

## This week in history: May 25-31

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.

**24 May 2026**

**25 years ago: US government convicts four in Africa embassy bombings**

On May 29, 2001, a federal jury in the US convicted four men—Mohamed Rashed Daoud al-Owhali, Khalfan Khamis Mohamed, Mohammed Sadiq Odeh and Wadih El-Hage—on all counts for bombing American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Federal prosecutors had charged the defendants with 302 counts, ranging from murder, conspiracy to kill American nationals and government employees, to use of weapons of mass destruction, and related terrorism offenses. The attacks killed 225 people and left thousands injured.

The American justice system's prosecution of foreign nationals arrested in Africa for crimes committed there and then transferred to the US, exposed the expanding reach of US imperialism. American courts claimed the authority to convict anyone Washington deemed an opponent—suspected terrorists, innocent civilians, foreign leaders, politicians—turning the judiciary into an extension of the US military.

The prosecution's case centered on an alleged conspiracy orchestrated by fugitive Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden. US officials had placed a \$5 million bounty on bin Laden, who was also listed as a co-defendant. Efforts to capture the suspected mastermind failed, more of a blow to America's reputation in the region than to the prosecution's case.

Confessions formed the core of the evidence against the defendants. Defense attorneys argued these had been coerced. They stated that US intelligence agents, collaborating with Kenyan police, had held three defendants incommunicado in Kenya and denied them the right to a lawyer. Evidence was also gathered through illegal warrantless searches and wiretaps.

A key government witness in the case, former bin Laden aide and defector Jamal Ahmed al-Fadl, testified about the hierarchy and operations of al-Qaeda. The defense emphasized that he had received substantial financial compensation from US authorities and had previously admitted to embezzling funds from the organization.

The prosecution's weakest case fell against el-Hage, the Lebanese-born American. His attorney presented extensive evidence, including the testimony of a Kenyan gem trader, demonstrating that el-Hage operated a legitimate business in Kenya and worked in commercial enterprises owned by bin Laden. He left a year before the bombing and no evidence connected him to the blasts. The prosecution, though, still insisted that he "worked for a group that he knew was fighting America."

To counter this, defense attorneys showed evidence of US death squads raiding the capital of Somalia, Mogadishu, and attempting to assassinate leaders opposed to Washington. They said these attacks unleashed widespread resistance to US forces, leading to American casualties,

fueling anti-American sentiment in the region.

**50 years ago: Syrian forces intervene in Lebanon**

On May 31, 1976, Syrian armed forces crossed into Lebanon to intervene in the ongoing civil war. The intervention was aimed at suppressing the left-nationalist coalition that was on the verge of defeating the right-wing Maronite Christian militias backed by Israel and the United States.

The invasion began with an initial force of 2,000 troops and 60 tanks. This deployment would rapidly swell into a decades-long military occupation of Lebanon numbering up to 40,000 soldiers at its peak. With the aim of rescuing the right-wing militias, including the fascist Phalangist movement, from imminent defeat, the invasion exposed the deeply counterrevolutionary role of the Syrian Ba'athist regime and the breakdown of the pan-Arab bourgeois nationalist movements.

The civil war had erupted in April 1975 as a profound class conflict between the reactionary Maronite ruling elite and an alliance of poor Lebanese workers, Shia and Druze peasants, and dispossessed Palestinian refugees. This left-nationalist coalition was led by Kamal Jumblatt's Lebanese National Movement (LNM) and Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Lebanon's Palestinian population had swelled dramatically following their forcible removal from their homeland by the new Israeli state during the 1948 Nakba and then the subsequent bloody expulsion of the PLO from Jordan during the 1970-71 Black September massacres. These stateless, highly oppressed refugees found natural allies in the impoverished Lebanese working class, who were disenfranchised by the sectarian state.

Together, armed Lebanese and Palestinian workers forged a powerful coalition against the Maronite-dominated commercial and landowning elite. This alliance threatened to establish a secular, independent left-wing state in the Middle East. Fearing such a movement could spread, the capitalist ruling classes internationally, including the Syrian bourgeoisie, demanded a counterrevolutionary intervention.

Syrian President Hafez al-Assad viewed the prospect of a PLO-LNM victory with extreme hostility and fear. He recognized that a revolutionary, independent left-wing regime on his border would threaten his own military dictatorship. Furthermore, Assad feared a PLO victory would prompt a full-scale Israeli military intervention that could drag Syria into a direct war with Zionism and US imperialism.

To avert this, Damascus entered into a de facto alliance with

imperialism and the Israeli state to smash the Palestinian-Lebanese left. Israeli leaders, including Ariel Sharon, tacitly approved of the Syrian intervention as a necessary measure to suppress the revolutionary threat and preserve “regional stability.”

This betrayal paved the way for horrific sectarian atrocities, most notably the August 1976 massacre at the Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp. Under the direct protection of Syrian forces, Phalangist militias besieged the camp and slaughtered approximately 2,000 defenseless Palestinian refugees.

All the major regional Arab nationalist states would also fall in line to support the imperialist-aligned occupation. The Arab League would back the Syrian presence, sanctioning the occupation as an “Arab Deterrent Force.” This military occupation, far from being a temporary peacekeeping mission, would last for nearly three decades until Syrian troops finally withdrew in 2005.

### **75 years ago: Britain appeals to world court to reverse Iranian oil nationalization**

On May 26, 1951, the United Kingdom lodged a case with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) against Iran, demanding compensation for interrupting the flow of British profits after the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC).

The nationalization of the AIOC was formally concluded almost a month prior, approved by the Iranian senate the same day that Mohammad Mossadegh was sworn in as prime minister. For British imperialism, this was an intolerable disruption to its exploitation and plunder of Iran’s natural resources, for which the UK had been deriving significant profits from since the British-owned AIOC began drilling for oil in 1913.

The UK immediately began its efforts to reverse this decision and regain its domination of Iranian oil, warning Mossadegh and Iran of “very serious and far-reaching consequences.” Their legal case to the ICJ, titled *United Kingdom v Iran*, alleged that the Iranian Oil Nationalization Law of 1951 violated a 1933 convention signed between Iran and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC), the precursor to the AIOC. Under this deal, the APOC and its successor company had a license to extract oil in Iran until 1993.

The ICJ’s initial response was a temporary ruling to supervise operations of the AIOC by a five-member board, consisting of two Iranian and two British representatives, plus a third from another state. When Iran declined this arrangement, the UK took a further step against Iran by lodging a formal complaint to the United Nations Security Council, claiming that Iran was jeopardizing world peace. Britain was unable, however, to gain enough votes to carry this complaint any further.

After almost 14 months of legal deliberations, the ICJ ruled in favor of Iran in July 1952, on the grounds that the court had no jurisdiction in this matter given that the agreement was between Iran and a foreign company (not the UK itself).

This legal victory for Iran did not halt the broader campaign by Britain to overturn the nationalization of the AIOC. In the aftermath of the ICJ’s ruling, British imperialism sought even more aggressive measures against Iran, including oil boycotts and blockades. These efforts culminated in the UK’s intelligence service MI6 collaborating with the US CIA to orchestrate a coup that ousted Mossadegh from power in August 1953.

On May 25, 1926, an assassin shot to death Symon Petliura, the former minister of defense of the anti-Communist Ukrainian People’s Republic (UPR) of 1918-20. Under his command, the Ukrainian People’s Army (UPA) had killed between 30,000 to 50,000 Jews. As many as 200,000 Jews were killed, primarily in Ukraine, by the various anti-Bolshevik White Armies during the Russian Civil War.

His assassin was Samuel Schwarzbard, a Jewish anarchist from Ukraine and a former soldier in the Red Army, who had organized resistance against the pogroms of UPA in 1919. Fourteen members of his family were killed in anti-Semitic pogroms.

Schwarzbard had learned Petliura was exiled in Paris and had roamed the streets and cafés looking for him, with two photographs and a pistol in his pocket. He had seen him at a café near the Sorbonne on two occasions, but both times he had been accompanied by his wife and children. As one historian notes,

Finally, on May 25, Schwarzbard encountered Petliura browsing alone through the new releases at Joseph Gibert’s booksellers, on the corner of the rue Racine and boulevard St. Michel. Still unsure if the man he saw matched the photo, Schwarzbard asked, “Are you Petliura?” ... [he] took a chance and shot the former head of state five times. When police arrived at the scene, Schwarzbard was waiting for them: “I have killed a great assassin,” he declared.

Schwarzbard’s murder trial the next year was a cause célèbre, The prosecution sought to portray him as a mentally deranged and a Bolshevik, but Henri Torrès, the famous French lawyer and communist who represented him, told the jury, “It is no longer Schwarzbard who is at issue here. It is the pogroms.” After only 32 minutes of deliberation, the jury acquitted him on the basis that he had acted in self-defense.

Since 2017, the Ukrainian regime has made Symon Petliura a national hero. Among other public artworks, an official commemorative bust of Petliura was unveiled by government representatives in the capital city of Kiev, located on a prominent street that was also renamed Symon Petliura Street. Ukraine has also issued several commemorative stamps.



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**100 years: Ukrainian rightist leader assassinated in Paris**