

This week in history: August 8-14

7 August 2022

25 years ago: Abner Louima assaulted and tortured by police in New York City

On August 8, 1997, Abner Louima, a Haitian immigrant in New York, was arrested and brutally assaulted by Brooklyn police officers responding to a dispute outside a club in Flatbush.

Louima was a night security guard at the Spring Creek water and sewerage plant and lived in Brooklyn with his wife and two children. Eyewitnesses said that police attacked people leaving the Club Rendez-Vous and took Louima away in a squad car. Police then drove him to a deserted side street where they took turns clubbing and beating him, then took him to the 70th precinct station house where they sodomized him with the handle of a toilet plunger.

It was several hours before the 33-year-old worker was taken to Coney Island Hospital suffering from extreme internal injuries. Even after the EMS unit arrived at the station house at 6 a.m., the cops delayed it for nearly two hours in an effort to cover up their crime. An EMS supervisor had to drive to the station and plead for Louima's release.

An emergency department nurse, Magalie Laurent, was suspicious of police claims that Louima's injuries were sustained as the result of "abnormal homosexual activities," and notified his family and the police of the possibility that he had been attacked in custody. He was treated for severe injuries including a punctured colon and gall bladder and remained hospitalized for two months.

The treatment of Louima was an example of what had become commonplace in working class neighborhoods, not only in New York, but throughout the United States. Five policemen were arrested and charged for the crime, three of whom were indicted for attempting to cover it up.

Louima charged that while two cops were beating him, they shouted racial slurs, and one of them said, "This is Giuliani time, not Dinkins time," referring to New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his predecessor, the city's first black mayor, David Dinkins. Louima ended up recanting that statement, which was used by police defense attorneys to question all of his testimony.

On August 16 and 29, demonstrations were held in protest of Louima's treatment. An estimated 7,000 people participated in the second protest. Concerned by public outrage over the attack just months before the mayoral election, Giuliani and police chief Howard Safir appeared at the victim's bedside to condemn the assault as "criminal acts carried out by criminals who happened to be wearing police uniforms," while attempting to portray the torturers as "rogue cops." Giuliani based his administration and his re-election campaign on law-and-order demagoguery, repeatedly boasting about his role in removing all restraints on the city's police force.

50 years ago: Uganda expels 80,000 South Asian immigrants

On August 9, 1972, Idi Amin, the military dictator of Uganda, ordered that the 80,000 people of South Asian descent living in the country be deported. The immigrants, who were citizens of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Great Britain, were given 90 days to make arrangements to leave.

The order created a major refugee crisis as the 80,000 South Asians scrambled to find countries willing to grant them asylum. Some 27,200 of the refugees held British citizenship and were able to emigrate to the United Kingdom, but under new immigration quotas put in place by the Tory government of Prime Minister Edward Heath, no more were to be admitted.

Canada accepted 6,000 migrants and 4,500 went to India. The United States, West Germany, Malawi and Pakistan each accepted 1,000. Several thousand, the poorest of the victimized Asians, attempted to cross the Ugandan borders with Kenya and Tanzania. Both countries would eventually close their borders and refuse to permit any further refugees from entering.

The order was a viciously racist attack on the minority population of Uganda in an attempt to direct growing discontent with social inequality away from Amin and his layer of corrupt military officials. Using right-wing nationalist and populist rhetoric, Amin used the order to transfer large amounts of land and wealth to his closest supporters.

In speeches, Amin denounced the south Asians as "bloodsuckers" and claimed, "Our deliberate policy is to transfer the economic control of Uganda into the hands of Ugandans for the first time in our country's history."

South Asians were originally brought to Uganda in the early 20th century while the country was still under British colonial control. Most were originally workers from India brought to build railroads and other industrial projects. Others were given lower-level administrative positions in the colonial government and were awarded land ownership.

The British colonizers consciously created this middle-class layer of South Asian administrators to have a buffer between themselves and the Ugandan masses. To many Ugandans, these administrators became the face of colonization, and given the limited cultural and educational development in the country, racist ideas about South Asians became widespread.

As the South Asians were removed, Amin brought much of the land that they had owned under the direction of the state-owned Uganda Development Corporation. From there it fell into the hands of Amin's allies in the government and military where they became the new beneficiaries of the country's great inequality.

75 years ago: Partition of India sets the stage for mass bloodshed

On August 14, 1947, the state of Pakistan was formally established, headed by Muhammad Ali Jinnah of the Muslim League. The following day, a new state of India came into being, with Jawaharlal Nehru of the Indian National Congress as its prime minister.

The two days marked the partition of the Indian subcontinent along ethno-religious lines, with the formation of Muslim and Hindu-based states immediately setting the stage for unprecedented communal violence.

For decades, Britain had toyed with the idea of splitting its Indian possession along religious lines to divide the masses. In the concluding stages of World War II, with the decline of British colonialism clearly evident, this long-simmering plan was put into action.

The granting of nominal Indian independence, aimed at maintaining imperialist dominance, involved handing power to venal native ruling cliques that could only ensure the survival of capitalist rule through the promotion of racism and religious antagonism.

The British plans were accelerated by the development of powerful movements of the colonial masses, including the 1946 naval mutiny by Indian sailors. The semi-insurrectionary struggle cut across ethnic lines and provoked major struggles of the working class, including a general strike in Bombay.

As negotiations for independence dragged on in 1946, the British encouraged Jinnah as he whipped up communal Muslim mobs, demanding an ethno-state. The Congress similarly collaborated with extreme right-wing Hindu nationalists and sought to ensure that the Muslim population would be sidelined in whatever state was formed.

Significantly, the partition was overseen by the British Labour Party government of Clement Attlee, demonstrating its commitment to imperialist policies first enacted by the Tories.

The partition immediately resulted in violence, with widespread rioting beginning the day Pakistan was established. The clashes stemmed from disputes over the state boundaries, as well as attempts at ethnic cleansing in the new communally based nations.

Over the ensuing weeks, anywhere from 200,000 to 2 million people would lose their lives. Ten million to 20 million were displaced, in what was described as the worst refugee crisis in history, to that point.

Historians Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh wrote: “There are numerous eyewitness accounts of the maiming and mutilation of victims. The catalogue of horrors includes the disemboweling of pregnant women, the slamming of babies’ heads against brick walls, the cutting off of the victim’s limbs and genitalia, and the displaying of heads and corpses.

“While previous communal riots had been deadly, the scale and level of brutality during the Partition massacres were unprecedented. Although some scholars question the use of the term ‘genocide’ concerning the partition massacres, much of the violence was manifested with genocidal tendencies. It was designed to cleanse an existing generation and prevent its future reproduction.”

100 years ago: Soviet government stays execution of counterrevolutionaries

On August 8, 1922, the Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Soviets in the Russian Soviet Federative Republic stayed the death sentences of 12 members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs), also known as the Social Revolutionary Party, who had engaged in counterrevolutionary activities against the Soviet Republic from 1918 on. The defendants, primarily leaders of the SRs, had been found guilty by a Soviet tribunal the day before.

The Bolshevik government stayed the executions on the condition “that the Social Revolutionary Party actually ceases all underground and conspirative acts of terrorism, espionage, and insurrection against the Soviet Government. If, however, the Social Revolutionary Party will continue the same methods of struggle against the Soviet regime, this will inevitably bring about the executions.”

The SRs had legal support from the international Social Democratic and trade union movements as well as 10 Soviet-appointed defenders, including Nikolai Bukharin and Mikhail Tomsy. The prosecution on the Soviet side was carried out by a team that included prominent Bolsheviks such as Nikolai Krylenko, Anatoly Lunacharsky, and Mikhail Pokrovsky. The panel of three judges was headed by old Bolshevik Iurii Piatakov.

The defendants had been convicted of playing the leading political role in the attempted assassination of Lenin and the successful assassination of Bolshevik leader V. Volodarsky in 1918, and for conspiring in the Kronstadt rebellion of 1921 and the Tambov peasant insurrection of 1921. Other defendants, also SRs, were given lesser sentences.

The SRs were a party that oriented itself to the middle-class layers in Russia, especially the intelligentsia and the wealthier peasantry. The party had split into right- and left-wing factions in 1917, and the Left SRs had briefly joined the Soviet government until its agreement with German imperialism in the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, after which they withdrew from the government and began a campaign of terror and insurrection against the Soviet Republic.



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