

# This week in history: May 28-June 3

28 May 2012

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

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## 25 years ago: Argentine senate passes amnesty bill for torturers

On May 29, 1987, the Argentine senate passed legislation amounting to a blanket amnesty for the military officers responsible for torturing and murdering tens of thousands during Argentina's "dirty war." The law was passed only seven weeks after the "Easter Coup" by military officers provoked massive protests in the streets of Buenos Aires and other cities across the country.

President Raul Alfonsin initiated the so-called due obedience legislation after the rebellion by a group of fascist officers at two military bases in early April. The military principle of "due obedience" excuses any war crime on the basis that the perpetrator was only following orders, and the new law accordingly limited prosecution to a handful of senior generals and admirals.

Alfonsin's election in 1983 installed the first civilian government after the collapse of the discredited military junta. His pretensions to being a champion of human rights and prosecuting the "dirty warriors" were exposed with the amnesty legislation, as trials of hundreds of army and police officers charged with the torture and murder of trade unionists, students and others were ended.

The prostration of the government before the bellicose actions and speeches of the military war criminals was in sharp contrast to the determination to fight expressed in the mass demonstrations through the country. This gross capitulation could have only been possible with the assistance of the Peronist opposition, the trade union leaders and the Communist Party, who all backed Alfonsin's deal with the military torturers.

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## 50 years ago: Eichmann executed

On May 31, 1962, Adolf Eichmann, 56, a central figure in the mass deportation of Europe's Jews to Nazi extermination camps in Germany and occupied Poland during World War II, was executed by hanging in Israel.

The Jewish populations of Germany, Austria, Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Russia, the Ukraine, and several other Eastern and Central European countries were largely wiped out. Jewish communities in Western Europe were also devastated. All told, over two-thirds of Europe's Jews, some six million people, were murdered.

The deportations involved seizing all the money and valuable possessions of the victims, transporting millions from throughout Europe via train, putting the able-bodied to work as forced labor, systematically killing those who could not work, and eventually exterminating all those who still remained alive. The process required extensive planning, at which Eichmann, the consummate bureaucrat, proved himself zealous.

Millions of others were exterminated, including socialists, Gypsies, Eastern Europeans, and the mentally or physically handicapped. The Nazi war machine killed many millions more in its wars of conquest.

Eichmann's central defense was that he was merely "following orders." This defense, which had been undermined by the prosecution of Nazi war criminals in the Nuremberg trials, also failed to pass muster with Israeli judges. They however did not rule, as the Nuremberg prosecutors had done, that Eichmann's crimes flowed from the crime of aggressive war, because Israel had itself launched such a war in 1956 and would do so repeatedly. Instead, the judges found that he had been more than a mere cog in the killing of Jews.

Israeli agents abducted Eichmann in 1960 from Argentina, where he had been living since 1950 under an alias with the knowledge of the US, West Germany, and the Vatican, which helped Eichmann and other fascist war criminals flee Europe.

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## **75 years ago: Chicago police gun down workers in cold blood**

An event that became known as the “Memorial Day Massacre” occurred May 30, 1937, when Chicago police shot to death ten workers at point blank range during an attack on a picket line. The bloodbath was typical of the semi-fascistic methods employed by sections of the American ruling class when confronted by a militant workers movement demanding decent wages and union rights.

US Steel, the biggest American manufacturer, had recently signed a contract with the CIO (Committee for Industrial Organization) and SWOC (Steel Workers Organizing Committee) regarding union representation, hourly pay rates and working hours. However, a number of major steel companies, known collectively as “Little Steel,” including Republic Steel, refused to sign an agreement.

In response to their intransigence, SWOC called a strike and on Memorial Day hundreds of workers gathered and marched en masse towards the Republic Steel mill, where a line of Chicago police blocked their route. When the workers demanded their right to pass, the police opened fire. When they had exhausted their ammunition they proceeded to set upon those still standing with their clubs and beat them savagely.

Ten workers died, with a further thirty suffering serious gunshot wounds. Such was the police barbarity that a further nine workers were permanently disabled and 28 had serious head injuries inflicted by police billy clubs.

In the weeks that followed the massacre, the American ruling elite and its two parties absolved the Chicago police of all responsibility for the killings. President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared his position to be a “plague on both your houses,” as though the murderers and their victims were equally to blame.

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## **100 years ago: 600 Moroccans killed in uprising against French rule**

On May 30, 1912, Moroccan tribesmen attacked the French garrison at Fez. They were opposed to the proclamation of Morocco as a French protectorate, on March 30, which ended

the country’s formal independence. Governor Louis Lyautey ordered French troops to fire on the poorly armed Moroccan forces, using heavy weapons including artillery, killing 600. An earlier mutiny of Moroccan infantryman in April, which won the support of broad layers of the native population, had also been brutally suppressed.

An agreement between France and Spain divided Morocco into a vast central French zone, comprising almost nine-tenths of the country, with Spanish zones to the north and south. The treaty gave the French government authority to occupy the country militarily to assure that French commerce was secure, to establish order, and to introduce “reforms.”

Morocco had been the site of European intervention in the latter part of the 19th century and first decades of the 20th century, as European powers sought to protect their investments and demanded economic concessions as they attempted to further their interests in North Africa.

Marshal Lyautey built a port at Casablanca and pursued other development projects. Meanwhile, French and European settlers were increasing in number and assuming privileged positions. They acquired vast amounts of fertile land for development. French officials assumed control over every aspect of government policy, while Moroccans occupied humble posts. Native Moroccans were denied freedom of speech as well as the rights to assemble and to move freely through the country.

The French settlers built modern European-style cities, or “villages”, for themselves, adjacent to old and poor Arab population centers, called “Medinas”. The education system was French and excluded the bulk of the Moroccan population. Even the small minority of upper-class Moroccans saw their children taught only French history, art and culture, and colonial authorities also controlled religious schools and universities.

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