

This week in history: July 15-21

15 July 2024

25 years ago: Plane crash kills John F. Kennedy Jr. and two companions

On July 16, 1999, John F. Kennedy Jr., his wife Carolyn Bessette, and her sister Lauren were killed in the crash of the small plane piloted by Kennedy, after he apparently became disoriented while flying at night over Long Island Sound, on a trip from the New York area to the island of Martha's Vineyard.

The son of the assassinated president, then 38, had only qualified as a pilot the year before and had relatively little experience in flying at night or over water, where navigation and orientation are more difficult. He had not yet qualified for instrument-only flying. When search and rescue crews found the wreckage of the plane, Kennedy was still strapped into his pilot's seat.

This pathetic event became the occasion for more than a week of media sensationalism, portraying the death of the JFK Jr. as a colossal loss to American society, depriving the country of what one newspaper described as the "Camelot Prince." Television networks interrupted their regular programming to provide round-the-clock coverage of the search, while commentators pontificated on the great significance of the event.

As the WWSW wrote at the time: "There was an obvious and conscious attempt to give the Kennedy disappearance and likely death the full "Diana" treatment, aping the saturation coverage which followed the death of the British princess in a 1997 car accident."

This included a public burial at sea from the deck of a US Navy vessel, ordered by Democratic President Bill Clinton, although Kennedy had not been a member of any military service and was a private citizen at the time of his death.

Kennedy was the undistinguished scion of a multimillionaire family, with outsized celebrity because of the tragic murders of his father and his uncle Robert F. Kennedy, assassinated in 1963 and 1968 respectively. He was a mediocre to average student, graduated from Brown University with a degree in American Studies, and, after law school, passed his bar exam only on the third attempt.

He then worked for several years as an assistant district attorney in New York City, before giving up law and politics for a publishing venture, the ill-fated magazine *George*, a venture which combined the worlds of celebrity and politics with which he was familiar.

This episode was a demonstration of the rise of the aristocratic principle in American bourgeois culture. The political and media establishment downplay the deaths of thousands of ordinary working people in accidents every year, from tornados and hurricanes to hideous workplace disasters. They suggest these deaths are not the fault of capitalist society, but a matter of "individual responsibility." But in the case of John F. Kennedy Jr., the death, largely attributable to personal recklessness, of an individual who made no significant contribution to American society was presented as a calamity of

historical dimensions.

50 years ago: Military coup sparks Greek-Turkish crisis over Cyprus

On July 15, 1973, the Greek military junta, with the backing of the CIA, launched a coup in Cyprus that overthrew the government of the Republic of Cyprus and brought the island under the control of the dictatorship. The Greek coup sparked a war with Turkey which would invade Cyprus five days later.

Located between Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, the island of Cyprus is a key trade and military strategic location in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. In 1878 the Ottoman Empire agreed to lease Cyprus to the British government, which then took full control after the First World War.

In 1960, Cyprus gained its independence from British rule and established a republic. For centuries the population of the island had been divided along ethno-linguistic and religious lines, about 80 percent Greek and Christian, and 20 percent Turkish and Muslim. The Turkish minority often faced discrimination and violence from right-wing Greek nationalist paramilitary groups who called for the island to be brought under control of Greece itself.

The Turkish ruling elite remained opposed to Cyprus' integration into Greece, claiming a responsibility to protect the interests of the Cypriot Turk population, but seeking even more to secure access to valuable mineral deposits and fishing rights, and to use the issue as a distraction from political conflicts within mainland Turkey.

Under the 1960 constitution Turkish Cypriots were granted full political rights and a guaranteed 30 percent of seats in parliament. The Greek nationalists fiercely opposed such concessions and saw the direct governance of the island by the Greek military junta, which took power in 1967, as the way forward to strip Turkish Cypriots of their rights and political influence on the island.

The July 15 Greek nationalist coup quickly ousted the Cypriot President Archbishop Makarios III, who immediately fled to London. By the time of the coup the Greek junta had already succeeded in winning over hundreds of officers in the Cypriot National Guard, the island's military force.

The junta chose Nikos Sampson to serve as the President of Cyprus. Sampson was a far-right Greek nationalist and viciously anti-Turk. His elevation to power raised fears among the Turkish communities that pogroms and forcible relocations could be on the agenda.

On July 20, 1974, 40,000 Turkish troops landed in northern Cyprus to reinforce the Turkish Cypriot militias that had taken up arms to defend against the Greek military. Fighting raged for about one month until August 18 when a UN-brokered ceasefire was declared. On both

sides over 6,000 casualties were recorded during the fighting.

The ceasefire created a partition of the island with the south being held by Greece while Turkish forces succeeded in holding the northern portion of the Island. While prior to the coup, the Turkish and Greek communities were spread out throughout the island, now the nationalities were forcibly relocated to one side of the border or the other.

In total over 200,000 people were forced to leave their homes and move to the opposite side of the new border. The partition of Cyprus along Greek and Turkish ethnic lines still exists to the present day.

The provocative Greek coup and the invasion of the island by Turkey accelerated the political crisis within Greece itself. Facing mass popular opposition following the Athens uprisings in 1973 the Greek junta hoped that the coup abroad and the annexation of Cyprus would help resolve its domestic crisis.

The Cyprus coup, however, was deeply unpopular among Greek workers, who opposed a war with Turkey. Fearing that the working class would intervene directly into events to oust the dictatorship, just days after the Cyprus coup, the collapsing junta called for national elections to be held in November.

Carefully orchestrated to avoid a revolutionary situation, the elections lead to the creation of the present-day Greek state, the Third Hellenic Republic. The bourgeois New Democratic party would win the elections and officially come to power in December of 1974 led by Konstantinos Karamanlis, who became prime minister.

75 years ago: Laos granted phony independence within French Union

On July 19, 1949, French President Vincent Auriol signed a convention with Laotian King Sisavang Vong in Paris purportedly recognizing Laos as an independent state within the French Union. In reality, the main levers of state power, including all foreign policy, remained in French hands with Sisavang assigned to function as a puppet ruler.

What became Laos had for centuries been ruled by several principalities. They were subjected to French colonial occupation in the latter part of the 19th century. In World War II, Laos was seized by Japan, along with Indochina. With the Japanese defeat in 1945, the French immediately moved to reclaim Laos.

Leaders of the anti-French Free Laos movement were forced to escape to Thailand. At the same time, the French cultivated support within elements of the Laotian establishment, still dominated by feudalistic princes. This included Sisavang, who was the last ruler of the Kingdom of Luang Prabang and in 1947 was installed with French backing to the newly created position of King of Laos.

The 1949 granting of nominal independence was aimed at neutralizing elements of the Laotian bourgeois opposition. Most of the leadership of the Free Laos movement returned from Thailand and agreed to work within the political structures established by the French, including the new Constitutional monarchy and limited popular representation in a state still dominated by Paris.

A dissident wing of the Free Laos movement, however, rejected the new set-up as a sham. Headed by Prince Souphanouvong and other radical nationalist leaders, it would be formally established as the Pathet Lao in 1950. Appealing to anti-colonial sentiment and the

social hardships of the peasantry, the Pathet Lao would join with Indochinese independence forces in fighting the French and later American imperialism and its local proxies.

100 years ago: Argentine police and ranchers massacre 400 indigenous people

On July 16, 1924, a group of armed police, ranchers and other whites killed over 400 men, women and children of the of Toba and Mocovi peoples, along with a small number of white farmers who supported them, at the settlement of Napalpi in Chaco province in Argentina in what has come to be known as the Napalpi Massacre.

One hundred and thirty police and settlers fired into Napalpi with rifles. Survivors were beheaded with machetes or hanged. The killers raped women and mutilated the bodies of the dead, taking as trophies ears and testicles. The terror lasted for days as anyone who escaped the initial bloodshed was hunted down and killed.

In the 1880s, the Argentine military had started a campaign to subjugate the native peoples of Chaco to open up the area for commercial cotton cultivation. This included forced relocations and killings. Napalpi, which means “cemetery” in the Toba Qom language, was one such relocation settlement founded in 1911. The government also built a series of forts to cordon off the native peoples from the Argentine ranchers.

Indigenous people around Napalpi began growing their own cotton for the market. The authorities heightened tensions by implementing a 15 percent tax on cotton in 1924, leading to violence between natives and settlers. Native farmers refused to sell their crops. It was then that the governor of Chaco, Fernando Centeno, began to prepare the massacre.

In August, an investigation was sponsored by the National Congress but, as one observer noted, witnesses had been hunted down to prevent them from testifying. It was not until 2022 that a “truth trial” was sponsored by the government to investigate the facts of the massacre, but charges were not leveled against anyone since no one involved was living. A judge ruled that the Argentine government was responsible for the massacre.



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