

This week in history: April 29-May 5

29 April 2013

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

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Gdansk shipyard strike provokes Polish state repression

The 12,000 workers at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk went on strike May 2, 1988, in solidarity with the striking steelworkers in southern Poland. In scenes reminiscent of the beginning of the Solidarity movement in August 1980, three thousand workers exuberantly occupied the yard, hanging banners, flags and flowers. The strike followed May 1 demonstrations in Polish cities such as Krakow, Warsaw, Wroclaw, Bielsko-Biala, Davrowa and Gdansk, which called for nationwide action to back the striking steelworkers.

Days earlier, on April 30, a show of force by state security forces, ZOMA, forced the Stalowa Wola steelworkers to end their strike, but those in Krakow continued their action. The Gdansk sit-down strike defied the Jaruzelski regime's military threats against striking steelworkers.

The strikers' demands were in defiance of the IMF-perestroika program of the Polish regime which lifted the monopoly on foreign trade to introduce inflation, raising prices and reducing wages. This was combined with plans to abolish subsidies on food, housing and transportation, extend private property relations and revamp the wage system to force increased productivity from workers.

The workers also demanded the urelease of all political prisoners and the restoration of the Solidarity movement, which was illegalized in 1982.

In response to the strike, the Jaruzelski regime rounded up Solidarity leaders across the country, leaving at large

those who had managed to go underground. On May 4-5, the state ZOMA forces brutally suppressed the Krakow strikers.

The capitalist media in the West responded with unconcealed sympathy for the Jaruzelski regime and the perestroika program of the USSR's Gorbachev. The *Wall Street Journal* offered this advice to the Polish regime:

"... it's increasingly difficult to squeeze sacrifices from the population. We cannot imagine that Western lending institutions still writing prescriptions of austerity for the East bloc don't realize this. But apparently they consider it ungentelemanly to tell the dictators that nothing short of a clean break with Communist ideology can save their countries."

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50 years ago: Birmingham police turn attack dogs on children

This week in 1963 the world's attention was drawn to the barbarism of Jim Crow segregation in the American South, as television images captured the Birmingham police, under the orders of Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor, firing high pressure water hoses and turning attack dogs on peacefully protesting high school students.

It was the second month of what came to be known as the civil rights movement's "Birmingham campaign." In late April 1963, thousands of high school students and school children joined in the civil disobedience campaign. Connor filled the jails with those arrested, not distinguishing between adult and child. Five hundred were arrested on May 2 alone. On May 3 three children required hospitalization after suffering bites from police dogs.

The televised images played an enormous role in shifting public opinion in America and building sympathy

for the demonstrators, mainly black but including some white supporters from the North.

The situation in Birmingham was becoming a major embarrassment to the Kennedy administration, whose foreign policy in the Third World, including in decolonizing Africa, sought to drape American imperialism in the mantle of “freedom.” On May 4 Attorney General Robert Kennedy issued a statement calling for redressing the grievances of the black population of Birmingham, but stating that this should be done “in good faith negotiations, and not in the street.”

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75 years ago: Nazis burn books in Austria

On May 1, 1938, in the newly annexed Austrian part of greater Germany, the “Aryanization” of social, cultural and economic life by the Nazis continued with the ceremonial burning of books written by Jewish and socialist authors and all those writers considered by fascism to be anti-German. Leading Nazi party members witnessed the first bonfire at the Residenzplatz in Salzburg, considered previously the cultural center of Austria. When they seized power in 1933 the Nazis had banned the annual celebration of International Workers Day on May 1 and replaced it with the “Festival of the German People.”

Hitler youth had busied themselves in the preceding days collecting books for the pyre, including works by Trotsky, Lenin, Marx, and Engels. Also burnt were works by the poet and critic Heinrich Heine, who had converted from Catholicism to Judaism. Heine had prophetically written in his play *Almansor* (1821), “That was but a prelude; where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people also.”

Other writers whose works were deemed subversive and tossed onto the flames included the author and dramatist Arthur Schnitzler, the theatre critic and essayist Alfred Kerr, writer and novelist Jakob Wasserman, novelist and essayist Alfred Döblin, and novelist, playwright and biographer Stefan Zweig. All were German or Austrian, and all were Jewish or of assimilated Jewish background.

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100 years ago: New Haitian president elected amid political turmoil

On May 4, 1913, Michel Oreste was elected president of Haiti, amid significant political turmoil and infighting within the country’s ruling elite. The US responded to the unrest in Haiti by provocatively stationing the *USS Nashville*, a gunboat, outside the harbor of Port-au-Prince.

Elections were called following the death of Oreste’s predecessor, Auguste Tancredi, who was believed to have been poisoned. The *New York Times* reported on May 4 that riots and disorder broke out at Tancredi’s funeral, with fusillades fired, and women and children trampled. During the vote for the presidency, General Defly, the governor of Port-au-Prince, led an attack on the parliament building. His forces were rapidly repulsed and Oreste secured political control.

The decision to dispatch the *USS Nashville* to the Haitian coast took place in the context of an escalating intervention by American imperialism in the region. Washington was actively intervening in Mexico, in an attempt to prevent the ongoing revolution there from threatening American dominance in the region.

Twenty seven hundred US marines had forced the surrender of a rebel force in Nicaragua in September, 1912. The same month, US troops were sent to the Dominican Republic to intervene in a civil war, and shore up American interests.

The Wilson administration and the American corporate elite were concerned over German and French investment and ownership of key areas of the Haitian economy. In May 1913, William Jennings Bryan, Wilson’s secretary of state, was advised by officials that France was sending a gunboat to Haiti in order to protect French financial interests.

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