

This week in history: July 20-26

20 July 2020

25 years ago: “Taiwan Strait Crisis” between US and China

On July 21, 1995, the People’s Republic of China conducted the first in a series of missile tests in the Taiwan Strait, just 60 kilometers north of the Pengjia Islet, setting into motion what would later be known as the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis. The crisis reflected early fears within American ruling circles over the emergence of mainland China (People’s Republic of China, or PRC) as a rival to US domination of the Asia-Pacific.

Since 1972, Washington had formally adhered to the “one China” policy, which declared that Taiwan was part of a unitary Chinese state. It did so as part of its strategic recruitment of Mao’s Stalinist regime against the Soviet Union. Yet the US always maintained informal diplomatic and military ties with Taiwan, which had been controlled by the Chinese anti-Communists since their 1949 defeat in the Chinese Civil War.

In May 1995, Lee Teng-hui became the first president of Taiwan to visit the US since the US broke off official relations with Taiwan in 1979 and recognized the Stalinist regime in Beijing. Lee accepted an invitation from Cornell University to deliver a speech on “Taiwan’s Democratization Experience” as an alumnus, but the ostensibly private trip had a clear political significance. Lee was welcomed at the airport by several Republican senators and a Democratic congressman.

The Beijing regime regarded the visa issued to the ruler of Taiwan as a threat to the territorial integrity of China and canceled scheduled negotiations on arms sales and visits by several cultural and economic delegations. The official New China News Agency said, “The issue of Taiwan is as explosive as a barrel of gunpowder. It is extremely dangerous to warm up, no matter whether the warming is done by the United States or by Lee Teng-hui.”

On July 7, 1995, the Xinhua News Agency announced that missile tests would be conducted by the People’s Liberation Army, as a result of the US’s policy on Taiwan. Further tests were conducted later in August and November of 1995, and by March of 1996, in the run-up to the Taiwan elections, the US government responded by staging the largest military display in the region since the Vietnam War.

50 years ago: Aswan High Dam completed in Egypt

After a decade of construction, the Aswan High Dam was completed on July 21, 1970. The dam was an immense feat of engineering that would give Egypt both new electric power and

the ability to regulate flooding in the Nile Valley. The latter was an issue that had confronted the region since the first known ancient Egyptian civilization.

Egyptian agriculture, which is based primarily on the regular flooding of the Nile River into the surrounding farmland, had for millennia suffered in years when flooding was so great that it washed away crops, and other years when less flooding created droughts. The damming of the Nile gave Egyptians the ability to store large quantities of water that could be made available to farms as needed, solving this persistent ecological problem and greatly improving agricultural production.

The dam also doubled as a huge generator of hydro-electric energy, making electricity available to many Egyptian villages for the first time. When it reached its peak output of 2.1 gigawatts, the Aswan Dam produced about half of the electric energy for all of Egypt.

The construction of the Aswan Dam was highly political. In the mid 1950s, the nationalist Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser initially looked to the United States for support in providing the required funding and scientific support in building the dam. However, after Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal, sparking a war with Israel, which was backed by US allies the United Kingdom and France, the possibility of a US-Egypt partnership in building the dam evaporated.

Nasser instead turned to the Soviet Union for aid and resources to build the dam. The USSR would provide over \$1 billion dollars in funding for the Aswan Dam project, dwarfing the \$270 million that the United States had previously proposed. The dam was designed by Soviet engineers at the Hydroproject Institute, with collaboration from Egyptian engineers headed by Osman Ahmed Osman, owner of the largest Arab contracting firm in the 1960s. The USSR also supplied the required heavy machinery to move the massive amounts of rock and clay used in the dam.

The Soviet-Egyptian partnership frightened Washington, which began working to undermine Nasser’s government in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s. By the time the Aswan Dam was completed in 1970, Egypt had been locked in a protracted war of attrition with Israel, which was heavily supported by the US and other imperialist countries since its 1967 invasion of Egypt and its other Arab neighbors in the Six Day War. During the stalemate that followed, the USSR continued to back Nasser, providing Egypt with aircraft and radar allowing them to resist the advance of Israel across the

Suez Canal.

75 years ago: Trial of Marshal Pétain, leader of the Vichy regime, begins in France

On July 23, 1945, the trial of Marshal Philippe Pétain, who had headed the extreme right-wing Vichy regime through most of World War II, began in France.

Pétain, whose government had collaborated with the Nazis and perpetrated its own crimes against the working class and French Jews, was charged with treason, as well as “abhorring the Republic” and plotting the restoration of monarchy. The 89-year-old had been taken into custody, after returning to France following its liberation by Resistance fighters and the Allied powers in September 1944.

The trial was held in the context of the recent defeat of Nazi Germany and the end of the war in Europe. It was conducted amid frenzied attempts by General Charles de Gaulle, who headed a provisional government, as well as the Stalinists and the Allies, to prevent the mass movement that had emerged against Stalinism from developing into a revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system.

Pétain’s Vichy regime had come to power in 1940. It had rapidly established the Milice, an armed militia that rounded up and murdered thousands of Resistance fighters. The government collaborated with Hitler’s genocidal “final solution” and directly facilitated the mass killing of Jews throughout Europe. It attacked the democratic traditions of France’s 1789 revolution, replacing the egalitarian slogan of “liberty, fraternity, equality” with “Work, Family, and Country.”

As part of the attempts to stabilize capitalism, Pétain’s trial was an operation in political damage control, aimed at covering up the responsibility of the entire French ruling elite for the crimes of the collaborationist government. Pétain, a decorated World War I general who had been involved in extreme right-wing politics through the 1930s, was handed power by the official parties and the ruling elite in 1940 as it ignominiously capitulated to Hitler’s invasion. Opposition to his regime had come not from the political establishment, but from below, in the form of the mass resistance movement.

De Gaulle revealingly complained that even Pétain’s stage-managed trial had come too close to exposing the political criminality of the ruling class. “Too often, the discussions took on the appearance of a partisan trial, sometimes even a settling of accounts, when the whole affair should have been treated only from the standpoint of national defense and independence,” he stated.

Pétain reportedly adopted an attitude of silent contempt throughout the proceedings, after he had issued an opening statement declaring that the High Court had no right to try him. He would die in prison in 1951, after unsuccessful appeals for his release by prominent ruling class figures, including members of the British royal family and US President Harry

Truman, who offered to provide the fascist war criminal political asylum in America.

100 years: Britain annexes East African Protectorate

On July 23, 1920, the British Empire annexed the East African Protectorate, which it had administered since 1895, and made it the Colony of Kenya, giving the British Crown more control over the area and conferring more legal rights to British settlers.

The colony, which comprised most of what is now the modern state of Kenya, had about 9,000 European settlers, primarily from Britain, 23,000 Indians, and 2 million Africans from several ethnic groups, speaking Swahili, Kikuyu, Kamba, Luhya, Luo, Gusii, Meru, and Nandi–Markweta.

During World War I, Kenya had been the base for British and Belgian troops fighting the Germans, who had been centered in German East Africa, which had been comprised of parts of modern Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania.

The territory saw an influx of British settlers in the postwar years, who were given exclusive rights to farm the fertile central highlands, displacing indigenous farmers, primarily Kikuyu.

The history of the Colony of Kenya, which continued until the independence of the modern state of Kenya in 1963, was one of imperialist brutality. One correspondent writing about the annexation in the *London Observer* in August 1920 remarked, “Not only have murders of natives taken place all too frequently, not only have revolting cruelties been committed, but when the white delinquents are brought up for trial white juries or white judges inflict trivial penalties or rebellious public opinion forces a Governor revise a sentence.”

The year 1921 saw the formation of the African nationalist East African Association and the beginnings of the struggles of African peoples against British imperialism. This struggle would cumulate in the Mau Mau uprising of 1952-1956, which the British would suppress by killing over 11,000 Kenyans, and through the widespread use of torture and the building of concentration camps for civilians.

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