

# This week in history: May 5-11

5 May 2014

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## 25 years ago: US denounces election in Panama

National elections in Panama were held on Sunday, May 7, 1989 in the midst of a US barrage of threats and economic sanctions against military strongman Manuel Noriega. In the weeks prior to the elections US President George H. W. Bush had made several public accusations of fraud and warnings to Noriega, stating on April 27 that the US “would not recognize the fraudulent election results engineered by Noriega.”

The international press and observers like former US President Jimmy Carter declared the CIA-financed opposition leader Guillermo Endara the winner of the vote by a wide margin. Carter announced that he had uncovered evidence of “massive” government fraud. But three days later, on Wednesday, May 10, Noriega’s electoral tribunal nullified the results of the election, claiming interference by the US “made it impossible to determine winners.”

On the payroll of the CIA since the late 1950s, Noriega was given approval to arrange the 1981 assassination of General Omar Torrijos, and replace him as the country’s leader. Torrijos was planning to assume full sovereignty of the Canal Zone for Panama, which was unacceptable to the US.

So long as Noriega was doing its bidding, he was regarded as an important US asset by the Reagan administration. During the US covert war against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, Noriega allowed money and weapons to be funneled through Panama to the Contras. In the wake of the Iran-Contra affair, Noriega’s corruption and trafficking in drugs became publicly known and he became an embarrassment to the US.

After Noriega annulled the elections, his thugs beat up opposition leaders and protesters. The price of oil jumped 54 cents a barrel due to market fears that Panama would close a pipeline to tankers bound for US refineries. US President Bush announced the sending of 2,000 additional troops into Panama, claiming they were needed to protect US citizens and the Canal Zone. *The Bulletin* newspaper, one of the forerunners of the *World Socialist Web Site*, warned at the time: “With the dispatching of a brigade-sized combat force to Panama, the placing of the 10,800 US troops already on Panamanian soil on

alert and the order to move all US personnel onto US bases, military intervention has already begun and the stage has been set for a full-scale invasion.”

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## 50 years ago: Johnson seeks to prop up Alliance for Progress

On May 11, 1964, US President Lyndon Johnson addressed a White House gathering of 13 Latin American ambassadors in a bid to prop up the Alliance for Progress, a \$20 billion package instituted by his predecessor, John Kennedy, to maintain American hegemony in Latin America. Johnson’s speech was a response to growing criticism that the US “no longer gave political democracy in Latin America as much importance as President Kennedy gave it,” according to the *New York Times*.

Kennedy’s program had aimed to bind the region to US capitalism, then still dominant in the hemisphere but facing a growing challenge from Western Europe, and to give a democratic fig leaf to US foreign policy, widely derided in the region as “Yankee imperialism.” Most importantly, the plan aimed to forestall nationalist revolutions such as that which took place in Cuba in 1959, by cultivating “third force” political formations that would provide an alternative to widely discredited US-backed dictatorship such as those of Trujillo in the Dominican Republic (1930-1961), Somoza in Nicaragua (1936-on), and Batista in Cuba (1940-1959).

The Kennedy policy had become discredited by 1964, after Washington provided direct backing or tacit support to military coups in Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Ecuador, removing democratically elected reformist regimes. These include extensive efforts to assassinate Fidel Castro, as well as the preemptive assassination of Trujillo in 1961. Johnson later said that when he came into office he learned “we had been operating a damned Murder, Inc. in the Caribbean.”

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## 75 years ago: Stalin-Hitler negotiations reported

A prominent German businessman and former supporter of Hitler confirmed to British secret services on March 6, 1939 a rumor that had been circulating for some weeks: that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were secretly negotiating a rapprochement.

The former mayor of Leipzig and Reich Price Commissar, Carl Friedrich Goerdeler, also informed the British authorities that the German economy was on the verge of economic collapse due to the enormous strain placed upon it by the massive Nazi program of military rearmament.

The journalist and historian of the Third Reich William L. Shirer described Goerdeler as “a conservative and monarchist at heart, a devout Protestant, able, energetic and intelligent, but also indiscreet and headstrong, he broke with the Nazi’s in 1936 over their anti-Semitism and their frenzied rearmament and, resigning both his posts, went to work with his heart and soul in opposition to Hitler.”

The British Foreign Office may have been astonished, but a full two months earlier Leon Trotsky, leader of the Fourth International, had warned of the possibility of negotiations between Berlin and Moscow.

In an article entitled “What lies behind Stalin bid for agreement with Hitler?,” Trotsky wrote that so long as the Soviet Union remains an isolated workers’ state, “episodic agreements” will be made out of necessity with imperialist states. “However,” Trotsky wrote, “in question is not a workers state, in general, but a degenerated and putrefying workers state ... Stalin’s government is capable of entering into agreements only in the interests of the ruling Kremlin clique and only to the detriment of the interests of the international working class.”

Trotsky noted how previous agreements between the Kremlin and the bourgeois democracies had led directly to the calamitous defeat of the Spanish working class, the strangulation of the French proletariat, the collapse of the Chinese Communist Party, and the annihilation of the leadership of the Polish Communist Party. “Every agreement of the Kremlin clique with a foreign bourgeoisie,” wrote Trotsky, “is immediately directed against the proletariat of that country with which the agreement is made, as well as the proletariat of the USSR.”

“We can state one thing with certainty. The agreement between Stalin and Hitler would essentially alter nothing in the counter-revolutionary function of the Kremlin oligarchy. It would only serve to lay bare this function, make it stand out more glaringly and hasten the collapse of the illusions and falsifications.”

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On May 11, 1914, Karl Liebknecht, a leading member of the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), denounced Germany’s rapid military build-up in a speech delivered on the floor of the Reichstag.

Liebknecht exposed the association of German government and military officials with major arms manufacturers, who had inordinate weight in the German economy. Liebknecht noted that former senior government officials as well as navy and army officers served as members of the board of management of Krupp, one of the leading German arms manufacturers, which had close connections with other international armament firms such as Skoda, whose activities were financed with French and English capital.

The connections went right to the top, with the Vice-President of the Reichstag, Dr. Hermann S. Paasche, serving as a member of the Directorate of Erhardt Works, another armaments firm. Liebknecht also cited the connection of Belgian, Italian and French firms with the Loewe Small Arms Company as well as the involvement of banks such as the Disconto-Gesellschaft and the Deutsche Bank in an international explosive powder trust.

He also charged that senior German military figures operated as intermediaries between foreign countries and the arms industry and stated that officials in the navy, army and the State held positions in the directorate of a well-known optical instrument company that overcharged the army for field glasses.

These revelations followed the exposure by Liebknecht in 1913 of Prussian War Office officials taking bribes from Krupp in exchange for military documents, which resulted in the conviction of a number of officers.

One of the leaders of the SPD most closely identified with the fight to mobilize the international working class against imperialist war, Liebknecht had written *Militarism and Anti-Militarism* in 1907, a seminal exposition of socialist opposition to militarism. The publication of that work had seen him charged with treason, and he was imprisoned for eighteen months. Following his revelations in the Reichstag, Liebknecht, with several British and French socialists, set out to write a book on what they dubbed the “Armament International.” This was never finished due to the outbreak of World War One.

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**100 years ago: Socialist leader Karl Liebknecht denounces German military build-up**