

This week in history: May 6-12

6 May 2013

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

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25 years ago: Mitterrand wins French presidential election

In the second round of the French presidential election held on May 8, 1988, François Mitterrand of the Socialist Party (PS) gained 54 percent of the vote, defeating Jacques Chirac, the incumbent right-wing neo-Gaullist prime minister, who received 46 percent of the vote. After his defeat in round two, Chirac submitted his resignation as prime minister on May 10, whereupon Mitterrand appointed PS leader Michel Rocard.

Since 1986, when the right wing regained a parliamentary majority, Mitterrand and Chirac shared governmental power, carrying out austerity measures against the working class, which led to unemployment exceeding 10 percent.

The first-round vote was held on April 24. The most notable feature of the result was ultra-right-wing candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen of the National Front outpolling the candidate of the Communist Party (PCF) by a wide margin. Le Pen received more than 14 percent of the vote—over twice that of the PCF, whose total fell to an all-time low of less than 7 percent.

The growth of the fascist vote and the collapse of the Stalinists exposed the enormous social crisis building up under the surface of French capitalism. The 1988 elections arose from the crisis in working class leadership and a resulting turn away from the parliamentary establishment by large sections of workers.

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50 years ago: Massacre of Buddhists in South Vietnam

On May 8, 1963, the Hue Vesak killings took place when the South Vietnamese army opened fire and threw grenades at peacefully protesting Buddhists in Hue. Eight were killed. The event generated massive anger against the US puppet regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

Diem was Roman Catholic and his regime—the ministers, the army brass, etc.—were also Catholic; Diem's brother was the Archbishop of Hue. The Catholic Church was the largest landowner in South Vietnam. The Diem regime discriminated against the majority Buddhist population, as had the French colonial government before it. While the Catholic elite flaunted their religion, the Buddhists were limited from public religious expression.

Such was the case on May 7, 1963, when Diem ordered that religious flags could no longer be flown, though May 8 was the celebration of Phat Dan, the traditional observance of the birthday of Gautama Buddha. Buddhist monks defied the edict. Thousands of demonstrators gathered in Hue to protest the ban on the Buddhist flag, holding signs and placards in both Vietnamese and English. After the crowd refused to disperse, soldiers opened fire and hurled grenades.

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75 years ago: Right-wing Brazilian dictator foils fascist coup

On May 11, 1938, the anti-communist Brazilian dictator Getulo Dornelles Vargas suppressed the country's indigenous "Integralist" fascist movement after learning of their plans to depose and kill him and his cabinet. Most leading members of the fascist Acoo Integralista Brasileira (AIB) were quickly located and arrested. In the sweep the authorities discovered evidence of a conspiracy, including a target list and an arsenal of weapons.

The fascist paramilitary Greenshirts of the AIB movement had aided Vargas's dictatorial rise and their growth had been encouraged by his presidency. But just prior to the discovery of plans for a coup against Vargas, the fascists had been campaigning against state measures to forcibly assimilate German, Italian and Japanese migrants into Brazilian society. When the German ambassador to Brazil requested that the cultural activities of the Nazi Party in Brazil be allowed exemption from such measures, Vargas refused the request.

The AIB was not satisfied that Vargas's regime, which borrowed many of its policies from the Portuguese dictatorship of Salazar, was sufficiently right-wing. Integralist leader Plinio Salgado had established the Brazilian fascist movement after a visit to Italy where he met Mussolini, and subsequently both the fascist regimes in Rome and Berlin helped finance their South American surrogate.

When the Brazilian police raided Salgado's house they discovered all manner of firearms, 3,000 daggers embossed with fascist insignia and large amounts of Brazilian currency. Holed up in the Japanese embassy, Salgado denied any knowledge of the plot and told the press there was an ideological schism within the party and his leadership had been usurped by those elements who wished to foment a fascist coup.

Vargas responded by passing a decree whereby all imports and exports to Germany would be inspected. All immigrants were forbidden from hosting any form of potentially political organization, displaying political insignia, organizing demonstrations or maintaining print publications.

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Hasa

On May 9, 1913, fighters led by the King of Najd, Ibn Saud, annexed Al-Hasa from the Ottoman Empire, expanding the territory that is now called Saudi Arabia.

Ibn Saud had met with the British Gulf officials in 1911 and requested Britain's support to drive the Turks out of Al-Hasa, a highly fertile eastern province with the largest oases in the region. He also sought Britain's support against a Turkish naval invasion in exchange for allowing a British political representative in the province. However, London rejected the request, as it was set to negotiate outstanding issues with the Ottoman government, including the German-backed Baghdad railway, and did not want to alter the status quo in the geo-strategically sensitive region.

In 1913, Ibn Saud repeated the proposal and declared his intentions to seize Al-Hasa, arguing that it was opportune timing given that the Ottomans were severely weakened as a result of the Italo-Turkish and Balkan wars. London again refused, and on May 9 Ibn Saud led a surprise attack on the fort of Hufuf, the capital of Al-Hasa. His forces surrounded the mosque where Turkish troops fled but offered them safe passage to Bahrain if they surrendered, which the Turkish commander accepted.

Not long afterwards, the Ottomans were also expelled from Qatif by Ibn Saud's fighters, who secured the entire eastern province, which borders the Persian Gulf from Kuwait to Qatar.

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100 years ago: Ottoman Turks driven out of Al-