

# This week in history: May 13-19

12 May 2024

## 25 years ago: NATO bombs kill 100 in Kosovo

On May 13, 1999, NATO warplanes struck the village of Korisa in Kosovo province, dropping eight cluster bombs which killed at least 100 Albanian Kosovar refugees, most of them women and children. It was the worst single atrocity since the US-NATO war against Yugoslavia had begun seven weeks prior, following the bombing of the Chinese embassy hardly a week earlier, which killed three journalists and injured a further 20 people.

The village of Korisa, near the city of Prizren, about 40 miles southwest of Pristina, was crowded with hundreds of Albanian refugees who had fled into the hills and woods 10 days before, when intense NATO bombing of the area began. The refugees were staying overnight in Korisa on their way back to their homes. Each cluster bomb released up to 200 bomblets, which showered a wide area with explosive charges.

NATO officials initially denied any knowledge of the Korisa atrocity, but they admitted that the surrounding area had been targeted for heavy air strikes that night, using cluster bombs to break up alleged Serbian troop formations. It was the heaviest night of bombing since the war began, with 679 strikes, most of them in Kosovo. Other strikes knocked out electrical power in the three largest cities in Serbia—Belgrade, Nis and Novi Sad.

On a visit to Yugoslavia, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson publicly criticized the conduct of the NATO bombing campaign, calling the civilian casualties “extremely high.” NATO warplanes dropped anti-personnel cluster bombs on Nis, while Robinson was riding through the city. Two schools were hit, and at least a dozen people were wounded.

Both UN and Red Cross officials came to Kosovo to assess damage from civil war fighting and NATO bombing, for the first time since they pulled out March 29. The Red Cross began shipping humanitarian supplies into the province, for both Serbian and Albanian victims, despite a NATO embargo on all aid to Yugoslavia.

## 50 years ago: Israeli soldiers kill 31 during hostage situation in Ma'alot

On May 15, 1974 an Israeli special forces unit stormed the Netiv Meir Elementary School in Ma'alot, Israel, where a hostage situation had developed. Early in the day three members of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) had taken

over the school and took 115 people hostage to demand the release of 26 Palestinian prisoners being held by Israel.

After taking the school in the morning, the DFLP issued its demands to the Israeli government that no students in the school would be harmed so long as the prisoners held by Israel were swiftly released. Just after noon, outgoing Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir sent word that they would meet the demands.

However, the Zionist government had no plans to keep its word. Instead of releasing the prisoners, Meir ordered that the military prepare a raid on the school. That Meir told DFLP she would agree to the demands was purely a ploy to buy time to ready the assault on the school.

After several hours when it became clear that the prisoners were not being released, the DFLP refused to speak with representatives from the Israeli government. They insisted they would only speak to representatives from the French and Romanian governments and demanded that their ambassadors be brought to mediate negotiations.

In the late afternoon, frustrated by the deception, one of the DFLP members appeared and reiterated the demands saying, “We mean the ultimatum, every word of it. We want to see the French and Romanian ambassadors. No one else will do. We warn you, 6 p.m. is the final deadline. You are playing with these children’s lives.”

Shortly after 5:00 p.m. the order was given for the Sayeret Matkal, one of the top special forces units for the state of Israel, to launch the attack on the school. Just before the soldiers entered the school, the DFLP could be heard shouting, “Release the prisoners! Think of the lives of your children!”

When the soldiers stormed the school, they indiscriminately fired thousands of rounds. The three DFLP militants were killed along with 31 others in the school, 25 of whom were children.

Residents of Ma'alot, including the parents of the children, were outraged by the decision of the government to kill students rather than agree to a prisoner release. When Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Dayan, who directed the assault, appeared in public, he had to be protected by a phalanx of soldiers from furious parents.

The decision to launch the assault was made with the full knowledge that children would be killed. The Israeli government was searching for an excuse to step up its attacks on Palestinians. The very next day Israeli forces carried out bombings against what it claimed were offices and training centers of the DFLP. In reality, the bombs were dropped on seven different Palestinian refugee camps in southern Lebanon and killed at least 27 people and injured 138 more.

## 75 years ago: British Labour Party expels two MPs for opposing NATO pact

On May 18, 1949, the Labour Party formally voted to expel two members of parliament from the party for having voiced opposition to the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Parliament, under the leadership of the Labour government, had ratified the North Atlantic Treaty, which would create NATO, on May 12 with 333 votes in favor and just six against.

The NATO pact was at the centre of the new international order being established under the leadership of American imperialism. It brought together the US along with the major European powers into an alliance openly directed against the Soviet Union. Included in the treaty were provisions of mutual defence, requiring NATO partners to join each other in war.

The two expelled Labour members, Konni Zilliacus and Leslie Solley, had warned that the pact would heighten the danger of a new global conflict. They also condemned the pact for potentially subordinating Europe to the US and instead called for a united Europe. Zilliacus and Solley were at various points accused of sympathies towards the Stalinist regime in the Soviet Union, though there was never firm evidence that they were Communist Party “fellow travellers.”

The passage of the treaty and the expulsions underscored the right-wing and militarist foreign policy of the Labour government. Labour’s Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin, a former trade union official, was central to the talks establishing NATO. He aggressively agitated for the pact and denounced all those who criticised it.

In the lead-up to the formation of NATO, Bevin had proclaimed: “There is no chance that the Soviet Union will deal with the West on any reasonable terms in the foreseeable future. The salvation of the West depends upon the formation of some form of union, formal or informal in character, in Western Europe, backed by the United States and the dominions, such a mobilization of moral and material force will inspire confidence and energy within and respect elsewhere.”

The expulsions were part of a broader attack on democratic rights associated with this militarist line. That included interventions by the Labour government to suppress major workers’ strikes, accompanied by claims that such struggles were the result of Soviet meddling in Britain.

## 100 years ago: Eugene O’Neill play about interracial marriage premieres in New York

On May 15, 1924, Eugene O’Neill’s play *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* premiered at the Provincetown Playhouse in New York City, directed by James Light.

The play, named after the famous Negro spiritual, concerns the unhappy marriage of a black man Jim Harrison and his white wife

Ella and the reactions of various family members and their community about miscegenation. Paul Robeson, the great singer and actor—and later victim of the McCarthyite anticommunist witch-hunts—played Jim in the production.

The play evoked considerable controversy not only because of its subject matter but because of a scene in which Jim kisses his wife’s hand. The opening of the play was pushed back from March, and O’Neill was obligated to defend it in an interview in the *New York Times*, in which the playwright observed that not one subscriber to Provincetown Playhouse objected to it.

In response to a question, O’Neill, who would later win the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes, noted “spiritually speaking there is no superiority between races, any race.” He continued:

I have no desire to play the exhorter of any racial no man’s land. I am a dramatist. To me every human being is a special case with his or her own special set of values. True, often these values are just a variant of values shared in common by a great group of people. But it is the manner in which those values have acted on the individual and reactions to them which makes of him a special case. ... What is the theater for if not to show man’s struggle, whether he is black, green, orange, or white, to conquer life in his effort to give it meaning?

Nonetheless, this was the period in which the Ku Klux Klan was at its height, and strenuous efforts were being made to divide the working class along racial lines. Calls were made to have the play banned, especially in the South.

While O’Neill did not consider himself a Marxist, he had been a part of the radical bohemian circles in New York’s Greenwich Village before the First World War and worked with the revolutionary socialist journalist and founder of the American Communist Party, John Reed, in the production of plays in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He had also been a member of the revolutionary trade union, the Industrial Workers of the World.



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