

This week in history: May 30—June 5

30 May 2016

[25 Years Ago](#) | [50 Years Ago](#) | [75 Years Ago](#) | [100 Years Ago](#)

25 years ago: White House tapes shed light on development of Nixon crisis

Sixty hours of previously unreleased Nixon White House tapes were made available on June 4, 1991, by the US National Archives. These new tapes provided a glimpse of the enormous crisis inside the political headquarters of US imperialism in the years leading up to the Watergate scandal and Nixon's forced resignation in 1974.

The new tape recordings showed an administration that felt itself under siege long before Watergate became a national sensation. This was not merely a question of Nixon's personal paranoia, as depicted in press accounts after the tapes were made public, but expressed the desperate crisis of US imperialism under conditions of military failure in Vietnam and economic and social crisis at home.

Several of the taped discussions revealed Nixon's fear of conspiracies against him organized by then FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. On October 8, 1971, Nixon, Attorney General John Mitchell and White House domestic affairs adviser John Ehrlichman discussed Hoover's investigation of a secret White House operation to bug the telephones of several newspapermen and aides to National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger. The White House had formed an illegal "plumbers" unit of ex-CIA operatives to determine the source of leaks to the press.

The tapes featured Mitchell noting that Hoover had refused to cooperate with Deputy Attorney General Robert Mardian on the investigation, and Ehrlichman freely admitting that the entire operation was of a criminal character.

Another conversation, described very briefly in press reports, gives a glimpse of Nixon's obsessive hatred of antiwar protest demonstrations. In a discussion May 5, 1971, Nixon launched into an anti-Semitic diatribe against Rennie Davis, Abbie Hoffman and other defendants in the Chicago Seven conspiracy trial.

In a related discussion, Nixon urged his aides to contact the Teamsters union bureaucracy to recruit right-wing goon squads to break up antiwar demonstrations:

Nixon: They've got guys who'll go in and knock their heads off.

Haldeman: Sure, murderers. Guys that really, you know, that's what they really do. And, uh, hope they really hurt them.

Nixon's anti-Semitic comments and his gangster approach were the occasion for mild criticism in the capitalist press—by the same newspapers and television networks that had built up the ex-president as a respected "elder statesman" of US imperialism.

[\[top\]](#)

50 years ago: Indira Gandhi devalues rupee

On June 5, 1966, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi announced that on the following day the rupee, the Indian national currency, would be devalued by 57.4 percent, from 4.76 to 7.50 rupees to the dollar, in one stroke, making imports to India unaffordable except for the most privileged layers.

The devaluation of the rupee was a humiliation for India's Congress-led bourgeois nationalist program of import substitution, which had aimed to promote domestic capitalism. The move was demanded by Washington, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which, unlike India's population, were given advance notice of the decision.

The decision came in response to a growing inflationary crisis brought on by India's recent wars with Pakistan and China, and by a drought that had crippled domestic agricultural production in 1965 and 1966 and necessitated importation of food, including millions of tons of American wheat. The World Bank, dominated by the US, had also failed to deliver on promised aid to India, which, 20 years after nominal independence from British colonial rule, remained one of the poorest nations on the planet.

The devaluation temporarily eased the balance of payments crisis. But it failed to generate substantial new export industries in India, while reducing the real wages and purchasing power of India's workers and impoverished masses.

[\[top\]](#)

75 years ago: World War II spreads to Syria

On June 4, 1941, British bombers dropped heavy explosives on oil tanks and harbor installations in Beirut, Lebanon and blew up bridges in Syria as a preliminary to an invasion aimed at denying Nazi Germany access to the oilfields of Mosul in northern Iraq.

Four days later, a combined invasion force of British, Australian, Jordanian, Egyptian and Charles de Gaulle's French exiles launched an attack against the colonial government of Lebanon and Syria, which was controlled by the Vichy regime in France. The invasion was accompanied by a proclamation from De Gaulle offering independence to the Arabs in order to induce them to side with the imperialist allies.

Vichy French authorities had given permission to Hitler's air force to use Syrian airports to aid the Arab rebellion against British colonial rule in Iraq and exploit the uprising to serve the interests of German imperialism.

Vichy resistance in Syria was strong in the first week of hostilities, but began to sag thereafter. Germany offered air support to reverse the position, but the Vichy regime declined, fearing that a direct and open military alliance with Hitler would lead to the liquidation of the entire French colonial empire in the event the United States entered the war on the side of Great Britain.

The Vichy surrender transferred power in Syria and Lebanon to the British military command. De Gaulle threatened to withdraw his troops from the alliance unless the so-called Free French were allowed to transfer soldiers and military hardware from the Vichy forces to their own control.

[top]

100 years ago: Russian Army begins major World War I offensive

On June 4, 1916, the Imperial Russian Army began a major offensive against Austria-Hungary on the eastern front of World War I, in the area of modern-day Ukraine. Known as the June Advance or the Brusilov Offensive, after the general who led it, the campaign lasted until September 20, 1916.

Under the terms of the Chantilly Agreement of December 1915, France, Britain, Italy and Russia agreed to launch simultaneous attacks against the Central Powers in the summer of 1916. In the spring of that year, under heavy pressure from the German Army at Verdun, France requested that Russia attack on the Eastern Front in the hope that Germany would divert some of its troops from the Western front.

The Russian Western Army, under the leadership of General Evert, launched an offensive against German positions at Lake

Naroch in March 1916. Despite the numerical superiority of the Russian Army, the offensive was unsuccessful, failing to overcome well-fortified German defensive positions and artillery. It was called off after 12 days. Aleksei Brusilov, Russian commander of the southwestern front, presented a plan to High Command for an attack against Austro-Hungarian forces further south.

The offensive began with a massive artillery attack that broke the Austro-Hungarian lines and allowed three of Brusilov's four armies to advance on a wide front. Brusilov also used shock troops to attack weak points along the Austrian lines. By June 8, the Austro-Hungarian army was in retreat. Germany responded by transferring troops to the region, but Brusilov's armies continued the offensive and reached the Carpathian Mountains by September 1916.

Considered by historians as one of the high points of Imperial Russia's efforts during the First World War, the Brusilov offensive is one of the bloodiest in world history. Brusilov's aim had been to strike a blow to the Austro-Hungarian army and draw German troops from other fronts. The offensive did both these things, but at a horrendous cost of life.

The Russian imperialist army suffered 440,000 casualties, either dead or wounded, and an additional 60,000 men were taken captive. The Austro-Hungarian Army lost 567,000 casualties, either dead or wounded, and the German army lost another 350,000. In addition, 408,000 Austro-Hungarian men were taken captive by the Russian Army. In total 1,357,000 men were either killed or wounded on all sides during the offensive.

[top]



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