

This week in history: May 8-14

7 May 2023

25 years ago: India tests nuclear bombs

On May 11, 1998, India detonated five nuclear devices as part of a nuclear arms race in south and east Asia, a region home to more than half the world's population. The show of force was aimed both at intimidating Pakistan, against which India had fought several border wars, and at putting China, India's regional rival, on notice.

The tests also had a domestic political purpose, demonstrating that the Hindu-chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party), under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, held the reins of power in Delhi.

Inconclusive elections the previous March had resulted in the coming to power of a ramshackle, 18-party coalition. The BJP dominated the new government, holding more than two-thirds of the coalition's parliamentary seats and all the key ministries. But until the nuclear tests, the government's agenda had publicly been set by the BJP's regional allies. They had repeatedly extracted concessions from the BJP by threatening to withdraw their support for the coalition.

Following the test, the Pakistani government signaled that it would soon test its own nuclear device. Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohard Ayub declared May 14, "We would be in great difficulty without a nuclear test. Our policy has been for a balance of power with India."

China, which Indian Defense Minister George Fernandes had recently called a grave threat to Indian security, reacted angrily to the Indian tests. Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan urged all governments to press India to abandon its nuclear capability.

The US government conceded that it was caught completely unaware by the Indian nuclear tests, a gaffe US foreign policy analysts described as "the worst intelligence blunder" of the decade. A 1994 law, the Nuclear Proliferation Prevention Act, made it all but inevitable that Washington would impose wide-ranging sanctions against India. But the Clinton administration, which had been seeking a new "strategic partnership" with India, initially indicated that India could escape sanctions if it immediately agreed to sign an international treaty banning nuclear tests. Delhi's response was to detonate two more nuclear devices.

The US—the only power to ever use nuclear weapons in combat—held a hypocritical stance on nuclear proliferation. Washington's aim was not to eliminate nuclear weapons, but rather to maintain the status quo, under which the US had by far the world's largest and most deadly arsenal. A constant of US foreign policy over the previous two decades was the use of the US military to project US power on the world stage and

compensate for America's loss of political and economic hegemony.

50 years ago: Former US Attorney General John N. Mitchell indicted

On May 10, 1973, two of Nixon's former cabinet members were indicted by a federal grand jury on conspiracy charges related to an ongoing investigation into the criminal financier and Nixon backer Robert L. Vesco. Former Attorney General John N. Mitchell and former Secretary of Commerce Maurice H. Stans were accused of obstructing the investigation into an illegal donation of \$200,000 by Vesco to President Nixon's reelection campaign.

In announcing the charges, US Attorney Whitney North Seymour Jr, said the two were being charged with conspiring to defraud both the commission's investigation into Vesco's activities and the General Accounting Office. "This is a seriously sad day for those of us concerned with justice," the prosecutor added.

In 1970 Vesco began operations to take over the mutual fund investment company Investors Overseas Service (IOS). The company held and invested money from members of the super wealthy elite in the United States and Europe.

Once at the head of the company, Vesco began embezzling money, at least \$200 million, out of IOS and into his personal accounts in Costa Rica where he fled to in 1973. Vesco had bribed Costa Rican politicians with over \$2 million to pass laws preventing his extradition to the United States.

But before departing the United States, in 1972 Vesco secretly sent \$200,000 to the Committee to Re-elect the President. He made another contribution through President Nixon's nephew Donald Nixon, who had worked for Vesco. The second payment was made with the explicit understanding that as Attorney General, Mitchell would intercede in the embezzlement investigation against Vesco.

The indictment was a further expansion of the crisis rocking the Nixon administration. While not directly connected to the Watergate break-in, the bribery scandal provided further evidence that the president's reelection campaign organization, the Committee to Re-elect the President, was involved in numerous illegal activities.

Mitchell and Stans would maintain their denial of any wrongdoing in the Vesco case. In 1974 the charges against the two were eventually dropped. But the indictment of a former Attorney

General of the currently sitting president proved to be an immense setback for Nixon still hoping to keep the scandals from rising to his office.

Later in May the US Senate subcommittee investigation into Watergate would officially begin with live broadcasts of witness testimony. In July Mitchell would be called before the Committee where he also attempted to deny any knowledge of the plot. In 1975 he would be convicted of charges of conspiracy and obstruction of justice related to the Watergate break-in. While initially sentenced to up to eight years, he would only serve 19 months.

75 years ago: Zionist leaders proclaim an Israeli state in Palestine

On May 14, 1948, Zionist leaders, headed by David Ben-Gurion, issued an Israeli Declaration of Independence declaring that a Jewish state would be established later that year amid the imminent withdrawal of Britain from its colonial rule over Palestine.

While the proclamation made a passing reference to respecting the rights of the Arab Muslims and Christians and other inhabitants of Palestine, it made clear that the state would be based on the Jewish religion and ethnicity, an extreme right-wing form of nationalism. This was in line with a resolution passed by the United Nations late the previous year, which had endorsed the ethno-religious partition of Palestine.

The proclamation was immediately welcomed by the Democratic administration of President Harry Truman in the United States. Truman had led the push for an Israeli state at the UN and in other international forums, viewing it as a potential beachhead of American imperialism throughout the Middle East.

Just 11 minutes after the Israeli declaration, Truman issued a statement: "This Government has been informed that a Jewish state has been proclaimed in Palestine, and recognition has been requested by the provisional government thereof. The United States recognizes the provisional government as the de facto authority of the new State of Israel."

The implications of the declaration were made plain by a debate among Zionist leaders prior to the announcement. Some had called for a recognition of the UN-proposed partition, without additional annexations.

But Ben-Gurion and others had rejected this line, with the future Israeli prime minister declaring during the discussion: "We accepted the UN Resolution, but the Arabs did not. They are preparing to make war on us. If we defeat them and capture western Galilee or territory on both sides of the road to Jerusalem, these areas will become part of the state."

In the months preceding the declaration, far-right Zionist paramilitaries such as Irgun, together with the broader Haganah organisation, had overseen a program of ethnic cleansing. Under cover of combatting Arab insurgents, the heavily armed Zionist forces had repeatedly entered villages and cleared them of all or

most Arab inhabitants, through mass executions and pogroms. The transparent aim was to secure Jewish majorities and Zionist control in as many key cities and towns as possible, prior to the partition.

The Israeli declaration and its immediate endorsement by the US and the other imperialist powers set the stage for the transformation of this war against the Palestinian population into a conflict between the nascent Israeli state and the regional Arab powers.

100 years ago: Soviet diplomat assassinated in Switzerland

On May 10, 1923, Vatslav Vorovsky, the Soviet representative to Italy, was assassinated in the restaurant of the Cecil Hotel in Lausanne, Switzerland by a Swiss-Russian former Tsarist and White Guard officer, Maurice Conradi.

Vorovsky and two other members of the Soviet delegation, Ivan Ariens and Maxim Divilkovsky, were observers at the Lausanne Conference, which was attempting to create a settlement in Turkey between the imperialist powers and the Turkish nationalist regime of Kemal Ataturk.

Conradi and an accomplice approached the table where the three were having dinner and fired a pistol, killing Vorovsky outright and wounding Ariens and Divilkovsky.

On May 20, over 250,000 mourners attended Vorovsky's funeral in Moscow.

Vorovsky was an old Bolshevik who had joined the Russian socialist movement in 1894. He was arrested by the Tsarist secret police in 1897 and imprisoned in Orlov. Upon his release in 1902, he emigrated to western Europe, where he assisted with the distribution of the Social-Democratic newspaper, *Iskra*. In 1903 he supported the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party led by Lenin.

He participated in the first Russian revolution of 1905 and after its defeat, in underground work from 1907 to 1912, when he was arrested again and exiled to Vologda province. He participated as a leading party member in the 1917 Russian Revolution and was a member of the Russian delegation to the founding of the Communist International in 1919 and later a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International. He served as a Soviet diplomat in Sweden and in negotiations with Poland.

The murder trial of Conradi became a cause célèbre throughout the world known as the "Conradi affair." The Soviet Republic was effectively put on trial and subjected to anti-communist misrepresentation and slander. Conradi was acquitted.



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