

This week in history: May 25-31

25 May 2015

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

in the struggle for control of the world's markets and was resorting, more and more, to class war policies against the working class at home.

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25 years ago: US-Soviet summit at Camp David

May 31, 1990, was the first day of a week-long summit between the major leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States, held outside Washington at the presidential retreat at Camp David. US President George H. W. Bush and Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev headed the delegations that included US Secretary of State James A. Baker III and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard A. Shevardnadze.

Gorbachev told the press upon arriving: "The most important thing we're going to discuss today is to go over the planet and its hot spots, in other words, to discuss regional issues." In the language of Stalinist-imperialist diplomacy, discussion of such "hot spots" meant the working out of measures to crush the revolutionary striving of the working masses internationally.

On the eve of the summit, a chilling glimpse of this collaboration was provided by a feature-length expose published in *Time* magazine. The article detailed how, in the wake of the Malta summit conference the previous December, the Soviet bureaucracy exerted enormous pressure to help US imperialism achieve its decade-old goal of forcing Nicaragua's Sandinista regime from power.

At a joint news conference with Bush at the conclusion of their discussions, Gorbachev himself referred to what he called "a new phase of cooperation":

"We really discussed all world problems ... and we did that in an atmosphere of frankness, a constructive atmosphere, an atmosphere of growing trust. We discussed specifically such urgent international issues as the situation in the Middle East, Afghanistan, southern Africa, Cambodia, Central America. And that is just some of what we discussed."

For his part, Bush welcomed Gorbachev to the most indebted nation on earth, whose ruling class was increasingly challenged by its rivals in Germany and Japan

50 years ago: Coal mine disaster kills hundreds in India

On May 28, 1965, an explosion and fire at the Dhori mine at Dhanbad, near Bermo, India, killed nearly 400 miners, when coal dust was ignited by a spark or flame. It was the worst coal mine disaster in Indian history.

The explosion occurred at shift change, when 178 miners were arriving to replace a similarly-sized group. The force of the explosion was such that it brought down houses and killed workers even on the surface. Among the structures destroyed was the mine superintendent's office, which included the paperwork that would have revealed the names of men working in the two shifts. The resulting fire prevented rescue operations, an Indian Ministry of Labor official said.

The mine was privately owned by the last Raj of Ramgarh, Raja Bahadur Kamakshya Narain Singh. It provided coal for the state-owned Bokaro steel mill, built by the Soviet Union and opened in 1964. Both the mine and the mill were located in Bihar state in northeastern India. One of the poorest regions in India, Bihar produced over half the country's iron and coal, and was rich in other minerals, including copper, chromite, manganese and mica.

The Indian disaster came less than two weeks after 31 miners were killed in a gas explosion in Tonypandy, Wales. In the British disaster, only 13 men escaped from the pit where they were working a seam two feet eight inches high. The Cambrian pit in the Rhondda valley where the deaths occurred was known by miners as the "slaughterhouse," because there were so many accidents there. The Cambrian miners were working to boost production under the threat of closure by the National Coal Board. Miners interviewed by the British Trotskyist newspaper *The Newsletter* exposed the fact that speedup had undermined safety conditions. With

the support of the National Union of Mineworkers, workers had pushed production per man shift to the highest level in the valley.

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75 years ago: Allied evacuation at Dunkirk

On May 26, 1940, British and French forces in northern Belgium began their evacuation from the port of Dunkirk across the English Channel, after being routed by the armies of German imperialism.

In four weeks, German forces had split the Allied armies, north and south, rupturing supply lines and forcing them into retreat. German Panzer units rapidly advanced north along the French coast, cutting off access to ports on the English Channel to the Allies. On May 24, German tanks had reached within 12 miles of Dunkirk, the last port of exit available to retreating British and French troops, when Hitler ordered them to halt for three days.

The Luftwaffe (German air force) continued to bomb Allied forces at Dunkirk as they re-embarked and made their way across the Channel. In a nine-day period, under intense pressure and disorganization, 70,000 British troops were killed, while a total of 338,000 British and Allied forces were evacuated. By this time, French forces had suffered 370,000 dead, wounded or taken prisoner. The day after the retreat began, Belgian forces collapsed and were penned in along a narrow strip on the Channel by Germany. King Leopold sued for an armistice and the following day surrender proceedings began.

German forces could have overrun Dunkirk, isolated and destroyed the Allied armies, except for the breathing space granted by Hitler that allowed the evacuation to proceed. Behind this decision, Hitler anticipated the end of the war in six weeks. By not using his land forces against the troops at Dunkirk, the bulk of whom were British, he hoped to retain their fighting capability to defeat the French in the south and force their surrender. But more importantly, he sought to avoid humiliating Britain and thereby come to an agreement with them. Germany would acquire hegemony on the European continent and have its former colonies, lost after World War I, returned, while the British Empire would be maintained. Hitler envisioned Britain as a future ally in his coming war against the Soviet Union.

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100 years ago: Ottoman parliament passes law for mass deportation of Armenians

On May 29, 1915, the Ottoman parliament passed the Tehcir Law, which authorized the deportation of the Armenian population and any other groups that were deemed to be a threat to national security. The law was part of a program that led to the systematic extermination of the Armenian population within the Ottoman Empire. It is estimated that between 800,000 and one and a half million Armenians were killed from 1915 to 1923.

The Ottoman Empire, led by the military officers known as the “Young Turks,” had entered the First World War in 1914 on the side of the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary. The Young Turks had come to power in 1908 on a program of aggressive Turkish nationalism.

During the first few months of the war, the Ottoman Empire suffered significant defeats at the hands of the Russians in attempting to regain territory previously lost in the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78. By April 1915, they found themselves surrounded by the Allied powers with Russia on their eastern border, the British to the south and the British, French and other Allies attacking from the west. Claiming that the defeats by the Russians were due to the treachery of the Armenians within the Ottoman Empire, the Young Turks set out on a program of mass murder and forced deportation.

On April 24, 250 Armenian intellectuals and community leaders were rounded up in the city of Constantinople, with the majority subsequently deported and ultimately assassinated. The rounding up reflected a deepening crisis of the regime exacerbated by the Allied invasion.

The genocide involved the killing of able-bodied male Armenians either through massacres or forced labor, and the deportation of women, children and the elderly on death marches into the Syrian desert with limited supplies.

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