This week in history: July 13-19

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.

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25 years ago: Japanese glorification of WWII conquests sparks opposition

On July 18, 2001, the South Korean government publicly proclaimed opposition to Japan's attempt to whitewash war crimes committed in East Asia during World War II, underscoring the fragile post-WWII order and the reemergence of Japanese imperialism.

South Korea, where memories of imperial Japan's atrocities remained raw for a population that had directly endured them, erupted in opposition. Hundreds of demonstrators, including former "comfort women"—women and girls forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during the war—gathered at the Japanese embassy to protest.

Calls emerged to cancel South Korea's joint hosting of the 2002 World Cup, 80 civic groups launched a consumer boycott of Japanese goods, and schools and universities cancelled exchange programs. President Kim Dae-jung refused to meet with envoys from Japan's governing coalition, while the Korean National Assembly unanimously voted to review diplomatic relations with Japan, suspended military trading and threatened to ban Japanese cultural imports. The controversy provoked opposition within China, which had endured some of the worst crimes of Japanese imperialism during World War II. Its foreign minister urged Japan to take "practical steps to ease the tension" and said that the Chinese government "cannot accept the position" of Japan.

The Japanese Society for History Textbook Reform, a right-wing nationalist organization, spearheaded the rewriting effort.

The textbook glorified and sanitized Japan's colonial conquests in the first half of the 20th century, presenting them as acts of self-defense that helped liberate Asia from European and American domination. It downplayed or omitted the conscription of women as "comfort women"—sex slaves for military brothels; the true scale of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre, in which more than 200,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians were murdered; the oppression of the Korean and Chinese peoples under colonial rule; and the 1942 conquest of Southeast Asia, portrayed as cultivating "the ideal and dream of independence." The authors' stated aim was to revive patriotism among Japanese youth by systematically expunging references to imperial atrocities.

Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi had strong political reasons to back the falsification. His government was drawing up a program of austerity—banking reform, corporate restructuring, budget cuts—meant to rein in massive public debt and restore corporate profitability. Anticipating fierce opposition from workers and from sections of the ruling class alike, Koizumi moved to build a right-wing nationalist base in advance. Endorsing the textbook was one such gesture: a provocative assertion of Japanese power meant to rally support.

50 years ago: Italian Communist Party advances "historic compromise," preserving Christian Democratic rule

On July 13, 1976, Italian President Giovanni Leone called on the former prime minister and Christian Democrat leader Giulio Andreotti to form a new government. This mandate initiated immediate negotiations with Enrico Berlinguer, the general secretary of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The negotiations would formalize a treacherous political arrangement known as the "Historic Compromise" that would rescue Italian capitalism from a deep revolutionary crisis.

The negotiations followed the June 20–21 general elections, which resulted in an unprecedented parliamentary deadlock. While the ruling Christian Democrats (DC) barely held a plurality with 38.7 percent, the PCI surged to a historic high of 34.4 percent. The smaller centrist and reformist parties that had traditionally propped up DC rule were decimated.

For three decades, the DC had maintained its uninterrupted rule by building shifting coalitions with these smaller bourgeois partners. The election results meant that the DC lacked the partners necessary to form a stable majority government.

Through the vote, the working class had expressed its contempt for the capitalist state and issued a mandate to sweep away the corrupt, crisis-ridden DC regime. However, instead of mobilizing this immense power of the working class to take state power, Berlinguer and the Stalinist PCI rushed to rescue the Italian bourgeoisie by launching the policy of "historic compromise" and entered into negotiations to support yet another DC government.

During the negotiations, Berlinguer and Andreotti agreed to a formula known as the "government of non-no-confidence." Under this deal, a single-party DC minority cabinet took office, possible only because the PCI agreed to abstain on crucial parliamentary votes. In return, the Stalinists were thrown minor parliamentary crumbs, such as the election of PCI member Pietro Ingrao as Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies.

This arrangement was the highest expression of "Eurocommunism" as a political tendency in the 1970s. After a period of major revolutionary movements worldwide issuing heavy blows to imperialism, support for the Communist parties in Europe was at a historic high. Workers were abandoning both the liberal and social democratic parties in favor of a revolutionary alternative.

The Stalinists in Moscow feared that independent working class power in Europe would spread and inspire the Soviet working class to overthrow the parasitic bureaucracy. To block this, Communist parties filled the gap left by declining Social Democrats, restricting working class activity to the confines of the capitalist state and pushing a "peaceful, democratic

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road to socialism."

In Italy, the newly formed Andreotti cabinet immediately moved to unleash a savage austerity program directed against the living standards of the working class. To satisfy international financiers and secure emergency loans, the new government introduced sweeping wage controls to halt pay increases and ordered immediate hikes in public transportation fares. Rather than opposing these attacks, the PCI and its daily paper *L'Unità* actively propped up the capitalist profit system, urging trade unions to accept these sacrifices under the banner of "national solidarity."

75 years ago: Belgian King Leopold III abdicates the throne

On July 16, 1951, King Leopold III of Belgium formally abdicated the throne in favor of his son Baudouin, nearly a year after announcing he would relinquish his powers in the face of a massive general strike that had pushed the country to the brink of civil war.

The "Royal Question" had convulsed Belgium since May 1940, when Leopold surrendered the Belgian army to Nazi forces without consulting his government or the Allies. While the cabinet fled to London to continue the war, Leopold remained in occupied Belgium. In November 1940, he traveled to Berchtesgaden to meet Hitler— an encounter that yielded nothing but proved catastrophic for the monarchy's standing among workers, particularly in the industrial Walloon region, where the resistance had been strongest and where the King was seen as embodying capitulation and betrayal.

After the defeat of Nazi Germany, parliament installed Leopold's brother Charles as regent. The question of whether the King could return split the country along class and regional lines. The Catholic Party, dominant in more rural, church-dominated Flanders, agitated for his restoration. The Belgian Socialist Party—the reformist social democratic party rooted in the Walloon working class—joined the Liberals in opposing him.

In March 1950, a non-binding referendum returned 57.7 percent in favor of Leopold's return, but the result laid bare the country's class geography. Flanders, with its larger petit-bourgeois and agricultural base, voted yes by 72 percent. Wallonia, the industrial center of coal, steel and heavy manufacturing, voted no by 58 percent. When Leopold returned on July 22, 1950, Wallonia erupted. A general strike swept the basins of Liège, Charleroi and the Borinage. In Grâce-Berleur, state police opened fire on striking workers, killing four.

Under pressure from the Socialist Party and trade union leaderships, who feared the movement escaping their control, Leopold agreed on August 1 to transfer his powers to Baudouin, then 19. The strike wave subsided, but the crisis was far from resolved.

A narrow Catholic government under Joseph Pholien took office—the Socialists refused to participate—and spent the next 11 months managing a fragile transition. Legislation had to be passed declaring Baudouin constitutionally fit to rule before his 21st birthday. Throughout this period, the government feared that any misstep could reignite the working class militancy that had nearly toppled the monarchy the previous summer.

100 years: Would-be assassins of Ataturk hanged in ?zmir

On July 13, 1926, a court in ?zmir (formerly Smyrna, on the western coast of Turkey) delivered its verdicts against 49 suspects in an assassination plot against Kemal Ataturk, the president and founder of the modern Turkish bourgeois state. The court sentenced 15 defendants to death. The first hangings were carried out that night and into the early hours of July 14, in various public locations in ?zmir, signaling the government's determination to eliminate what it regarded as a direct threat to the new republic.

Following the discovery on June 14 of an alleged conspiracy to assassinate Ataturk during a planned visit to ?zmir, dozens of suspects, including military officers, politicians and opposition figures, were arrested and brought before the tribunal. Many had been members of the Committee of Union and Progress, better known as the Young Turks, who had ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1908 and were dissolved as a party in 1918 after the defeat and break-up of the empire by the Allied imperialist powers at the end of World War I.

The plot emerged from a period of profound political tension. Just a few years after the expulsion of French, British, Italian and Greek armies from Turkey in the War of Independence and the proclamation of the Republic, Turkey remained deeply divided over the pace and direction of Ataturk's religious, cultural and legal reforms.

The abolition of the Ottoman sultanate and caliphate, the consolidation of power under the ruling Republican People's Party and the suppression of opposition movements generated resentment among former leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress, conservative elements and members of the recently dissolved Progressive Republican Party. While some critics sought constitutional opposition, the government argued that clandestine networks posed an existential danger to the fragile republic. The alleged assassination conspiracy therefore became both a criminal investigation and a defining political moment, accelerating the marginalization of organized opposition and reinforcing the authority of the Kemalist state.

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