

This week in history: August 18-24

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

17 August 2025

25 years ago: Chinese Communist Party launched crackdown on peasant protests

Between August 19 and 23, 2000, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched a militarized crackdown in Yuandu County, Jiangxi Province, to restore control over a rapidly growing protest movement that had mobilized residents from Fengcheng and surrounding towns and villages.

Several days earlier, about 20,000 peasants joined in a large-scale demonstration against crippling taxes that had driven them into extreme poverty. The CCP required approximately two-thirds of their income in taxes—about 180 yuan (\$21) per mu (0.0667 hectares) of land. For rural workers and the peasantry, incomes had declined for years due to falling grain prices in the early 2000s, resulting in an estimated 150 million unemployed across China and fueling social unrest.

Initially, the peasant protesters attempted to negotiate with local CCP tax collectors. However, when these efforts were rejected, the 20,000-strong crowd began occupying government buildings and targeted the homes of wealthy CCP officials, razing 12 houses during their march across the county. The protests soon spread to neighboring towns including Baitu, Duantang, and Xiaotang.

To prevent the unrest from reaching urban centers—where many former peasants and rural workers had migrated for employment—the government resorted to harsh measures. Beginning August 19, police armed with lethal weapons killed three peasants, injured about 100, and detained 50. After suppressing the demonstrators through beatings, shootings, and mass arrests, the government stationed a 550-strong pro-CCP militia in the area, but tensions remained high throughout the occupation. To address public outrage, the central government in Beijing blamed local CCP officials for the excessive taxes and removed the local party secretary in an effort to quell further retribution.

The economic hardship driving these protests traced back to the 1980s, when the CCP concocted the theory of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” This policy reintroduced capitalist market and property relations, enriching corrupt party bureaucrats and strengthening their political dominance. Collective farms were dismantled and subdivided into small plots, leaving peasants with barely enough for subsistence. Then, as government revenues fell and deficits grew, officials responded by raising taxes on impoverished farmers—setting the stage for the explosive unrest in Yuandu.

50 years ago: Pathet Lao take control of Vientiane, ending the Laotian civil war

On August 23, 1975, Communist Party-led Pathet Lao forces entered Vientiane, the capital of Laos, marking the ending of the Laotian civil war. The Lao People's Democratic Republic would be established four months later. The victory was the culmination of decades of struggle against US imperialism.

The entry of the Pathet Lao into Vientiane was less a military operation than a political capitulation by the last holdouts of the royalist government. Many of the principal military leaders of the monarchy, including top general Vang Pao, had already fled the country. Once Pathet Lao units had surrounded the city, military resistance collapsed and the government dissolved. Pathet Lao troops were able to march into the city virtually unopposed and were greeted with overwhelming support by the population.

Laos, a landlocked nation bordered by Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and China, formally gained independence from France in 1953 but was immediately plunged into a political crisis. A struggle for state power emerged between the royalist government, supported by the US, and the Pathet Lao, a left-wing nationalist movement with strong ties to the Vietnamese Communist Party.

Washington viewed the Pathet Lao as an extension of North Vietnam and embarked on massive covert operations in Laos during the Vietnam War that involved extensive bombing campaigns, the arming and training of anti-communist forces, and the deployment of CIA-backed mercenaries. From 1964 to 1973, the US dropped over 2 million tons of bombs on Laos during 580,000 bombing missions—more than the total tonnage dropped during all of World War II. An estimated 30 percent of these were unexploded cluster munitions that continue to kill and maim civilians to this day. The massive scale of the air attacks made Laos the most heavily bombed country per capita in history.

The American public remained largely unaware of the extent of this activity until 1971 when Fred Branfman, a former US government adviser in Laos, testified before Congress to his experiences witnessing the impact of the bombings on the civilian population. Later that year, the Pentagon Papers further detailed the vast scale of the secret operations.

The military situation shifted dramatically in Laos after the Paris Peace Accords of 1973 removed US forces from Vietnam. With the withdrawal of US military support and personnel, the Royal Lao Government's forces, which were totally dependent on American aid, began to collapse. The Pathet Lao then began a methodical offensive to take control of key areas, facing little resistance from what remained of the royalist forces.

As in Vietnam and Cambodia, the swift victory of the Pathet Lao confirmed definitively that there was never any popular mandate among the Laotian population for US involvement or its puppet government. In direct contradiction to the official narrative from Washington, the wars it waged were against the working masses of South Asia.

75 years ago: Belgian Communist Party chairman Julien Lahaut assassinated

On August 18, 1950, prominent Belgian parliamentarian Julien Lahaut was assassinated in his home located in the industrial province of Liège.

Lahaut, who had been chairman of the Communist Party of Belgium (KPB/PCB) since 1945, was killed by two men who rang the doorbell of his house. Lahaut's wife answered the door and called him to the front door after the men asked to speak to her husband. Lahaut was shot twice after his wife walked away to the kitchen, leaving no witnesses to the murder.

The assassination occurred in the immediate aftermath of the political crisis in Belgium surrounding the "Royal Question." Only a few weeks prior, a general strike involving more than 300,000 workers forced the abdication of the widely despised monarch Leopold III. Four protesters were shot and killed by police on July 30 only a few kilometres away from Lahaut's home.

A week prior to Lahaut's killing, Leopold's 19-year-old son Baudouin was sworn in as Regent. The ceremony was interrupted by a Communist deputy who shouted a widely used anti-monarchist slogan: "Vive la République" (Long live the Republic). Though the identity of the man was never verified, it was widely assumed to be Lahaut, a vocal advocate for the abolition of the Belgian monarchy.

A team of historians in 2015 linked the murder of Lahaut to anti-communist and royalist elements within Belgian intelligence agencies, in particular, André Moyen, who founded the Belgian Anti-Communist Bloc. A note by Moyen from August 1950 defended the killing of Lahaut as a "necessary measure" in response to his view that the Belgian government was not sufficiently clamping down on communist and left-wing political activity within the country.

Lahaut had led an eight-day strike in May 1941 which mobilised up to 70,000 workers opposing the German occupation of Belgium during World War II. The strike forced the Nazi government to agree to a wage increase of eight percent, but in its aftermath, Lahaut was sent to a German concentration camp where he was detained for the remainder of the war.

While Lahaut's involvement in such anti-fascist actions had made him a popular figure, he and the Stalinist Belgian Communist Party offered no way forward. In line with the policies of the Stalinists internationally, they supported the reestablishment of a capitalist republic after the war, blocking the strivings of the working class to reorganize society on socialist foundations. The Stalinists' defence of the capitalist state apparatus helped create the conditions where Lahaut could be assassinated, amid a broader repression of the working class.

The assassination was a major political event, with around 100,000 workers attending Lahaut's funeral and an additional 300,000 downing tools and walking out of work on the morning of August 22.

100 years: Chinese nationalist leader assassinated in Guangzhou

On August 20, 1925, five gunmen armed with semi-automatic pistols shot to death the southern Chinese Republic's Minister of Finance, Liao Zhongkai, as he entered the meeting of the Kuomintang (KMT) executive committee in Canton (now Guangzhou).

Liao, who had been born in California and educated at Queens

College in Hong Kong and Waseda University in Japan, was closely associated with the founder of Chinese nationalism, Sun Yat-sen, whom he met in 1903. He became a leader of the KMT's left wing, responsible for implementing the alliance between the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party, and member of the three-person KMT executive along with Wang Jingwei, another supposed left-winger, and Hu Hanmin, a leader of the KMT right-wing.

In response to mass protests and strikes against imperialist domination, Liao had closed the Canton harbor to foreign shipping, raising the specter of war between China (or at least the Republic of China based in Guangdong province) and the imperialist powers. Britain and Japan, in particular, were already deeply unsettled by the movement of the Chinese workers and poor, which had trapped imperialist officials in their legations in Canton and Shanghai.

The bourgeois press in the West discussed the need for a "strongman" in China because of the threat of revolution and the possible expropriation of imperialist property and loss of privileges secured under the "unequal treaties" with China.

The outcome of Liao's assassination was that Chiang-Kai Shek, the commandant of the Whampoa Military Academy in Canton, increased his sway over the leadership of the KMT. In March 1926 Chiang would lead a coup to become the paramount leader of the KMT and purge the Communists from the organization.

Hu Hanmin was arrested for the assassination of Liao but eventually released after he agreed to cooperate with Chiang. Wang was exiled after the 1926 coup but returned to lead the rival Wuhan nationalist government in 1927. Wang would eventually become a collaborator with Japanese imperialism.



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