

This week in history: May 11-17

11 May 2020

25 years ago: Ebola outbreak deaths rise to 170

On May 12, 1995, the Associated Press reported that the death toll from the Ebola virus outbreak in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo) increased to 170. The outbreak was centered in the city of Kikwit, capital of Kivu Province, about 500 km east of the capital, Kinshasa.

The virus, first identified in 1976 during an outbreak in a Zairean village, is a hemorrhagic fever virus that attacks the lining of blood vessels, inducing a high body temperature followed by uncontrollable hemorrhaging. Death comes from a heart attack or shock due to loss of blood. Its most lethal strain killed between 80 and 90 percent of those who became infected.

At the time there was no vaccine to protect against the virus and no cure. The first Ebola vaccine was not approved in the United States until December 2019.

Health care workers were concerned that the virus would spread to Kinshasa, a city of 5 million, despite the quarantine of Kikwit by the military. Clinics and schools were closed, and a stay-at-home order put in place. The local airport was also shut down and roadblocks established to stop and inspect all trucks and cars coming from the area.

The main reason for the disease's emergence was the lack of water and sewerage systems in Zaire and the impoverished and primitive state of the country's public hospital system. During the outbreak, 14 percent of the population of Zaire's 43 million resided in cities and towns, but only 14 percent of these had access to clean water.

It was suspected that the initial outbreak could have begun as early as December 1994. It was not identified correctly until mid-April because it was difficult to distinguish between deaths from the virus and those which occurred "normally" in Kikwit due to dysentery, malaria and other infectious diseases. The Center for Disease Control in the US was not notified until May 6, 1995. An investigation identified and confirmed 93 further suspected cases by May 17, of which 92 percent were fatal.

The Ebola virus cannot be transmitted through cough or sneeze, but requires contact with bodily fluids to spread. The ability of the virus to infect large percentages of people is somewhat limited by its relatively short incubation period, from seven to 21 days. Victims died quickly, limiting the chance of further infections.

50 years ago: Police kill two students during protest at Jackson State College in Mississippi

police officers opened a barrage of gunfire into a women's dormitory at the historically black Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi. Two students, Philip Lafayette Gibbs, a junior at Jackson State, and James Earl Green, a senior at a nearby high school, were killed and twelve others wounded.

The police were attempting to disperse a group of about 100 students who had been protesting the US invasion of Cambodia and the killing of four students at Kent State University 11 days before. As at most campuses throughout the US, Jackson State students had been participating in antiwar demonstrations since President Nixon's announcement of the Cambodian invasion on April 30. Several demonstrations had been organized in the weeks leading to the shooting.

In a display of cross-racial unity, students from Jackson State had been invited to join demonstrations led by students at the predominantly white Millsaps College on May 9. A student from Kent State and witness to the killings there, Tom D'Floure, addressed these demonstrations, recalling the horrors of seeing his classmates gunned down.

Henry Thompson, a Jackson State antiwar activist also gave a speech at the rally asking the crowd, "Why talk about a war eight thousand miles away, when we've got one right here?" In an interview in Tim Spofford's book *Lynch Street: The May 1970 Slayings at Jackson State College*, Thompson later recalled, "We were trying to bring out some of the injustices of the war that day. They were sending black soldiers over there to fight people we didn't know a damned thing about."

Jackson State students began organizing protests on their own campus over the next few days, with hundreds of students participating in marches and demonstrations on May 13 and May 14. In the later hours of May 14 there were reports of violent confrontations between black student protestors and white Jackson residents driving on the main road through Jackson State campus. Initially, the police sent in black officers in an attempt to break up the demonstrations. When this failed to intimidate the protesters, a much larger group of officers armed with shotguns were deployed.

The officers approached the crowd of demonstrators gathered outside the Alexander Hall dormitory and opened fire continuously for about 30 seconds, unleashing about 500 shots. Most of the shots were fired into the building itself, shattering dorm windows and leaving bullet marks in the walls. Other shots went into the crowd, killing Gibbs and Green and wounding others.

The police would later make the absurd claim that they opened fire after seeing a sniper in the window of the women's dorm. No evidence of this claim was ever found at the scene of the shooting or in later investigations. No officers were prosecuted for the killings.

Just after midnight on May 15, 1970, a group of 75 city and state

75 years ago: Fourth International warns of Allied plans to impose a “harsh peace” on ruined Europe

Less than a week after the formal surrender of Nazi Germany on May 7, the world Trotskyist movement, the Fourth International, warned of the determination of the Allied powers, including the United States, Britain and the Soviet Union, to impose a “harsh peace” upon Europe directed against the revolutionary strivings of the masses.

A lead article in *The Militant*, the newspaper of the American Socialist Workers Party, noted that the war had come to an end after claiming more than double the number of casualties as the First World War in Europe. “Over the European continent hangs a ghastly pall of death and devastation, the ‘peace’ of the charnel house and the grave. This is the price the peoples are paying for the imperialist struggle to decide which coterie of capitalist gangsters shall dominate and exploit mankind,” it stated.

Against those who asserted that the end of the war would result in an era of peace and prosperity, the article warned: “Ruined Europe cannot even feed the multitudes of its hungry inhabitants, let alone house and clothe them. To the toll of millions of lives which the imperialist war has already exacted, must be added those now doomed to death by disease and starvation. They include the children, unnumbered millions of them, who are suffering from acute hunger and afflicted with rickets and other maladies of malnutrition.”

It noted that the primary concern of the Allied powers was to prevent a threat to capitalist rule in Germany, where the bourgeoisie had fled and capitalist state structures lay in ruin, and throughout Europe.

The article warned that the Allies “intend to keep large forces in Europe. For all the fine talk about ‘democracy’ and the right of every nation to choose its own government, the Allies have no intention of allowing the European peoples to determine their own future. As they have already done in Greece, Italy and Belgium, they intend to saddle the rest of Europe with reactionary dictatorships, propped up by Allied arms, so that the masses may be held in permanent subjection to the decayed capitalist system.”

The mention of Greece referred to the role of British troops in violently suppressing anti-fascist partisans at the beginning of the year, after they had overthrown the country’s German-aligned dictatorship. In Italy, Britain and the US had demonstrated their willingness to work with those sections of the fascist ruling elite, who, late in the war, had recognized that Benito Mussolini was no longer able to serve the interests of the capitalist class.

The Fourth International also pointed to the perfidious role of the Soviet bureaucracy and the Stalinist communist parties internationally. While the Soviet Red Army had played the decisive role in the military defeat of Nazi Germany, the bureaucracy was allied with the western imperialist powers and had already concluded agreements with them for the carve-up of Europe and the world into a series of spheres of influence.

This was directed above all against the emerging revolutionary movement of the working class that the Stalinists feared would trigger social upheavals against their own police-state forms of rule.

On May 11, 1920, the novelist, critic and editor William Dean Howells at the age of 83 at his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Howells was a member of the generation of writers that developed in the aftermath of the Civil War and made significant contributions to the realistic description of American life.

Howells wrote over two dozen novels, as well as plays, poetry, and literary criticism. He was instrumental in developing an American literary culture that reflected the contradictions of the rise of the US as a world economic power.

He was born in Ohio in 1837, the son of a newspaper editor and printer. In 1856 he began his own career in journalism and wrote Abraham Lincoln’s official campaign biography in 1860. He then served as American ambassador in Venice from 1862 to 1865.

Howells settled in Cambridge after his return to the US and began writing for *Harpers Magazine* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. He became the editor of the latter in 1871 and first published Mark Twain, who became a lifelong friend.

As a literary critic he wrote about Emile Zola and Henrik Ibsen and helped to secure the place of Leo Tolstoy among readers in the United States. He introduced writers such as Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and Sarah Orne Jewett to the public.

He became established as a fiction writer with his second novel, *A Modern Instance* (1882), one of the first works of American fiction that dealt frankly with divorce. His masterpiece is widely regarded to be the *Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), about the rise and fall of an American capitalist.

The post-Civil War period not only saw the rise of the American bourgeoisie, but also the entrance of the working class into open struggle. The great railway strikes of 1877 undoubtedly had an impact on Howells, who became sympathetic to the working-class and to the socialist movement.

On November 6, 1886, he wrote a famous op-ed in the *New York Tribune* demanding freedom for the eight framed-up anarchists on trial in Chicago known as the Haymarket Martyrs. The piece elicited a letter of praise from Eleanor Marx, the daughter of Karl Marx.

This “civic murder,” as he called it, apparently had a lasting impact on the writer. Shortly after the anarchists were hanged, he wrote to his sister, “It’s all been an atrocious piece of frenzy and cruelty, for which we must stand ashamed forever before history.”

Some of his fiction had a deeply felt critique of capitalism. *A Traveler from Altruria* (1894) is a utopian novel that excoriates American society from the point of view of a visitor from a newly discovered socialist continent. The novel’s sequel, *Through the Eye of a Needle* (1907) is a scathing report on social inequality in New York City.



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100 years ago: American novelist William Dean Howells dies