

This week in history: August 6-12

6 August 2018

25 years ago: Coalition government in Japan excludes former ruling party

On August 9, 1993, an eight-party coalition government was formed in Japan, without the Liberal Democratic Party, which had ruled in Tokyo continuously for the previous 38 years. The shaky coalition was established after weeks of negotiations following the country's July 18 election, in which the LDP lost its majority in the Diet, the lower house of parliament.

The new government, headed by Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa of the New Party, a split-off from the LDP, immediately signaled a more nationalistic stance in defending the interests of Japanese big business against the United States, rejecting demands by the Clinton administration for a reduction in Japan's huge trade surplus with the US, particularly in automobiles and auto parts.

Japan Renewal Party leader Tsutomu Hata, a former LDP cabinet minister, took the post of deputy prime minister and minister for foreign affairs. Hata and former LDP secretary-general Ichiro Ozawa led the group of renegade LDP MPs who joined with opposition parties to bring down the government of Kiichi Miyazawa in a vote of no confidence in June, and then split with the LDP to form a new party to contest the elections.

The result of the July 18 vote was complete fragmentation. The LDP lost its majority but remained the largest single party, with 223 seats out of 511. The next largest party, the Social Democratic Party of Japan, split before the vote and lost half its seats, plunging from 136 to 70, but still remained the second largest parliamentary grouping. The SDPJ joined the coalition government but was relegated to less important domestic ministries.

The election debacle was the product of deepening political and economic crisis in Japan, driven above all by mounting conflict between Japanese and American imperialism. Since 1985, when the United States became a net debtor nation, with Japan as its largest creditor, there were mounting demands in both countries for an end to the longstanding post-World War II arrangement in which Japan was politically subordinated to Washington, particularly in foreign and military policy, in return for relatively open access to the US market for Japanese goods.

These shifts came together in the form of a political explosion in both the LDP, which had ruled Japan without interruption since 1955, and the SDPJ, the nominal "opposition" party. The election was marked by growing popular alienation from the entire corrupt ruling stratum, as voter participation fell to the lowest level in post-World War II history, 67 percent. Non-voters were actually the largest political "bloc," more numerous than LDP voters.

The Hosokawa government was to be extremely short-lived, with the coalition disintegrating in only ten months, as the SDPJ deserted it to support a return to power by the LDP.

50 years ago: Nine coal miners killed in an explosion in Greenville, Kentucky

On August 7, 1968 an explosion inside the River Queen No. 1 Coal Mine killed nine men who had been working under the surface. The youngest miner killed was James Bryant, just 25 years old, with the oldest being Dennie Salig at 58.

The initial explosion caused so much damage that it took rescue workers 14 hours to recover the first body from the debris. Once word spread about the disaster over 300 people, mainly miners and their families, gathered outside the mining grounds to find their relatives and learn what had happened.

According to an interview with My KY News, Bob Cox, a long-time worker in the mine who was 22 at the time of the explosion, said it was caused because "There was powder on the back of a drill and it ignited." He continued, "In an underground mine a blast like that has nowhere to go except out the entrance, like a shotgun barrel. It was just a horrific day for everyone concerned."

The Greenville mine was owned and operated by the Peabody Coal Company. In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, where the Greenville mine was located, produced more coal than anywhere else in the world.

James Harris, the son of a miner by the same name who died in the explosion, also described the impact of the blast. Harris recalled that after his father died, men from Peabody came to his house and assured his mother that her sons

would have safe jobs with the company where they wouldn't have to work underground.

When he was of working age, Harris went to the mine for the job he was promised but was disappointed in the outcome. He said, "They just laughed and said 'man we can't hire you there but we can put you to work underground.'" Harris worked underground for seven years and was with Peabody for over 22. He now suffers from black lung and COPD.

75 years ago: Soviet troops launch offensive against German forces

On August 7, 1943, Russian troops launched a significant military offensive against German troops in the Smolensk and Bryansk regions of the Soviet Union. The campaign was part of a broader push-back against the invading forces of the Third Reich, which had suffered major military defeats earlier in the year.

The Battle of Smolensk was initiated by the attempt of three Soviet armies to break through German lines in the direction of Roslavl. While the Russian troops made initial breakthroughs, they were quickly confronted by heavy German defenses, facing strong mortar and gun fire. Having made limited breakthroughs, the Russian troops were bogged down in a stalemate that was to last for several weeks.

The offensive at Smolensk, however, became one front in a sweeping counter-attack by Soviet troops. On August 3, Russian forces had launched the Belgorod-Kharkov Offensive, aimed at recapturing those cities and expelling Nazi troops from the Ukraine.

On August 26, the Red Army began the Battle of the Dnieper, a vast conflict involving up to four million troops on both sides of the conflict. Over its four-month duration, Soviet troops regained control of the eastern bank of the Dnieper river, while establishing strongholds on the western bank of the waterway. The victory paved the way for the seizure of Kiev, the Ukrainian capital.

By the end of September, Russian troops gained control of Smolensk, retaking roughly 250 square miles of Soviet territory in the process. Despite the relatively modest scale of the territorial gains, the victory quashed the prospects of a Nazi counter-offensive threatening Moscow.

The series of defeats suffered by the Third Reich followed the crushing blows it had received in the Battle of Stalingrad, at the beginning of the year, and the debacle of the Kursk offensive in July. They coincided with mounting signs that the days of the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy were numbered.

100 years ago: Japanese troops land in Vladivostok

August 11, 1918: Over 12,000 Japanese troops poured into the Siberian city of Vladivostok on the Pacific, only about 80 miles (127 km) north of Korea, which the Japanese had occupied in 1895, as a part of the Allied Siberian expedition. The intervention would include, in addition to the Japanese, almost 8,000 American, 4,000 Canadian, 2,700 Chinese, and 2,500 Italian troops. By September there would be nearly 80,000 foreign troops in Siberia, primarily Japanese.

The landing of Japanese troops in Vladivostok was a part of a broad effort by the major imperialist powers to crush the new workers state. British and French troops had already landed at Arkhangelsk in the northeast on August 2, which would be reinforced by American troops in September. Ukraine had been ceded to German imperialism in the treaty of Brest-Litovsk and Georgia was under the control of a reactionary Menshevik regime that allowed first German and later British troops on its soil.

The immediate military objective of the taking of Vladivostok was to gain access to the Trans-Siberian Railway. This would allow the imperialist troops to link up with the anti-Bolshevik Czech Legion, comprised mostly of the Czech prisoners of war from the defunct Austro-Hungarian army. On August 7, the Czech Legion had helped the anti-Soviet Komuch People's Army to capture the city of Kazan from the Red Army, seizing the gold reserves of the former Tsarist regime. The loss of Kazan was what Trotsky later called "the lowest ebb of the revolution."

The imperialist intervention in Siberia allowed the Allies to supply counterrevolutionary forces throughout the country, including the anti-Bolshevik Provisional All-Russian Government in Omsk, soon to be headed by Admiral Kolchak. One historian notes that the four-to-six-week trip by rail from Vladivostok to Omsk was now "dependent on Japanese good will."

Despite a common goal of reestablishing capitalism in Russia, the imperialist powers exhibited sharp divisions among themselves: Japanese imperialism had in mind its own strategic goals in Manchuria and the Pacific. By November, it had occupied several Russian ports, alarming the Americans whose main military goal in Siberia became to counter the movements of the Japanese.

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