

This week in history: May 16-22

15 May 2022

25 years ago: Mobutu flees Congo as Kabila forces enter capital

On May 16, 1997, long-time dictator Mobutu Sese Seko fled from Kinshasa, the capital of the Congo, as troops of rebel leader Laurent Kabila were preparing to enter it. Mobutu's regime, one of the bloodiest and most corrupt in the history of the 20th century, collapsed amid mass popular disaffection, acute economic crisis, and the explosion of tribal conflicts precipitated by imperialist intrigues.

The instability of the regime, in power since Mobutu seized control in a 1965 military coup, was exacerbated by the terminal illness of the aging dictator, who would die of prostate cancer three months after fleeing the country.

On May 17, the Kabila's troops marched into Kinshasa. The new ruler ordered them to break up demonstrations with gunfire and beatings and imposed a ban on parties and virtually all forms of political activity. He was praised as a liberator and democrat by both the US State Department and the bulk of petty-bourgeois left in the West, but his role was to maintain stability after the collapse of the Mobutu regime and ensure the continued ability of giant multinational mining companies to exploit the vast resources of the Congo.

Kabila's first actions pointed to the emergence of another despotic regime tied to international financial interests. The takeover of Kinshasa, a city of over 4 million, was accompanied by mounting social friction and popular resentment. In addition to the ban on political activity, soldiers enforced a proscription against miniskirts and tight pants, a measure which led to women being brutalized in the streets of the capital.

There was a growing perception of Kabila's forces as an occupation army. Most of the soldiers were Tutsis, an ethnic group comprising barely 1 percent of the country's 46 million people. They spoke a different language than the inhabitants of the capital and were popularly believed to be drawn from the armies of neighboring countries. Corrupt bourgeois politicians like Etienne Tshisekedi attempted to promote ethnic hatred, portraying all Tutsis as foreigners and demanding that they return to their countries.

There was ample evidence that Kabila owed his conquest of the country in the space of just seven months not to any popular uprising, but rather to the support he received from several African states and imperialist governments and corporations.

His meteoric rise to power had its roots in the genocidal ethnic conflicts, sparked by the conflict between France on one side, the US and Britain on the other, which erupted in Rwanda and Burundi in 1994, culminating in the mass killings in Rwanda. These bloody upheavals spilled across the border into the Congo, where more than 1 million Hutus, including elements of Rwanda's ousted Hutu-dominated government and its army, fled to escape feared retaliation for the anti-Tutsi massacres.

50 years ago: Nixon visits Moscow for summit with Brezhnev

On May 22, 1972, Richard Nixon became the first United States president to visit Moscow, for a summit meeting with Leonid Brezhnev, the head of the ruling Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union. Franklin D. Roosevelt had previously visited the Soviet Union in February 1945 for the Yalta conference, on the Black Sea coast, where he, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin negotiated the postwar carve-up of Europe, but a US president had never visited the Soviet capital.

Nixon's trip marked the beginning of the "Détente" period of eased tensions between the Stalinist bureaucracy and American imperialism, as they made common cause against the revolutionary upsurge that swept the world during the years 1968-1975. The Moscow visit followed a similar visit to China where Nixon met with Mao Zedong earlier in the year.

The official purpose of the visit was to move forward in two areas of nuclear weapons accords, the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) and the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty. In these deals the two powers agreed to limit the production and deployment of nuclear weapons and to reduce the possibility of a direct military confrontation. Another agreement was signed preventing the use of spaceflight for military purposes.

Both Nixon and Soviet representatives gave speeches calling for more open channels for co-operation between the two nations. "We should recognize further that it is the responsibility of great powers to influence other nations in conflict or crisis to moderate their behavior," Nixon remarked at a state dinner on his first night in Moscow.

Nikolai Podgorny, the official head of state of the USSR, also spoke at the dinner saying, "Even though there exist principled differences, there are objective factors that determine similarity of interests and require that the USSR and the USA should act in a way as to ward off the danger of a global war, to remove the vestiges of cold war from Soviet-American relations, and as far as possible to rid their relations of all that complicated them in the past and burdens them even now."

However, underlining the remarks calling for peace was the fact that while the visit was taking place the United States was carrying out a massive bombing campaign against North Vietnam, the Soviet Union's supposed ally. The summit was closely followed by Vietnamese workers and peasants who feared the visit might signal a cutting back of Soviet support for their fight against imperialism.

The Stalinist policy of "Socialism in one country" and "peaceful co-existence" with imperialism was again reaching its logical conclusion. As the Vietnamese people waged a life and death struggle against US invasion, the Stalinist bureaucracy hoped to use them as a bargaining chip to gain advantages in trade and strategic concessions in other areas.

The Stalinist press attempted to sell the meeting to Russian workers as being in line with “Leninist principles.” The *Bulletin*, the newspaper of the American Trotskyists, replied, “Contrary to the Stalinist falsifiers of Lenin and his policies, Lenin fought to preserve the gains of the Russian Revolution by extending the revolution throughout the world. His trade and economic agreements were completely subordinate to the tasks of overthrowing capitalism.”

75 years ago: US Congress approves the Truman Doctrine

On May 22, 1947, Democratic President Harry Truman signed into law what became known as the “Truman Doctrine,” after it had been passed by the Republican-controlled US Congress. The new foreign policy program formalized the beginning of the Cold War, an aggressive global US confrontation with the Soviet Union. It laid the basis for innumerable imperialist crimes, including coups and counter-insurgency operations, over the following decades.

On March 12, Truman had delivered an address to a joint session of Congress unveiling the new foreign policy program. Decrying the purported expansion of Soviet influence, Truman couched his doctrine in anti-communist terms as a fight for freedom against totalitarianism. “I believe it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures,” he declared. “I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way.”

The first practical application of the new doctrine was the approval of \$400 million in US aid to stabilize the Greek and Turkish governments. These operations gave the lie to the democratic rhetoric. In Greece, the US and Britain were supporting the monarchist and conservative forces who had collaborated with the Nazis during World War II in a brutal civil war against popular partisan forces under the leadership of the Greek Communist Party.

The support for the Turkish regime was an attempt to shore-up US control over the strategically critical Turkish straits, and to create a foothold for broader American imperialist operations in the Middle East. In August 1946, the US had provoked a major conflict with the Soviet Union by asserting the right of American warships to unfettered access to the Turkish Straits, which were the only means for the Soviet fleet to access the Mediterranean Sea and the oceans from their Black Sea ports.

That diplomatic clash was one of a series, marking the end of the alliance between US and British imperialism and the Stalinist bureaucracy of the Soviet Union during and in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Having used the services of the Stalinists to prevent socialist revolution at the end of the war, American imperialism was intent on establishing its hegemony, throughout Europe and globally.

100 years ago: United States Marines put down rebellion in Nicaragua

On May 22, 1922, the commander of a detachment of United States Marines stationed in Managua, the capital of the Central American

republic of Nicaragua, threatened to begin an artillery bombardment of anti-government rebels unless they surrendered.

The group of soldiers and civilians had seized the strategic fortress of La Loma in a bid to overthrow the American-supported president, Diego Manuel Chamorro. After they capitulated to the American ultimatum, the civilian participants were pardoned and members of the military who participated received 30 days in prison.

The threat to bombard the rebels was a part of an almost continuous aggression in Central America and the Caribbean since 1898, which included sending American troops not only to Nicaragua but also to Cuba, Honduras, Panama, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic as well as interventions in Mexico from 1910 to 1919.

American imperialism had occupied Nicaragua since 1909 and stationed Marines there almost continuously from 1912 to 1933 to ensure that respective governments of during this period complied with the needs of American companies that did business in Nicaragua.

The United States had nearly complete financial control of the Nicaraguan government. Under the 1918 Bryan-Chamorro Treaty, Nicaragua became a virtual protectorate of the US, and was forbidden to negotiate with any other country for building of a cross-Nicaragua canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

The treaty was negotiated between US Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan and Nicaragua President Emiliano Chamorro. In 1921, Americans manipulated the elections to ensure that Emiliano Chamorro was succeeded by his first cousin, Diego Manuel Chamorro.

The Chamorro dynasty, wealthy landowners and Managua newspaper publishers, have been a major factor in Nicaraguan politics for a century and a half. Pedro Joaquín Chamorro Cardenal, a great-nephew of Diego Manuel, was editor of *La Prensa* when his 1978 assassination by the Somoza dictatorship helped fuel the Sandinista revolt. Other Chamorros played leading roles in the contra terrorist campaign against the Sandinistas, and Pedro’s widow Violeta Barrios de Chamorro was elected president in 1990, with US backing, ousting the Sandinistas from power.



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