

This week in history: May 20-26

20 May 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: Soviet pullout from Afghanistan under siege by US-backed jihadists

Unnamed “Western diplomats” from Islamabad, Pakistan announced May 24, 1988 that the increasing US-backed military assault on Afghan troops was delaying the scheduled Soviet pullout. Based on the Geneva Accords signed on April 14, the withdrawal of Soviet troops was to have begun May 15, with 25 percent of the Soviet Union’s 115,000 troops to be out by the end of the month.

Kabul Radio reported rocket attacks by the mujahedin on the capital for the second straight day, killing at least two. Similar attacks were intensified on key Afghan garrisons in the country, raising questions whether the Afghan army could fight the US-backed guerrilla forces on its own without the aid of Soviet troops. A chain of Afghan bases was overrun by Islamist rebels, mostly on the eastern border with Pakistan.

Sayedbad, the capital district southwest of Kabul on the main highway to the Soviet garrison town of Ghazni, had been seized the week before, with heavy casualties resulting from intense fighting around two other rebel-captured garrisons.

The intensified attacks were carried out to harass departing Red Army convoys. As a result, according to embassy dispatches cited by diplomats in Islamabad, only one Soviet combat unit was on the move, with little evidence of the planned withdrawal.

The arming and mobilization of the Islamic fundamentalist mujahedin was begun in the late 1970s by

the US under the Carter Administration as a provocation to topple the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan and draw the Soviet Union into a ruinous war. US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski described it as, “giving to the USSR its Vietnam war.” The policy proved a success, but the Afghan people were its collateral damage.

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50 years ago: Greek dissident assassinated

On May 22, 1963, Greek pacifist and parliamentarian Dr. Grigoris Lambrakis, known for his opposition to the right-wing regime of Prime Minister Konstantinos Karamanlis, was clubbed over the head by two fascists driving by on a motorcycle, moments after he had given a speech at an antiwar meeting in Thessaloniki. He died from his injuries five days later. Later, crime investigator Christos Sartzetakis uncovered connections between the fascists and the police and military in the murder.

The funeral of Lambrakis on May 28 in Athens provided the occasion for a massive demonstration against the regime, with estimates of between 100,000 and 500,000 in attendance. Mourners chanted “No more blood!” “Democracy!” and “Long live immortal Lambrakis.” Reaction to the killing contributed to the downfall of Karamanlis that summer and the victory of liberal forces under Georgios Papandreou’s Center Union Party in the fall.

Lambrakis’ middle class politics, his pacificism, anti-nuclear weapons activism, and martyrdom helped inspire a “new left” of youth in Greece and Western Europe. In 1969 the French language film *Z*, by director Costa-Gavras, recounted the story of the Lambrakis killing.

Lambrakis was a member of the only legal left opposition party in Greece, the United Democratic Left (EDA). A renowned track-and-field athlete in the 1930s, he supported the partisans in the struggle against German

occupation during World War II, though he never joined the largest force in the partisan struggle, the Greek Communist Party (KKE), which counted 200,000 members by war's end and whose militia controlled the country.

In wartime negotiations with Roosevelt and Churchill, Stalin betrayed the Greek revolution, handing over Greece to the British zone of influence in exchange for a free hand in Eastern Europe after the war. Accordingly, the KKE ordered the partisans to disarm.

In the wake of the civil war the KKE and other leftist organizations were banned, leaving the EDA as the officially recognized left. Lambrakis was elected an MP in 1961.

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75 years ago: Jamaican dock workers strike

Workers employed at Kingston docks, Jamaica, struck for higher pay on May 21, 1938. Two days later, on May 23, the West Indian capital's sanitary employees joined the longshoremens, and together they marched through the city, compelling most workplaces to close. In the evening workers paraded through Kingston's commercial thoroughfares.

On the streets, workers confronted local armed police whose ranks were swelled by officers from surrounding parishes. The police were also bolstered by the arrival of a battalion of Sherwood Foresters—British soldiers. The British Admiralty dispatched the HMS Ajax, a 7,000-ton cruiser, to Jamaica from Bermuda.

In response to the repression, workers erected barriers across main roads in the capital and stoned the police and soldiers when they arrived to remove the obstacles. During violent clashes between the Jamaican workers and the colonial police and army many cars and buildings were burned. As the waterfront strike stood firm, ships entering the Kingston docks were turned away with their cargoes still on board.

As the confrontation between the government and the Jamaican working class intensified, the colonial government responded by ordering soldiers and police to utilize live rounds upon strikers and demonstrators. On May 24, three women and a child were killed in Kingston by police bullets fired directly into the unarmed massed ranks of workers. Two hundred workers were treated for

injuries inflicted by police truncheons and 70 were arrested, including many who the state referred to as “strike ringleaders.”

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100 years ago: Mexican insurgents attack Concepcion del Oro

On May 20, 1913, Eulalio Gutierrez led seven hundred insurgents in an attack on Concepcion del Oro in Zacatecas. The attack took place in the context of the Mexican revolution, which spanned 1910 to 1919.

Gutierrez's forces were in revolt against the military dictatorship of General Jose Victoriano Huerta, who overthrew President Francisco Madero in a coup d'état in February 1913 that ended in Madero's execution. The coup sparked rebellions throughout 1913, in which haciendas, mines and other industries were targeted including in Los Tocayos, Sombrerete and Zacatecas.

The 38th rural regiment defected to the rebels in Zacatecas, who took the town in what was considered a major conquest, as Zacatecas was not only a silver-mining town of 30,000, but also a railroad junction necessary to advance to Mexico City. Upon taking Zacatecas, Gutierrez and the rebels formed the so-called “Army for the restoration of the Constitution.”

Huerta, a figure from the previous regime of longtime ruler Porfirio Diaz, was retained by Madero when he assumed the presidency after Diaz fled into exile in Spain in 1911. Huerta was charged with suppressing an anti-Madero rebellion led by Pascual Orozco, one of the radical leaders, along with Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata, who had initially backed Madero.

Huerta conspired with Henry Lane Wilson, United States Ambassador to Mexico, General Bernardo Reyes and Porfirio Diaz's nephew, Felix Diaz, to overthrow Madero—events that are known in Mexican history as the Ten Tragic Days.

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