

This week in history: May 10-May 16

10 May 2010

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

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25 years ago: Black radicals massacred by Philadelphia police

On May 13, 1985, the Philadelphia Police Department dropped a four-pound bomb on the roof of a row house where a group of black radicals and their families lived. The resulting fire burned 61 homes, an entire city block, and took the lives of 11 people, among them 5 children and the leader of the MOVE group, John Africa.

Police ostensibly surrounded the building due to “noise complaints.” City officials claimed that after MOVE members failed to emerge from the building, police had no choice but to fire tear gas canisters and water cannon. They then claimed that gunfire emerged from the house. Police responded by firing thousands of rounds, in a volley that lasted for about 90 minutes. After this, a helicopter dropped the bomb on the building.

A jury eventually found the city guilty of unreasonable use of force and unwarranted search and seizure, forcing it to pay \$1.5 million to survivors.

MOVE advocated self-sufficiency and embraced a pan-Africanist identity politics. It campaigned energetically on behalf of nine members who had been convicted for the 1978 shooting death of a Philadelphia policeman, who was likely killed by friendly fire in another military-style attack on MOVE. One of the group’s best known

supporters—though not a member—was the journalist Mumia Abu Jamal, who was framed up and sentenced to die for the death of a Philadelphia policeman in a 1981 shootout.

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50 years ago: Eichmann seized by Israeli agents in Argentina

Adolf Eichmann, who as a high-ranking official in Germany’s Nazi government had played a prominent role in the extermination of millions, was seized by Israeli Mossad agents in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on May 11, 1960 and spirited out of the country to Israel.

In his first years as a Nazi bureaucrat, Eichmann had concerned himself with the feasibility of a mass forced emigration of Jews from Germany and Austria to Palestine. In this capacity he worked closely with prominent Zionists, who welcomed such a development. After British opposition scotched the plan, and Eichmann’s blueprint for removal of Jews to Madagascar failed with the outbreak of the Second World War, he became one of the central figures in the mass extermination of Europe’s Jewish population, overseeing transportation to labor and extermination camps.

Captured by US forces at the end of the war, Eichmann assumed an alias and escaped in 1946. In 1950 he went to Rome, where like many other fascist war criminals from throughout Europe he was protected by the Vatican, which provided him with credentials for emigration to Argentina. There he lived and worked in a water plant, joined by his family, until 1960.

The US and West German governments, it was later revealed, were well aware of his survival and alias, Riccardo

Klement.

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75 years ago: US-vetted constitutional plebiscite in the Philippines

On May 14, 1935 a plebiscite was held in the Philippines, then under US control, to determine whether or not a new constitution prepared by the Philippine Legislature would be ratified. Portrayed as a step toward independence, the constitution was ratified by a vote of 1,213,046 to 44,963.

The Tydings-McDuffie Act, passed by the US Congress in 1934, provided for a 10-year transitional period after which the Philippines would gain its independence. The Act had granted the Philippine Legislature the right to draft a constitution which would govern the newly created Commonwealth of the Philippines during this time.

First approved by Washington, the constitution provided only nominal independence. It left the US in complete control over foreign affairs, exempted all US property from taxation, and forbade any legislation related to imports, exports and immigration without approval from the US president.

Tensions in the Philippines were high during the week of the plebiscite. The country had experienced the Sakdalista peasant uprising on May 2 and there was considerable anxiety among ruling layers that there would be further rebellions during the May 14 vote. In preparation for the event, selected buildings, including those that were home to the country's newspapers, were placed under the protection of armed guards. Automobiles were stopped on the road and searched in the capital of Manila. Leading figures in the Sakdalista movement such as Celerino Tiongco, editor of the Sakdal newspaper, were arrested.

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100 years ago: 36 black prison workers die in stockade fire

Thirty-six black prison laborers were killed after the coal mine stockade where they were forced to work caught fire. There were "few survivors" according to a press account, among them three white inmates. The men were leased to the Red Feather Coal Company by the state of Alabama's penal system.

There was little media coverage of the disaster. The *New York Times* dutifully repeated company claims that the fire was started by an inmate attempting to escape. "Among those who burned is the Negro who started the blaze," according to the *Times*. How this could have been established if the man had died, the *Times* did not bother to report.

The "rescue" effort was primarily concerned with seeing to it that no one escaped. Or, as the *Times* put it, the effort "to guard the prisoners who were hurried outside greatly hampered rescue work." Indeed, one of the 36 killed "was fatally shot by guards while attempting to escape." The *Times* concluded that "it was with much difficulty" that the few survivors "were prevented from eluding the guards."

The forced labor of prison convicts emerged in the South in the 1870s after the US Civil War (1861-1865) had abolished slavery. "Southern justice" routinely rounded up black men, as well as poor whites, who were then sold for a fee to mines, railroads, and other interests. The men were not paid, had no rights, and were subject to savage beatings.

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