

This week in history: July 14-20

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

13 July 2025

25 years ago: Germany compensates Nazi slave laborers

On July 17, 2000, the German government and German corporations, politically backed by the US, founded a fund to compensate the survivors of forced/slave labor under Hitler's Third Reich. The "Memory, Responsibility and Future" agreement, signed by Count Otto Lambsdorff and Manfred Gentz from Germany, the American Stuart Eizenstat, and representatives from Israel, Poland, the Ukraine, Chechnya and Belarus, allocated 10 billion marks, or \$5 billion, to settle claims litigated by Holocaust victims, ranging between 1.5 million and 2.3 million people.

During Hitler's reign of terror and mass murder, millions of Jewish men, women, and children, Eastern Europeans, conquered peoples, and communists were abducted and transferred to forced labor and extermination camps. Under the Nazi whip, these abductees worked in concentration camps and ghettos for German corporations such as IG Farben, Volkswagen, and Continental.

While business leaders and the imperialist powers piously beat their chests for fulfilling a "moral responsibility" for the worst crimes in human history, the agreement shielded German companies from future litigation and protected their bank accounts. German business leaders were thrilled: it had "everything in it that we wanted."

Free Democratic Party politician Otto Lambsdorff highlighted the shameless hypocrisy and pro-business character of the agreement during his Bundestag speech on July 6:

I would like it to be understood in all clarity that rarely have morals and business been as close together as they were in these negotiations. The foundation directly protects German interests in the USA, i.e., our exports and investments.

According to the Jewish World Congress, the US government deposited an initial \$10 million, 20 million marks, to encourage German business participation in the fund. Washington guaranteed a total of \$25 million, which had been earmarked for another fund for victims of Nazi persecution. All of this money was taken from stolen Nazi gold seized from European banks by US and British imperialism after the war. German government and German industry then provided the funding of 10 billion marks, each contributing 5 billion.

Approximately 5.5 billion marks went to survivors in Eastern European countries: 1.8 billion for Poland; 1.7 billion for the Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova; 835 million for the Russian Federation and the Republics of Latvia and Lithuania; 695 million for Belarus and Estonia;

and 423 million for the Czech Republic. In addition, 1.8 billion marks were intended for Jewish victims outside the Eastern European states, and 800 million was set aside for non-Jewish victims and their descendants.

Some victims of the Nazis were excluded from receiving any compensation, indicating the pro-business nature of the agreement. Victims who had been forced agricultural laborers, had been subjected to medical "experiments," or lived in children's homes in horrific and slave-like conditions never recovered a penny.

50 years ago: US and Soviet Union complete first joint space mission

On July 17, 1975, a United States Apollo command module and a Soviet Union Soyuz capsule successfully docked in orbit over earth. Millions of people watched the televised Apollo-Soyuz Test Project (ASTP), which was marked by the "handshake in space" between Apollo commander Thomas Stafford and Soyuz commander Alexei Leonov. The mission was promoted prominently in the media as a symbol of the period of "détente" between the two Cold War superpowers.

Beginning with the Soviet mission that launched the first manned space flight in 1961 and culminating with the NASA moon landing by US astronauts in 1969, the first period of human space exploration was colored politically by an intense state of war readiness between the two countries. However by 1975 the political landscape had changed.

A period of mass anti-imperialist and working-class struggles proved the importance of Stalinism for preserving capitalist rule, particularly in Western Europe, where the May-June 1968 events in France terrified both Moscow and the world bourgeoisie. Always looking for deals that would prop up imperialism and their own bureaucratic rule ("peaceful coexistence"), the Stalinist regime negotiated trade deals and other agreements with the US. One consequence was that the Cold War "space race" gave way to a brief period of international space collaboration.

The primary stated goal of the ASTP was to test the compatibility of rendezvous and docking systems for American and Soviet spacecraft to enable any future rescue of astronauts or cosmonauts in space. This required overcoming significant technical hurdles rooted in the separate evolution of the two space programs. The principal innovation was the development of a common docking mechanism. Unlike previous probe-and-drogue systems, which required one active and one passive craft, the new Androgynous Peripheral Attach System (APAS) allowed either spacecraft to take on either role, creating a truly universal connection.

A major engineering challenge was reconciling the two crafts' different cabin atmospheres. The Apollo module used a pure, low-pressure oxygen

environment, while the Soyuz used a mixed nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere at a pressure closer to sea level. Direct transfer was impossible. The solution was a specially designed Docking Module, carried into orbit by the US Saturn IB rocket, which functioned as an airlock. Astronauts and cosmonauts would enter the module, which would then adjust its atmospheric pressure and composition to match that of the other craft, allowing for crew transfers.

During the two days the spacecraft remained docked and linked, the crews conducted a series of joint scientific experiments. One of the most significant was the “artificial solar eclipse,” where the Apollo craft positioned itself to block the Sun, enabling the Soyuz crew to photograph the solar corona. Another key experiment involved ultraviolet absorption, measuring the density of atomic nitrogen and oxygen in the low-Earth-orbit environment. The crews also collaborated on biological studies, including an experiment on the effects of space radiation on certain fungi.

The Apollo-Soyuz mission was a major success. It demonstrated to a global audience the potential for the pursuit of scientific knowledge to overcome national divisions. While the political détente would prove to be short-lived, the technical groundwork and cooperative experience gained from the ASTP directly informed future international projects, including the Shuttle-Mir program and the construction of the International Space Station.

75 years ago: Julius Rosenberg arrested in New York on charges of espionage

On July 17, 1950, Julius Rosenberg was arrested at his New York City apartment on suspicion of espionage and passing on information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. Over the next three years, he and his wife Ethel were subjected to a political frame-up which culminated in their execution in 1953.

Julius Rosenberg, an engineer in New York, became a member of the Young Communist League during the Great Depression in 1936. There he met Ethel, also a member of YGL, and they married soon after. From 1940-1945 he was an engineer for the US Army until he was discharged when his communist affiliations were discovered. At the time of his arrest, Julius was operating a machine shop in New York City, where he lived with Ethel and their two sons.

The arrest of Rosenberg followed the previous seizures of chemist Harry Gold in May and US Army technician David Greenglass, the brother of Ethel Rosenberg. Greenglass's testimony in particular played an essential role in the frame up of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Greenglass accused his sister, falsely as he would admit decades later, of typing up the notes he passed on to the Soviets, and implicated Julius as the one who recruited him to espionage, which led to his arrest. Ethel was arrested less than a month after her husband, and together they were executed in 1953 after being convicted under the reactionary Espionage Act of 1917.

Documentation released in the decades after their deaths, especially since the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, provide no evidence that either Julius or Ethel Rosenberg stole “the secret of the atomic bomb” and passed it to the Soviet Union—which was the “crime” that the US government accused them of committing.

The Rosenberg case, which began with the arrest of Julius, was a particularly sharp expression of the McCarthyite anti-communist witch-hunt aimed at criminalizing anyone suspected of communist sympathies or associations. The main purpose of this campaign of state repression was to intimidate and silence any left-wing opposition to the government, particularly in the working class.

100 years: Druze rebels capture French garrison in Syria

On July 20, 1925, in one of the first actions of the Great Syrian Revolt of 1925-27, a detachment of fighters from the Druze religious minority overran a French garrison in the southern Syrian city of Salkhad.

The rebels were led by Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, who was to become one of the leaders of the Syrian revolt. Al-Atrash's forces entered the city and set fire to the garrison, which consisted of 40 French officers and government employees. The garrison surrendered. The rebels proceeded to occupy imperialist institutions in the city including the library and the police station.

Al-Atrash had been rallying members of his clan in the villages surrounding Salkhad and assembled a force of about 250 cavalry. On July 19, his forces shot down a French reconnaissance plane and took the two pilots prisoner.

After the seizure of Salkhad, al-Atrash was able to form alliances with local Muslim leaders. When the French dispatched 160 troops from the capital of the area, Suwayda, to restore order to Salkhad on July 21, rebel forces were able to head them off and kill most of the unit, including its commander. Al-Atrash's forces soon linked up with Syrian nationalists and the revolt spread throughout Syria and Lebanon.

The League of Nations had given France a mandate to rule the two countries in 1923. Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq were former provinces of the Ottoman Empire and were divided between French and British imperialism in the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1917, which was made public by the young Soviet Republic led by Lenin and Trotsky.

France ruled Syria and Lebanon through a series of puppet states, running largely along religious and ethnic divisions, but by 1925, the Syrian masses were impatient for France to set up a transition to an independent state. There was widespread anger at the domination of French imperialism over the Syrian economy, at the French authorities' chauvinism against Arab culture, and France's divide and rule policy that set ethnic and religious groups against each other. All of these grievances were expressed in the revolt of the next two years.



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