

This week in history: May 18-24

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

17 May 2026

25 years ago: 14 Mexican migrants die in Arizona desert

Over two days on May 23-24, 2001, 14 Mexican migrants between the ages of 16 and 35 died while crossing the Arizona desert, the largest documented death toll of immigrants in a single incident in over 20 years. Two others—former Coca-Cola workers from Coatepec, Jose Isidro Colorado Huerta, 28, and his cousin Edgar Martinez, 22—went missing and were presumed dead. Border Patrol officials also apprehended and deported a 12-year-old boy back to Mexico.

The 14 Mexicans died in a stretch known as the “Devil’s Path,” where scorching air temperatures reached an oppressive 115 degrees and ground temperature hit almost 130 degrees. The area was extremely remote with no nearby aid within a 150-mile radius. An emergency physician later compared the dehydrated, scorched bodies to Egyptian mummies.

The group of young workers had left from Veracruz, one of Mexico’s most impoverished states, on May 19. A total of 28 people paid smugglers (coyotes) to guide them into the United States. They were abandoned in the desert and told that a highway was only a short distance. In reality, the highway was over 60 miles away.

US government policy intended to stop border crossing at any cost. Enacted under the Democratic Clinton administration and continued by successive administrations, Operation Gatekeeper and similar police/military programs drastically bolstered border patrols near cities in California, Texas and Arizona. As more and more militarized border agents prowled the urban crossing points hunting human beings, migrants switched to more perilous routes through unpopulated areas in the mountains and deserts. Since the commencement of Operation Gatekeeper in 1995, migrant deaths soared along the US-Mexican border, increasing five times over. At least 340 died during the 2001 fiscal year, nearly one person a day.

The administration of Clinton’s Republican successor, George W. Bush, rejected any responsibility for the deaths, pinning all the blame on the smugglers. While coordinating with Mexican authorities to pursue the coyotes, Bush simultaneously expanded border enforcement, promising to surge 11,000 agents by 2003. These repressive policies only contributed to more preventable deaths.

The underlying cause of the immigration was Washington’s economic policy toward Mexico and Latin America. The IMF and World Bank’s market-derived austerity measures impelled individuals to seek work abroad to feed themselves and their families. As one

immigrant rights advocate put it: “They’re sentencing people to death for looking for work.”

50 years ago: Pol Pot installed as Cambodia prime minister

On May 20, 1976, Pol Pot was officially appointed prime minister of Democratic Kampuchea, the name given to Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge regime. Pol Pot had already emerged as the leading figure in the Khmer Rouge during the civil war, but the official appointment represented the consolidation of the absolute authority of the Khmer Rouge just over a year after their peasant guerrilla forces captured Phnom Penh in April 1975.

The political transition finalized the sidelining of the monarch Prince Norodom Sihanouk, who had been forced to resign as head of state in April. Sihanouk was placed under heavily guarded house arrest in the royal palace in Phnom Penh. Rather than exiling or executing the former monarch, the new regime sought to keep him alive and within reach, in the event he became politically useful in the future.

Pol Pot, born Saloth Sar, first became politically active in 1949 when he traveled to Paris on a government scholarship to study radio electronics. He quickly gravitated toward Stalinist intellectual circles associated with the French Communist Party.

Returning to Phnom Penh in 1953, Pol Pot worked as a history and geography teacher while also working to organize a Stalinist party in Cambodia. Following a severe police crackdown by Sihanouk’s royal government in 1963, Pol Pot and other party leaders fled the capital to seek sanctuary in the remote border highlands.

In this rural isolation, heavily influenced by Chinese Maoism, he developed an extreme nationalist program. Alongside associates like Khieu Samphan, Pol Pot envisioned a primitive peasant-based society that rejected urban culture, science and modern commerce.

The path to state power for Pol Pot’s faction was cleared by the massive societal disruption of the US war in Indochina. From 1969 to 1973, the US carpet-bombing of neutral Cambodia shattered the traditional agrarian economy, leaving two million people homeless.

The Khmer Rouge capitalized on this social catastrophe, building its guerrilla forces by recruiting heavily from the most impoverished, culturally isolated and traumatized layers of the rural peasantry who

had little connection to the industrial economy. When the corrupt, US-backed military dictatorship of General Lon Nol collapsed in April 1975, Pol Pot's guerrilla army—which had grown from 5,000 in 1970 to 70,000—came forward as the new state power.

Once officially installed as prime minister in May 1976, Pol Pot aggressively pursued a regressive social experiment. Viewing cities as strongholds of “imperialist contamination,” his regime ordered the immediate, forced evacuation of Phnom Penh and other urban centers. Over 2 million city dwellers—including workers, intellectuals, and civil servants—were driven into the countryside to perform grueling manual labor on massive, poorly planned agricultural projects. Over the next three and a half years, these anti-working class policies, including the total abolition of currency, medicine, and traditional cultural life, resulted in the deaths of up to 2 million people—nearly a quarter of Cambodia's population—from starvation, overwork, disease and political purges.

75 years ago: “17-point” agreement marks Chinese annexation of Tibet

On May 23, 1951, the “17-point” agreement was signed in Beijing between the governments of Tibet and China. Officially titled the “Agreement of the Central People’s Government and the Local Government of Tibet on Measures for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet,” the agreement secured Chinese control of the nominally independent province.

The first of the agreement’s 17 points declared that “the Tibetan people shall return to the big family of the motherland—the People's Republic of China,” officially incorporating Tibet within Chinese territory. Other points established a Chinese military headquarters in Tibet, integrated Tibetan soldiers into the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), and centralised control of Tibetan international affairs within the Chinese government.

The Tibetan cabinet, or Kashag, was compelled to accept the agreement after the PLA rapidly defeated the much smaller Tibetan army in late 1950. The newly formed People’s Republic of China (PRC), established by the 1949 revolution, invaded Tibet out of a desire to prevent the region becoming a base of operations for the imperialist powers or the nationalist Kuomintang, which had been overthrown and exiled to Taiwan.

The Tibetan people were one of the poorest ethnic groups in Asia, and had been particularly impacted by imperialist aggression over the previous decades. This included the British invasion in 1904, which effectively transformed the region into a British semi-colony until the granting of independence to India in 1947 and the departure of Britain from the region.

The victory of the Stalinist Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under Mao Zedong in 1949 was not based on the socialist unification of China’s different ethnic groups, and thus was incapable of securing the social and democratic aspirations of the oppressed Tibetan masses. After the 17-point deal was signed, the CCP initially avoided sweeping social reforms, preserving the position of the nobility and postponing land redistribution and the abolition of serfdom.

The maintenance of a large PLA garrison after the annexation fuelled anti-Chinese sentiment among broad layers of the Tibetan population. Opposition deepened throughout the 1950s, eventually

leading to the 1959 Tibetan uprising against the PLA’s military occupation.

100 years: French forces capture rebel capital in Morocco

On May 23, 1926, French imperialist troops took the headquarters of the Rif rebels—predominately Berber tribesmen led by Abd el-Krim—in the Moroccan city of Targuist in the mountainous north of the country.

French troops disarmed the rebels and pacified the area and on May 23, Abd el-Krim sent emissaries to the French lines under a flag of truce, explicitly stating his willingness to surrender. He accepted the strict terms laid out by French General Ibos.

The Riffians had revolted against Spanish colonialism in 1921, inflicting a major defeat on the Spanish at the Battle of Annual and had the Spanish on the defensive. They established a Rif Republic in 1923. Opposition to the war in Spain helped trigger the military coup which established the dictatorship of Spanish General Primo de Rivera. French imperialism entered the war on 1924 to protect its own interests in North Africa and in 1925 the Spanish government devoted enormous resources to the Rif War, including staging the world’s first modern amphibious landing.

A massive alliance of roughly 250,000 Spanish and French troops under French Marshal Philippe Pétain pushed the guerrilla fighters deep into the mountains. A relentless, devastating use of aviation-delivered mustard gas by Spanish forces had shattered the civilian economy, destroyed livestock, and broken the tribes' ability to resist. Realizing that continued fighting meant the genocide of his people, Abd el-Krim retreated to his heavily fortified compound at Targuist to negotiate an end to the war.

Abd el-Krim was exiled to the island of Réunion, a French territory in the Indian Ocean, from 1926 to 1947. He was then sent to the south of France, where he escaped to Egypt. From there he supported the fight of the Algerian National Liberation Front and the Vietnamese Viet Minh against French imperialism. He called on North African troops in Vietnam to defect to the Vietnamese liberation fighters. He died in 1963.



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