

This week in history: July 10-16

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.

9 July 2023

25 years ago: Japan's prime minister resigns

On July 13, 1998, Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto resigned at a press conference held in the wake of the stunning defeat of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party in the previous day's elections for the parliamentary upper house, the House of Councillors. The LDP won only 44 seats of the 126 contested, falling far short of the 61 the party had hoped to retain. The results of the upper house elections were a harbinger of further political instability, not only in Japan but throughout the region, as the economic slump deepened. Hashimoto was the second major political leader, after Indonesia's long-time dictator Suharto, to fall victim to the Asian financial crisis.

Upper house elections in Japan had usually been dull and uneventful affairs. Only half of the seats were contested at a time. The upper house had limited powers to name the prime minister, ratify treaties and pass state budget bills. The LDP had not had a majority in the House of Councillors since 1989 and did not expect to gain one in the election.

But the poll rapidly became a test of confidence in Hashimoto, who had been under increasing attack over his government's handling of Japan's economic crisis. Voter turnout reached a record low of 44 percent at the previous upper house elections, reflecting widespread alienation from all the bourgeois parties and politics. In the 1998 election, however, voters turned out in higher numbers at 58 percent, many of them determined to register their hostility to the LDP.

After early morning meetings with party leaders, Hashimoto announced he would take "all responsibility" for the election losses and resigned. His resignation threw into doubt the planned prime ministerial visit to Washington, scheduled for later in July, for talks about the Japanese economy, including plans to create a special "bridge bank" as a means for restructuring the estimated \$US600 billion in bad debts burdening the country's banking system.

In the midst of its worst economic recession since World War II, Japan had a lame duck prime minister. Economic crisis created political instability which compounded uncertainty on the international markets. The response to the election results was a further plunge in the yen from 140.93 to the US dollar to around 142.4 that day, and a decline in share prices.

50 years ago: Recently completed dam prevents mass death in Soviet Kazakhstan

On July 15, 1973 a massive landslide rushed down the Trans-Ili Alatau Mountains toward the hundreds of thousands of residents of Alma Ata, the capital of Soviet Kazakhstan. However, the flow of over 3.8 million cubic meters of mud, a sum large enough to lay waste to the city, harmed no one and caused no significant damage. Responsible for the survival of the city was the Medeu Dam, completed only one year earlier. The dam trapped the mudslide in its reservoir, preventing it from reaching the city below.

The Medeu Dam is one of the many great civil engineering achievements of Soviet workers and scientists that brought modernization and life saving advances to even the most isolated regions of the Soviet Union. Similarly to the Aswan High Dam, constructed by Soviet engineers in Egypt to control flooding of the Nile River, the Medeu Dam demonstrated the immense scientific and cultural gains made by the working class as a result of the October Revolution and the kind of achievements possible under a planned economy.

Alma Ata, deep in southern Kazakhstan, had long been a remote border city of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. It was the site of Leon Trotsky's first exile from Moscow by Joseph Stalin in 1928, where he was held under house arrest until he was forced out of the Soviet Union entirely in 1929. It was while in Alma Ata that Trotsky wrote his *Critique of the Draft Program of the Comintern*, a document that became a foundational text of the Fourth International.

After the Bolshevik Revolution and the victory of the Red Army in the Russian Civil War, Alma Ata's population grew rapidly as a number of Soviet initiatives allowed the remote city to become more connected to the world. These developments included the Turkestan-Siberia Railway, through which Alma Ata became an important crossroads. Before the Russian Revolution, Alma Ata had a population of less than 40,000. By 1973 it had grown to over 800,000. (The population of the city, now known as Almaty, today stands at 2 million).

However, as the city expanded the threat of landslides posed a deadly hazard. In 1921 a massive 10 million cubic meter slide killed 500 residents and wrecked many buildings and roads. In July 1963 another disaster occurred, killing at least 150 people.

In the aftermath of the 1963 disaster, preparations were made to begin building the Medeu Dam. Top scientists and engineers in the Soviet Union were enlisted to work on the project and solve the age-old mudslide problem. Among them was Mikhail Lavrentyev, an expert in explosives. A critical component of constructing the Medeu Dam involved setting off massive but precise explosions to move thousands of tons of rock and sediment. In 1972 the construction was completed, just in time to prevent the destruction of Alma Ata when the 1973 slide hit.

Lavrentyev was a student of Nikolai Luzin, a Soviet mathematician who became a victim of the Stalinist purge in 1936 and was stripped of his academic positions despite important advances made by his research.

Unlike some of his peers, Lavrentyev did not participate in the witch-hunt against Luzin.

75 years ago: Fascist student attempts assassination of Italian Communist Party leader

On July 14, 1948, Antonio Pallante, a fascist university student, shot Palmiro Togliatti, the leader of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), as he left the Chamber of Deputies. Togliatti, who suffered life-threatening injuries, was an internationally known political figure, whose record in left-wing and socialist politics began in the period immediately following the 1917 Russian Revolution.

The assassination attempt provoked mass anger. Just three years after the end of World War II, it underscored the fact that scores had not been settled with the fascist forces that had ruled Italy for several decades. The shooting, moreover, came amid a sharp shift to the right of the government, headed by Christian Democratic party Prime Minister Alcide De Gasperi. It was increasingly aligned with the US Cold War policies directed against the Soviet Union, which included a revival of far-right forces.

The PCI called for a general strike in response to the shooting. Workers responded powerfully, with mass abstentions from work. Despite the massive social struggles that had taken place in Italy over the preceding decades, one historian would later describe the stoppages after Togliatti's shooting as "the most complete and most extensive general strike ever in the history of Italy." For two days, the country was entirely paralyzed.

De Gasperi, making little attempt to distance himself from the fascist organizations behind the attempted killing, declared the country would be ruled by parliament, not by workers on the streets. The critical role in ending the strike movement, however, came from Togliatti himself. From his near-death bed he declared himself on the road of recovery and appealed for industrial peace. The PCI called off the stoppage. Workers and youth were left to isolated riots and disturbances which were dispersed by the police.

Togliatti's role was in line with his decades-long career as a Stalinist functionary, who supported and was involved in all of the counter-revolutionary actions of the Soviet bureaucracy. This included participation in the crushing of the Left Opposition, formed by Leon Trotsky in the 1920s to combat the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian Revolution.

In the post-World War II period, the Stalinist parties throughout Europe played the key role in restabilising capitalism. This was based on an agreement between Stalin and the imperialist powers for the maintenance of capitalism in Western Europe, in exchange for a Soviet sphere of influence in the east.

With Italian workers seeking to take on the ruling elite, which for decades had backed the fascists, the PCI entered into successive capitalist governments. Togliatti would serve as deputy prime minister and then minister of justice in the bourgeois governments formed immediately after the war. He supported all of the reactionary policies of the right-wing, including a formal agreement with the Vatican, after it had been even further compromised by its collaboration with the fascists, and closer ties with the US.

Togliatti and the PCI did not leave the capitalist governments. Instead they were forced out by De Gasperi as he was entering into various US-dominated imperialist pacts, such as NATO.

Pallante, the fascist hitman, was initially sentenced to 13 years and 8 months for attempted murder. After repeated interventions by the authorities, his sentence was lessened to just five years. He was released

in 1953 and immediately provided with a government department job. He died peacefully in July, 2022, at the age of 99. Pallante was an unrepentant fascist who never expressed remorse for his attempted assassination.

100 years ago: Farmer-Labor Party wins second US Senate seat in Minnesota

On June 16, 1923, Magnus Johnson, the candidate of the left-wing Farmer-Labor Party (FLP) was elected to the junior United States Senate seat in Minnesota in a special election after the death of the serving senator, Knute Nelson, a Republican. Johnson was the second FLP senator from Minnesota, joining Henrik Shipstead, who had been elected in 1922. Johnson had served as Minnesota state senator and as member of the Minnesota House of Representatives and later as a United States Congressman.

The vote for the FLP represented the leftward movement of small farmers in the upper Midwest amidst a tremendous agrarian crisis that was shaking the United States. The party had its origins in the Nonpartisan League of North Dakota, a left-wing agrarian movement founded in 1915.

The election in Minnesota and the anticipated victory of the FLP had already caused considerable concern in the ruling class. The *New York Times* noted that the issue had dominated regional Republican conferences held in July. The Republicans had the most to lose from an agrarian upsurge. "Radicals and radicalism were said to be eating toward the heart of Government in this country, and were cited as the common foe of Republicans and Democrats alike," the newspaper reported, before adding that "Special attention will be paid to spreading publicity to placate the farmers ..."

The FLP had begun to organize itself as a national party at a Chicago convention earlier in July 1923. As its name indicates, the FLP attempted to appeal to workers, an aim bitterly opposed by the American Federation of Labor bureaucracy, which was beholden to the Democratic Party. Based as it was on petty-bourgeois layers of the population, the FLP could never have been a working class party. Nonetheless, opportunist elements of the young Communist Party, encouraged by the right-leaning Comintern official John Pepper, attempted to steer militant workers into the FLP. Leon Trotsky was later to call Communist participation the "senseless and infamous adventure of creating a 'Farmer-Labor party.'"

During the 1930s, the FLP was to develop into an establishment bourgeois party that worked closely with the Roosevelt administration in implementing the New Deal. It was heavily infiltrated by the Stalinized Communist Party and played a reactionary role under Farmer-Labor governor Floyd B. Olson in attempting to suppress the Trotskyist-led 1934 general strike in Minneapolis.



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