

This week in history: May 5-11

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

4 May 2025

25 years ago: Irish Republican Army vows to hand over its weapons

On Saturday, May 6, 2000 the Irish Republican Army (IRA) vowed to relinquish its weapons “completely and verifiably beyond use” and to allow international inspectors to oversee the disposal of arms. This was a sharp reversal, since only months before, the IRA had decided to keep its weapons, prompting the British government to reimpose direct rule over Northern Ireland on February 11, 2000, sequestering the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly until the IRA backed down.

After further backroom talks, British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that the Assembly would reconvene on May 22 but only after the IRA started the decommissioning of weapons. London and Dublin followed with a joint statement extending the deadline for power-sharing and decommissioning from May 22, 2000 to June 2001. The IRA then signed on to the deal.

The third parties selected to dismantle the cache of weapons were former African National Congress Secretary General Cyril Ramaphosa and retired Finnish president Martti Ahtisaari, both of whom were members of the International Crisis Group, led by former US Senator George Mitchell, the architect of the Good Friday Agreement signed on April 10, 1998.

The heads of state of Britain, Ireland and the US, along with Northern Ireland’s nationalist Social Democratic Labour Party, applauded the IRA’s decision. British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson, claimed that initially identifying the weapons but not destroying them gave the IRA an aura of renouncing violence but not surrendering to the British. US President Bill Clinton called it a “truly historic step.”

The leader of the political wing of the IRA, Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein, acknowledged the IRA’s effort to offer more than anticipated to ensure the continuity of the peace process. He stated, “The IRA doesn’t have to do this. It is only doing it to try and give some assurance to those who are nervous or genuinely concerned.”

Some hard-liners in “Continuity IRA” and “Real IRA” on the one side and in the ultra-right pro-British Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) on the other attempted to tear apart the weapons agreement.

Economic considerations extinguished any opposition, however. The bourgeoisie in Northern Ireland, together with the capitalist class in London, hoped to transform the six northern counties along the

lines of the Irish Republic in the south, which had attracted tens of billions in foreign investment from corporations using Ireland as a base for operations in the European Union.

In these endeavors, the IRA and Sinn Fein were direct accomplices in bargaining with the imperialist powers for both a share of the spoils and seats at the head of a capitalist government.

50 years ago: Soviet talks with Arab leaders break down

On May 5, 1975, a series of meetings in Moscow between Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko and the foreign ministers of Syria, Egypt, and Iraq concluded without substantive agreements. Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), also was in the USSR at the time and met with Soviet leaders.

The talks were organized by the Soviet government to convince the Arab nations to participate in a US-Soviet sponsored conference in Geneva. The Geneva conference was initially to be held in December 1973 following the conclusion of the Yom Kippur War but broke down after the US and Israel refused to allow the PLO to participate.

The 1973 Yom Kippur War, in which a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria recaptured significant territory from Israel, demonstrated the weakness of US imperialism’s control over the oil-rich Middle East. The prior prevailing conception that US-armed Israel was an unstoppable military force was shaken, leading to a broader radicalization among the Arab masses in the region.

This realization sent both the US and the Stalinist leadership in Moscow scrambling to prevent such a movement from developing. By refusing to allow Palestinian representation at the conference the US hoped to drive a wedge between nations like Syria and Egypt, who at the time still expressed a commitment to the defense of Palestine, and nations who were willing to abandon Palestinian rights to cut deals with imperialism, like Saudi Arabia and the USSR itself.

During talks with Syrian Foreign Minister Abdel Halim Khaddam, Gromyko proposed that the USSR would provide the “strictest guarantees” for Israel’s security if it withdrew from territories occupied since 1967. During another meeting, Gromyko stated that such guarantees could be formalized “with the participation... of the Soviet Union” to ensure “peaceful conditions for all states in the Middle East.”

The Stalinist proposal was essentially aligned with US demands for the permanent existence of Israel and thus the permanent expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland. Officially, the Soviet Union too did not recognize the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people despite its recognition by the Arab states. Arafat's visit to Moscow during the May meetings, which included appearances at the May Day parade, was purely symbolic and was not accompanied by any change to Soviet policy.

The meetings revealed other strains between the USSR and the Arab countries. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's request for relief from its Soviet debt was rejected, despite ongoing economic struggles. Soviet military aid to Egypt since the end of the war had been minimal, with Sadat noting receipt of "no more than a few tanks" by early 1975.

The Soviet stance expressed the bureaucratic regime's willingness to make trade and security deals with US imperialism in exchange for ceasing support to the Arab anti-imperialist resistance struggles.

75 years ago: Schuman Plan announced for European coal and steel production

On May 9, 1950, French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman announced a proposal to place French and West German coal and steel production under the control of a single authoritative body. Declared one day after Victory in Europe Day—marking five years since Nazi Germany's unconditional surrender in World War II—the "Schuman Plan" aimed to ease relations between France and West Germany and deepen their alignment.

In Schuman's words, "the solidarity in production thus established will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible."

The plan was later expanded to include other European countries, including Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. It led directly to the signing of the Treaty of Paris in April 1951 and the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). This institution laid the groundwork for further European integration through the European Economic Community (EEC) and, eventually, the European Union (EU). Today, the Schuman Declaration is regarded as one of the founding documents of the EU, and May 9 is commemorated each year as "Europe Day."

The Schuman Plan emerged out of the post-war reconstruction of European capitalism, which required dismantling barriers to trade and production across national borders. US support for the plan was bound up with its efforts—through measures such as the Marshall Plan—to stimulate the economic recovery of Europe and enable the free flow of capital and commodities.

It took place under the conditions of the emerging Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. The United States saw the Schuman Plan and European integration more broadly as a means of consolidating a Western bloc against the Soviet Union, including East Germany. Billions of dollars in Marshall Plan aid had already been pumped into Europe, to rebuild its shattered economies, so as to stabilize capitalism and construct a political and economic barrier to contain the Soviet Union.

100 years: Teacher charged in Tennessee for teaching evolution

On May 5, 1925, John T. Scopes, a 25-year-old teacher in Dayton, Tennessee, was charged with violating the state's Butler Act, which prohibited the teaching of evolution in schools.

In the lead-up to the charge and the trial that followed, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) had announced that it was prepared to run a test case against the Butler Act if it could find a teacher who had violated it. Several businessmen in Dayton, sensing an opportunity to get publicity for the town, approached Scopes and asked him to teach a class with George William Hunter's *Civic Biology* (1914), which had a chapter on evolution.

The book was required by the state of Tennessee, thus imposing on teachers the risk of breaking the law by using it. Scopes was initially reluctant, but the group persuaded him to use the book, although years later he admitted that he had skipped the evolution chapter in instructing students.

The ACLU backed Scopes and what followed was one of the most famous legal battles in American history, widely called the "Scopes Monkey Trial," that set up the teaching of science against religious dogmatism. Clarence Darrow, the leading progressive attorney of the day, was a part of the defense team and the prosecution featured William Jennings Bryan, the three-time presidential candidate of the Democratic Party and former Secretary of State in the Wilson administration.

Scopes was found guilty and fined \$100 (about \$1,790 today). The fine was later overturned by the Tennessee Supreme Court on a technicality, although it found the Butler Law to be constitutional. The law remained on the books until 1967.

Scopes' teaching career was essentially ruined, and he returned to school, ran for Congress in Kentucky as a member of the Socialist Party, and worked in the energy industry for most of his life.

A fictionalized account of the Scopes trial was the subject of the important 1955 play *Inherit the Wind*, written by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee. Written during the McCarthy period, the play, according to the authors, is "about the right to think." The play was made into a classic film by Stanley Kramer, starring Spencer Tracy and Fredric March, in 1960.



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