 1918 had already consisted largely of dogging the heels of the Japanese armies there.

Wilson's efforts with the Senate over the next few days had little effect. He then sought to whip up public support for his foreign policy in a cross-country barnstorming operation, but by September his health began to fail, and he returned to Washington. In October, he suffered a stroke that likely impacted his political judgment. In November, Lodge passed a compromise Treaty, but Wilson rejected it and the United States never participated in the League of Nations. The US made its own separate peace with Germany in 1921.



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