

This week in history: July 17-23

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.

16 July 2023

25 years ago: Yeltsin reburies Tsar Nicholas II with honors

On July 17, 1998, 80 years to the day after their execution by revolutionary forces in the midst of the civil war that followed the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Russian government buried the remains of Tsar Nicholas II and his family in a ceremony at Saint Peter and Paul Cathedral in St. Petersburg.

In a speech at the funeral, Russia's President Boris Yeltsin declared, "The burial is an act of humane justice, a symbol of unification in Russia and redemption of common guilt." He called for atonement for "one of the most shameful pages of our history."

The Russian population had been inundated in previous weeks with accounts of the glories of tsardom. The Russian president spoke in florid terms at the ceremony about the tsar and his family.

Nicholas II, who reigned from 1894 to 1917, presided in luxurious fashion over a semi-feudal regime that oppressed the masses of ordinary Russian people. The wealth of the aristocracy and the royal family depended on the dire misery of tens of millions of peasants and several million urban workers. Tsarist Russia was synonymous throughout the civilized world with backwardness, repression and ignorance. Nicholas maintained his power through the mobilization of a vast army of policemen and police spies. Every progressive political movement and idea was banned. The regime exiled thousands of political opponents to Siberia; thousands more died in medieval prisons; it executed hundreds more.

In his speech, Yeltsin, the man who ordered his own parliament building bombed and prosecuted a brutal war against Chechen nationalist forces, hypocritically condemned violence in all its forms as "doomed" and raised the spiritual importance of the end of the millennium.

The fate of the tsar and tsarina was sealed by the outbreak and course of the civil war. Trotsky proposed at a meeting of the Bolsheviks' Politburo that Nicholas be placed on trial and that a full portrait of his rule be painted in open court. He suggested that the trial be broadcast on radio. There was some sympathy for the proposal, but the invasion of the Soviet workers state by 14 foreign armies, led by Britain and France, aimed at the crushing of the revolution, made it impracticable.

By July 1918 the military situation for the Red forces in Yekaterinburg had become increasingly precarious. White armies were advancing, and the Bolsheviks feared that if the royal family fell into the hands of the counterrevolution they might become a living symbol to the wavering and more backward layers of the rural population. So, on July 17, 1918, the tsar and his family were executed, sharing the fate of Charles I of England, Louis XVI of France and other victims of the tide of human progress.

50 years ago: Afghanistan coup ends monarchy, establishes dictatorship

On July 17, 1973, Mohammad Daoud Khan, the leading general of the Afghan military, launched a successful coup against King Mohammad Zahir Shah. At the time, Zahir Shah was out of the country receiving medical treatment in Italy. Upon assuming power Khan abolished the monarchy and established a one-party state with himself at the head.

The coup was relatively bloodless, with only seven police officers killed as the army took control of the major government offices. Once word of the coup reached Shah, he immediately responded by announcing his abdication, admitting that Afghans, "with absolute majority welcomed a republican regime."

Khan was Shah's cousin and had previously served as Prime Minister from 1953 to 1963. At the end of this period a political split emerged between the two. At the time, Khan favored a closer alliance with the Soviet Union and had proposed that Shah himself reform the government into a republican system.

Shah preferred to keep Afghanistan officially non-aligned with either the United States or the Soviet Union in the Cold War, hoping to maneuver between the two as it advantaged him. He rejected Khan's proposals and in 1963 demanded his resignation as Prime Minister. In 1964 he created a new constitution which banned any member of the royal family from holding ministerial positions, a move specifically designed to keep Khan out of high office.

Khan, however, maintained his position in the army and remained an important figure in politics. In the decade following his ousting as Prime Minister he gradually consolidated around himself a bloc of different political factions who would support his seizure of power in 1973.

Outside of the army, the most important of these factions was the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA was Afghanistan's Stalinist party, which had held a handful of seats in parliament during the Shah monarchy. Khan pledged to bring PDPA members into his cabinet if they supported and provided assistance to his coup, which the Stalinists agreed to with little hesitation.

In his first years in power Khan pursued policies designed to modernize Afghanistan economically. These included the nationalization of banks and industrialization initiatives. Much of these measures were overseen by the Stalinist PDPA ministers.

In 1977 Khan reformed the constitution, officially enshrining his National Revolutionary Party as the sole legal ruling party. He began a purge of PDPA members from the government, distanced himself from support for the Soviet Union and began closer collaboration with the United States and Egypt, which by that time had also broken from their

Soviet alliance.

In 1978 PDPA leader Mir Akbar Khyber was assassinated. After his funeral turned into mass political rallies in support of the PDPA, Khan attempted to suppress the party. The PDPA responded by launching their own coup and organized sections of the army that had been won to their ranks. Khan was killed during the PDPA coup on April 28, 1978.

After the 1973 coup, Zahir Shah remained in Italy for nearly the rest of his life. However, in 2002 he was permitted to return after the United States invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. He obediently played the role demanded of him by the US and supported the regime of the occupation. He died in 2007 as a semi-rehabilitated monarch-like figurehead, although he never officially had his title restored.

75 years ago: American Communist Party leaders indicted for “conspiring to overthrow government”

On July 20, 1948, twelve leaders of the American Communist Party were indicted under the Smith Act, accused of conspiring to “overthrow the US government.”

The indictments were the highest stage to that point of an anti-communist witch-hunt, which included sweeping purges in film and other artistic sectors. They were brought down by the Democratic Party administration of President Harry S. Truman, which was implementing Cold War policies directed against the Soviet Union, aimed at establishing the global hegemony of American imperialism.

In a statement shortly after the indictment was announced, Farrell Dobbs, the 1948 presidential candidate of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party declared: “The indictment of the twelve Communist Party leaders under the notorious Smith ‘Gag’ Act is a monstrous blow against civil liberties, another step in the direction of establishing a police state and thought-control in this country.”

Dobbs’ statement cited similar comments by civil liberties and human rights organizations, which warned that the prosecution marked a turn to authoritarianism within the United States.

Dobbs had himself been prosecuted under the Smith Act, in 1941, along with 28 other members of the SWP. They were the first to be charged and imprisoned under the legislation, which particularly targeted anti-war organizations.

The SWP was attacked by the Roosevelt administration because it was the only tendency in the labor movement which opposed American participation in World War II, and the only one that exposed the imperialist motivations underlying the interventions of all the major powers in the conflict. The Stalinist Communist Party, in keeping with its alignment with American imperialism, under conditions of the US-Soviet wartime alliance, cheered on Roosevelt’s prosecution of the Trotskyists.

In his 1948 statement, Dobbs noted the irony. But unlike the Stalinists, the SWP defended the democratic rights of other tendencies within the workers’ movement, including those that it had the most fundamental disagreements with.

Dobbs’ statement noted the ludicrous character of the charge. The Communist Party had been in a protracted alignment with the Democratic Party and was implacably hostile to socialist revolution.

Dobbs explained:

The charge that Stalinist leaders were advocating the doctrines of Marx and Lenin is fantastic and false. The Stalinist leaders long ago abandoned the philosophy of Marxism. Their shift in position in 1945 after the expulsion of Browder, upon which the indictment

is hinged, did not indicate a return to Marxism but was merely an adaptation to the new foreign policy of the Kremlin.

The present prosecution is likewise the result of a recent reversal in attitude by Washington toward the Communist Party. The Federal Government was more than willing to accept the super-patriotic support of the CP during the war, their strikebreaking and their hounding of union militants.

In concluding, Dobbs stated:

The Department of Justice was also more than willing to accept the support of the CP in railroading us to jail under the same Smith Act during the war. Despite the hypocrisy, deceit and treachery of the Stalinist leaders, we have no intention of imitating their unprincipled abandonment of civil rights and outrageous treachery toward us during the war.

We consider it our duty to fight the present prosecution to the limit and to alert the entire labor movement to oppose it. I propose to make the issue of the administration’s attack on civil rights a major point in my campaign for the presidency.

100 years ago: Pancho Villa assassinated in Mexico

On July 20, 1923, Pancho Villa, one of the outstanding leaders of the Mexican Revolution of 1911-1920, was shot in his motor car by seven gunmen while he was driving from his ranch near the city of Parral in the northern state of Chihuahua. Villa and his three bodyguards were killed and only one person from his entourage survived. At the time, sources speculated that the murder had been commissioned by Francisco Herrera, a leader of a rival faction of the Mexican revolution whose father and three brothers had been killed by Villa. There, were, however, almost certainly political motives for the killing as well.

Villa, who was born impoverished in the northern state of Durango, had worked as a sharecropper, bricklayer and railway foreman until becoming a bandit by the turn of the century. He developed into a leader of the Mexican revolution after 1910 when he and his band joined the military actions to overthrow President Porfirio Díaz. In 1916, Villa led a raid on Columbus, New Mexico because the United States had been supporting the new Mexican government of Venustiano Carranza, which had come to power on the heels of the revolution. President Wilson sent 5,000 American troops into Mexico, but they proved unable to capture Villa.

Villa and his followers had continued to play an insurrectionary role until 1919, when he led an assault on Ciudad Juárez near the American border. Since 1920, Villa had been living on a 25,000-acre estate the government had given to him after peace negotiations with the regime of Adolfo De la Huerta, supposedly in retirement.

Villa was allegedly preparing to re-enter politics for the 1924 elections. Most historians believe that Plutarco Elías Calles, who became president in 1924, commissioned his murder to suppress a potential rival.

The socialist journalist John Reed’s first published book, *Insurgent Mexico* (1914), describes his experience of traveling with Pancho Villa’s army.



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