

## This week in history: May 12-18

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

11 May 2025

### 25 years ago: A massive firework explosion in the Netherlands killed 23 people

On Saturday, May 13, fireworks stored in a warehouse in the Dutch city of Enschede exploded, killing 23 people and injuring another 950. Four firefighters died trying to extinguish the blaze, 400 homes were obliterated, and 1,500 buildings were damaged. Around 10,000 people needed quick evacuation. The strength of the most intense blasts ranged from the equivalent of four to five tons of TNT. The epicenter of the blast sent shockwaves over 32 miles away. Property damage was over \$450 million.

Authorities said the fire started inside the building where 2,000 pounds of fireworks ignited. The fire spread outside the building, consuming two shipping containers that were illegally storing 177 tons of explosive fireworks. A multinational team of firefighters from the Netherlands and Germany stamped out the blaze over the course of the day and night.

The initial police hypothesis revolved around arson. In the preceding months, a spate of arson attacks in Enschede and the surrounding area unsettled local responders. It was instead revealed that a series of profit-driven safety violations, as well as governmental regulatory failures, created conditions for the disaster. Indeed, residents of the district of Roombeek, a working class neighborhood obliterated by the fireball, criticized government apathy and highlighted the consequential events that produced a potential, yet preventable, catastrophe.

SE Fireworks was a major supplier to concerts and commemorative events, housing copious quantities of fireworks in the poor working class neighborhood of Enschede. The warehouse, constructed in 1977, sat outside of the town but local authorities permitted the building of low-income neighborhoods around the warehouse without safety regulations in place. Residents and local councilors were oblivious to the firework depot and the safety threat it posed.

Dutch safety regulations demanded that explosives had to be stockpiled in separate insulated bunkers to prevent deadly accidents, but the company's entire supply of fireworks caught fire and detonated. During the court case, the judge condemned city officials, saying they knew safety laws were broken by the

company but failed to act because of financial considerations. Officials scoffed at paying the cost of moving SE Fireworks to another area. Underscoring the lack of government oversight and accountability, a week before the deadly inferno, SE Fireworks passed a check-the-box safety audit.

### 50 years ago: 41 US Marines killed in *SS Mayaguez* incident

On May 12, 1975, Cambodian revolutionary forces seized the US container ship *SS Mayaguez* near the Wai Islands, igniting a four-day crisis that expressed the desperation of American imperialism in the wake of its defeats in both Vietnam and Cambodia. The incident, occurring just two weeks after the fall of Saigon, was one of the final acts of US military aggression in Southeast Asia during the Vietnam era.

The *Mayaguez*, owned by the Sea-Land Corporation, had traveled into Cambodian waters while on route from Hong Kong to Sattahip, Thailand despite orders from the new Khmer Rouge government banning all foreign ships from their naval territory. The US government initially claimed the ship had been seized illegally in international waters. This was later proven to be false. The ship had come within just a few miles of Cambodian shores. Additionally, it was discovered that the *Mayaguez* had been carrying military spying equipment for use by the CIA.

The Ford administration responded to the capture of the ship by ordering a desperate and provocative operation to release 39 crewmen of the *Mayaguez* who were being held by the Khmer Rouge. US President Gerald Ford ignored all diplomatic options to secure the safe release of the crew. Believing that the capture of the ship was a test of imperialist resolve in the region, he hastily ordered a Marine assault on Koh Tang island, where the crew was falsely believed to be held.

The operation was a frenzied attack on the Khmer Rouge where the lives of the *Mayaguez* crew was only a secondary consideration. Over 1,100 Marines were deployed in total from Thailand for the operation. However, by the time the Marines landed, the Cambodian government had already announced the

crew's release and they had been delivered to a US navy vessel. One detachment of the Marine force sent to storm and retake the Mayaguez found it totally empty upon boarding.

Upon landing on Koh Tang island, however, the Marines faced fierce resistance from Khmer Rouge fighters. Despite outnumbering the Khmer Rouge three to one, the Marine assault was ground to an immediate stop by unrelenting machine gun fire from the Cambodian defenses.

After a day of fighting and it became known publicly that the Khmer Rouge had safely returned the crewmen, the US command eventually ordered the Marines to retreat and be evacuated from the island. During the battle, 41 US Marines were killed, including three who were left behind and later executed. Several helicopters were also shot down by the Cambodian forces.

Despite the embarrassing failure of the operation the media in the US assisted the Ford administration in covering up the debacle. Newspapers hailed Ford for his "decisiveness" while saying little to nothing about the 41 Marines killed in a "rescue" operation that took place after the crew was already safely returned.

### **75 years ago: American Communist Party leader jailed defying HUAC**

On May 12, 1950, Eugene Dennis, General Secretary of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA), began a 12-month jail sentence after being charged with contempt of Congress. Dennis was convicted for refusing to answer a subpoena and testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a body created in 1938 which served as a key instrument of the United States government's anti-communist witch hunt.

Dennis appealed the conviction to the Supreme Court, arguing that the jury was not impartial because it included federal employees who might fear being seen as "disloyal" for acquitting and sympathizing with a known communist. On March 27, 1950, the Supreme Court ruled 5-2 to uphold the conviction. Dennis was jailed six weeks later.

This contempt case coincided with Dennis and eleven other CPUSA leaders facing charges under the Smith Act (Alien Registration Act of 1940), which criminalized advocating the violent overthrow of the government. Arrested in 1948, they were tried for conspiracy to overthrow the government by force. The trial, lasting nine months, ended with guilty verdicts and five-year prison sentences for all defendants.

The targeting of Dennis and the CPUSA leadership was part of the broader wave of McCarthyite anti-communist repression sweeping the US. The Smith Act itself was a major escalation of the government's targeting of working class and socialist organizations in the US.

The trials of the CPUSA leaders followed the earlier persecution of Trotskyists in previous years, including members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). The CPUSA, a Stalinist organization, aligned itself with the regime in Moscow and supported the frame-ups of Trotskyist leaders under the Smith Act.

The SWP on the other hand, upheld the principle of defending all working class organizations against attacks from the capitalist state.

One week after the 1948 arrest of Dennis and others, the SWP Political Committee wrote, to no answer from the CPUSA: "While you did not come to the defense of the Trotskyists when we were persecuted under the Smith Act, we have already made public our opposition to your indictment and are fully prepared to further assist in your defense."

### **100 years: Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway* published**

On May 14, 1925, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf's third novel, was published by Hogarth Press (owned by Virginia Woolf and her husband, Leonard Woolf) in the United Kingdom. The work is widely known today as a classic of modernist literature. Many of its first readers appreciate its innovative style and psychological depth, others found its experimental nature challenging, but it was generally recognized as a significant contribution to contemporary literature.

The book concerns the events on a single day in London in 1922, when the 51-year-old upper middle-class Clarissa Dalloway, the wife of Richard Dalloway, a Conservative member of parliament, prepares for a party. The novel focuses on her thoughts and those of the war veteran Septimus Smith, who is suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, and Peter Walsh, Clarissa's former lover, although Woolf lets also us see into other minds, giving the reader a rounded picture of this milieu in its time and place. The book slides backwards and forwards in time, but its perspective is almost always highly subjective.

The book was undoubtedly impacted by the chaos and slaughter of the First World War and its aftermath and reveals disorientation among the middle classes. The language of the book is generally acknowledged to be of high artistic caliber.

Woolf was a member of the literary circle known as the Bloomsbury Group, that included her husband, Leonard, the economist John Maynard Keynes, the novelist E. M. Forster, Woolf's sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, and writer and essayist Lytton Strachey.



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