

This week in history: June 12-18

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

11 June 2023

25 years ago: NATO makes plans for war in the Balkans

On June 16, 1998, NATO staged a five-hour show of force aimed at ending Serbia's military crackdown in Kosovo by flying some 80 fighter jets over mountains in Albania.

The exercises signaled the preparation of another military intervention in the Balkans by the US and the Western European powers. NATO officials had reportedly drawn up a set of military options ranging from air strikes to "halt or disrupt" Serbian military action in Kosovo, to the enforcement of a no-fly zone or a heavy weapons exclusion zone.

Another measure under consideration was the deployment of NATO troops along Kosovo's borders with Albania to the west and Macedonia to the south. It was estimated that at least 20,000 troops would be needed for such an operation. Proposals had also been aired for NATO to mount a "peacekeeping mission" in Kosovo.

As the NATO exercise was taking place, Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic arrived in Moscow for talks with the Boris Yeltsin government. Moscow had joined with the Western powers in calling for an end to the fighting in Kosovo, but at the same time condemned any threat of NATO military force against Serbia. Moscow played a virtually identical role—distancing itself from NATO and conducting diplomatic talks with Belgrade—on the eve of the last major NATO intervention, the massive bombing campaign directed against Bosnian Serb forces.

Washington also claimed at that time that it was acting on humanitarian grounds. The result was the largest expulsion of ethnic populations since the beginning of Yugoslavia's breakup, culminating in the eviction of a quarter million ethnic Serbs from the Krajina region of Croatia. The end result of US and NATO intervention in Bosnia had been to solidify the country's partition along ethnic lines into Moslem, Croat and Serb-ruled enclaves. None of the major issues of contention—the return of refugees to their homes, the status of the strategically crucial town of Brcko, etc.—had been resolved.

From the outset of the Yugoslav crisis, Washington and the Western European powers claimed that their actions were guided by the principles of self-determination for the former republics of Yugoslavia and the sanctity of their borders. In reality, these principles merely masked the pursuit of economic and political self-interest. They adopted this policy in order to weaken the Yugoslav state and assert their own hegemony in the Balkans.

50 years ago: Soviet Stalinist leader Brezhnev arrives in the United States

On June 16, 1973 Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, arrived in the United States for a meeting with President Richard Nixon. The Washington Summit, as it was known, followed a similar meeting in Moscow in May 1972 when Nixon became the first president to visit the Soviet Union. The meetings marked the peak of the "détente" period of the Cold War, during which public hostilities between the US and the USSR temporarily thawed.

At the official meeting at the White House there was a display of military pomp and pageantry to welcome Brezhnev. Then he and Nixon met privately for a discussion that lasted nearly four hours. At a state dinner later that evening Nixon told the guests:

We have laid the groundwork for a significant improvement in our relations that will result from the discussions and agreements undertaken this week. We shall be worthy of the hopes of people everywhere that the world's two strongest nations will work together for the cause of peace and friendship.

Brezhnev similarly commented:

The start of our negotiations—and I have in mind both their content and the atmosphere in which they are proceeding—gives reason to hope that their results will be fruitful and will become a new landmark in Soviet-American relations.

Outside of the summit meeting much of the visit was devoted to the wining and dining of Brezhnev by Nixon. In addition to fine cuisine and yacht cruises, the US president gifted the leading Stalinist bureaucrat a custom luxury Lincoln Continental, adding to the list of high-end cars already owned by Brezhnev.

The week-long summit would see a number of agreements signed by Nixon and Brezhnev. Discussions included arms limitation, trade deals, and the Middle East. Most of the terms on routine issues like transportation and oceanography had been worked out in advance. Most significantly was the signing of the Prevention of Nuclear War Agreement, which stated that both nations would make it an official policy to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. However, the agreement stopped short of any actual dismantling of their nuclear capabilities.

Driving détente was a series of dramatic changes in the political landscape. Among these were the global financial crisis spawned by the end of the Bretton-Woods system, the breakdown of relations between

China and the USSR in the Soviet-Sino split, and the defeat of US imperialism in the Vietnam War. These events, accelerating the political crisis in each country, pushed Brezhnev and Nixon together, with each hoping that cutting a deal would alleviate the political instability.

Falling in line with Moscow's dictates as always, the Stalinists of the American Communist Party gave the visit their full approval, celebrating Brezhnev's new friendship with Nixon. They hailed the meeting as a step forward for "peaceful coexistence," defended Nixon against the Watergate inquiry, and assisted the trade union bureaucracy in suppressing any movement of workers that might emerge to force Nixon out of office.

75 years ago: Britain launches brutal attack on anti-colonial struggle in Malaysia

On June 17, 1948, British colonial authorities launched a brutal crackdown on Malaysian workers and left-wing activists affiliated with the country's Stalinist Communist Party. The onslaught would provoke a 12-year guerrilla war that would persist even after Malaysia's formal independence and that would again flare up from 1969 to 1989. The fighting, in other words, spanned almost a third of a century.

Britain had colonized various states in the Malaysian region over hundreds of years, beginning in the late 1700s. In 1946, it brought them together in the Malaysia Union, still under strict colonial rule. This was a period, following World War II, where colonialism was being challenged all over the world, including through massive struggles in China, India, Vietnam and elsewhere in the Indo-Pacific region.

In Malaysia, where the wartime conquest and occupation by Japan dealt a serious blow to the authority of the old colonial power, there was also a post-war upsurge. The economic fallout of the war, registered in substantial unemployment and grinding poverty, combined with hostility to the rule of the British and their puppets among the local feudalistic elite. In early 1946, the first full-day general strike was held, and the following year there were more than 300 stoppages, some of them large.

In this context of ferment, with the Malaysian Communist Party coming to prominence, the British were itching for the pretext for a crackdown. It came this week in June, 1948, with the killing of several plantation owners. On June 17, Britain responded by declaring a state of emergency.

There had been no investigation into the killings, their perpetrators or the underlying causes. Instead, all basic civil rights were suspended. Communist and union organizers, along with those wrongly suspected of political affiliation, were rounded up and jailed under extraordinary powers. Curfews and other repressive measures were imposed.

The Communist Party, it appears, had been preparing for a confrontation with the state. Several of its leaders were able to escape to rural areas, where the party had begun to develop a following among peasant layers. There they would regroup and begin a guerrilla struggle that would span decades. The British would employ "counter-insurgency" methods similar to those later used against the Vietnamese masses in the US war against that country.

The Communist Party, while its members displayed exceptional courage, was incapable of advancing a way forward. The Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union had struck a deal with the major imperialist powers during World War II for a carve-up of the world at its conclusion. The bureaucracy was hostile to revolutionary struggle in Asia and everywhere else. At the same time, the reactionary influences of Maoism were evident in the Malaysian Communist Party's orientation to a struggle based not on the country's industrial working class, but on the peasantry, mixed social layers that was dominated by the petty-bourgeois

proprietors.

100 years ago: Red Army defeats last remnants of White Guard in Siberia

On June 16, 1923, A Red Army unit under the command of Stepan Vostretsov defeated White Guard forces under the command of Anatoly Pepelyayev in Ayan in the recently proclaimed Yakut Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in Siberia. Pepelyayev was a former tsarist officer who led the counterrevolutionary armies of Admiral Alexander Kolchak in Siberia.

The Red Army had defeated Kolchak, with whom Pepelyayev had quarreled, by 1920, and executed him. But Pepelyayev continued to be active in Siberia and had sought contact with an anti-Bolshevik government in Vladivostok. Other White forces had set up their own areas of control in Siberia near the Sea of Okhotsk.

Pepelyayev, who had been convalescing from typhus in the northern Chinese city of Harbin, a center of White Russian emigration, sailed on a ship of the former Tsarist fleet with hundreds of volunteers in August 1922 to Okhotsk, along the Sea of Okhotsk, where he disembarked to head for the city of Yakutsk, 1,000 km (620 mi) inland, then under Bolshevik control. He was unable to overcome Red Army resistance, and, since Vladivostok had fallen to the Bolsheviks in October, Pepelyayev was forced to retreat to Ayan, also along the Sea of Okhotsk, which was besieged by Vostretsov.

Pepelyayev was captured with 102 officers and 230 soldiers and transported to Vladivostok where he was tried and sentenced to death. His term was commuted—possibly because he had freed 20,000 Red Army soldiers after seizing Perm in 1918—and he was released in 1936 only to be rearrested and executed in 1938 during Stalin's purges.

Some historians regard the battle at Ayan as marking the end of the Russian Civil War.



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