This week in history: May 28-June 3

28 May 2018

25 years ago: German neo-Nazis kill five Turkish immigrants in Solingen

On the night of May 28-29, 1993, five members of a Turkish family in Solingen, in the German state of North-Rhine Westphalia, died in a house fire set by a gang of neo-Nazi youth. The dead included three young girls and two women, while another 14 people, including several children, were injured in the blaze, some severely. The extended family had lived in Germany since 1970, and in the house for 12 years.

The fire, set with gasoline, broke out at 1:38 a.m., while all those inside the house were sleeping. The dead included 27-year-old Gürsün ?nce, who jumped out of a window clutching her four-year-old daughter and an infant in her arms. The two children survived. Another 15-year-old boy leaped from a window, his clothing in flames, but survived. The others who lost their lives were teenager, Hatice Genç, 18, and three children, Gülistan Öztürk, 12, Hülya Genç, 9 and Saime Genç, 4. The oldest survivor, Mevlüde Genç, 50, lost two daughters, two granddaughters and a niece.

The Solingen attack was the most violent (up to that time) of a wave of neo-Nazi attacks on Turkish and other foreign-born working people in Germany, beginning in December 1988. These attacks accelerated under conditions of the revival and encouragement of German nationalism in the course of the reunification of Germany in 1989-90 and the liquidation of the Stalinist-run East Germany (German Democratic Republic or GDR). Only three days before the Solingen deaths, the German Bundestag passed a resolution to change the German constitution by limiting the number of asylum seekers.

The response by the state to the Solingen killings was extremely limited. For young men, aged between 16 and 23, were eventually arrested, prosecuted, convicted and sent to prisons. Three of the perpetrators, two 16-year-olds and a 19-year-old, were sentenced to ten years in prison, the maximum sentence for an offender in their age bracket. Markus Gartmann, 23 years old, was sentenced to 15 years in prison.

But there was no investigation into the deeper ties of the four youth, all belonging the skinhead milieu, with ultra-right and neo-Nazi political organizations, even though the oldest, Gartmann, was a member of the nationalist DVU party. Moreover, all four had exercised together at a martial arts school whose manager was an informant of the North Rhine-Westphalia domestic intelligence agency (the *Verfassungsschutz*).

This was only one of many ties uncovered over the years between the neo-Nazi "underground" and the top levels of the German capitalist state, particularly the security services, which were refounded after World War II under the leadership of high-ranking "former" Nazis and protected by the political leaders of all the major parties, including the Social Democrats.

50 years ago: Dozens arrested in Poor People's Campaign

On May 29, 1968, black, Hispanic and Native American participants in the Poor People's Campaign marched on the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., to protest a high court ruling that affirmed limits on Indian fishing rights in several rivers of Washington state.

The mainly Native American demonstrators were led by Ralph David Abernathy, the principal leader of the Poor People's Campaign following the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., and Reies Tijerina, a leader of the Chicano movement in the state of New Mexico. When they arrived at the Supreme Court building, across the street from the U.S. Capitol, and found the doors locked, protesters began banging on the windows, breaking some. Police moved in and made dozens of arrests.

King, Abernathy and other leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) began to organize a new movement called the Poor People's Campaign in early 1968, seeking to address broader issues of economic inequality and poverty for all races, after the passage of the civil rights acts. It was King's shift to the left, both in coming out openly against the war in Vietnam and moving towards efforts to organize an interracial, working class movement over economic injustice, that accelerated ultra-right and government plotting of his assassination.

The SCLC had organized a demonstration in Washington that modeled itself of the Bonus Army campaign of 1932 where World War I veterans camped out demanding cash payment for their service certificates. The intent of the Poor People's Campaign was to bring as many poor people as possible to the US capital to make American poverty visible. King proposed, "we ought to come in mule carts, in old trucks, any kind of transportation people can get their hands on. People ought to come to Washington, sit down if necessary in the middle of the street and say, "We are here; we are poor; we don't have any money; you have made us this way...and we've come to stay until you do something about it." On May 21 thousands of poor people from across the United States erected a shanty town on the National Mall called "Resurrection City."

The Poor People's Campaign called for an Economic Bill of Rights with Five Planks:

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• A meaningful job at a living wage
• A secure and adequate income for all those unable to find or do a job
• Access to land for economic uses
• Access to capital for poor people and minorities to promote their own businesses
• Ability for ordinary people to “play a truly significant role” in the government

Even in the heyday of the post-World War II economic boom, American capitalism was both unable and unwilling to meet these modest and reasonable demands.

75 years ago: French Committee of National Liberation established

On June 3, 1943, French military forces in North Africa, headed by generals Charles de Gaulle and Henri Giraud, formed the French Committee of National Liberation. The new entity, proclaimed after discussions in Algiers, which was under the control of French military forces, was conceived of as an alternative government to the Vichy regime in France, which had collaborated closely with Nazi Germany following its formation in July 1940.

The French Committee of National Liberation, which appointed de Gaulle and Giraud as “co-presidents,” stated that its aim was to “re-establish all French liberties, the laws of the Republic and the Republican regime.” It declared that the Vichy government was illegitimate because of its support for the Third Reich.

The committee was established under conditions of a deep-going crisis of the Nazi regime, along with its proxies in France and elsewhere. Earlier in the year, German forces had suffered a devastating defeat at Stalingrad, with the Soviet military encircling and destroying a substantial invading force. Weeks before the committee’s formation, German and Italian forces had been expelled from their last redoubts in North Africa.

The creation of the committee followed bitter conflicts among the French forces opposed to the Vichy regime, and between the Allied powers. De Gaulle, fearful that its collaboration with the Nazis would discredit French capitalism and provoke social upheavals, had opposed the Vichy regime from the outset. Giraud, however, had previously enjoyed the support of Vichy. His turn towards the Allies was prompted by a recognition that the collaborationist regime’s days were numbered.

The divisions in the French camp intersected with mounting tensions between the Allied powers over the redivision of Africa, and the world, that would be carried out in the wake of World War II.

US President Franklin Roosevelt sought the break-up of the old French empire, as one of the conditions for the establishment of American hegemony after the war. He supported Giraud, who had consented to US demands to abandon French bases in Asian and African colonies. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had backed De Gaulle and the continued existence of French colonialism, viewing it as a junior partner in the maintenance of the much larger British empire, and a counterweight to US attempts to supplant Britain as the dominant world power.

The Allied powers acknowledged the formation of the committee, but in a sign that the divisions had not been resolved, stopped short of recognizing it as an alternative French government.

100 years ago: Sixty-nine Sinn Fein leaders deported from Ireland

On May 30, 1918, Edward Shortt, chief secretary for Ireland, announced in the British House of Commons that sixty-nine leaders of the bourgeois nationalist Sinn Fein society had been deported from Ireland for internment in England.

This move followed midnight raids by the police and military in Ireland and the arrest of the entire leadership of Sinn Fein, including Eamon De Valera, leader of the movement, and Arthur Griffith, the organization’s founder and vice president.

All the Sinn Fein members of the British parliament were taken into custody. In Dublin, the arrests were made by detectives acting in cooperation with the British army, while in the provinces they were carried out by the Royal Irish Constabulary. No charges were preferred against the prisoners. They were seized and held on warrants issued under the Defense of the Realm Act. Sinn Fein’s Dublin headquarters were raided, and books and documents in large quantity seized.

The Irish nationalists were arrested on trumped-up charges of “treasonable communications with the enemy,” i.e., the German government. In a typical response, the pro-British *Irish Times* declared that the Lloyd George coalition government had not acted a moment too soon, “as all the signs pointed to another outbreak of armed violence, possibly in connections with the landing of German forces on Irish shores.” Shortt claimed in a statement that the arrests were “directed solely against German intrigue.”

The *New York Times* reported, “Documents of great importance in connection with the Irish conspiracy have fallen into the hands of the government through the arrest by coast guards of a man with certain evidence on him.” Neither the name of the man, nor the evidence, nor the nature of the plot was ever made public.

De Valera escaped from prison in February 1919 and took refuge in the US.

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