

# This week in history: July 9-16

9 July 2018

## 25 years ago: US helicopter gunships kill scores in Somalia

July 12, 1968: A US attack force of 17 Cobra helicopter gunships and Blackhawk helicopters struck a neighborhood in the center of the Somali capital of Mogadishu. Firing 16 missiles and more than 2,000 rounds of 20-millimeter cannon fire, the fleet of warplanes laid waste to a building which housed large numbers of civilians. Somalis reported 73 dead and more than 200 wounded in the attack. Many of the victims were women and children.

Crowds of enraged Somalis responded to this unprovoked sneak attack by setting upon Western journalists, killing four of them. This became the near-exclusive focus of media coverage, ignoring the bloodbath that triggered the popular anger.

US military spokesmen presented the attacks as pinpoint strikes that had hit their targets, killing “only” 13 Somalis. This soon proved to a lie. Both the International Red Cross and journalists verified the Somali reports of scores killed and hundreds wounded, simply by checking with local hospitals in the Somali capital.

US officials justified the slaughter by claiming that the target was a compound serving as “command and control center” for Mohammed Farah Aidid, the leader of the United Somali Congress, which has demanded an end to the US-United Nations occupation of Somalia. A Pentagon spokesman in Washington described the raid as part of a US effort to “trim General Aidid down to size.”

The US military rampage also had the effect of virtually halting the relief operations to feed starving Somalis, which were the ostensible pretext for the US intervention in the first place. Hundreds of tons of food rotted in warehouses around the city, while relief workers fled to avoid the violence.

The chaos in Somalia was exacerbated by a falling out among the imperialist powers participating in the intervention. The Italian government, the former colonial power in the country, threatened to withdraw its 2,600 troops, the second largest component, after the UN demanded the removal of General Bruno Loi, the Italian commander, over his alleged refusal to follow US orders.

After the scale of the July 12 attack became clear, the Italian government called for a suspension of all combat operations by the “peacekeeping” forces deployed in Somalia.

## 50 years ago: Jobless youth protest in New York City

On July 10, 1968, youth seeking jobs through President

Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” programs, in particular, the Neighborhood Youth Corps, began protests in New York City against cuts in the program ordered by Mayor John V. Lindsay. The mayor had announced that Youth Corps jobs that summer would be reduced from 43,000 to 26,900.

The director of the Neighborhood Youth Corps, William J. Smith, organized NYC youth to protest the cuts. Organizers distributed leaflets throughout impoverished areas of the city urging youth to attend the rally. Black, white and Puerto Rican immigrant youth participated. Some carried signs with slogans such as “Earn or burn” and “No money, no peace.”

The protests began July 10. After city officials refused to meet with Smith and his delegation the protests became more disorderly. Rocks and bottles were hurled at police surrounding city hall. The disturbance lasted for more than an hour. The police intervened and nine youth were arrested, two on charges of inciting to riot. About 100 protesters later gathered outside the police station where the arrested youth were taken to demand their release.

After the protest dispersed an aide to Mayor Lindsay met with youth director Smith. Lindsay issued a statement denouncing the demonstration as disgraceful.

The Neighborhood Youth Corps was designed to place young people in jobs, particularly during the summer when students are out of class. Its mission was supposedly to provide “underprivileged youths the opportunity to work, particularly over the summer months, in order to prevent delinquency, show the value of hard work, engender self-respect, provide hope for the future, and to instill a sense of confidence in the government.” But the experience of cuts to program funding would drastically reduce young people’s faith in the government.

Later in the week Lindsay reported that the city would appropriate an additional \$5 million for summer jobs to make up the shortfall produced by the federal cutbacks. At the same time, the city announced that it would remove Smith from his \$18,000 a year job as head of the Youth Corps.

## 75 years ago: Allied forces invade Sicily

On July 9, 1943, the military forces of the Allied powers began the invasion of the Italian island of Sicily. Involving a multinational force of 160,000 American, British and Canadian soldiers and 600 tanks, the Allies caught the German and Italian armies off guard. Hitler had expected an allied offensive

in the Mediterranean since the fall of North Africa in May, but thought Sicily too heavily defended. He expected the blow to come in Corsica, Sardinia or Greece. Capitalizing on surprise, the Allies seized Syracuse on July 10 and Palermo, the capital of Sicily, on the July 22.

While brilliant tactically, the invasion of Sicily involved strategic decisions that represented a compromise between British and American imperialism. While British Prime Minister Winston Churchill claimed that Operation Husky, as it was called, would strike the “soft underbelly” of the Axis powers, directing Allied forces through Sicily and then up the mountainous spine of Italy, it actually meant delaying any full-scale confrontation with the main Nazi military force until 1944, leaving the Soviet Union to carry on the bulk of the war.

Churchill wanted to postpone any direct strike across the English Channel into occupied France, Belgium or the Netherlands, hoping that the mutual Nazi-Soviet bloodletting would weaken both sides and allow the Western powers to dictate terms in postwar Europe. He also proposed to strike even further east than Italy, moving into Greece and the Balkans, in order to forestall a Soviet counteroffensive that threatened to overwhelm German forces and then overrun all of Eastern Europe. His goal was to link up US-British and Soviet forces on the Danube rather than, as actually occurred, in central Germany.

The compromise policy of invading Italy soon demonstrated its limitations. Despite inflicting large casualties on the Italian forces with 131,900 dead, captured or wounded, the Allies failed to destroy German forces on the island, which were able to escape to the mainland in August. The offensive also failed to draw away any German forces from the Eastern Front. Though Germany would send reinforcements, they came from the West.

The damage inflicted on the fascist Italian government, however, was fatal. The Italian military and ruling elite lost all confidence in the regime. It had become apparent that the continuation of Mussolini’s regime portended not only a military catastrophe, also a social explosion as workers’ discontent grew. A major wave of strikes in the Po Valley had demonstrated that social opposition, long repressed by the brutal regime, was coming to the surface. In a meeting of the Grand Council of Fascism, held from July 24 to 25, Mussolini was dismissed and shortly afterwards arrested.

### **100 years ago: German army makes last large offensive in Second Battle of the Marne**

On July 15, 1918, the Imperial German Army made its last large-scale attack on the Western Front, initiating a conflict that became known as the Second Battle of the Marne.

Since March, the German forces had made three major, largely unsuccessful, offensives along the Western Front in order to separate the French and British armies and push the British to the coast of France and Belgium. These attacks took

advantage of the arrival of nearly 50 additional divisions from the Eastern Front because of the peace made with the Bolsheviks in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

The timing of the offensives also took into consideration the fact that American troops had only arrived in France on June 26, 1917 and were still not fully deployed. It was only on July 1 that the Americans, in their first large action, had recaptured territory from the Germans in the Battle of Belleau Wood, at a cost of 9,777 American casualties, including 1,811 killed.

Erich von Ludendorff, the supreme German commander, had intended a thrust across the river Marne in northern France to be a diversion while he prepared a decisive offensive in Flanders.

The German goal along the Marne was to split the French defenders in two. Twenty-three German divisions of the First and Third Armies attacked the French Fourth Army to the east of the city of Reims. German troops were prevented from crossing the Marne there by French artillery barrages and good use of fortifications.

To the west of the city, 17 German Seventh Army divisions attacked the French Sixth Army and succeeded in crossing the river, in spite of an aerial attack of 225 French bombers, which dropped over 40 tons of ordnance. The Germans used heavy artillery bombardment, including poison gas, and owed its initial success partly to the use of elite troops that forced a crossing of the river.

But by July 18, an Allied counterattack that included British and American troops pushed the German forces back across the Marne. The Allied advance recaptured the city of Soissons on August 2 and drove the Germans into heavily fortified positions. By the end of the battle on August 6, the Allies had taken 9,367 prisoners and inflicted 168,000 German casualties.

The Germans canceled the planned offensive in Flanders. The failure of this fourth and last German offensive of 1918 marked the beginning of a series of retreats by the German Army. It enabled the Allies to launch several offensives along the Western Front in August and September that led to the collapse of the German Empire, amid military defeat and internal revolution.

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