

This week in history: May 15-21

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

14 May 2023

25 years ago: Suharto quits as Indonesian ruler

On May 21, 1998, in a desperate bid to defuse an intense political crisis, Indonesian dictator Suharto resigned as president and installed his hand-picked successor, vice president B. J. Habibie, as his replacement. The move was made with the backing of the military high command.

Habibie, one of Suharto's closest associates for more than two decades, was immediately sworn in for the rest of Suharto's five-year term—through 2003—leaving the entire political structure intact, and the generals in command.

This maneuver was an attempt to cloak the military regime with new political legitimacy and draw in layers of the bourgeois opposition, such as Amien Rais and Megawati Sukarnoputri, to attempt to prevent a social explosion from below.

The central role of Suharto's military apparatus in this operation was quickly demonstrated when Armed Forces chief General Wiranto, on hand to endorse the leadership change, addressed the nation before Habibie. Wiranto bluntly declared that no one should be mistaken: the generals would continue to protect not only the political order but also Suharto and his family.

Wiranto's statement was a thinly veiled threat to the hundreds of thousands of students, workers and professional people who had defied a massive military mobilization earlier that week to join demonstrations in major Indonesian cities demanding Suharto's immediate resignation, in spite of calls by opposition leaders to stay at home.

Students occupying the national assembly building in Jakarta reacted with jubilation at Suharto's announcement, declaring that they had "freedom at last." Wider rejoicing was reported on the streets of Jakarta.

Suharto's ouster from office was orchestrated not only by the military but even more so by the international financial markets and the IMF, which effectively pulled the economic rug from beneath the regime. One of Suharto's ministers commented that "market forces" had forced Suharto out.

This process, expressed in the collapse of the economy and the currency since the middle of 1997, was intensified in the last hours before Suharto stood aside. Despite mass marches and rallies in many cities, Suharto had previously refused pleas by the leaders of the

national assembly to quit.

The brutal military strongman who seized power in 1965-66 in one of the twentieth century's greatest political massacres—the killing of from 500,000 to 1 million workers, political activists and peasants—was not simply an individual tyrant. His bloody regime was sustained for 32 years by the native ruling class and Western imperialism, whose profit interests Suharto enforced against the working class and rural masses. With his ouster, these same forces sought only a facelift in order to better defend their interests.

50 years ago: Brezhnev visits West Germany

On May 18, 1973 Leonid Brezhnev, the general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, made a diplomatic visit to Bonn, the capital of West Germany. The visit was the first time a Soviet leader had visited West Germany since the country was established following the partition of Germany by the Allied powers at the end of the Second World War.

The purpose of the visit was to meet with West Germany's Chancellor Willy Brandt to discuss new trade deals between the two countries. West Germany had been the Soviet Union's leading western trade partner and each hoped to expand the lucrative relationship.

The visit by Brezhnev was part of the "détente" period of the Cold War where the intense state of war readiness between the Soviet Union and the NATO-aligned countries temporarily thawed. One year earlier, in May 1972, US President Richard Nixon had traveled to Moscow to meet with Brezhnev to sign both arms limitation and trade agreements.

Earlier in the year capitalist West Germany had signed an agreement with Stalinist East Germany that opened the door to more normal political relations and eased the restrictions on travel between East and West Berlin.

Brandt mobilized a massive police force of at least 6,000 security officers to protect Brezhnev while he toured Bonn, enjoyed an eight-course meal, and then made a public address. After standing at attention for the German national anthem, in his televised speech Brezhnev told the audience,

“Our talks with Chancellor Brandt confirm that there is a good outlook for the future... The quarter century period of the cold war is now giving place to relations of peace, mutual respect and cooperation between the states of the East and the West.”

But underlying the hopeful proclamations of peaceful co-existence between the imperialist countries and the Stalinist bureaucracy was a global financial crisis that had caused prices to skyrocket and placing immense pressures on all of the national economies, those of Germany and the USSR included.

For Brandt the opening up of relations with the Soviet Union offered an opportunity to offset this crisis somewhat by gaining access to Soviet markets, while for Brezhnev the trade deals offered access to German industrial goods and a platform to move closer to other west European countries to which he could offer to sell the labor of the Soviet working class.

75 years ago: Arab-Israeli war begins amid mass ethnic cleansing of Palestinians

On May 15, 1948, war broke out between the newly proclaimed state of Israel and a coalition of neighboring Arab majority states. The conflict began immediately upon the formal end of the British colonial possession of Palestine. The previous week, Israeli independence had been declared with the support of the US and the other imperialist powers.

The war began under conditions of widespread ethnic cleansing in Palestine. Terrorist gangs, directed by the new Israeli state, went from village to village, depopulating them through fear and mass violence.

This campaign, which had already been taking place for months, was entirely in line with the Israeli declaration of independence, which explicitly based the new state on Jewish ethnicity and religion, excluding all other groups. In a particularly notorious incident, on May 20 Israeli army forces took over the Palestinian town of Al-Kabri. Its defenseless population of more than 1,500 people was cleared within the day, with many fleeing and an untold number executed.

The Arab League, composed of the main Arab states, had opposed the United Nations-backed plan for an ethnic partition of Palestine when it was unveiled in 1947. Upon the end of the British mandate, they immediately declared war.

The Arab leaders stated that their objective was to restore law and order and prevent further bloodshed amid the massacres; to help in the establishment of a unitary Palestinian state; and to intervene under conditions where the end of the British mandate meant that there was no legally-constituted authority over the territory.

The Arab states involved in the conflict included Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. On May 15, Egyptian-led forces initiated an invasion from the south of Palestine. The conflict would continue for almost ten months, before an Israeli victory.

The outcome was bound up with the support of the US and the other imperialist powers for Israel, which they viewed as a beachhead for predatory operations throughout the region. It was also aided by conflicts among the Arab states, each of which was advancing the

interests of its own capitalist class. The Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union, in another gratuitous betrayal of the working class, supported the establishment of the Zionist state.

100 years ago: Nazis attack performance of Bertolt Brecht play in Munich

On May 18, 1923, members of the Nazi party disrupted a performance of Bertolt Brecht's *In the Jungle of Cities* at the Residenztheater in Munich.

Erwin Faber, one of the actors in the play, said later:

“The audience threw rotten eggs and stink-bombs onto the stage, and the performance had to be stopped, the theatre aired out, and even at the premiere of the play the police had to come, where they sat in every row of the theatre, while we played on with a half-lit house. It was the same with later performances.”

Brecht was a sympathizer of the German Communist Party (KPD) at the time. He had been critical of the 1919 Revolution in Germany but had participated in the Augsburg Soviet during the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic.

The play was about two men in a gangster-like struggle to destroy each other and did not have an overtly political message, but the Nazis even at this early stage expressed a hatred for left-wing artists and progressive culture.

Nazi activity interrupted Brecht's work again in November when he arrived at a rehearsal of his play *Edward II* at the Munich Chamber Theater and found the actors were talking about a putsch Hitler was attempting. Brecht canceled the rehearsal and met with Jewish and communist friends to discuss what they should do in the event that the putsch was successful. The putsch was put down by the authorities and rehearsals resumed the next day.

Brecht moved to Berlin the next year, but Nazi provocation became a ritual part of the opening of his plays and operas. His books were among those burnt by the Nazis in the infamous book burnings of 1933.



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