

This week in history: May 27-June 2

27 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: Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Moscow

The fourth Reagan-Gorbachev summit opened in Moscow May 29, 1988. Ostensibly held to sign minor arms agreements and hold a ratification ceremony for the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, the summit was the venue of behind-the-scenes collaboration between the Stalinist bureaucracy, committed to Gorbachev's perestroika policy, and US imperialism.

Rather than signifying the prospect of peace and the elimination of the threat of nuclear holocaust, the stage-managed display of congeniality between the two leaders was aimed at perpetrating a fraud against both Soviet and American workers. The US required the accession of Soviet leaders to its plans for military interventions including the Middle East as well as Panama, Central America and the Caribbean.

At the same time, the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy was preparing for the upcoming Party Conference in June to overcome any internal opposition to the Gorbachev policy of perestroika.

The *Bulletin*, newspaper of the Workers League (US) warned its readers of the true significance of the summit. It reported on June 3, "Reagan went to Moscow as the political representative of the plutocrats who rule the United States, the billionaires who exercise, for all the trappings of capitalist democracy, a ruthless class dictatorship based on their ownership and absolute power over the means of production.

"Gorbachev, for his part, represents, not the Soviet people or Soviet working class, but the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, the privileged layer of the party and state officials which usurped power from the working class after the 1917 October Revolution and destroyed the Bolshevik Party of Lenin and Trotsky.

"Now the Stalinist bureaucracy has gone even further, launching a frontal assault on the economic foundations of the degenerated workers' state in the Soviet Union, and seeking to reestablish capitalism and transform itself into a new Soviet

capitalist class."
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50 years ago: Struggle over racial segregation in US intensifies

This was an event-filled week in the fight against segregation and for racial equality in the United States, culminating in the infamous pledge by Alabama Governor George Wallace to "stand in the schoolhouse door" to block the desegregation of the University of Alabama.

On May 27, 1963 the US Supreme Court ruled unanimously that the city of Memphis, Tennessee, must desegregate its parks immediately after authorities had sought to impose various delays. "The basic guarantees of our Constitution are warrants for the here and now," wrote Justice Arthur Goldberg in *Watson v. City of Memphis*, adding that in the absence of "an overwhelmingly compelling reason," desegregation must begin immediately. A survey found that, nine years after the high court decision outlawing segregated public schools, of 2.5 million black public school children in the 11 southern states, a mere 12,217 attended schools with white children—less than one half of one percent.

Also on May 27, Attorney General Robert Kennedy met with representatives of theater associations that represented about 80 percent of all ticket sales in the South and implored them to commence desegregation of movie theaters. The next day, Pres. John Kennedy announced he was considering favoring legislation that would deny interstate commerce privileges to companies doing segregated business in the South. On May 31, the media reported that the Kennedy administration was now prepared to throw its weight behind a new civil rights bill.

In Jackson, Mississippi, on May 28, two black students and a white college professor were beaten by a crowd as they sat at the "white only" counter of a Woolworth's pharmacy. One of the students was kicked repeatedly in his face while police stood by. On May 29, 19 were arrested in an anti-segregation protest in front of downtown Jackson stores. On May 31, Jackson police and Mississippi state troopers arrested about 600 demonstrating students, many of them grade school age, cramming city and county jails to capacity.

On May 30, authorities in Tallahassee, Florida, arrested 257 black youth in two separate anti-segregation demonstrations. In addition to the arrests, police fired tear gas on an evening protest march, dispersing 150 demonstrators.

On June 2, the segregationist Democratic governor of Alabama, George Wallace, was interviewed on CBS' Meet the Press, where he promised to personally stand in the doorway to block the integration of the University of Alabama. Hundreds of New York police officers shut down the city blocks around the RCA building in Rockefeller Center, home of CBS studios, to protect Wallace from demonstrators.

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75 years ago: Hitler declares desire to crush Czechoslovakia

On May 28, 1938 in a meeting in Berlin, German Chancellor Adolf Hitler told a secret gathering of German military and foreign policy officials that he was "utterly determined that Czechoslovakia should disappear from the map." His remarks dispensed with the pretext offered by Nazi Germany publicly, that its aim in the conflict with Prague was solely to defend the oppressed minority of Sudeten Germans on the western fringe of the country.

Responding to the threat of a German invasion, Czechoslovakia had recently mobilized 180,000 army reserves. That, and the presumed threat of war with France and possibly Great Britain, had caused certain diplomats and members of the military brass to suggest that an invasion was not advisable. Hitler sought to convince the military that Germany must eliminate Czechoslovakia to prepare for world war. The dictator told his listeners that it was their responsibility to find a lasting solution to Germany's geopolitical problems, which he summed up in the idea of "lebensraum"—or expansion to the east.

Hitler calculated that Czech defenses were not yet complete and that French and British rearmament plans lagged behind Germany. The rate of construction of Germany's western fortifications would be rapidly increased. The combination of these such circumstances would, according to Hitler, provide the necessary framework for "a lightning march into Czechoslovakia."

On May 30, a revised "Green Case" for the invasion of Czechoslovakia was presented to Hitler. The initial version had been deemed insufficiently aggressive. The preamble in the new version eschewed the ambiguous introduction of the original version—which had declared there were no immediate plans to invade Czechoslovakia—with an introduction whose intentions were very clear: "It is my unalterable decision to smash Czechoslovakia by military action in the near future."

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100 years ago: Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* debuts in Paris

On May 29, 1913, *The Rite of Spring*, a ballet produced by famed Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, premiered at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. The revolutionary and avant-garde character of the piece, which experimented with meter, tonality, and rhythm, and was likely influenced by traditions of Russian folk music, led to major disturbances at the premiere, with musical traditionalists almost rioting.

The premiere was part of the Paris season of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company. Stravinsky had been recruited to the Ballets Russes by Diaghilev while still a largely unknown composer, and had rapidly achieved success with *The Firebird* in 1910, and *Petrushka* in 1911.

According to Stravinsky, the purpose of *The Rite of Spring*, subtitled "Pictures of Pagan Russia in Two parts" was to give expression to the "mystery and great surge of the creative power of Spring." The piece is not a unified narrative, instead taking the form of a series of episodes centering around the theme of spring. Choreography for the piece was developed by Vaslav Nijinsky, also a famed dancer, while stage designs and costuming were devised by Nicholas Roerich, a prominent Russian artist and intellectual.

Parisian ballet audiences at the time were generally divided into two major groups, wealthy traditionalists, and younger bohemian elements anxious to rebel against stultifying conventions. Trouble began during the introduction of the ballet, with audience members heckling and making it impossible to hear the music. According to eyewitnesses, two factions in the crowd fought each other, but quickly focused their hostility on the orchestra, hurling objects at the musicians, who continued to play. Around 40 audience members were ejected from the crowd, and disturbances subsided as the ballet continued.

Two subsequent performances of the ballet a month later took place without incident, although an attitude of derision and hostility amongst a broad layer of critics to the work persisted. Stravinsky's composition is considered highly influential in shaping the direction of classical music in the 20th century.

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