

This week in history: August 11-17

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

10 August 2025

25 years ago: Fiji military regime charges coup leader with treason

On August 11, 2000, Fiji's military government charged the leader of a failed May 19 coup, George Speight, and 14 associates with treason—a capital offense. This was widely seen as a calculated gesture to Washington, Canberra, London, and Wellington, signaling a readiness to re-establish law and order and restore conditions favorable to foreign investment.

Speight's group—including former army commander Ilisoni Ligairi, spokesperson Joe Nata, Timoci Silatolu, and Jim Speight—was accused of waging civil war against President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and overthrowing Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry's elected government. On May 19, 2000, they had stormed Parliament and taken government officials hostage.

The treason charges, denying bail and postponing trial for at least four weeks, marked a dramatic escalation from lesser offenses initially brought after their July arrests. The military's abrupt reversal was a direct response to diplomatic and economic leverage by the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Britain: aid, trade, and investment relationships were put on hold pending action against the coup plotters, with US Ambassador Osman Siddique urging Fiji to move toward "national reconciliation and reconstruction" with a "more transparent" administration—diplomatic code for opening the island wide to capitalist exploitation.

The economic fallout from Western pressure had been immediate and severe, with about \$400 million in planned investments frozen. A South Pacific Forum report predicted at least two years of recession under the best scenario and up to five years with 40,000 job losses if harsh sanctions continued. Those most effected were poor, unskilled workers in construction, tourism, and retail—the majority of the island's population.

Reacting to the imperialist pressure, Interim Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase announced sweeping pro-business measures, including corporate tax cuts and concessions for exporters.

The imperialist powers were able to prey on ethnic divisions. Speight and his supporters sought the exclusion of Indo-Fijians from government and pushed for constitutional changes favoring indigenous dominance, triggering violence and discrimination against Indo-Fijians, including attacks on their businesses and places of worship. Qarase aimed to keep this aspect of the coup's aims, promising "much of Speight's program will be implemented." New laws implemented after the coup entrenched land ownership for Fijian chiefs and privileges for indigenous businesses, reinforcing divisions already exploited by the coup.

Western governments welcomed the military government's move against Speight. But their support remained conditional. Regional powers

Australia and New Zealand lifted travel bans but kept targeted sanctions in place to maintain leverage. Australia's Foreign Minister Alexander Downer openly stated that Canberra would maintain "economic, sporting and military sanctions in place in order to keep pressure on the new government."

50 years ago: Bangladesh President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman assassinated

On August 15, 1975, a military coup in Bangladesh resulted in the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the country's first post-independence president. In addition to Mujibur Rahman, the assassins killed his wife, three sons, and other family members. Only his two daughters, including the future prime minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, survived due to being abroad in Germany at the time.

The coup was led by a group of army officers who established a military junta as the new ruling power. The military government immediately issued an "Indemnity Ordinance" to protect the assassins from prosecution, a law that would stand for two decades throughout several subsequent military dictatorships.

The assassination was the culmination of the profound political crisis in the newly independent Bangladesh. The country was born out of the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which saw the country, then known as East Pakistan, engage in an independence struggle against West Pakistan.

The conflict was a product of the reactionary communal partition of India in 1947, which created the states of India and Pakistan with arbitrary borders that split both Bengal and Punjab. In East Pakistan, the Bengali-speaking majority was dominated by the ruling elites from West Pakistan, who imposed Urdu as the state language and systematically marginalized the eastern wing. This led to the rise of a Bengali nationalist movement.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman emerged as the central political leader of this movement, heading the Awami League. In the December 1970 national election, the Awami League won an overwhelming majority, but the Islamabad establishment and military refused to allow him to form a national government.

This refusal triggered a brutal military crackdown in March 1971, which, in turn, provoked an armed rebellion and a full-scale independence war. With the military support of India, Bangladesh won its independence in December 1971.

After his release from a Pakistani prison, Mujibur Rahman returned in January 1972 to lead the newly independent nation as its first president. However, his bourgeois nationalist program was completely unable to

address the dire needs of the impoverished working masses of Bangladesh.

Upon independence, Bangladesh was beset by immense economic and social problems. By 1973, industrial and agricultural production had plummeted to a fraction of pre-war levels. A devastating famine in 1974 claimed millions of lives. The Awami League government became increasingly corrupt and resorted to authoritarian methods to consolidate its rule.

As political opposition mounted, Mujibur Rahman declared a state of emergency in December 1974, suspending fundamental constitutional rights. In early 1975, he established a one-party presidential system with himself as the head of state, effectively ending parliamentary democracy.

This turn to dictatorship, combined with rampant corruption within the Awami League and his perceived ties with India, created an environment of resentment within sections of the army that ultimately led to the August 15 coup and assassination. Bangladesh would be ruled by a continuing series of military rulers until 1990 when a mass uprising finally ousted the dictatorship.

75 years ago: Ethel Rosenberg arrested at New York courthouse

On August 11, 1950, Ethel Rosenberg was arrested on the steps of a New York City courthouse just hours after testifying before a grand jury. Her husband Julius had been arrested less than four weeks prior on suspicion of espionage and passing on information about the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union.

Ethel's testimony before the grand jury involved a barrage of questions about her communist affiliations, to which she continuously asserted her right not to answer the questions to protect against self-incrimination, a right guaranteed under the Fifth Amendment of the US Constitution. Before her testimony and later arrest, she had previously been implicated by her brother, David Greenglass, himself arrested two months prior by the FBI. During his trial in 1951, he implicated Ethel as the person who typed up the notes which he passed to the Soviet Union through a courier.

The prosecution team at the time admitted they had a weak case against Ethel but proceeded with arresting and charging her anyway, partly as an unsuccessful attempt to apply pressure to her husband to talk, and partly to use her punishment as an example in the midst of McCarthyite anti-communism. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's trial concluded in March 1951 with a conviction of espionage, and a death sentence which was carried out on June 19, 1953.

Documents released in the decades since the arrest, trial, and execution of Ethel Rosenberg have provided increasingly strong evidence that she was the victim of a political frame-up. In 2008, the grand jury testimony for almost all the witnesses (excluding, notably, David Greenglass) was released, after being sealed for over half a century. In particular, historians have noted that the testimony of Ethel's sister-in-law Ruth Greenglass directly contradicted the central charge of the trial against Ethel, that she typed up the notes which David Greenglass passed to the Soviets.

Ruth Greenglass's grand jury testimony on the other hand, confirmed that the notes passed on from Greenglass were handwritten by Ruth herself. This lines up with what David Greenglass later admitted to journalist Sam Roberts in 2003, that he lied in his 1951 trial and falsely implicated Ethel Rosenberg to protect his wife. When Greenglass's own grand jury testimony, four days prior to Ethel's arrest, was finally released in 2015, it demonstrated that Greenglass initially claimed that he had never spoken to Ethel about his espionage activities.

100 years: French and Spanish armies combine to fight rebels in Morocco

On August 11, 1925, the French and Spanish militaries combined forces in an offensive in Morocco against the rebels led by Abd el-Krim, the Berber politician and general.

French Marshal Pétain, the commander of French forces in World War I and future head of the Vichy Nazi puppet state during the Second World War, arrived in Morocco in July and was appointed sole commander of the French forces in September. The Spanish dictator Primo De Rivera was also in Morocco at this time in command of the Spanish forces.

Spain had established a protectorate over large parts of Morocco, including the mountainous Rif region in the coastal north, as a result of a 1912 agreement with France. The Rif war had begun in June 1921 when Berber and Arab tribes under the leadership of el-Krim attacked Spanish fortifications, with the goal of driving the Spanish out and founding an independent republic. The Republic of the Rif was established on September 18, 1921, though the war dragged on.

In 1924 French imperialism came to Spain's aid. In the spring of 1925 over 8,000 Riffian troops had attacked fortresses manned by the French, necessitating a united Franco-Spanish counteroffensive.

Their joint action was to involve a large-scale amphibious landing operation at Alhucemas Bay in September, deploying around 123,000 men supported by 150 aircraft against about 12,000 Riffian fighters. This was the first ever amphibious landing involving tanks and aircraft. The two armies utilized as well the services of a group of American mercenaries known as the Escadrille Chérifienne, who bombed civilians in Riffian villages in addition to military targets. The actions of the group provoked so much public outrage that it was disbanded in November.

The military offensive of French and Spanish imperialism was the beginning of the end of the Rif rebellion, which was finally defeated in May 1926.



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