

This week in history: May 10-16

10 May 2021

25 years ago: ValuJet Flight 592 crash kills 110 on board

On May 11, 1996, Atlanta-bound ValuJet Flight 592 crashed in the Florida Everglades approximately 10 minutes after takeoff, killing all 110 people on board.

The crash was caused by improper storage of canisters filled with hazardous and explosive chemicals, which were loaded into the front cargo bay of the plane underneath the cockpit. The plane was not licensed to carry such materials. A subsequent 15-month investigation into the cause of the fire determined that the fire broke out below the passenger cabin, causing the crash.

The accident brought widespread attention to the airline industry's aggressive cost-cutting measures at the direct expense of safety. The crash was not merely the product of one airline's greed and indifference to safety. It was the outcome of the deregulation of the airline industry which began under Jimmy Carter in the late 1970s with legislation drafted by liberal Democrat Edward Kennedy and pursued and developed under Reagan, Bush, and then Clinton.

ValuJet was a start-up airline, which, in its first two-and-a-half years of business, expanded its operations to 60 jets and became a major player in the industry. The company succeeded in combining low fares and high profits through a cost-cutting campaign that raised eyebrows even in the airline industry, where the erosion of safety standards to boost profit margins was standard operating procedure. The bulk of ValuJet maintenance was farmed out to subcontractors, many of which operated without FAA scrutiny and hired workers with less skill and experience than other major carriers.

ValuJet paid its pilots the lowest rate in the industry, then at \$45,000 a year in starting salary, and required them to pay up to \$10,000 a year for training out-of-pocket. It paid pilots per flight instead of a base rate. If a ValuJet flight was canceled, the pilots and flight attendants did not get paid, increasing the pressure to ignore "minor" problems.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) found three parties played a role in the disaster: SabreTech, the company responsible for incorrectly packaging and storing dangerous materials; ValuJet, for not supervising SabreTech; and the FAA, for not mandating smoke detection measures after a similar incident in 1988.

ValuJet was grounded by the FAA on June 16 but was allowed to resume flying just three and a half months later. The airline was not prosecuted and eventually rebranded under the name AirTran after acquiring that airline in a merger in 1997.

50 years ago: Egypt's Anwar Sadat purges political opponents

On May 14, 1971 Egyptian President Anwar Sadat declared in a national television broadcast that he had removed from office or arrested six leaders of his government and three officials in the ruling Arab Socialist Union party. Among those arrested were Vice President Ali Sabri; Sharawy Gomaa, the Interior Minister and head of the secret police; and the Minister of War, Lieutenant General Mohammed Fawzi.

Sadat claimed that the purge was in response to a coup attempt against him. According to Sadat, the ministers had conspired to bug his home. In the broadcast he warned that he "would cut to pieces" any continuing political opposition to his presidency. The next day the National Assembly voted to expel 18 members who were opposed to Sadat.

The purges were the beginning of what would become known as Sadat's "Corrective Revolution." The move was aimed most principally at removing the pro-Soviet faction in the Egyptian ruling class and creating the political foundations for an agreement with the United States and Israel on re-opening the Suez Canal, which had been closed since the 1967 Six Day War, and more broadly, on opening Egypt up to the interests of western capital.

The following week, on May 20, Sadat gave a speech to the National Assembly in which he declared that a secret "Communist-oriented" faction had been formed in the Arab Socialist Union and was conspiring to bring about his demise. He also declared that he would be presenting a new constitution for the country, effectively dissolving the government established by the 1952 Egyptian revolution.

Sadat added that just before the purges, he had concluded discussions with US Secretary of State William P. Rogers, who assured the Egyptian president that he would work to find a settlement with Israel. In the address to the assembly, Sadat invited the leading imperialist power to resolve the crisis in the Middle East. "The United States must define its position," Sadat said.

In the days and weeks after the announcements, Sadat was visited by the left-nationalist leaders of Syria, Sudan, and Libya who also assured him that he maintained their full support. Yet Sadat's purge and "Corrective Revolution" were reflective of a general shift to the right among the Arab bourgeois nationalists. As it had become apparent that the program of pan-Arab nationalism was incapable of achieving even limited unity among the various Arab states, the Arab ruling classes now each looked to cut its own deal with the imperialists. The most critical element of this was achieving the assistance of the US in suppressing the class struggle within Egypt and the other Arab states.

75 years ago: Nazi SS troops convicted of mass killings at Mauthausen concentration camp

On May 11, 1946, a war crimes tribunal organized by the US military convicted 61 members of the Nazi Waffen SS of war crimes, including the murder of some 70,000 people, most of them Jewish, at the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria. The trial was one of a series held in the German town of Dachau by the Allied powers in the aftermath of their defeat of Hitler's Nazi regime in May 1945.

The Mauthausen camp had been established by the Nazis after their absorption of Austria into Germany in 1938. It would function as the main site of a network of some 100 camps throughout Austria and southern Germany.

The Mauthausen site was operated by the DEST Company, a private concern owned by a senior member of the SS, but it was controlled by the German state. The camp was constructed there for its proximity to a nearby granite mine. Prisoners of the Nazis from around Europe were brought to the facility, where they were forced into slave labor aimed at extracting the maximum profit from them as they were worked to death.

Members of the Jewish and European intelligentsia were dispatched to the camp where many perished. Prisoners included socialist and communist activists, members of the Roma minority, and Spanish anti-fascists.

The trial heard evidence of the barbaric practices employed by the Nazis at Mauthausen. This included compelling prisoners to race up mountains carrying heavy stones, after hours of labor, forcing them to line up on the side of a cliff and giving them the option of being shot or pushing a fellow prisoner to their death, and conducting cruel and pseudo-scientific experiments on them. In 1941 the Nazis built a gas chamber at the camp that could murder up to 80 people at a time. The following year the camp officials were given a mobile gas chamber by the German government, which could kill 30 people at once. Tens of thousands would be murdered by these methods.

The defendants were charged with "violations of the laws and usages of war." They included SS officials, camp administrators, guards, and doctors. All 61 defendants were found guilty after a trial that lasted six weeks. Three were sentenced to life imprisonment. The remaining 58 were given a death sentence, which was later changed to life imprisonment for nine of them.

100 years ago: Communist Party of Czechoslovakia founded

At a conference, held May 14-16, 1921, in the National House in the Prague neighborhood of Karlín, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia was formed by supporters of the Communist International who split from the Social Democratic Party of

Czechoslovakia.

One of the first actions of the Congress was to ratify the 21 conditions the Communist International had set for member parties to join the International. The Congress elected to the top leadership of the party Václav Šturc, Bohumír Šmeral, and Václav Bolen. The party's daily publication in Czech was *Rudé Právo* (Red Truth).

Czechoslovakia itself was a new capitalist state that had been formed from the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the aftermath of its defeat in 1918 by the Allied imperialist powers. The new state fought wars with Poland and Hungary over the acquisition of territory.

The founding of the Communist Party came in the aftermath of the general strike of December 1920, which had been brought about by the high cost of living and a housing shortage. Coal miners and textile workers responded to an appeal of the left, Communist, wing of the Social-Democratic Party. The strike was opposed by the party's right wing. In some areas, workers formed revolutionary committees and armed themselves. In some places, workers seized the post offices and railways and disarmed military units sent out against them.

One of the main reports to the Third Congress of the Communist International held in Moscow in the summer of 1921, noted, "The Czechoslovak Communist Party was formed this past May with 350,000 members, alongside the Communist Party of German Bohemia [Sudetenland], which had been formed earlier and has 60,000 members. The Communists thus make up a large segment not only of the Czechoslovak proletariat but also of its population as a whole." It added that, "The Czechoslovak party ... must unite the workers of all nations within Czechoslovakia in a solid proletarian front against nationalism, the main weapon of the bourgeoisie in Czechoslovakia."



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