

This week in history: May 20-26

20 May 2019

25 years ago: Southern Yemen declares independence

After the outbreak of a civil war and several weeks of fighting, on May 21, 1994, leaders of southern Yemen announced secession and declared the Democratic Republic of Yemen (DRY). The declaration was denounced as illegitimate by the north, and the DRY was not formally recognized by any official government internationally.

The secession and subsequent declaration of independence was led by the Yemeni Socialist Party's General Secretary Ali Salem al-Beidh. Al-Beidh served as Yemen's vice president after the unification between the "leftist" south and the conservative north in 1990, but left in 1993 and was later exiled to Oman after the failed secession.

The poorest country in the Middle East, Yemen's electricity and water were shut off to the population of 13 million. Fuel and diesel were in short supply, and most civilians, particularly in the south, fled larger cities like Aden for the safety of remote villages.

The civil war pitted 40,000 soldiers from the north against 20,000 in the south. The conflict between north and south reached a head in the 1980s—Southern Yemen, separate from the north and allied with the Soviet Union, allowed the USSR to set up a military base. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, the north and the south merged, but the south—with one-fifth of the population spread across a land area twice as large—balked under northern rule and the sharing of oil reserves. The unified Yemen sided with Iraq in the Persian Gulf conflict in 1990-1991, to which Saudi Arabia reacted by expelling over a million Yemeni workers and cutting ties, deepening the country's economic woes.

Casualties of the civil war are estimated between 7,000-10,000, and the republic itself was short-lived. On July 7, less than two months after the declaration of independence, the north recaptured the southern capital of Aden and most political opposition fled.

50 years ago: Military coup brings Nimeiry to power in Sudan

On May 25, 1969, Sudanese Army Colonel Gaffar Nimeiry launched a coup to overthrow the civilian government and replace it with the rule of the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC). The RCC, with Nimeiry as chairman, was a body made up primarily of military officers from the self-proclaimed "Free Officers Movement," including Hashem al Atta, Babikir al-Nur, and Joseph Garang, who were members of the Communist Party.

Nimeiry was a member of the Sudanese Socialist Union (SSU), an Arab nationalist party. The SSU and the Free Officers Movement disagreed with how the civilian government was handling the affairs of the state and in particular the ongoing civil war in southern Sudan.

Nimeiry sought to pursue a bourgeois-nationalist development of the Sudanese economy. After coming to power the RCC nationalized many of the major banks and industries to help strengthen the fragile economy. Central to Nimeiry's military dictatorship was support from the Sudanese Communist Party. The Sudanese Stalinists assisted in the coup and then sat on the RCC which passed reactionary anti-working-class laws such as banning strikes and all non-SSU political parties, including the Communist Party itself.

Despite being avowedly anti-communist, Nimeiry's use of the Sudanese CP was to widen his base and give the army-based regime a "socialist" front to head off a genuine left-wing opposition which had started to develop and grew more rapidly after the coup.

Even with their own supporters banned in Sudan, the Stalinists in both Moscow and Beijing welcomed the Nimeiry dictatorship with open arms. The Soviet and Chinese governments both supplied Nimeiry with weapons and assisted in training his secret police in the months and years after the RCC came into power.

While Nimeiry maintained a close political alliance with Moscow and Beijing to bolster his anti-imperialist credentials, the Sudanese dictator persecuted Communist Party members and radical workers. Nimeiry was even permitted to send a "fraternal delegation" to the 24th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party despite having already ordered the arrests of Sudanese Communists.

The treacherous alliance would further expose the Stalinists in 1971 when members of the Sudanese Communist Party launched their own short-lived coup against Nimeiry. After only a few days Nimeiry would retake power, execute Garang

and other participants in the coup and other communist leaders, and redouble his repression of the working class. The Soviet bureaucracy made no move to break relations or even recall its military advisors during the purge.

75 years ago: German surprise attack on Tito's headquarters

On May 25, 1944, German bomber and fighter planes attacked the small industrial town of Drvar in Bosnia, near the headquarters of Josip Broz-Tito, leader of the Yugoslavian Communist Party and the anti-fascist partisan movement. A second wave of planes dropped Nazi SS paratroopers, who were followed by gliders bringing machine gunners. The German forces were backed by units of the fascist-ruled puppet state of Croatia.

The only partisans in the town were six members of the Communist Youth League, who holed up in a building in the center of the town and fought to their death. The Germans killed every man, woman and child in Drvar that they could get their hands on. Other German units moved quickly to occupy the approaches to the cave where Tito and his staff were bunkered. A hole in the roof of the cave allowed Tito to escape.

The nearest partisan division was seven miles away and arrived on the run to engage the Germans. For a day and a half both sides received reinforcements and savage fighting took place with heavy losses. German aircraft and infantry pursued Tito and his staff for eight days through the rugged Bosnian mountains until an Allied force of seven planes, six American and one with a Soviet crew, flew in from Italy and rescued them.

The chiefs of the American OSS (forerunner of the CIA) and the British Special Operations Executive, who had been stationed with Tito, were absent at the time of the attack. The Germans' exact knowledge of Tito's secret headquarters caused an internal investigation in the OSS. It revealed that OSS agents privy to Tito's movements had met with right-wing Serbian Cetniks, who passed this information on to the Germans.

The incident reflected the great power rivalry over control of the partisans as the Red Army advanced into the region. The US and Britain feared that the growth of the partisan movement and the defeat of Hitler's forces would lead to a socialist revolution.

100 years ago: British air force raids Kabul

On May 24, 1919, British bombers struck the Afghan capital of Kabul to secure supply lines from attacking Afghan forces. The British and their colonial Indian troops had invaded Afghanistan in a counterattack in early May in what is known as the Third Afghan War or, by the Afghans, as the War of Liberation.

Afghanistan at the time was a nominally independent kingdom that had balanced between British and Tsarist Russian influences for decades. It had been at peace with Britain, which was the reigning colonial power in India (including what is now modern Pakistan) for over 40 years. Since 1879, however, the country had, by treaty, allowed the British to determine its foreign policy.

Afghanistan had remained neutral in the First World War, though there had been diplomatic entreaties by the Ottoman Turks and the German Empire as well as the British.

The Russian revolution had transformed the geopolitics of the region when it removed Russian imperialism from what had been known as the "Great Game." The rising of Muslim peoples in central Asia under the influence of the new Soviet Republic and the development of an anti-colonial movement, particularly in India, had an impact on Afghanistan. A consensus for national independence was growing in the country, particularly after the British Viceroy in India had denied Afghanistan a place at the Paris Peace conference in January 1919.

A faction of the hereditary monarchy led by the Emir, Amanullah Khan, for its own dynastic interests, took advantage of the considerable unrest in India after the Amritsar massacre in Punjab on April 13 and invaded the British Raj on May 3 in what is now the northwest of Pakistan.

At the time of the air raid, the military situation had been deteriorating for the British as they passed through the Kurram Valley into Afghanistan. Soldiers in the Khyber Rifles, the British colonial military unit made up primarily of Pashtuns from the area, began to defect, and the British had to abandon several outposts. This prompted mutinies by other local units of Indian colonial troops of the British, and the Afghans were able to counterattack.

While the British were able to recoup, particularly because of their air power, the war was fought to a stalemate and the British were forced to give Afghanistan control over its foreign affairs.



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