

This week in history: May 6–13

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.

5 May 2024

25 years ago: NATO bombs Chinese embassy in Belgrade raids

On May 7, 1999, US and NATO warplanes carried out their most devastating raids in seven weeks of increasingly savage bombardment of Yugoslavia, bombing Belgrade and hitting the Chinese embassy. Three were killed in the intentional attack and at least 20 were injured.

Those killed were journalists, including a newly-married couple, Zhu Ying and her husband Xu Xinghu, who had been dispatching first-hand reports of the bombing's impact on daily life in Belgrade to the Beijing newspaper *Guangming Daily*.

One Chinese diplomat expressed outrage over the attack, saying that the embassy was in a residential neighborhood, far from any likely military target. Yugoslav officials said that the targeting of the Chinese embassy was deliberate, in retaliation for China's opposition to the bombing and its agreement to represent Yugoslav diplomatic interests in Washington for the duration of the war.

Belgrade, a city of 2.5 million, was without electricity again as US warplanes dropped another graphite "blackout bomb" used to shut down the city's electrical system. The blackout shut down hospitals, the water and sewage system and other vital public services, for a metropolis the size of Boston or Cleveland. Another blackout bomb was used on Podgorica, capital of Montenegro, the smaller republic which, with Serbia, comprised the Yugoslav Federation. Virtually the entire Republic of Montenegro was without electrical power.

Hundreds of thousands of people took part in protests in Beijing and cities across China against the embassy bombing that weekend. Thousands of students and staff from a dozen universities marched past the US and British embassies, carrying banners that read "Killer NATO," "Stop American aggression" and "Pay blood debts in blood." As the numbers swelled with organized contingents from separate institutions, the mood became angrier. Students began to pelt the embassy with rocks and water bottles, smashing windows and lights. Many stayed behind after dark, defying police orders to disperse, and smashing cars with US embassy number plates. Others pushed against the lines of police ringing the embassies, shouting: "Don't you protect Americans."

50 years ago: German Chancellor Willy Brandt resigns

On May 6, 1974, West German Chancellor Willy Brandt resigned following an espionage scandal. Weeks before he stepped down, it was revealed to the public that one of Brandt's top aides, Günter Guillaume, was an agent of the East German government.

In his letter announcing his resignation, Brandt wrote, "I accept the political responsibility for negligence in connection with the Guillaume espionage affair and declare my resignation from the office of Federal Chancellor." Brandt named Foreign Minister Walter Scheel to serve as interim chancellor until the West German parliament could be organized to select a permanent replacement.

Guillaume had been an agent of the Ministry for State Security, or Stasi, the East German counterpart of the Soviet secret police, the KGB. In 1956 he moved to West Germany and was assigned to infiltrate the Social Democratic Party (SPD) to provide the Stalinist governments of East Germany and the Soviet Union with intelligence reports on the internal discussions in the SPD.

Upon his arrival in Frankfurt, Guillaume was quickly elevated in the SPD, first working as a publicist for the mayor of Frankfurt, Rudi Arndt. Then he was promoted to serve as Brandt's personal aide when he became chancellor in 1969.

According to West German state security reports that became public after Brandt stepped down, suspicions against Guillaume and his backstory of having "fled" East Germany in 1956 had existed since at least 1969. However, there was no real evidence against him and he was cleared by all security investigations. When the case was brought to Brandt, he ordered the police to continue to monitor Guillaume but also that no charges be brought against him unless hard evidence existed.

Eventually Guillaume became aware that he was under watch and confessed to being an agent when confronted by police on April 25, 1974. He was arrested and charged with treason against the West German government.

Initially, it was not expected that the scandal would bring down Brandt. News of the resignation came as a surprise to many. That he did resign was a major concession to the right-wing Christian Democrats who seized on the opportunity to call for his ouster.

Ultimately, the exposure of Guillaume as an agent was merely the pretext for a shift in orientation already decided by the German ruling class. The German capitalists could no longer tolerate any reforms or concessions to the working class. During Brandt's term as chancellor, West Germany was rocked by a major inflation-driven strike wave in the period after the collapse of the Bretton Woods system.

Fearing that the strikes could expand and even link up with East German workers, Brandt granted some wage demands. This provoked outrage from the German elite, who demanded major attacks on workers' living standards.

On May 16, 1974, Helmut Schmidt, the Minister of Finance, became chancellor. Brandt would remain the political leader of the SPD until June 1987.

75 years ago: Brutal police attack on striking miners in Canada

This week in May 1949, tensions boiled over in a strike by miners in the Quebec town of Asbestos that had begun in February, culminating in a brutal police assault on the workers. The stoppage was against the draconian pay and work conditions inflicted on the workers, who mined the toxic substance that shared the same name as the town.

On May 6, in an operation coordinated between the mine bosses and the right-wing provincial government, police forcefully broke pickets. The *New York Times* reported: "A motorized convoy of 150 provincial policemen armed with shotguns and tear gas bombs, today broke through barricades thrown up by 4,000 strikers around this entire town, the biggest asbestos production center in the world."

Police had been instructed to "shoot as necessary" and to use as much force as they liked. Cops shot into the air and began beating strikers ruthlessly with batons. At least 150 workers were arrested, some requiring hospitalization. The police assault was reported internationally and increased sympathy for the strikers and hostility to the provincial authorities.

The attack came the day after strikers had erected stronger pickets and blockades. The aim had been to prevent the Johns Manville Company, one of the main mine operators, from bringing in thousands of scab laborers. The blockades were one of a series of militant actions taken by workers. Over the previous month, railroads had been bombed, to prevent scab goods from being transported, and company cars overturned.

In addition to safety concerns over deadly asbestos, the strike was motivated by broader regressive conditions. That included pay rates that had not improved in decades, long working hours and the absence of any overtime penalty payments, including for weekend work.

The violent events of early May would increase the impetus for a negotiated settlement. A union-brokered deal would ameliorate some of the worst conditions facing the miners, in an attempt by the political establishment and the ruling elite to prevent further

eruptions.

100 years ago: J. Edgar Hoover becomes head of the predecessor to the FBI

On May 10, 1924, with the resignation of Director William J. Burns, Attorney General Harlan Fiske Stone made J. Edgar Hoover the acting director of the US Department of Justice's Bureau of Investigation, the predecessor to the FBI. Stone appointed him full director on December 10, a position he would hold for the next 48 years.

Hoover had joined the Justice Department as a 22-year-old lawyer in 1917, four months after the United States entered World War I, and soon became head of its Alien Enemy Bureau. He set himself the task of persecuting and imprisoning "disloyal" non-citizens, including a large number of socialist and anarchist immigrant workers from Eastern and Southern Europe who opposed the imperialist war. His work was facilitated by the passage of the Espionage Act that year.

In the aftermath of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the American ruling class saw the need to closely monitor and disrupt the development of the socialist and communist movements in the US. Hoover was selected to lead the Bureau of Investigation's "Radical Division" in 1919. He played a central role in the infamous anticommunist Palmer Raids of that year and the deportation of hundreds of left-wing immigrants.

His tenure as the leader of the FBI was devoted to disrupting workers and socialist organizations, spying on, harassing and imprisoning leftists and civil rights activists, and, very likely, directing physical assaults on and assassination of prominent anti-establishment figures.

Hoover was the first figure in American history to play the role of, in what was all but name, head of the secret political police.



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