

This week in history: April 29-May 5

29 April 2019

25 years ago: Japanese minister defends World War II atrocities

On May 4, 1994, newly elected Justice Minister Shigeto Nagano made a series of comments in the newspaper *Mainichi* defending the atrocities of the Japanese military during World War II.

The former chief of staff for the army declared that the 1937 Rape of Nanking—in which 200,000 Chinese were butchered—was a fabrication. He added that the war waged by the Japanese armed forces was not aggression, but was instead aimed at “liberating” the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere, the wartime term used by Japan to refer to its Asian conquests.

These comments were immediately denounced by China, North Korea, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and the Philippines, all of which were occupied by Japan in the first half of the century.

Three days later, Nagano’s resignation was reluctantly accepted by Prime Minister Tsutomu Hata. It was the third time since 1986 that a Japanese Cabinet minister had resigned or was fired for making revisionist statements about the role of Japan in the Second World War. Protests emerged in Seoul outside the Japanese embassy. Hata named Hiroshi Nakai, deputy secretary general of the Democratic Socialist Party, as Nagano’s replacement.

In reviving Japan’s wartime propaganda, Nagano was preparing the way for changes in Japan’s constitution to allow the dispatch of the military overseas. The week prior to Nagano’s comments, newly elected members of the foreign and defense ministries called for “emergency legislation” to ensure Japan’s “collective security,” albeit in a more guarded fashion. Nagano’s mistake was declaring too explicitly the political orientation demanded by the new Hata government among sections of the ruling class.

The preparations for the revival of Japanese militarism were made as bitter conflicts were emerging over control of the Asia-Pacific region. Unable and unwilling to accept its postwar status as a “defeated power,” the Japanese ruling class attempted to create a political regime to

defend its interests against other imperialist powers.

50 years ago: Number of US troops in Vietnam reaches peak of 543,482

On April 30, 1969, the Pentagon calculated that the number of US military personnel in South Vietnam had reached 543,482, a figure that turned out to be the high point of the US military presence in the occupied country. President Richard Nixon was just four months into his presidency after an election campaign in which he had promised, in a formulation so vague as to be meaningless, to “an honorable end to the war in Vietnam.”

The plan of the Nixon administration was to end the war by escalating US military violence to force North Vietnam into agreeing on a settlement that was favorable to the US. The goal was to keep the US-backed South Vietnamese government afloat and prevent a military defeat that would do incalculable damage to the world position of American imperialism.

Nixon had already begun an escalation of the war earlier in the year by greenlighting Operation Menu, the secret bombings of Cambodia. It was hoped that the additional surge of troops would be able to bolster the US forces to carry out offensives against the North Vietnamese Army and the National Liberation Front.

However, after the 1968 Tet Offensive, which exploded the lies of the US government about steady progress in the war, and revealed the strength of the guerrilla forces, support within the United States for the war was falling fast. Just a few weeks earlier in the month students at Harvard and other universities had carried out large demonstrations calling for the immediate end to the war.

The mounting death toll powerfully reinforced the growth of anti-war sentiment. In April 1969 alone, some 30,000 American soldiers were either killed or wounded in the Vietnam theater of operations, which included coastal navy warfare and the air strikes on North Vietnam, as well as cross-border operations into Laos and Cambodia, which the administration kept secret from the American people.

75 years ago: Nazis execute 200 Greek communists at Kaisariani

On May 1, 1944, Nazi forces in Athens carried out the execution of 200 Greek communist prisoners, long held at the Haidar concentration camp, in reprisal for the killing of a German general by Greek Resistance forces.

Partisans of the communist-led ELAS ambushed and killed General Franz Krech and three other German officers at Molaoi in the Peloponnese, on April 27. The German occupation authorities immediately declared they would execute the communists on May Day, to desecrate the day of the international revolutionary working class.

Most of the prisoners were members of the Communist Party of Greece, arrested under the right-wing Metaxas dictatorship before World War II, and held in prisons or in internal exile on small islands where they were rounded up after the Nazi invasion and occupation of Greece in April 1941. Those communists held in Italian prisons were transferred to the German-run concentration camp at Haidari after the Italian surrender in September 1943.

According to eyewitness accounts by surviving prisoners and guards, the 200 prisoners selected for execution remained defiant to the end, singing the Greek national anthem and prison songs as they were put into trucks to be moved to the site in Kaisariani, outside Athens, where the firing squads would perform their bloody work. The men refused to undress, as ordered to by their killers, and were shot in groups of 20, with their bodies buried in an Athens cemetery.

Besides the political prisoners—who had played no direct role in the guerrilla warfare against the Nazi occupiers—at least another 125 actual or suspected members of the Resistance were executed. This included 25 in Athens, killed by the Germans, and another 100 prisoners of the Greek collaborationist forces, murdered at the orders of Colonel Dionysios Papadongonas, in an action that prefigured the savage fighting of the Greek Civil War that followed the defeat of the Nazis.

The Nazi military command in Athens further expanded the bloodbath by declaring the entire Peloponnese, the portion of Greece south of the isthmus of Corinth, to be a war zone, the equivalent of the “free-fire zones” declared by American forces in Vietnam, where German troops were authorized to shoot anyone on sight.

100 years ago: Anarchists begin campaign of mail bombings in the US

On April 29, 1919, a mail bomb detonated in the home of Georgia Senator Thomas W. Hardwick. The explosion blew off the hands of Hardwick’s housekeeper when she opened the package. It also injured the senator’s wife. Hardwick had been a sponsor of the 1918 Immigration Act that targeted anarchists, communists and union organizers.

In April a total of 36 other mail bombs containing dynamite and shrapnel were sent out to capitalists such as John D. Rockefeller, editors of newspapers, law enforcement figures such as Richard Enright, New York City Police Commissioner, and Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, as well as to politicians such as Seattle Mayor Ole Hanson who had helped to defeat the general strike in that city in February.

Most of the bombs that reached their targets failed to explode and others were intercepted in the mail by postal authorities.

The group that sent the bombs were followers of Luigi Galleani, an Italian-born anarchist who had settled in Paterson, New Jersey. He believed in the use of individual terror to further the class struggle. In 1902 he had been shot and wounded by police after speaking at a rally of striking silk workers in Paterson. He was the author of *Health Is In You!*, a manual for making bombs.

The Galleanists conducted a second wave of bombings in June. Attorney General Palmer’s house was demolished and the anarchist who placed the bomb was killed. Future President Franklin D. Roosevelt, then the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, and his wife, Eleanor, avoided injury in the blast when they passed Palmer’s house only minutes before detonation.

The Galleanists also were later believed to be responsible for the Wall Street bomb of September 16, 1920 that killed 38 people.

The bombings of 1919 became a pretext for the anti-communist Palmer Raids that began in November 1919 and targeted immigrant workers, striking coal miners, and communists and socialists.

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