

This week in history: August 13-August 19

13 August 2012

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

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25 years ago: Strike of 350,000 miners defies apartheid regime

On August 16, 1987, the strike by some 350,000 black gold and coal miners entered its second week, with strikers remaining defiant against threats of mass firings and the use of brutal violence by the security forces of both the mine owners and South Africa's brutal apartheid regime. Workers demanded a 30 percent increase in pay. The average pay of a black miner was one-sixth that of an average white miner.

The leadership of the largest strike in South Africa's history, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) defied the back-to-work ultimatum issued on August 17 by the Anglo American Corporation, the largest of the mining companies.

The same day, black diamond miners voted to join the strike, involving 10,000 more workers against De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd., producing 80 percent of the world's uncut diamonds.

Since the strike began, over 250 miners were wounded by company security forces and apartheid police. In addition, over 200 more were arrested, including 78 charged with subversion and plotting to kill scabs. During a sit-in at two East Rand Gold & Uranium Co. plants, police were called in to attack the workers who voted to strike and organized the occupation of the plants. Twenty-three workers were arrested and scores injured when police locked the doors plant doors and mercilessly beat the strikers.

On August 14, for the first time, police fired on a crowd of over 800 strikers in eastern Transvaal, using shotguns and teargas. Similar scenes occurred at mines in other areas of

the country. Most of the attacks took place at miners' hostels close to the mines, where they were forced to live, separated from their families.

NUM President James Motlatsi warned that the union "will have to revise and change our strategies because the industry has declared war on us. It is our responsibility to defend our members."

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50 years ago: Rakosi purged from Hungarian CP

Matyas Rakosi, Erno Gero, and 24 other prominent figures of the Hungarian Communist Party were purged on August 19, 1962 by party head Janos Kadar, on grounds of their ultra-Stalinist politics and promotion of the "cult of personality" during the early years of the Hungarian Stalinist regime. The move was part of an effort by Kadar, installed in power after the crushing of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution by the Soviet military, to posture as an advocate of "reform."

Rakosi had been the leading figure of the Budapest regime from the late 1940s until 1956, known for his absolute fealty to Stalin—he described himself as "Stalin's best pupil" and had purged an estimated 350,000 officials and intellectuals from the party and state apparatus.

Ironically, Rakosi had himself only survived the purges, in which Stalin had murdered virtually the entire exile cadre of East European Communist parties, because he was in a Hungarian prison under the authoritarian regime of Admiral Horthy. He was exchanged to the Soviet Union in 1940, and thus also avoided the extermination camps of the Nazis, where as a Communist Party leader and a Jew, he would certainly have been killed.

The Communist Party came to power in Hungary in the wake of the Red Army's defeat of the Nazis, and initially had broad popular backing, winning a parliamentary majority in the 1947 elections. Rakosi quickly squandered

this support with brutal repression, including the show trial of Laszlo Rajk and other “dissident” Stalinists, who were tortured into confessing to being fascist and American agents, then executed.

Rakosi was initially removed from power after Nikita Khrushchev’s secret speech of 1956, which made a partial admission of Stalin’s crimes, and replaced as Communist Party secretary by Gero, who was driven from power a few months later in the 1956 Hungarian revolution. He was exiled to the Soviet republic of Kirgizia in Central Asia, and never returned to Hungary.

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75 years ago: The Battle of Shanghai begins

On August 13, 1937 the Second Sino-Japanese War entered into a new phase when the Imperial Japanese Army clashed with the Chinese National Revolutionary Army in the first major episode of the Battle for Shanghai. The dogged Chinese resistance at Shanghai, only a week after Beijing fell into Japanese hands without a shot being fired in resistance, was designed to buy time for the government to shift their administration and vital armament industries further south beyond the reach of the rapid Japanese advances across northern China. This military tactic became known as trading “space for time.”

Located in the province of Jiangsu, the city of Shanghai comprised part of the crucial industrialized lower Yangtze Delta region. It was also the only region in China where Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang had established unchallenged political authority. The city essentially existed at the center of the Kuomintang’s economic and political administration.

The battle began with Chinese troops attempting to eradicate the presence of Japanese forces from the Shanghai downtown districts. The Chinese troops were handicapped by their reliance upon small caliber firearms against an army that had at its disposal enormous air, naval and armored vehicle strike power.

The Japanese Imperial Army was replenished with fresh troops for the advance south by superior rail and naval transport from the Japanese mainland over and through Korea and Manchuria and into northern China. Chinese troop movement was severely curtailed by the lack of adequate rail or road transport and most soldiers had to march large distances before engaging. In addition, the Imperial Japanese Navy also held complete control of

Chinese waters. The Japanese Third Fleet patrolled the rivers that ran through Shanghai and could fire within range into any part of the city.

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100 years ago: Virginia executes black teenage maid

On August 16, 1912, the state of Virginia executed Virginia Christian, a black teenage maid who was accused of murdering her employer. Christian was the first woman executed in Virginia, and was a juvenile, turning seventeen the day before her execution.

Christian was frequently mistreated by her 72-year old employer Mrs. Ida Virginia Belote. On March 18, Belote accused Christian of stealing a locket and a skirt. During the ensuing altercation, Christian and Belote ran for two broom handles that were used to prop up a window. Christian struck Belote over the head with one of the broom handles, and stuffed a cloth in her mouth to muffle her screams. Christian stole a purse and a ring, but was quickly caught by police. She claimed to have had no intention of killing Belote, and was shocked that she was dead.

The local court convicted Christian of murder, and sentenced her to be executed by electric chair. The trial took place in the context of widespread attacks on and lynchings of blacks, and the desire to placate the lynch-mob constituency was undoubtedly a factor in the sentence. On September 4, Robert Johnson, a black man, had been lynched in West Virginia.

Christian’s execution provoked widespread anger. W.E.B Dubois, the prominent black intellectual and socialist, denounced the execution, commenting “It was Christian Virginia against Virginia Christians, a Christian Virginia which does not provide a reformatory for colored girls.” Dubois denounced the “social organization of white Virginia that made this girl what she was and then brutally killed her for it.” He argued that clemency was warranted because of indications that Christian may have acted in self-defense, her young age, and evidence of diminished mental capacity.

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