

This week in history: July 4-10

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25 years ago: Pathfinder lands on Mars

On July 4, 1997, the Pathfinder spacecraft landed on Martian soil seven months after its launch, dazzling and inspiring millions of people all over the world. The stream of photographs and data sent back proved the extraordinary success of its mission and demonstrated the power of modern science and technology to solve the most complex problems.

After a week on the surface of Mars, Pathfinder transmitted more than 1,700 photographs of the landscape and conducted dozens of experiments. Its diminutive rover, named Sojourner Truth by scientists at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, had inched its way across the Martian surface and examined not only the soil, but the chemical composition of several rocks.

Indications of the presence of water at some point in the planet's evolution had attracted mission scientists to the Ares Vallis flood plain as a landing site. Analysis of Pathfinder's photographs revealed patterns in the positioning of the rocks suggestive of water movement of enormous proportions. What happened to the water remained a mystery, but its presence held out the possibility that life in some form once existed on Mars.

The contradictions of modern social life found sharp expression in the Pathfinder mission. The US space program had been hit by budget cuts and, more generally, declining interest within the ruling class in any project that did not generate immediate and substantial profits. More recent developments, such as the failure of NASA's 1993 Mars Observer, made the Pathfinder project into something of a make-or-break mission.

Operating on a shoestring budget, Pathfinder scientists scored an astounding success and, in the process, reawakened public interest in space travel and exploration. Other technological advances, including the development of the personal computer and the internet, encouraged and to a certain extent made possible this reawakening. On the day of Pathfinder's landing alone, NASA websites recorded over 100 million hits.

Spectacular images of the Mars landing and color panoramas of the planet's surface were carried virtually instantaneously into millions of homes. Thus, the Pathfinder mission demonstrated the expanding capacity of technology to satisfy the healthy curiosity of human beings about the nature of the universe.

50 years ago: Ceasefire in Northern Ireland collapses after British soldiers kill five

On July 9, 1972, a ceasefire between the occupying British army in Northern Ireland and the Provisional Irish Republican Army fell apart after British troops shot and killed five unarmed Irish civilians in Belfast. Among the victims was a 13-year-old girl. Two others, also teenagers, belonged to the youth wing of the IRA and two were bystanders who attempted to aid the wounded.

The Springhill massacre, as it became known, followed the Bloody Sunday massacre in January when 26 civilians were killed. In both cases the killings were carried out by the hated British parachute regiment known for their brutality and violence against Irish civilians.

The ceasefire was short-lived having been announced only earlier that same week when IRA leaders traveled to England for a secret meeting to negotiate with the Tory government of Prime Minister Edward Heath.

The plans of the IRA Provisionals to cut a deal with the British occupation was a massive betrayal of the Irish working class, Catholic and Protestant. The working class in Ulster (northern Ireland) was facing the most brutal repressions British imperialism had to offer.

In the past year, the Heath government had suspended democratic rights for Irish Catholics, imprisoning and torturing without trial thousands suspected of supporting the IRA, removed the Stormont parliament, imposing direct rule of the North from London, and oversaw several massacres of unarmed civilians by the British Army.

Like the 1921 agreement that ended in the partition of Ireland, any agreement in this context between the IRA and British imperialism would have only imposed further divisions between the Irish Protestant and Catholic workers. The International Committee of the Fourth International responded to the ceasefire proposal with a statement calling for a break with Irish nationalism in favor of socialist internationalism and unity with workers of all nations and faiths.

"Ulster and the consequences of direct rule have once again shown that no other class and no other party can substitute itself for the proletariat and that any attempt to do so must result in defeat and the reimposition of capitalist rule," the ICFI statement declared. It continued, "In Ireland North and South the revolutionary leadership will only be trained and built in a fight for a program which unites the working class to strike mighty blows together with those being struck by the workers in Britain."

The families of the victims of the Springhill massacre campaigned for an inquest into the killings which would clearly prove the guilt of the British military for the murders. No one has ever been held responsible for the killings.

75 years ago: Trial of Nazi war criminals for mass killings in the Balkans

On July 8, 1947, the so-called “Hostages Trial” of senior Nazi military commanders accused of perpetrating war crimes in the Balkans and Greece began. The hearings were the seventh of twelve “subsequent Nuremberg Trials,” organized by the US, Britain and the Soviet Union, after the proceedings relating to the Nazi political leadership and military high command.

The 12 defendants in the “Hostages Trial” were accused of a litany of crimes during World War II. They were summarized by the prosecutors as the mass murder of civilians and the taking of civilian hostages in Greece, Albania, and Yugoslavia; the plundering and destruction of villages and towns in those countries, along with Norway; the murder of prisoners, including those arbitrarily designated as “partisans,” as well as torture and deportation to concentration camps.

The defendants included Wilhelm List, who had served as the Nazi military’s commander in chief of south-east operations, and Maximilian von Weichs, who had been the commander of the German 2nd Army during its Balkan campaign. Together with their ten codefendants, they were accused of overseeing the murder of hundreds of thousands of civilians, as part of the German war of plunder in the Balkans and other territories. This included collaboration in the Holocaust.

After a seven-month trial, most defendants were convicted of various offenses and received custodial sentences.

Notably, however, the court set several precedents, undermining the prosecution of war crimes. The presiding judges found that the partisan forces in south-east Europe during World War II could not be lawful combatants, with associated protections. This meant that their resistance could be deemed as unlawful and they could be subjected to extraordinary punishments, including execution without trial as war criminals.

The tribunal also ruled that under certain circumstances, the killing of hostages could be a legitimate act of war, as could reprisals against civilian populations.

These rulings expressed a significant shift in the trials that had been held by the Allied powers following World War II. The judges effectively repudiated the Nuremberg Principles, established in the trials of the Nazi political leadership, which had determined that the killing of hostages, along with attacks on civilian populations, constituted war crimes regardless of the context.

This watering down of the definition of war crimes occurred as the US embarked upon aggressive Cold War policies, aimed at securing the hegemony of American imperialism on a world stage. This involved a rejection of the wartime alliance with the Moscow Stalinist bureaucracy and an aggressive bid for dominance in Europe.

Two of the 12 defendants were acquitted, and another was discharged due to medical issues. The nine others received sentences between 15 years and life imprisonment. All of them were released between 1951 and 1953, as part of amnesties for Nazi war criminals issued by the US-backed government in West

Germany.

100 years ago: Irish Civil War begins

On July 5, 1922, the Battle of Dublin ended after forces of the Irish Free State, who supported the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, defeated units of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) opposed to the treaty—which required an oath of allegiance to the British Crown and ceded control of foreign policy to British imperialism. The battle marked the beginning of the Irish Civil War of 1922-23.

A group of 200 IRA men had occupied the Four Courts government center on April 14. Leaders of Sinn Féin, the nationalist movement which had fought the British in the Irish War of Independence (1919-21), had been furiously attempting to reach a compromise on the treaty that would be acceptable to all factions, but the British refused to cooperate.

Supporters of the treaty won the elections of June 16 and constituted the Free State government. As the nationalist movement split into opposing factions, the British, particularly Colonial Minister Winston Churchill, began applying pressure on the new government and its Prime Minister Michael Collins, to oust the IRA from the buildings. This intensified after the IRA assassinated Sir Henry Wilson, a northern Irish politician and British military leader, who had played a particularly brutal role in suppressing the anti-British insurgency from 1919 on.

After an ultimatum, on the night of June 27 government troops began a bombardment of the Four Courts with artillery donated by the British. The IRA soldiers surrendered on June 30 but not before a massive explosion destroyed the Irish Public Records office, including records that dated to the Norman conquest of Ireland.

Bitter street fighting, particularly on O’Connell Street, continued in Dublin for the next five days. The IRA was supplemented by volunteers, including many women, from the Irish Citizen Army, which held the YMCA building as a defensive position. The Republicans evacuated it after the Free Staters, under the cover of armored cars, brought up heavy artillery, effectively ending the battle.



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