

This week in history: July 26-August 1

25 July 2021

25 years ago: Protests shake Suharto dictatorship

On July 27, 1996, Indonesian government forces attacked the head office of ousted Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) leader Megawati Sukarnoputri. The military junta used thousands of riot police and troops to put down protests by her supporters. The clashes were the most serious in the capital since President Suharto and his fellow generals seized power in the bloody coup of 1965.

Megawati was removed as PDI leader at a party congress orchestrated by the Suharto regime. Hand-picked delegates replaced her with Suharto's nominee, former PDI leader Suryadi. The military moved in as the protests surrounding the PDI offices threatened to generate a wider movement involving industrial workers, sections of the middle class and university youth.

Suharto was seeking to block a 1998 presidential campaign by Megawati who had gained support both within the Indonesian ruling class and in Washington. Her candidacy was seen as a means of breaking up the immense economic monopolies enjoyed by the Suharto family and the military, while at the same time heading off social upheavals.

In addition to lending support to Megawati, Washington had encouraged the development of rival trade unions to the discredited government-controlled All-Indonesia Workers Union as a means of controlling growing strike activity in Indonesia.

Megawati was the daughter of former president Sukarno, who led Indonesia to independence from the Dutch in 1945 and was overthrown by Suharto's military coup 20 years later. She had played almost no role in Indonesian politics until 1985, when she was approached by the PDI to run as one of its candidates.

She attempted to make an appeal to workers, peasants and the poor; and Washington was looking to her to divert and trap popular opposition to military-backed regimes by cashing in on the populist reputation of her father. Her husband, a businessman, had by then become a PDI MP as well. She later served as vice president and president in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

50 years ago: Apollo 15 mission lands on the Moon

On July 26, 1971, the US National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) launched the Apollo 15 lunar space mission. The mission was the fourth landing on the surface of the moon, and, at 66 hours and 55 minutes, was the longest continuous stay on the moon up to that point.

The three-man crew of Apollo 15 consisted of Commander David R. Scott, Command module pilot Alfred M. Worden, and Lunar module pilot James B. Irwin. While previous trips to the moon were undoubtedly remarkable feats and scientific-historic milestones in and of themselves, the Apollo 15 mission placed special emphasis on conducting experiments and other types of scientific research.

Apollo 15 arrived in the Moon's orbit on July 29, with Scott and Irwin descending to the surface of the Moon on July 30, where they spent the next three days. Accompanying the astronauts was the first Lunar Roving Vehicle, which was used to transport the crew and their equipment longer distances from the landing site, so they could survey more of the Moon's surface and collect a larger array of samples.

One such sample was the Genesis Rock, originally thought to be a piece of the Moon's primordial crust. However, study of the sample back on earth determined that the rock was formed after the Moon's crust had solidified. Still, the sample was found to be over 4 billion years old, placing its creation alongside the early stages of the Solar System.

In what has become a staple of many physics lessons, the astronauts filmed a demonstration of Galileo's Leaning Tower experiment where he proved that, regardless of weight, all objects are affected by gravity equally. Where Galileo used two round balls of different sizes, on the Moon, where there is no air to create resistance, the Apollo crew dropped a hammer and a feather, which fell to the Moon's floor at the exact same time, further providing evidence of Galileo's theory.

While many samples were collected and brought back to earth for further study, the Apollo team also left behind a few items as well. Before departing the Moon, the crew left behind a small "Fallen Astronaut" monument to honor those who had died to advance the science of space exploration. The monument consists of a small figurine of a man in a space suit and a plaque with the names of 14 astronauts, both American and Soviet, who died during space flight.

After the team had concluded their work, they departed the lunar surface and re-joined the orbiting command craft. The crew returned safely to Earth on August 7 after spending over 12 days in space. The official Mission Report of Apollo 15 stated that the trip "resulted in the collection of a wealth of scientific information. The Apollo system, in addition to providing a means of transportation, excelled as an operational scientific facility."

75 years ago: Four African Americans lynched by mob in

Georgia

This week in July, 1946, there was widespread outrage among workers and young people in cities across the US over the brutal murder of two young African American couples at the hands of a white-supremacist gang in Georgia.

Roger Malcolm, 24, had been accused of stabbing Barnette Hester, a white landlord, on July 11 during an argument. On July 25, J. Loy Harrison, a white farmer who employed Malcolm as a sharecropper, drove to the town of Monroe, county seat of Walton County, to post bail for him, along with Malcolm's pregnant wife Dorothy and another African American couple, George W. Dorsey and Mae Murray Dorsey.

On their way back to Harrison's farm after bailing out Malcolm, their car was stopped by a group of 15–20 armed white men on Moore's Ford Bridge, between Monroe and Watkinsville. The assailants killed the four African-Americans, all aged in their 20s, shooting them at point blank range. Harrison was unharmed.

The massacre took place in the context of a Democratic Party primary to select its candidate for governor of Georgia, in that period tantamount to election. The incumbent, Eugene Talmadge, waged a viciously racist campaign, which included boasts of violence against his own African American sharecroppers, and feverish denunciations of any turn away from racial segregation. Talmadge's campaign was one of a series directed against a Supreme Court ruling earlier in 1946, effectively banning "white primaries" that excluded African American voters.

In response to widespread protests, President Harry S. Truman, a Democrat, ordered an FBI investigation into the murders, the first time that the FBI, headed by the notorious anticommunist and racist J. Edgar Hoover, had ever been called into a civil rights case.

Over the course of four months, however, the investigation did not identify the shooters and after grand jury hearings, the case was eventually dropped, despite reports that the identities of a number of the perpetrators were known. Talmadge himself had gone to Monroe a day after the stabbing of Barnette Hester, and had later been seen speaking with his relatives, prompting allegations of direct involvement by the governor in the lynching.

Talmadge lost the popular vote in the Democratic primary to his challenger, James V. Carmichael, but nevertheless won the party nomination based on an electoral-college-type system that gave disproportionate representation to rural "county units" like Walton.

Hitler had become a member of the DAP in 1920 under orders from a military intelligence unit, for which he had been an operative since 1919. After his discharge from the army in March 1920, he began working for the party full time and quickly became its leading public spokesman.

Earlier in July 1921, he had threatened to resign in a dispute over a merger with another party and possible move of the headquarters from Munich, the capital of Bavaria. His terms for staying in the party were absolute control of the apparatus.

From the beginning, Hitler embraced the anti-Semitic, anticommunist and nationalist views of the DAP. Already in 1919 Hitler argued that the aim of a nationalist government "must unshakably be the removal of the Jews altogether" from Germany, showing that the seeds of the Holocaust were sown at the start of his political career.

The party was a part of the far-right milieu in Bavaria that had emerged out of the defeat of the working class November revolution of 1918 and the smashing of the left-wing Bavarian Soviet Republic in 1919 by armed right-wing gangs. The NSDAP appealed to the dispossessed members of the middle class and its ideological glue was the hatred of Jews and Marxism.

While the terms "socialist" and "workers" appeared in the party's name to give it a populist appeal, it was violently opposed to the two mass parties of the working class, the Social-Democratic Party and the Communist Party, and depended, from the beginning, on physical thuggery, ostentatious displays and Hitler's own skill in public speaking.

The NSDAP sought to overthrow the Weimar Republic, which had emerged in 1918 after the defeat of German imperialism in World War I. Hitler would act on this program in his Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 in Munich, an attempted quasi-military power grab, which was quickly put down. After Hitler's release from a short sentence in prison, the Nazis began their rise that would culminate in the seizure of power in 1933.



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100 years ago: Hitler becomes leader of Nazi Party

On July 26, 1921, the fascist demagogue Adolf Hitler was elected leader of the National Socialist German Workers Party (NSDAP—abbreviated as Nazis) centered in the south German state of Bavaria. By a majority vote of the executive committee, Hitler replaced Dietrich Eckart, the founder of the party, which had originally been known as the German Workers Party (DAP).