

# This week in history: August 24-30

24 August 2015

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## 25 years ago: Liberian civil war flares

On August 24, 1990, a “peacekeeping” force arrived off the coast of Liberia with orders to end the eight-month civil war in which more than 5,000 had been killed. The 3,000-man force sent by Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) included troops from Sierra Leone, Guinea, Nigeria, Gambia, and Ghana.

The regime of President Samuel K. Doe had taken power in a 1980 coup, drawing support from many indigenous tribes who had been disenfranchised since the country was founded in 1847 by freed American slaves. Doe’s regime brutally repressed all opposition. In response to a November 1985 coup attempt led by Thomas Quiwonkpa, the former Commanding General of the Armed Forces, Doe, a member of the Krahn people, targeted the Gio and Mano tribes in the north of the country for repression, further fueling ethnic tensions.

The civil war began late in 1989 when Charles Taylor, a renegade from Doe’s government, assembled and trained a force of anti-Doe rebels in neighboring Côte d’Ivoire and invaded Liberia, recruiting thousands of Gio and Mano forces from the north as he crossed through Nimba County.

The ECOWAS peacekeeping force was in contact with the US embassy when they arrived in Monrovia, the capital city. The force hoped to work out a deal for Doe to cede power. They were welcomed by forces under Taylor’s rival rebel chief, Prince Johnson, at the Monrovia port authority.

However, as soon as the ECOWAS force left the area under Johnson’s control, they came into conflict with Taylor’s forces. Taylor said the announced intention of ECOWAS to stop the fighting was just a maneuver to keep Doe in power. He expressed concern that the force contained soldiers from Nigeria and Guinea, whose leaders had supported Doe in the past. Days after the forces arrived, hundreds of civilians from Nigeria and Guinea, living in Liberia, were killed in retaliation.

It was revealed later that Taylor operated as a CIA informant in the 1980s. Taylor himself told a UN-backed Special Court for Sierra Leone in the Hague that US agents had helped him escape from a maximum security prison in Boston in 1985 after

he was extradited by the US for embezzling funds from the Doe government.

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## 50 years ago: Switzerland avalanche kills 88 workers

On August 30, 1965, an avalanche from the Allalin Glacier in southern Switzerland killed 88 workers and seriously injured eight others. The men were on nightshift work on the construction of the hydroelectric Mattmark Dam, near Saas-Fee, Switzerland, six miles from the Italian border.

Only 18 managed to escape the massive collapse, which brought 500,000 pounds of ice and rock down from Strahihorn Mountain, 13,750 feet high. The avalanche traveled the final 1,650 feet of its descent in a matter of 90 seconds before hitting the camp, which was located 6,500 feet above sea level. Even before the avalanche hit, the air pressure preceding it “shattered the wooden sheds and barracks and the huge conveyor belt as if they were matchboxes and toys,” one survivor said. Another report described 40-ton earth-moving machines being “tossed like corks in a tidal wave.”

Among the dead were 56 Italians, 23 Swiss, 4 Spanish, 2 Germans, and 2 Austrians. The Italians were part of a mass emigration of some 2.5 million Italian workers in the 1950s and early 1960s. Of this exodus Switzerland by itself received nearly half. They were drawn to the Alpine country by its rapid economic expansion and a massive construction boom that included the development of extensive hydroelectric projects. Among the Italians, 17 came from Belluno province in Veneto, and seven from one Calabrian village, San Giovanni in Fiore.

The project was being hurried along by Swiss authorities in order to beat the winter months, during which construction would no longer be possible. Geologists believe the avalanche was caused by warm weather, and perhaps dynamiting for construction on the Mattmark Dam, which avoided the path of the avalanche.

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## 75 years ago: Breakthrough study in use of penicillin

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In the edition of the British medical journal the *Lancet* published on August 24, 1940, there appeared an article showing the potential use of penicillin as a means of combatting bacterial infections. Written by a team of Oxford scientists led by Howard Florey and Ernst Chain and entitled “Penicillin as a Chemotherapeutic Agent,” the study was the first to describe the antibacterial effects of natural agents, marking the beginning of antibiotics in medical use. Prior to penicillin, simple cuts could result in death and disfiguration from blood disease, which was feared much as cancer is today.

On May 25, 1940, Florey and Chain’s team had injected eight mice with *hemolytic streptococci*, then the cause of puerperal fever in post-partum mothers. Four mice were then injected with penicillin. Less than a day later, the four injected mice were alive and healthy, and the four not injected were dead.

Florey and Chain had become interested in the natural antibacterial properties produced by fungal microorganisms. This brought them to the overlooked work of Scottish scientist Alexander Fleming, who had discovered the substance benzylpenicillin (Penicillin G) in the fungus *Penicillium notatum* in 1928, but had been unable to stabilize the substance in sufficient quantities for research. Florey, Chain, and their team were able to describe penicillin’s healing action as well as its structure and chemical composition, making theoretically possible its mass production. Their research also suggested that penicillin could be effectively administered in the human body.

The discovery demonstrated the social character of scientific research in the 20th century. Florey, an Australian, and Chain, a German Jew who had fled Nazi Germany, understood that to develop penicillin as a medicine would require the involvement of different fields of scientific inquiry. In addition to the work of Florey, a pathologist and pharmacologist, and Chain, a biochemist, the work depended on a correct bio-structural hypothesis by Edward Abraham, which was later confirmed by x-ray crystallography carried out by Dorothy Hodgkin, also at Oxford. Another lab member, Norman Heatley, created an extraction technique for purifying penicillin in sufficient quantities for clinical trials.

The study “electrified research groups around the world that were seeking cures for bacterial disease,” according to one account. By 1943, dozens of institutions and government agencies in the US and Britain, as well as private pharmaceutical firms, were involved in research and production. By the end of the war enough penicillin was in production to treat all the wounded of all the allied armies.

Florey and Chain shared the 1945 Nobel Prize in physiology with Fleming, who humbly insisted that his own contribution had been the result of a mere lab accident.

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## 100 years ago: Russian Army retreats on Eastern front

On August 25, 1915 the German Army took the fortress of Brest-Litovsk, then in eastern Poland, which before World War I was part of the Russian Empire. The loss was part of a broader strategic withdrawal by the Russian Army along the eastern front.

From the beginning of May the German and Austrian armies had been advancing eastward, resulting in tactical breakthroughs both in the south and north of the Russian line. In the face of repeated attacks by the Central Powers, Russian troops were sent streaming backwards in what has become known as “The Great Retreat.”

The German advance was finally halted by Russian counter-offensives in September, when German soldiers, suffering from disease and hunger, were unable to continue their advance.

As Trotsky explained in the *History of the Russian Revolution*, the Russian army, while having the form of a modern army, was weakened by the backwardness of Russian society. “There was no correspondence between the cultural level of the peasant-soldier and modern military technique,” he wrote. “In the commanding staff, the ignorance, light-mindedness and thievery of the ruling classes found their expression. Industry and transport continually revealed their bankruptcy before the concentrated demands of wartime.”

Trotsky explained the breakdown of morale among the soldiers caused by the Great Retreat: “During the retreat from Galicia a secret order was issued by the commander-in-chief: flog the soldiers for desertion and other crimes. The soldier Pireiko relates: ‘They began to flog soldiers for the most trivial offences; for example, for a few hours’ absence without leave. And sometimes they flogged them in order to rouse their fighting spirit.’ The same soldier, Pireiko, writes: ‘Everyone, to the last man, was interested in nothing but peace ... Who should win and what kind of peace it would be, that was of small interest to the army. It wanted peace at any cost, for it was weary of war.’”

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