

This week in history: June 8-14

8 June 2020

25 years ago: France ends moratorium on nuclear weapons testing in the Pacific

On June 13, 1995, the French government announced that it would resume nuclear weapons testing in the South Pacific. French President Jacques Chirac decided to end the three-year moratorium on nuclear testing, citing France's "higher interests," just shy of the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima in World War Two—earning himself the hostile label "Hirochirac."

Chirac told the press that "all the civilian and military experts ... were unanimous in telling me that if we wanted to assure the safety and reliability of our deterrent forces, if we wanted to move to a stage of simulating [nuclear tests] in laboratories, we were obliged to lift the moratorium." He also stated that the tests would have no "ecological consequences," in spite of one United Nations report which estimated that 150,000 had already died or would eventually die as a direct result of nuclear testing in the Pacific. The tests were supposedly run to provide enough information to improve nuclear technology without requiring more tests.

In turning the South Pacific atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa into testing grounds, Paris followed the precedents established by its American and British rivals. Between 1946 and 1958, the US government detonated 66 nuclear bombs in the south Pacific—six islands were vaporized completely and others remained uninhabitable for decades afterward.

Three months after the announcement, a French atomic bomb was detonated beneath Mururoa Atoll in the South Pacific, on September 5. It sparked widespread opposition and protests took place in Japan, Australia, New Zealand and Polynesia. The Tahitian capital of Papeete erupted into protests and riots. The same day, French naval commandos seized two ships owned by the environmental group Greenpeace to prevent them from sailing near the test site, about 750 miles southeast of Tahiti. They also arrested two Greenpeace divers who used rubber dinghies to enter the 12-mile exclusion zone around Moruroa.

The day before the blast, the Tahitian capital of Papeete saw its largest demonstration ever against French nuclear testing, and many in the crowd called for French Polynesia's independence from colonial rule. France has occupied the Society Islands since 1840, and in 1958 annexed them,

declaring them an "overseas territory."

Chirac ended the nuclear testing program in January 1996, after six of the eight planned tests were completed.

50 years ago: Military coup in Argentina

On June 8, 1970, Argentina's President Juan Carlos Onganía was removed from office by a military coup. His government was replaced with a military junta headed by three military leaders: Army Lieutenant General Alejandro Agustín Lanusse, Navy Admiral Pedro Gnavi, and Air Force General Juan Carlos Rey.

Onganía had come to power in a coup of his own in 1966, overthrowing the elected president Arturo Illia. He had overseen a brutal military dictatorship that had used police and military force to suppress all civil liberties and political dissidents. One of his first acts as president had been a major attack on universities. In an event known as La Noche de los Bastones Largos (the night of the long batons), on July 29, 1966, federal police had raided Argentina's universities, beating and arresting those suspected of leading potential resistance to Onganía's military dictatorship.

The Onganía regime became quickly despised by the masses of Argentinian workers. Strikes became illegal and a wage freeze was ordered, despite climbing inflation significantly lowering workers' standard of living, so that cheap labor could be marketed to foreign investors.

The beginning of the end of Onganía's rule came on May 29, 1969 during "El Cordobazo," a general strike in the city of Cordoba that temporarily forced the police and military to retreat from the city. However, lacking a revolutionary leadership and betrayed by Peronism and Stalinism, the workers were unable to develop the strike into a national movement to remove Onganía's government. The military was eventually able to retake Cordoba and arrested the union leaders and hundreds of other workers.

But the Cordoba uprising was enough to display that Onganía's dictatorship was unable to successfully suppress the working class and carry out the interests of the Argentine ruling class. In the year after the general strike, Onganía's regime struggled to keep order among the ranks of the military.

Suspecting Alejandro Agustín Lanusse, the commander of the Argentine Army, of leading a conspiracy against the regime, Onganía had him fired in June 1970. But the attempted removal of Lanusse directly triggered the coup.

Led primarily by Lanusse, the military was mobilized to force the resignation of Onganía, who had barricaded himself inside the Casa Rosada presidential office with a small guard force. After a 12-hour negotiation Onganía capitulated and gave up his office, leaving the country to the control of the military junta.

Officially, Roberto M. Levingston, another army general, became the president selected by the junta. However, he would only hold office until March 1971 when Lanusse would oust him, this time taking direct control of the presidency himself.

75 years ago: US troops and Filipino guerillas secure control of Mindanao capital

On June 10, 1945, US soldiers and Filipino guerillas allied with them expelled the last Japanese troops from Davao, the largest city on Mindanao island. The victory gave the US army effective control over the southern Philippines, in one of a series of blows to the Japanese empire throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The battle claimed almost 5,000 Japanese casualties, while there were 350 US soldiers killed and 1,650 injured.

Davao had been a center of the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, being seized in 1942. Large troop numbers were stationed in the city, along with civilians involved in commerce and administration. Guerilla attempts to undermine the Japanese presence had begun in 1944 with US backing.

The US army launched its assault on Mindanao in early March 1945. After the defeat of Japanese forces in the Battle of Leyte in late 1944, the imperial army's forces were cut off from a supply base on Luzon. Throughout April, US forces made significant advances, despite the difficulties posed by the rugged and mountainous terrain of Mindanao.

In May, the Americans entered Davao, initially encountering only limited resistance. Japanese troops regrouped in pockets of the city near their munitions centers and in neighboring villages. Over the following weeks, a series of bloody close-quarters battles were fought, with the US troops and Filipino guerillas exploiting limited Japanese supplies and making use of substantial firepower. Japanese soldiers engaged in desperate naval attacks in Davao Gulf, launching so-called "suicide boats" at the superior US naval fleet. These operations were rapidly crushed.

At the end of May, the US troops launched a coordinated assault, approaching the last Japanese stronghold simultaneously from the north and the south. They rapidly

overwhelmed the redoubt, and over the following two weeks conducted successful operations against isolated Japanese units. The remaining Japanese troops were compelled into the mountains of Bukidnon on June 10.

Both American and Japanese imperialism recognized the Filipino islands as critical for the domination of the entire Asia-Pacific region. The US had first acquired the archipelago after its victory over Spain in the predatory Spanish-American war of 1898. However, this led to both a vicious anti-insurgency war in which many tens of thousands of civilians were killed before the Americans were able to pacify the Philippines, and set the US on a collision course with Japan.

100 years ago: Red Army retakes Kiev

On June 13, 1920, Red Army troops entered the Ukrainian capital of Kiev and forced out Polish and Ukrainian nationalist troops. Semyon Budyonny's First Cavalry Army was largely responsible for breaking through the Polish lines near the city from June 5 to June 10.

In the next few days, Polish troops withdrew along the front, and the Red Army was able to capture some strategic footholds in their rear. The Polish army, however, though in danger of being surrounded, managed to escape largely unscathed.

The Polish-Ukrainian forces had captured Kiev on May 9 as part of an unexpected invasion by the Polish leader Jozef Pilsudski to gain control of the Ukrainian borderlands between Poland and Russia. The Polish army, many of whose troops had participated in the First World War in the Tsarist or Austro-Hungarian armies, was largely modernized with a highly trained officer corps.

The impetus of the invasion was to assert control over areas of Ukraine that had previously been ruled by the Polish landowners and in the interests of French and British imperialism.

The Soviet offensive proceeded to the Polish capital of Warsaw by the summer, where it was forced to retreat to the frontiers of the newly-created Soviet Ukraine. Kiev had changed sides 16 times since the Russian Civil War had begun in 1918, but was then incorporated firmly into the Soviet Union as the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.



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