

# This week in history: May 31-June 6

30 May 2021

## 25 years ago: Czech vote blow to right-wing

On June 2, 1996, the ruling right-wing Civic Democrats of Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus lost its majority in parliament in the Czech elections. It was the first balloting since the 1993 split between Slovakia and the Czech Republic.

The Civic Democrats barely edged out the opposition Social Democrats, 29.6 percent to 26.4 percent, but Klaus and his two coalition partners, the Christian Democrats and the Civic Democratic Alliance, held only 99 seats out of 200, down from 112 in the previous parliament. The balance of the vote was split between the Communist Party, which took 10.3 percent, and the neofascist Republican Party, which gained 8 percent.

The Social Democrats, who campaigned against the disparities of wealth and poverty created by Klaus's policies of privatization and unrestrained encouragement of the capitalist market, quadrupled their vote over 1992. But Social Democratic leader Milos Zeman said after the vote that he would not force the ouster of Klaus as prime minister and reaffirmed his support for the Czech Republic joining both NATO and the European Union. "This country needs democracy and a market economy," he told reporters. "There is no way of going back."

By early July, Klaus had submitted a proposal for a new coalition cabinet to President Vaclav Havel. Klaus agreed to negotiate support in Parliament from the opposition Social Democrats. The Social Democrats would fill the chairmanship and other important positions in Parliament.

## 50 years ago: USSR launches Soyuz 11 mission to Salyut space station

On June 6, 1971, the Soviet Union launched the Soyuz 11 mission to board the world's first space station, Salyut 1. While successfully docking and completing their mission at the station, the three-man crew tragically died while preparing to reenter earth's atmosphere.

Soyuz 11 was the second attempt at entering the Salyut space station. A Soyuz 10 mission had made an attempt in April but was forced to abort after the crew was unable to properly dock

the shuttle onto the space station.

After launching from the Baikonur Cosmodrome spaceport, the Soyuz 11 crew arrived at the space station and successfully docked on June 7. The three men—Georgy Dobrovolsky, Vladislav Volkov, and Viktor Patsayev—then crossed into station to begin their 22-day stay aboard Salyut 1. At the time this was the longest continuous stay in space.

Once on board the space station, the crew began checking Salyut 1's systems and making necessary repairs. During their time on the station, the astronauts conducted many experiments and made significant discoveries related to prolonged time in space.

In addition to biological experiments, the Soyuz 11 crew performed studies related to weather and Earth resources. According to Boris N. Petrov, a leading expert in the Soviet Academy of Science, the data returned to earth by Soyuz would be used by students of agriculture, land reclamation, geodesy, and cartography, as well as by meteorologists to improve forecasting.

Writing in remembrance of the crew in July for Pravda, Petrov said, "The experience of the cosmonauts' work has shown that the Salyut manned station is a space laboratory well adapted for experiments in orbital flight conditions. Such stations are opening broad prospects for the continuation and development of the research carried out by the first Salyut crew... Ahead lie new flights into space and the creation of new inhabited orbital stations of the Salyut type. Undoubtedly, even larger and more complex manned multipurpose and specialized space stations will be built. But the significance of the work carried out by the first crew of the first manned orbital station... will never fade."

On June 29, after their experiments had been concluded, the crew undocked from the space station and began the return trip to earth. Before descending into the atmosphere, a breathing ventilation valve failed as the descent module separated from the service module.

As a result, the breathable air was rapidly vacated from the craft and the crew suffocated. The shuttle's automated systems successfully piloted the shuttle back to Earth where it was picked up by the Soviet recovery teams who discovered the three astronauts dead inside. Dobrovolsky, Volkov, and Patsayev remain the only people ever to have died in space, rather than during launch or reentry, as in multiple American space disasters.

**75 years ago: Italy abolishes monarchy in popular referendum**

In a national referendum on June 2, 1946, the Italian population voted overwhelmingly in favor of abolishing the monarchy, a bastion of reaction that had been fatally compromised by its close ties to the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini.

The House of Savoy, an ancient royal dynasty dating back to the year 1003, had ruled Italy since its unification in 1861. King Victor Emmanuel III had played a crucial role in Mussolini's ascension to fascist ruler, anointing him as prime minister following the fascist march on Rome in 1922. The monarchy was complicit in all of Mussolini's crimes, including the outlawing of socialist and communist opposition, the persecution of Jews and other minorities, brutal massacres in Italy's colonies, and participation on the side of the Nazis in World War II.

Victor Emmanuel had deposed Mussolini in 1943, as the fascist regime crumbled amid Allied advances and popular opposition. Italy would be divided between a rump fascist republic ruled by Mussolini and supported by German troops, and a "legitimist" regime tied to the Allies, until liberation from the Nazis in April, 1945.

Aware that his tactical falling out with Mussolini had not altered popular hostility to the monarchy and its collaboration with fascism, Victor Emmanuel agreed to a referendum on the future of the institution. On the eve of the poll, in May 1946, he abdicated, handing the throne to Crown Prince Umberto.

In a turnout of almost 90 percent of eligible voters, more than 54 percent of the population voted to do away with the monarchy. The yes vote was far higher in centers of the industrial working class, reaching 68 percent in Milan, almost 70 percent in Genoa, and over 80 percent in Bologna.

In elections for a Constituent Assembly on the same day, the Christian Democrat party won 207 out of 556 seats. It would form a coalition government with the social democrats, who had secured 115 positions, and the Communist Party, which had 104 parliamentary representatives.

The entrance of the Communist Party into the capitalist government was in line with the counter-revolutionary program of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR. In exchange for a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe, it had struck a deal with Britain and the US to suppress revolutionary upheavals in Western Europe, and to ensure the restabilization of capitalist rule.

On June 4, 1921, a cabal of White Guard officers proclaimed the Cossack general Grigory Semyonov to be the supreme ruler in Vladivostok, the Pacific port city of the Russian Far East.

Semyonov's officers were quickly overcome by forces loyal to Spiridon Merkulov, who had come to power only a few days earlier in the city and established the so-called Provisional Priamurye Government, which ruled the city until another coup in 1922 replaced it.

The government that Merkulov overthrew was known as the Far Eastern Republic, based in Chita, which was led by Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries. The Bolsheviks had cooperated with this regime out of a reluctance to provoke American and Japanese troops, who then controlled much of Siberia.

The Far Eastern Republic served as a buffer state between the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and the Japanese occupiers. Japan recognized the state in 1920. Nevertheless, Japanese troops had disarmed the FER troops in Vladivostok and allowed the White Guard coup to succeed. The Bolsheviks, who had substantial influence in the Vladivostok working class, were driven underground.

Both anti-Bolshevik groups vying for power had their origins in the now-defeated White armies that had fought the Bolsheviks from 1918 on. Semyonov was one of the most grotesque figures of the Russian Civil War. An ataman, or Cossack leader, his forces, according to one historian, "ruthlessly liquidated all Reds, terrorized the population, prostituted themselves to the Japanese Army, antagonized the American Expeditionary Force." A notorious anti-Semite, Semyonov handed out copies of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a forgery by the Tsarist secret police that purports to be a plan for Jewish world domination.

Semyonov went into exile in Japan and the United States after the establishment of Soviet power in Siberia and returned to East Asia during the Second World War. He was captured by Soviet forces in Manchuria in 1945 and executed in 1946.



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