

This week in history: November 30-December 6

30 November 2009

This Week in History provides brief synopses of important historical events whose anniversaries fall this week.

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25 years: Thousands die from poison gas in Bhopal, India

On the morning of December 3, 1984, hundreds of thousands of residents of Bhopal, India, wake up with a burning sensation in their lungs and eyes. Panicked, many run from their homes into an enormous cloud of poisonous gas that has seeped out of a nearby chemical plant, owned by the US corporation Union Carbide.

As many as 8,000 Bhopal residents die within 72 hours, and more than 500,000 are exposed to the deadly compound methyl isocyanate. Many experience gruesome deaths, the result of the chemical attacking soft body tissue. Others are trampled by fellow residents fleeing affected neighborhoods in this city of one million, the capital of Madhya Pradesh. Many more are made blind or permanently injured by the poison.

In the years leading up to the disaster, Union Carbide had been warned by experts of the danger of a chemical reaction posed by suspect chemical storage methods. The governments in New Delhi and Bhopal, for their part, had taken no serious measures against Union Carbide, and disregarded the dangers posed by the location of a large chemical factory in a crowded urban

50 years: Detroit gears up for record production

Detroit automakers are projecting record production in the first quarter of 1960, according to an industry trade journal.

The Big Three; General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler, together with American Motors and Packard, project that they will turn out 2,240,600 cars in the first three months of the new year, eclipsing the quarterly record set in 1955, and moving toward the nine million car mark on an annualized basis. GM aims to produce well over 1 million cars in the first quarter; Ford about 620,000, and Chrysler, 380,000. US automakers will account for over 90 percent of all cars sold in the US, and nearly half of global auto sales.

The increased production will make up for a decline in 1959 caused by the recently concluded steel strike that lasted 116 days and involved 500,000 workers, which starved the nation's auto plants of steel.

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75 years: Soviet leader Kirov assassinated

On December 1, 1934, Sergei Kirov, the chief of the Leningrad Communist Party and secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee, and member of the party's Political Bureau (Politburo), is assassinated under mysterious circumstances at the party headquarters in the Smolny Institute in Leningrad.

A Bolshevik from the 1905 Revolution onward, and a loyal supporter of Joseph Stalin during the 1920s, Kirov (born 1886) became a perceived threat to Stalin in 1932-34 due to his hesitation in carrying out the latter's demands for the arrest of oppositional party members. Kirov also embarrassed Stalin by receiving only a handful of negative votes at the 1934 Party Congress, as opposed to the 292 votes cast against Stalin.

The assassination is attributed to Leonid Nikolaev, but within hours Stalin seizes on the event to arrest alleged "enemies of the Soviet Union" within the Red Army general staff, Leningrad political leadership, the GPU secret police, and elsewhere. Press reports indicate that dozens are executed in the first week of December, after the Central Committee reinstates the death penalty and institutes swift trials without possibility of appeal.

There is no credible explanation for the assassination. Kirov is killed by a bullet shot through the back of the neck fired from close range. Nikolaev has been arrested many times, most recently three weeks earlier when he was found with a gun at the Smolny. He was released and allowed to keep his handgun in violation of Soviet law. The day of the assassination, party security is removed from Smolny. A witness to the crime is arrested and dies the next day while under police custody, allegedly in a car accident. Nikolaev and much of his family, including his wife, siblings, and elderly father, are soon executed.

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constitutional crisis

On November 30, 1909, the House of Lords votes, by a margin of 350 to 75, to reject the reformist budget proposed by the Liberal-controlled House of Commons. In response, the Liberal prime minister, H. H. Asquith, dissolves Parliament, calling the Lords' vote unconstitutional and a violation of the powers of the Commons.

It marks the first time since the 17th century that the House of Lords has rejected a budget from the House of Commons, which holds the power of the purse.

The first budget of Chancellor of the Exchequer David Lloyd George, the "People's Budget," as it is called by its supporters, aims to raise retirement pensions and institute other social reforms by increasing income taxes on the wealthy and by instituting a "land tax" on large landholders. The land tax infuriates the landed gentry who dominate the House of Lords.

Behind the scenes King Edward pleads with the Lords to approve the budget. It is said he fears the Lords' vote will "open the door to the most dangerous possibilities, among which even the very existence of the monarchical form of government was included," according to one observer.

Ominously, the "People's Budget" also calls for naval rearmament to maintain Britain's traditional naval superiority over Germany.

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100 years: "People's Budget" in Britain provokes