

This week in history: May 21-27

21 May 2018

25 years ago: Eritrea wins independence from Ethiopia after 30-year civil war

On May 24, 1993, following a UN-supervised referendum in Eritrea in which the local population voted overwhelming to separate from Ethiopia and establish an independent state, Eritrea was declared an independent and sovereign republic. Four days later the new country was admitted to the United Nations.

The separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia was the culmination of a bloody, 30-year civil war launched by the Eritrean Liberation Front, a nationalist movement with an inchoate ideology that combined elements of Eritrean nationalism and Stalinism. The war was sparked by the unilateral annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie in 1962. Although Selassie was overthrown in 1974 and replaced by the military dictatorship headed by Mengistu Haile Mariam, Mengistu also opposed separation of Eritrea, which would deprive Ethiopia of any coastline on the Red Sea, rendering it landlocked.

Finally in 1991, the Eritrea People's Liberation Front (EPLF), a successor to the ELF, defeated Ethiopian forces and backed a coalition of Ethiopian rebel groups, headed by the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front of Meles Zenawi, which seized power in Addis Ababa and agreed to end the protracted war with Eritrea. But there was never a full peace treaty or settlement of the extensive border between the two countries, leading to repeated military clashes in disputed areas.

The EPLF took power through its political arm, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice, which quickly established a one-party police state in Eritrea, banning all other parties and refusing to hold elections. EPLF leader Isaias Afwerki became president and has ruled the country brutally ever since, fighting a series of border wars with Ethiopia, as well as clashes with neighboring Djibouti, the former French Somaliland. Afwerki quickly dropped his "socialist" rhetoric and sought the aid of the United States and the former colonial powers of Europe, expressing the goal of turning his desperately poor country into the Singapore of East Africa.

The imperialist powers and their client regimes in the region have sought to dominate Eritrea in large measure because of its strategic geographical position on the Red Sea, near the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait through which the bulk of Persian Gulf oil bound for European markets is shipped. Ships bringing merchandise from China, Japan and elsewhere in East Asia, headed for Europe, also pass by the Eritrean coast.

In recent years, Eritrea has sunk into extreme poverty and isolation, hit by repeated droughts, border conflicts, and the cutoff

of most international aid. In 2008, the Bush administration branded Eritrea a "state sponsor of terror" for its support to anti-Ethiopian Islamist forces in Somalia. The country remains one of the poorest on the planet. Out of a population of 6.3 million, nearly 360,000 had become refugees by 2014, and they comprised the second largest number of refugees entering Europe, after Syrians.

50 years ago: De Gaulle makes television appeal for end to French general strike

On May 24, 1968, French President Charles de Gaulle appeared on national television to plead for an end to the general strike by 10,000,000 workers, the largest and most widespread walkout in world history, which had completely paralyzed the French economy and brought the country to the brink of revolution. He announced a referendum to be held in June to give him emergency powers to act and stop what he called the "roll to civil war."

"Frenchmen, French women," he declared, "you will deliver your verdict by a vote. In case your reply is 'no', it follows that I would no longer assume my functions." The appeal came at a turning point in the May-June events, with De Gaulle's real audience not the great mass of the French population, who were thoroughly in sympathy with the rebellious students and workers, but the leaders of the main trade unions and the French Communist Party, whom he relied on to save French capitalism from the mobilized working class.

Two days later, De Gaulle's prime minister, Georges Pompidou, began negotiations with the union leaders and the Organisation Patronale, the main body representing French employers, which were to lead to the Grenelle agreements, calling off the general strike in return for various concessions in terms of higher wages and better conditions, but avoiding any political concessions, above all the demands for the ouster of the De Gaulle government itself.

The Grenelle agreement called for a 25 percent increase in the minimum wage, and a 10 percent wage increase overall, but workers rejected these offers and continued the strike. Mass meetings continued at the universities, with students and workers demanding the ouster of the right-wing government and new elections.

De Gaulle continued with a mix of conciliation and repression. He exercised his constitutional power to grant amnesty to the leaders of the student strike, but his government barred Daniel Cohn-Bendit, one of the student leaders, from re-entering the

country when he tried to cross from West Germany at the border station between Saarbrucken and Forbach. The Interior Ministry declared him “undesirable.”

On May 22, the government of Pompidou narrowly survived a vote of censure, with 233 members of the 485-seat National Assembly voting in favor, 11 short of the 244 required to force the government to step down.

75 years ago: The Stalinist bureaucracy dissolves the Comintern

On May 22, 1943, the ruling bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, headed by Joseph Stalin, formally dissolved the Communist International (Comintern). The organization, initially formed under the leadership of Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolshevik government in 1919, had been founded as a world party of socialist revolution, aimed at unifying the international working class in the struggle to overthrow capitalism.

Over the 15 years prior to its formal dissolution, the Comintern had been transformed into a foreign policy instrument of the Stalinist bureaucracy, which emerged on the basis of the isolation of the Russian Revolution and the country’s material backwardness.

Stalin used the organization to forge alliances with sections of the ruling elite in the imperialist and backward countries, to prevent revolutions elsewhere for fear that they would give an impetus to the political revolution against the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, and to brutally repress the Trotskyist proponents of socialist internationalism.

The formal dissolution of the Comintern was intended as a signal to the Stalinist bureaucracy’s imperialist allies, including Britain, France and the US. It was a pledge that the bureaucracy would redouble its efforts to promote nationalism and suppress the revolutionary upheavals that would result from the Second World War.

The move was also the logical outcome of the Stalinist bureaucracy’s anti-Marxist program of “socialism in one country,” first promulgated in 1924. A communique from the Comintern to its constituent parties, announcing the dissolution, explicitly rejected the very concept of an international party uniting the struggles of the working class around the world.

The letter stated: “It became increasingly clear that, to the extent that the internal as well as the international situation of individual countries became more complicated, the solution of the problems of the labor movement of each individual country through the medium of some international center would meet with insuperable obstacles.”

In an article in May, 1943, James P. Cannon, the leader of the American Trotskyist movement, wrote that the Fourth International, founded by Trotsky in 1938, inherited the best traditions of the early Communist International: “Stalin can bury the dead organization but he cannot bury the great progressive work the Comintern accomplished in its first years. He cannot bury

the Fourth International which has risen, phoenix-like, from the ashes of the Third. We know very well and we don’t try to conceal the fact that the numbers of the Fourth International are small. But its ideas are correct, its program represents historical necessity, and, therefore, its victory is assured. Its program consciously formulates the instinctive demands of the workers and the colonial peoples for emancipation from capitalism, fascism and war.”

100 years ago: The Democratic Republic of Georgia is established under Menshevik rule

On May 26, 1918, the republic of Georgia declared its independence, coinciding with the dissolution of the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic, established formally on April 22, 1918, although it existed in practice since November 1917, after the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, when the Mensheviks, who dominated the Caucasian region, refused to recognize the new Soviet power and established a provisional regime under the leadership of Nikolai Chcheidze.

While the Transcaucasian federation grouped three nations, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, its existence was always problematic as the troops of the Ottoman Empire advanced into the former territories of the Tsarist Empire. In the wake of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, which ended formal hostilities with Russia on the part of Germany, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, the anti-Bolshevik forces which controlled the Caucasian republics quickly found themselves at odds.

Under the terms of Brest-Litovsk, the Ottoman Empire regained the provinces of Batum, Kars and Ardahan, captured by Tsarist forces in the course of the world war. Starting on March 14, the Trabzon peace conference was held between the Ottoman Empire and a delegation from the three Caucasian republics. On April 22 however, the Mensheviks proclaimed the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic and confirmed a state of war between the Republic and the Ottoman Empire. Almost immediately, the Ottoman Third Army took Erzerum and Kars.

The Turkish government increased its demands to include Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, as well as rail concessions leading directly to Baku. Ottoman forces advanced into Armenia in late April and early May, fighting a series of battles with Armenian forces with mixed results. At the same time, a Georgian-Armenian war threatened to erupt over parts of Georgian provinces populated mainly by Armenians. British imperialism exerted its domination over Azerbaijan, where the Baku oil fields were the main prize, and also sought to make Georgia a protectorate against both Turkish and Soviet forces.



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