

# This week in history: May 9-May 15

9 May 2011

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

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## 25 years ago: Syria threatened after Libya bombing

One month after the US bombing of Libya, the US, UK, West Germany, and Israel stepped up pressure on the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad, which they also accused of being a state sponsor of terrorism.

On May 9, 1986, Israel issued a denial that it was planning “a major military strike against Syria” in response to warnings from Western and European intelligence sources that an attack was probable. On record, Tel Aviv asserted that Syria was seeking military parity. However, Defense Minister Yitzhak Rabin declared, “Syria alone is not a match for Israel. I have no doubt we will win such a war.”

The Thatcher government in Britain on May 10 ordered the expulsion of three Syrian diplomats, claiming it had “plenty” of evidence tying them to terrorist activities, but without providing details. A separate report emerged the same day that West German intelligence had linked Syria to the April 5 bombing of a Berlin disco club that had killed three and wounded hundreds. The Reagan administration had blamed the Libyan regime of Muammar Gaddafi for the attack on the club, a popular location with US soldiers, and used this as the rationale for its April 15 attack on Libya.

Relative to London, Bonn, and Tel Aviv, the Reagan administration was in this case restrained. A spokesman said that it was “premature” to link Syria to the attack. As the *New York Times* noted, the caution was in “marked contrast” to the Reagan administration’s bellicosity toward Libya. Secretary of State George Shultz said the attack on Libya had made Syria “think hard” about its support of organizations Washington labeled terrorist, including militant groups of Palestinians and Lebanese, and State Department sources revealed that Syria had given new assurances that it opposed “terrorism.” In fact, Damascus had in the previous years played the critical role in uprooting the Palestinian Liberation Organization from Lebanon in the midst of the Lebanese civil war.

## 50 years ago: “Freedom Riders” assaulted by racist mobs in Alabama

Racist mobs acting with police backing brutally attacked groups of interracial bus travelers organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama, on May 14, 1961. The freedom riders, as they called themselves, were seeking to challenge racial segregation in the South in light of a recent Supreme Court decision, *Boynton v. Virginia*, which outlawed laws separating races in bus facilities as a violation of the Interstate Commerce Act.

The two buses carrying whites and blacks seated in mixed patterns—rather than blacks at the back as required in most of the South—set out from Washington DC on May 4 and had made it through Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia en route to their ultimate destination of New Orleans. Several arrests and one beating had already taken place by the time the bus arrived in Alabama.

On May 14, a large group of Ku Klux Klan members attacked one of the buses in Anniston, slashing its tires and firebombing it. Klansmen attempted to trap the passengers in the burning vehicle. When this failed, travelers fleeing the flames were savagely beaten. The local hospital refused to treat their wounds. The second bus was also boarded by Klansmen in Anniston, and its passengers beaten. Later, when the Greyhound arrived in Birmingham, the travelers were subjected to beatings with bicycle chains, iron pipes, and baseball bats. James Peck, a 47-year-old white New Yorker, was beaten nearly to death, requiring 50 stitches to mend his face and head.

While some of the riders were intimidated into quitting, and some of the wounded could not go on, other riders and new buses were organized to continue the demonstration, with the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) taking the leadership from CORE. Beatings and police repression would continue in Alabama and Mississippi.

The attacks were the organized response of the white Southern elite to challenges against the system of segregation, which had been the basis of the Southern social order for a century after the Civil War. The notorious Birmingham police commissioner, Bull

Connor, planned the attacks with police sergeant Tom Cook, a member of the Klan. Also involved in both planning the attack and the physical assault itself was an undercover FBI agent named Gary Thomas Rowe, who would later be implicated in the murder of Viola Liuzzo. (See “Viola Liuzzo: martyr in the struggle for social equality”)

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## **75 years ago: Italian annexation of Ethiopia pushes world toward war**

The Mussolini regime’s declaration of an Italian empire in East Africa, upon its formal annexation of Ethiopia this week in 1936, increased tensions among the Great Powers, pushing the world closer toward a global conflagration.

The annexation was an open repudiation of the norms of international law and the most devastating rebuke yet suffered by the League of Nations, forerunner of the United Nations, which had failed miserably to check Rome’s aggression. Likewise implicated were Britain, which had allowed the Italian war machine to pass through the Suez canal, and France, which was seeking to maintain Italian support for the Locarno Pact against Germany aggression.

Nazi Germany and imperial Japan, both of which had quit the League in 1933, watched with keen interest. Like Italy, the two had come to the imperialist game late enough to find the world divided by the United Kingdom and France, as well as lesser powers Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain and Portugal. With all of Africa now divided by the Europeans—the exception being small Liberia in the west—no further gains could be made on the continent without war among the European powers.

Moreover, Germany and Japan could make no territorial gains in Eastern Europe and East Asia, respectively, without encountering sovereign states or established empires. The German media was filled with speculation that Italy’s seizure of Ethiopia would mean that African concessions would have to be made to Berlin, and perhaps even a tacit acceptance of German aims of union with Austria. On May 15, Japan announced that it would increase the size of its army in occupied north China, citing the threat posed by communist guerrillas.

In response, Britain sent a diplomatic mission to Hitler seeking Germany’s non-recognition of Mussolini’s conquest, while France remained oriented toward maintaining Italy’s support against Germany. The Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, meanwhile, was fearful that maintenance of sanctions against Italy would push it out of the League of Nations and into the arms of Germany.

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## **100 years ago: US Supreme Court upholds breakup of Standard Oil**

On May 15, 1911, the US Supreme Court unanimously upheld, with modifications, a circuit court decision ordering the breakup of Standard Oil as a violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act’s prohibition against monopolies that restrain interstate trade.

The ruling was one of the major landmarks of progressivism, whose leading proponents—including former president Theodore Roosevelt—argued that if the extremes of capitalism could be softened through reform, the threat of socialism could be lessened. The reformers trained their fire on the enormous corporations, then called trusts, which had come to dominate every sector of the economy. The aim was not to expropriate the “captains of industry,” but to alter their methods through political reform.

Standard Oil loomed large. By 1911 it rivaled US Steel as the world’s largest corporation, dominating petroleum refining and sales and, through vertical integration, controlling dozens of attendant industries, including railroads. John D. Rockefeller, its founder and principal owner, had accumulated unfathomable wealth, while his workers—and the US working class as a whole—were paid just enough to survive for toil in abysmal conditions.

Though the Supreme Court ruling was unanimous, Justice John Marshall Harlan dissented over its rationale, in particular singling out the ruling’s declaration that Standard Oil carried on an “unreasonable restraint” on interstate commerce. Harlan was alarmed by the use of the word “unreasonable,” which they argued amounted to the Supreme Court legislating that there could exist “reasonable” monopolies. This was in fact precisely the position of the Taft administration, which litigated the case.

The court’s order breaking Standard Oil up into 34 parts actually doubled Rockefeller’s wealth through increased stock values in the inheritor corporations. These included firms that would come to be called Exxon, Mobil, Chevron, and Amoco.

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