

This week in history: May 6-12

6 May 2019

25 years ago: Channel Tunnel opens, connecting Britain and France

On May 6, 1994, the Channel Tunnel officially opened, connecting for the first time the United Kingdom with the European mainland from Kent, England, to Pas-de-Calais, France. While the first full public service did not occur until several months later, an opening ceremony was held in Calais with Queen Elizabeth II and French President Francois Mitterrand traveling in trains between the two countries.

The half-hour train ride spanning 31 miles beneath the English Channel was the first land link between England and the Continent since the Ice Age. The American Society of Civil Engineers elected the tunnel as one of the seven modern wonders of the world. A major geological and engineering feat, the \$15 billion project was compared to the completion of the Suez and Panama Canals, transforming travel and transportation, further integrating international economies and connecting the working class.

The idea of a tunnel linking the UK to the rest of Europe had been discussed for nearly 200 years. The first ever proposal put forward for such a project was by French mining engineer Albert Mathieu-Favier in 1802. Ambitious for its time, the first geological and hydrographical surveys were not conducted until 1839. A formal proposal was presented to Napoleon III in 1856, but nothing ever came of it.

The project was discussed and stalled further throughout the first half of the 20th century, until France and England came to a mutual agreement in 1964. A second agreement and initial construction talks took until 1973, and in 1975 the newly elected Labour Party in Britain canceled it again. It was not until 1979 that it was taken up by the Conservative government, with Margaret Thatcher agreeing to a privately-funded project.

Construction began in December 1987, with a projected \$7 billion in cost. At the peak of construction, 15,000 workers were employed, and 10 died during construction between 1987 and 1993.

Leading spokesmen for imperialism expressed the hope that the Channel Tunnel presaged the peaceful integration of Europe on a capitalist basis, with the *New York Times* writing, “The tunnel is also a reflection in steel and concrete of the recent crumbling frontiers in Europe, beginning with the collapse of Communism and continuing with closer political ties within the European Union.” But as the current crisis over Brexit demonstrates, the genuine unification of Europe, however feasible from a technical standpoint, is impossible within the framework of capitalism and the nation-state system.

50 years ago: Battle of Hamburger Hill

On May 10 US forces in Vietnam began a 10-day assault on Hill 937, which was heavily defended by the North Vietnam’s People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN). The location was later nicknamed “Hamburger Hill” by American soldiers because they were “chewed up” when trying to storm its defenses.

The battle, while technically ended in a victory for the US, saw an extremely high number of casualties, with 72 Americans killed in the battle and at least 370 wounded. PAVN casualties numbered around 1,500 killed or wounded. The hill had essentially no strategic value for the US other than being occupied by enemy soldiers.

The North Vietnamese defenses on Hamburger Hill were highly organized. The American 101st Airborne division found themselves fighting against the experienced Vietnamese 29th regiment who had earned themselves the nickname the “Pride of Ho Chi Minh.” The natural terrain was highly dense with vegetation and made it difficult for US helicopters to land and provide reinforcements and supplies. The forested area also allowed the Northern soldiers to successfully conceal their anti-aircraft weapons without being spotted.

The US attacks on the hill were poorly coordinated. Command was decentralized and at times organized solely on a platoon to platoon basis. There were five instances of US air attacks firing on their own soldiers by mistake. These attacks killed seven and wounded 53 American soldiers.

One 19-year-old American soldier being interviewed about the battle told one war reporter, “I’ll take a court martial before I go up that goddam thing again. It’s suicide.”

Eventually, through continual bombardment of the hill with napalm, all the vegetation that was hiding the North Vietnamese bunkers was burnt away. Still the PAVN held the position until May 20 when they retreated into Laos. With no real reason for keeping the hill under their guard, the US abandoned the now-barren Hamburger Hill just two weeks later.

In the US the battle added to growing anti-war sentiment. The high casualty number in a strategically meaningless battle led many Americans to the conclusion that the war was being waged with total disregard not just of the lives of Vietnamese soldiers and civilians but of US soldiers as well.

75 years ago: Soviet offensive clears Axis forces from Crimea

During this week in 1944, Soviet military forces completed the destruction of the Axis bastion in Crimea, capturing the key port city of Sevastopol on May 12, 1944, while a handful of transport ships escaped, loaded with German and Romanian soldiers fleeing the shrinking pocket.

The Soviet Army had cut off the Crimea in late 1943 as part of its westward counteroffensive across Ukraine, with the Wehrmacht's 17th Army forced to withdraw from a small bridgehead on the Kuban side of the Kerch Strait in October 1943, and the land-based connection through the Isthmus of Perekop cut in November 1943.

German troops were able to hold out in Crimea because they could be resupplied by sea, where Germany and its ally Romania were dominant. Maintaining this position was considered imperative by the Nazi hierarchy, because from airfields in Crimea, Russian warplanes would be able to hit Romanian oilfields that were the key supplier of fuel to the Wehrmacht.

In early April, the Soviet 4th Ukrainian Front began an assault across the Perekop isthmus, forcing their way through against heavy German resistance, capturing Kerch on April 11 and Simferopol on April 13. German forces were forced back into the city of Sevastopol, where they had their backs to the Black Sea.

The beleaguered German forces were unable to match the record of the Soviet troops who had held Sevastopol against a Nazi siege in 1941-42 for eight months, from November 1941 until July 1942. They held their ground for barely three weeks, giving time only for sea evacuation efforts that were carried out under constant air attack. More than 30,000 German soldiers surrendered in Sevastopol, while 18,000 Soviet soldiers gave their lives to liberate the peninsula.

As one historian has written, "By mid-May the 120,000 men formally organized as the 17th German Army had been crushed. Only a small proportion was evacuated; there was no long siege as in 1941-42. The Soviet victory and Axis defeat in the Crimea was one of the most complete, if least known, of the war."

Politically as well as strategically, the Crimean defeat was a disaster. Romanian fascist dictator Antonescu had pleaded with Hitler to allow the withdrawal of the Romanian forces trapped there, nearly equal in numbers to the German, so that Romania could better meet the impending Soviet offensive into the Balkans, but the Nazi leader rebuffed him, and allowed the isolated armies to be overrun, leaving Romania doubly exposed to the ensuing Soviet attack.

demolished a black barbershop and destroyed much of the downtown area. Other black businesses and residences were damaged.

Civilian authorities were helpless to control the situation, and marines and naval police were called out, and martial law declared. Six African-Americans were killed, 17 injured seriously and 35 hospitalized. Several sailors were injured and admitted to the hospital as well. By the early morning of May 11, sailors were restricted to the naval installation and naval troops were posted in the city. Nearly 50 men, black and white, were arrested, but charges were dropped on most. Three sailors were court-martialed and two were sentenced to prison for a year.

The riot is significant for beginning what was to be known as the Red Summer, a series of riots and racial attacks on African-Americans across the United States in the spring and summer of 1919, notably in Chicago in late July and early August, when 23 blacks and 15 whites were killed.

The Red Summer was a result of the increasing social tensions in the aftermath of the war, as thousands of black and white soldiers were demobilized, and millions of blacks had moved to the northern cities to take industrial jobs and escape Jim Crow segregation and lynching in the South.

Also at work were Democratic and Republican politicians who were terrified of any unity of the working class in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution two years earlier and the foundation of the Communist movement in the United States.

One historian notes that Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, who initiated the Red Scare and the Palmer raids against socialist and anarchist immigrants later in 1919, was particularly concerned about Communist recruitment of blacks. He adds: "President Wilson was predisposed to such a connection. That March [of 1919], he remarked to his doctor that 'the American Negro returning from abroad would be our greatest medium in conveying bolshevism to America.' Black American soldiers were being treated as equals by the French, he worried, and 'it has gone to their heads.'"



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100 years ago: Race riots and martial law in Charleston, South Carolina

On May 10, 1919, hundreds of white sailors serving in the US Navy rioted in the port of Charleston, South Carolina, attacking African-Americans and destroying property. The riot allegedly broke out when a sailor was shot at by a black man in a poolhall. Sailors poured out of the naval base, armed themselves with rifles, and pulled blacks from streetcars and beat them. The sailors