

This week in history: May 26-June 1

26 May 2014

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25 years ago: Social tension builds as Chinese workers mobilize in support of students

This week, 25 years ago, saw a deepening of the turmoil in China, as the Stalinist bureaucracy had been unable to implement its crackdown on protesting students in Tiananmen Square. After martial law was declared on May 20, subway workers cut power to the subways, shutting them down for four days. When troops did arrive by rail, angry protesters massed at the subway exits, preventing them from leaving the trains.

Support for the students grew rapidly. A group called the Beijing Workers' Autonomous Federation protested in front of Beijing municipal police headquarters. Liu Qiang, a 27-year-old printer, told the media, "I've made an oath on the flag. I'm putting my life on the line." An organization claiming to represent workers at 37 factories threatened to call a general strike in Beijing if student demands were not met.

On May 30, students unveiled the 33-foot (10 meters) tall "Goddess of Democracy," erected in the middle of Tiananmen Square.

The response of the bureaucracy to its military paralysis was to conduct a purge inside the top echelons of the Communist Party. In a nationally televised speech, longtime party official Chen Yun warned of a secret plot aimed at the overthrow of the top leadership of Deng Xiaoping, Li Peng and their allies. Chen announced, "We old comrades must resolutely expose and struggle against a very, very small number of people who have fabricated schemes and intrigues, and never yield to them." It was widely believed that Zhao Ziyang, known for being sympathetic to the students' cause, was put under house arrest, along with several others.

Wang Gang, a 30-year-old worker at a sweater factory, was quoted by the *New York Times*, "The Communist Party is generally good, but the problem is that it is manipulated by a handful of people like Li Peng and his puppet government. And with this puppet government there is no equality. The leaders claim they represent the interests of the whole nation. They claim they are practicing Communism and they use the Chinese flag as their flag, but the people of the country feel these

leaders are not real Communists."

On June 1, 300 troops marched to within hundreds of feet of Tiananmen Square. Chinese officials announced new rules against foreign journalists, banning any photography or videotaping in the area around the Square.

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50 years ago: Nehru dies in India

On May 27, 1964, Jawaharlal Nehru, the prime minister of India, died at the age of 74 after suffering a stroke. A close collaborator of Mahatma Gandhi, Nehru had been prime minister since India gained independence in 1947. Hundreds of thousands viewed his cremation on the banks of the Yamuna River.

A member of the privileged Brahman caste, he attended school in England at the upper class Harrow School and Cambridge University. He later claimed conversion to socialism and, along with Gandhi, to represent India's impoverished masses in their struggle against the British colonial rulers. In fact, Nehru and Gandhi gained the admiration of ruling layers all over the world for using pacifist nonviolence to hold back the explosive struggle of the masses. Imprisoned during WWII, Nehru was released after the war and took part in the negotiations with Britain that led to the catastrophic division of the Indian subcontinent along religious lines.

Nehru's death found the Indian subcontinent, 17 years after its nominal independence, mired in crisis. The region remained among the poorest in the world, with hundreds of millions eking out a miserable existence. The power of the great landlords had not been broken, and their political interests—including within the ruling Congress Party—constituted a potent brake on development.

Nehru's import-substitution policies had pushed forward an inefficient industrial sector in the overwhelmingly agrarian country, but India's economic growth was less than that of most of the advanced economies. Nehru's "Forward Policy" in India's disputed Himalayan border region with China had resulted in a humiliating defeat in the Sino-Indian War of 1962, while the Congress's support for the religious partition of the

subcontinent subjected India to the constant threat of war with Pakistan and provoked sharp communal tensions within the polyglot society.

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75 years ago: Soviet census shows dramatic growth

The population of the Soviet Union was growing by approximately two million people a year, according to official census figures released on June 1, 1939. The census showed that from December 1926 to January 1939 the population of approximately 147 million grew to almost 170 million, an increase of 23 million in just twelve years. The whole of capitalist Europe had grown during the same period by 32 million people.

The Soviet population had grown despite the annihilation of hundreds of thousands of workers and intellectuals viewed as threats to the bureaucracy, the mass famine in Ukraine caused by Stalin's catastrophic agricultural policy, and the deadly conditions faced by Soviet workers because of Stalin's reckless breakneck industrialization.

The Soviet Union's population was also urbanizing rapidly. At the time of the 1917 October Revolution, the Russian empire was dominated by the rural masses; the working class was a tiny minority of the population. With industrialization, the birth rates in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev and Kharkiv were between 27 and 29 per 1000, and Baku, the oil center of the Soviet Union on the Caspian coast, grew by 34 per 1,000.

Of the total population of the Soviet Union, over 109 million resided in the Russian Soviet Republic, followed by the 30 million inhabitants of Ukraine. The major Soviet cities and towns had virtually doubled in size. Moscow grew from 2 million to over 4 million and Leningrad grew from 1.7 million to over 3 million. Kiev, in Ukraine, with a population of 850,000, was still the third-biggest city in the Soviet Union, but since 1926 eight other cities had surpassed the half-million mark—Kharkiv, Baku, Gorky, Odessa, Tashkent, Tbilisi, Rostov-on-Don, and Dnepropetrovsk. The Soviet Union by 1939 also had 82 cities with populations exceeding 100,000, compared to just 31 some twelve years earlier.

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100 years ago: Over a thousand die in sinking of the RMS *Empress of Ireland*

On May 29, 1914, some 1,012 people died when the RMS *Empress of Ireland* sank in the Saint Lawrence River. The

disaster occurred after the *Empress* collided with a Norwegian collier, the SS *Storstad*. It is regarded as the worst maritime tragedy to have occurred in Canada during peacetime.

The *Empress of Ireland* had been launched in 1906, and commissioned by Canadian Pacific Steamships to traverse the North Atlantic Route, connecting Quebec to Liverpool in Britain. The *Empress* had begun its 96th sailing on May 28, departing from Quebec.

Having left their pilot at Rimouski near Pointe-au-Père, Quebec, the *Empress* sighted a ship in the distance. The river was rapidly enveloped by a heavy fog, however, and shortly after, a collision occurred between the two vessels. *Storstad*, the Norwegian ship, did not sink, but the *Empress* quickly listed, having sustained substantial damage to the starboard side, and took on water. Many of those who were below deck in 2nd and 3rd class, along with the crew, drowned quickly. Most of those in the upper decks also drowned, because the ship listed so heavily that it was impossible to disembark lifeboats. Only 465 passengers and crew survived the disaster. Following the crash, it emerged that the quick sinking was due to the ship's watertight doors not having been closed. Many portholes were open at the time of the collision.

The disaster was followed by mutual recriminations between Canadian and Norwegian officials, with each claiming that the other ship was responsible for the collision. Widely different stories of the circumstances of the collision were presented by the captains of the *Empress* and the *Storstad*.

An official commission launched on June 16 assigned blame exclusively to the captain of the Norwegian vessel. The commission was presided over by Lord Mersey, who had also headed the inquiry into the sinking of the *Titanic*. In both cases, the primary concern of those presiding was to prevent any examination of the safety measures of the major shipping companies, which led to a number of disasters in which thousands of people died.

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