

This week in history: May 20-May 26

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.

19 May 2024

25 years ago: India-Pakistan confrontation

In a major escalation of the India-Pakistan conflict, on May 26, 1999 the Indian Air Force began strikes against Pakistan to strafe groups of anti-Indian insurgents entrenched in the remote mountain region of Kargil-Batalik-Drass in the disputed areas of Kashmir.

The danger of a military confrontation between the two nuclear powers was ratcheted up another notch after the downing of two Indian warplanes earlier that week—one through mechanical failure and the other shot down by a Pakistani surface-to-air missile. Both aircraft crashed in Pakistani-held territory. One pilot was killed and the other was kept as prisoner of war.

The incident provoked a fresh round of belligerent accusation and counteraccusation. Indian Air Vice-Marshal S.K. Malik described the downing of the aircraft as a “provocative and hostile act” by Pakistan, insisting that the planes were operating on its side of the Line of Control (LoC) demarcating the Indian state of Kashmir and Jammu from the Pakistani-held Azad-Kashmir.

A senior Pakistani military spokesman, Major-General Anis Bajwa, claimed that the Indian aircraft had “rocketed” Pakistani positions in the Indus sub-sector and were shot down when they returned to the area. He described the violation of Pakistani airspace as an “act of war” and said the captured pilot would be held “under the regulations.”

The confrontation in Kashmir rekindled political tensions on the Indian subcontinent that erupted in May 1998 when the two powers carried out rival nuclear tests. In February 1999, Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif had claimed that their Lahore Declaration, which increased bilateral cooperation, constituted a new era in Indian-Pakistani relations.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the Hindu chauvinist party that dominated India’s caretaker coalition government, described the situation in Kashmir as “war-like.” India alleged that Pakistan staged the incursion to draw international attention to its half-century-long conflict with India over Kashmir. Pakistan had long-favored an “international” solution to the Kashmir question, that is, the direct involvement of the US, Britain or other major powers—a move that India had adamantly opposed.

In Pakistan, opposition parties urged the government to take further measures against India. The Pakistan People’s Party of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto branded the Indian air strikes “a brutal exercise against innocent civilians.” The fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami party urged Pakistan to sever diplomatic, economic and cultural relations with India.

50 years ago: Thousands arrested during India rail strike

On May 20, 1974, a massive nationwide strike of India railway workers entered its third week. This final leg of the strike was accompanied by a major increase in police repression by the government of Prime Minister Indra Gandhi.

The strike had begun on May 8, when some 1.7 million rail workers walked off the job. Gandhi responded with state repression and terror. In addition to the arrest of the principal leaders of the strike, including George Fernandes, president of the All India Railwaymen’s Federation, tens of thousands of workers were thrown in prison by police who violently attacked picket lines. In total, as many as 40,000 workers were arrested over the course of the strike.

The rail strike paralyzed all industrial production. Estimates at the time placed the total profit losses due to the strike at about \$2 billion. When adjusted for inflation, the impact of the 20-day shutdown would be the equivalent of more than \$12.7 billion today.

Workers called for a doubling of pay, which was as low as \$26 per month, an 8-hour workday and an end to the “continuous” staffing system that required workers to remain at work until a train had completed its trip. This system commonly saw rail workers and conductors remaining on the job away from their homes and families for weeks at a time.

In the months leading up to the strike the rail unions convened a series of meetings and congresses to organize the shutdown. Several different rail unions established a National Coordination Committee for Railwaymen’s Struggle (NCCRS) as the central leadership body of the strike. The committee’s leadership was a coalition of the Stalinist and Social Democratic factions in the various rail unions.

As state repression increased, rail workers demanded the strike be expanded to all other sections of industry in a nationwide general strike to force the release of all arrested workers. But the Stalinists of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Communist Party refused to defend the rail workers, though many were party members. Rather than expanding the broadly popular struggle into a nationwide general strike—which would have posed the question of the seizure of power by the working class—the Stalinists allowed the government to smash the strike.

On May 25 the AITUC issued a statement denouncing the call for a general strike as “unrealistic and adventurist.” It instead proposed to sponsor a toothless “Solidarity Day.” The AITUC also put forward an absurd bureaucratic argument claiming that the only body with authority was the full NCCRS. However, since several members of the NCCRS were in prison it was impossible for the committee to meet.

On May 27 the strike ended in an agreement to release all the arrested

workers and union leaders. No demands for wages or improvements to conditions were met.

The concession to the government by the Indian union leaders legitimized police terror as a method to combat opposition to inequality by the working class. It paved the way for the 21-month period known as “The Emergency,” that began just one year later in June 1975, when Gandhi imposed a state of martial law in India and arrested thousands of left-wing political opponents.

75 years ago: West Germany formally established

On May 23, 1949, a state of West Germany was formally established, with the promulgation of a new constitutional framework known as the Basic Law and plans for elections in several months’ time. The announcement formalized a partition of Germany between East and West that would persist for decades in the Cold War waged by American imperialism against the Soviet Union and its satellites.

The formation of a West German state had been in the works for several years. At the conclusion of World War II and with the defeat of the Nazis, Germany had been occupied by the Allied powers, including the US, Britain, France and the Soviet Union. The country was initially divided up into “zones” administered by each of those powers.

In a series of steps, the US, Britain and France would amalgamate their “zones,” which were increasingly counterposed to the Soviet “zone” in eastern Germany. This process formed part of the shift by the major powers from a wartime alliance with the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy to an aggressive confrontation with it, aimed at consolidating American imperialist dominance throughout Europe and internationally.

The divisions were underscored at a Paris Foreign Ministers Conference, also convened on May 23. Soviet representatives protested the establishment of West Germany, instead calling for a return to joint and collaborative control by the four wartime Allied powers. This was connected to Soviet demands for further “denazification,” and warnings that a new West German state would become a haven for German militarism. This call was sharply rebuffed by US Secretary of State Dean Acheson.

The Basic Law was heralded for its enumeration of a number of civil rights and liberties and at least on paper placing restraints on the use of the military, especially in any aggressive context. Despite being presented in this way as a turn to democracy, it was never put to the population for a vote.

The new state was dominated by Konrad Adenauer, leader of the Christian Democratic Union. He would become Chancellor after elections in September. Among Adenauer’s first measures then would be to call a halt to the official denazification campaign and declare an amnesty for many Nazis were they to come forward.

A Stalinist-dominated East German state would be formally established in October 1949.

100 years ago: 13th Congress of the Russian Communist Party opens in Moscow

On May 23, 1924, the 13th Congress of the Russian Communist Party opened proceedings in Moscow. It would last until May 31 and was the first party congress to be held without V. I. Lenin, the founder of Bolshevism, who had died in January.

The Congress was dominated by the ~~th~~ conflict between Opposition, led by Leon Trotsky, and the representatives of the party’s bureaucratic apparatus, represented by the “troika” of Grigorii Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and Josef Stalin.

The Left Opposition had begun its struggle against bureaucratic privileges in the party and for inner-party democracy with the “Declaration of the 46” in October 1923, and subsequently with several documents and letters by Trotsky, culminating in his collection *The New Course*, which was published in January 1924.

In March, the bureaucracy had purged many members of the party from military, academic and administrative groupings which were largely sympathetic to Trotsky. The delegates to the Congress had been selected by the apparatus and many supporters of the Left Opposition were excluded.

Two days before the congress, Lenin’s testament was read aloud to a small group of party leaders. The testament had called for the removal of Stalin on the grounds that he was rude and disloyal. Only a minority, including Trotsky, voted to release a written copy of the testament to the congress delegates. Instead, the document was read aloud to delegates by regional leaders who omitted some phrases and emphasized others. Delegates were not allowed to take notes. These readings were “transformed into a direct struggle against me,” as Trotsky later noted.

The testament also outlined reforms to the party, including the expansion of the number of members of the Central Committee. According to the Marxist historian Vadim Rogovin, however, these reforms were not discussed at the Congress and Zinoviev and Kamenev argued that conditions in the party had changed since the time when Lenin wrote it and that, in fact, the greater danger was Trotsky.

Zinoviev had at the outset of the Congress demanded the Left Opposition repudiate its political positions. As Rogovin notes, “The speeches of two Opposition leaders, Trotsky and Preobrazhensky, who indicated that such a demand was being made in the party for the first time, merely evoked a new wave of aggressive attacks.”

As a result of the congress, fewer supporters of Trotsky—who remained enormously popular with the Soviet working class—were elected to the party leadership, further isolating him. A campaign of misinformation and outright lies began. By the fall, Trotsky’s Theory of Permanent Revolution came under attack and Stalin began to push his reactionary theory of socialism in one country.



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