

This week in history: May 3-9

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25 years ago: Bosnian war crimes trials open in The Hague

On May 7, 1996, the first in a series of war crimes trials stemming from the war in Bosnia opened in the international court at The Hague, Netherlands. Dusan Tadic, a Bosnian Serb, stood accused of carrying out atrocities against Bosnian civilians, including murder, rape and torture.

The opening of the trial, however, centered on a dispute over the nature of the Bosnian conflict. The prosecution attempted to base itself on war crimes laws relating to international conflicts and therefore sought to present the war in Bosnia as an attack by the Serbian state on the state of Bosnia. Defense attorneys countered that Yugoslavia's breakup and the attempt by large Serb minorities in Croatia and Bosnia to maintain their ties to Belgrade precluded any such definition.

The first Bosnian Muslim defendant arrived to await trial during the initial proceedings. Zejnil Delalic was one of three Muslims indicted for war crimes. He was charged with responsibility for murder, torture and rape carried out by troops under his command against Serbian prisoners.

Radovan Karadzic, president of the Bosnian Serb Republic, head of the Serbian Democratic Party and supreme commander of the Bosnian Serb army, had been indicted in 1995 by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia on 13 counts of genocide and other war crimes allegedly committed between 1992 and 1995. Included in the charges leveled against him were his responsibility for the 44-month shelling of the capital Sarajevo and the massacre of 8,000 Bosnian Muslims at Srebrenica. Karadzic disappeared following the signing of the Dayton peace accords, and was only arrested in July 2008.

What was largely ignored throughout the trials was the role of the major imperialist powers, in particular the United States and Germany, which deliberately engineered the break-up of Yugoslavia. This project required the promotion of nationalist and communalist politics. This inevitably led to the crimes associated with the term "ethnic cleansing" in the multi-ethnic, multi-religious state, including ones carried out by western allies such as Croatian President Franco Tudjman and Bosnian Muslim leader Alija Izetbegovic.

50 years ago: East Germany's Walter Ulbricht forced out of power

On May 3, 1971, Walter Ulbricht resigned as the first Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party of East Germany (SED). Ulbricht was a longtime ally of Stalin, responsible for betrayals of the working class extending as far back as the 1930s when he was a leader in the German Communist Party (KPD).

Ulbricht's resignation was officially reported as being due to the health and age of the 77-year-old bureaucrat. Yet the changing of the Stalinist guard came at a time of working class upheaval in eastern Europe and internationally. Just months earlier, workers in Poland took major strike action against the Stalinist government, which responded by gunning down young protesters.

Ulbricht's political career was characterized by consistent suppression of the independence of the working class. From 1928 to 1933 he helped promote the criminal KPD policies of attacking the SPD as "social fascists" and claiming, "after Hitler us," paving the way for the Nazis and the destruction of the organized working class in Germany. While in exile during the war, first in France, then in the Soviet Union, Ulbricht conspired to eliminate the remaining Trotskyists in Germany by handing over information on their political activity and location to the Nazi secret police, resulting in their murder.

Once Germany had been carved up by the Allies and the Soviet Union after the war, Ulbricht became First Secretary of the SED in 1950. Shortly afterwards, he proved his value to Moscow by organizing the suppression of the 1953 East German uprising of over 1 million workers. Ulbricht's regime was faced with an immense political and economic crisis that saw thousands fleeing East Berlin into the Allied-controlled Western section of the city. His response was the construction of the Berlin Wall and giving the order to fire on those attempting to cross the border.

With conditions in 1970s East Germany politically explosive, a reliable replacement was needed to continue the suppression of the working class. Selected for this task was Erich Honecker, Stalinist hard-liner and the SED Secretary of Security, who oversaw the country's police and military. Honecker was the handpicked political protégé of Ulbricht and the two were close political allies throughout their careers. Honecker would remain First Secretary of the SED until 1989.

75 years ago: French post-war constitution defeated in national referendum

On May 5, 1946, a draft constitution for post-World War II France was narrowly voted down in a national referendum that

reflected sharp social polarization and the bankruptcy of the Stalinist and social democratic parties, both of which were committed to the restabilization of capitalist rule.

With the liberation of France from Nazi occupation in late 1944, sections of the country's ruling elite, along with the Allied powers, Britain, the US, and the Soviet Union, scrambled to establish a government. The French ruling elite and its political establishment were widely discredited, as a result of their participation in the Vichy regime, which collaborated with the Nazis.

In 1944, a provisional government had been declared, led by General Charles de Gaulle. After the final defeat of the Nazis in May 1945, a French Constituent Assembly, tasked with writing up a new constitution, was established.

The Stalinists of the French Communist Party (PCF) and the social democrats of the SFIO entered into De Gaulle's capitalist provisional government. Divisions emerged, however, over the political setup to be outlined in the constitution. The PCF and the SFIO, along with a minority of the ruling elite, favored the establishment of a unicameral parliament, in line with their attempts to dress up the new regime as democratic.

De Gaulle was hostile to this, instead advocating a presidential system. He resigned from the provisional government in January 1946. The traditional parties of the French bourgeoisie, including the Moderates, Radicals, and the Popular Republican Movement, which had collaborated closely with the PCF and the SFIO, also opposed unicameralism. They demanded the establishment of a senate, which had historically been associated with ensuring the effective veto power of propertied interests in parliament.

Confronted by a temporary falling out with their bourgeois allies, the PCF and the SFIO were alone in advocating a "yes" vote in the referendum. The constitution mandating a unicameral parliament was defeated by 52.8 percent of those who voted, with a turnout of just under 80 percent of the population.

The leadership of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist movement, rejected claims that the unicameral constitution would mark a step forward, stating that to advocate a "yes" ballot "meant, whether one wanted to or not, to sanction the bourgeois state, capitalist property, national defense and colonial oppression." The class collaborationist program of the Stalinists and the social democrats, it warned, was preventing the working class from intervening independently, and was opening the door for right-wing parties to make an appeal to sections of the middle class.

A reworked constitution, providing for a bicameral parliament, would pass in an October referendum.

100 years ago: Allies deliver ultimatum to Germany on war reparations

On May 5, 1921, the Allied Supreme Council delivered an ultimatum to the German government for repayment of war reparations. The document was signed by top officials of Britain,

Belgium, France, Italy and Japan and delivered in person by the British Prime Minister David Lloyd George to the German Ambassador, Friedrich Sthamer.

The "London Ultimatum," as it became known, was delivered because Germany was in default of the war reparation payments imposed upon it by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The Allies were now demanding 135 billion marks.

By 1921, the resistance of German imperialism to the conditions of the treaty had reached a crisis point. The country was the scene of brewing civil war between the working class and far-right militias, and capitulation to the conditions of the treaty would cause a domestic political firestorm.

The Allied ultimatum demanded that Germany must agree to its terms by May 12 or suffer an invasion of its industrial Ruhr Valley. The government of Constantin Fehrenbach of the Catholic Centre Party, unable to agree on terms, resigned.

Even before the ultimatum, the French had begun pouring troops into the German city of Duesseldorf in preparation for such an invasion. The French army announced plans to push toward Essen and encircle the whole of the Ruhr region by May 15.

On May 4 the European Allies had invited American imperialism to participate in the diplomatic and military pressure on Germany. The United States had not joined the League of Nations and had not been a signatory to the Treaty of Versailles but had negotiated its own treaty with Germany. The Allies, according to press reports at the time, were eager not to displease Washington.

The United States accepted the Allied invitation and by May 6 had made a formal announcement that it would participate in several Allied organizations to ensure that the Germans paid their war reparations.

By May 10, the German Reichstag voted by 221 to 175 to accept the Allied ultimatum and form a new government under Joseph Wirth, a politician of the Catholic Center Party, with the active support of the Social Democratic Party.



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