

This week in history: June 9-15

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25 years ago: After election sweep, Walesa offers Polish Stalinists face-saving deal

On June 9, 1989, Solidarity leader Lech Walesa announced an agreement with the Polish government to hold a second round of elections, following a June 4 vote in which the Communist Party candidates were routed by those backed by Solidarity. The follow-up vote would fill the 33 seats in parliament left vacant by voters' refusal to vote for all but two of the 35 unopposed CP candidates on a so-called "national list."

At his first news conference since the election, Walesa declared, "We will not disturb the government." More than 73 percent of the eligible voters in Poland—some 20 million voters—went to the polls, the vast majority voting for Solidarity candidates, leaving the party in power with no mandate whatsoever.

The previous year, mass strikes of Polish workers in the shipyards, mines and transport industry forced the Stalinist regime to legalize Solidarity on April 17, 1989, in the midst of months-long negotiations. The talks, called the "round table," were the result of the action of Solidarity in calling off the strike wave the previous September. The complex election process planned for June 4 was engineered carefully by the bureaucracy and Solidarity to preserve the rule of the regime no matter what happened.

The unopposed candidates on the "national list," however, required a 50 percent majority to take office. The majority of voters, desiring to express their contempt for the regime, rejected 33 of the 35, leaving the seats unfilled. The second round of the elections were held to save face. Walesa had wanted the "national list" to be approved, but Polish voters refused.

Solidarity had won 252 of the 261 seats it was allowed to contest, yet the organization was not prepared to govern. One of its candidates, Jan Litynski stated, "We are simply not ready. We have no experience."

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50 years ago: Mandela sentenced to prison in South Africa

On June 11, 1964, African National Congress Deputy President Nelson Mandela and seven others anti-apartheid leaders, including ANC General Secretary Walter Sisulu, were convicted for having planned guerrilla sabotage against South Africa's racist government.

The six others convicted included four black members of the ANC, one Indian, and one white. A ninth defendant, Lionel G. Bernstein, was acquitted but immediately rearrested on charges he had "furthered the aims of communism." The defendants each received life sentences, the harshest penalties yet imposed on leaders of the ANC.

Prosecutors for the white minority government claimed that the eight had recruited supporters for military training in South Africa and abroad for an organization called Umkonto we Sizwe ("Spear of the Nation"). The guerrilla movement was organized by the ANC in 1961 to pressure the South African regime for reform of its apartheid policy through acts of sabotage against government offices and economic targets such as telephone and power transmission lines.

Before his sentencing, Mandela delivered what is regarded as his most famous speech, "I am Prepared to Die," in which he appealed not to the working masses of South Africa or the world, but to reformist sections of the ruling class in South Africa and internationally. While embracing individual acts of violence, he explicitly rejected the revolutionary violence of the masses and disavowed any connection to communism.

In the speech Mandela insisted that sabotage was a last resort turned to "solely because the government has left us no other choice ... we believed that as a result of government policy, violence by the African people had become inevitable, and that unless responsible leadership was given to canalize and control the feelings of our people," revolution would ensue. He declared he sought a South Africa not of equality, but of "equal opportunities."

Mandela differentiated "African nationalism" from Marxism. The latter seeks to abolish class distinctions, he admitted, "whilst the ANC seeks to harmonize them." Pointing to specific models, Mandela heaped praise on the British constitutional system. "I regard the British Parliament as the most democratic institution in the world, and the independence and impartiality of its judiciary never fail to arouse my

admiration,” Mandela said.

Spared the death sentence, Mandela would spend the next quarter century imprisoned at bleak Robben Island before being transferred to a mainland prison until 1990, when he was quickly catapulted from prison to the government to save capitalist rule in South Africa.

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75 years ago: Spanish fascist troops given benediction by Pope Pius XII

During the morning of June 11, 1939, Pope Pius XII granted a special audience to 3,200 of General Franco’s fascist troops. The soldiers were accompanied by the Spanish Minister of the Interior and by senior members of the Spanish Military and Naval Missions.

While the Pope was borne on a ceremonial seat into the Hall of the Benedictions, a Spanish military band played a march and the troops broke into enthusiastic cheers. Before taking his seat on the throne the Pope blessed a pile of rosaries that were afterwards distributed amongst those present.

In a brief address the Pope described the assembled mass murderers and rapists as the defenders of the faith and the civilization of their country. At the conclusion the Pope imparted the apostolic blessing to the audience and stressed how it was also extended to General Franco and the whole of the faithful of Catholic Spain.

Pope Pius XII and his recently-deceased predecessor, Pope Pius XI, as well as the Roman Catholic Church and the Spanish clergy had incited, supported and participated in the destruction of Republican Spain. Indeed the Catholic Church operated as an integral part of Franco’s fascist junta. As major landowners and stakeholders in Iberian capitalism and therefore the exploitation of Spanish workers and peasants, the Church was vehemently opposed to socialism and a society free from the age-old backwardness of clerical influence.

Whilst the Spanish troops visited Italy, the fascist-controlled Italian press took the opportunity to extol the contribution of Mussolini’s air force in the victory of fascism in the civil war. The newspapers boasted how almost 6,000 officers and men of the Italian Air Force took part in the Spanish campaign from 1936 to 1939.

The figures released by the Italian media, even making allowances for fascist exaggeration, make for horrifying reading. During the course of the Spanish Civil War, Italian airborne forces made almost 90,000 flights lasting a total of 135,265 hours, dropping 11,584,420 kilograms of high explosives, fired 1,042,712 rounds of small-arms ammunition, carried out 5,318 bombardments, hit 224 Republican ships during air attacks and downed 903 Republican planes, whilst

losing 83 of their own aircraft. Italian airmen killed in action numbered 175, with a further 200 injured.

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100 years ago: Tensions between Greece and Turkey threaten war

On June 12, 1914, Greece issued an ultimatum to Turkey to cease the persecution and expulsion of the Greek population in Ottoman-controlled territories. The tensions were part of the ongoing fallout from the Balkan wars of 1912-13, which had centered on a scramble for control of former possessions of the ailing Ottoman Empire by Greece and a number of Balkan states.

In the Greek Chamber of Deputies, Prime Minister Eleftherios Venizelos claimed that over 100,000 refugees had arrived in Greece or were waiting for transport, having abandoned their homes to escape persecution by the Ottomans. In addition to an end to the persecution, Venizelos demanded reparations from Turkey.

Tensions were heightened further by the announcement the next day of Greece’s formal annexation of the Chios and Mytilini (Lesbos) Islands, which were the wealthiest on the Aegean, had the largest Greek population on the Asiatic mainland, and were located in close proximity to important ports of Anatolia. The Great Powers awarded the islands to Greece during the Balkan Wars. Turkey did not recognize the award, and instead demanded Ottoman sovereignty over the islands, guaranteeing autonomy along the same lines as the islands of Crete and Samos.

Turkey argued that Greek occupation of Chios and Mytilini threatened Turkish sovereignty and pointed out that should Greece convert these harbors into naval bases, Anatolia would be threatened with constant Greek blockade. Moreover, Turkey argued that these islands were necessary for the defense of Ottoman territory in Asia Minor.

With war seemingly imminent, the Greek Cabinet decided to prepare by convoking the annual navy reservists, while in Turkey preparations were also made in the event of an attack by Greece, including planting mines in key waterways. Serbia, meanwhile, warned that it would not remain on friendly terms with the Ottoman government should war erupt between Greece and Turkey.

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