This week in history: November 3-9

3 November 2014

25 Years Ago | 50 Years Ago | 75 Years Ago | 100 Years Ago

25 years ago: Berlin Wall comes down

On November 9, 1989, thousands of residents of East Germany (GDR) crossed the border into West Berlin after the government of Egon Krenz announced free travel into West Germany. The announcement followed weeks of mass anti-Stalinist demonstrations in the major cities of the GDR, with hundreds of thousands participating. On November 4, in a demonstration in the Alexanderplatz, a half million people protested

GDR Politburo member Guenter Schabowski announced at a press conference that East German citizens would “promptly” be issued permits to travel to West Germany and could either stay there or return. Schabowski had not been informed of the stipulations made by the session of the Politburo that day, including the fact that the new regulations were to go into effect the following day. As a result, chaos ensued at all the checkpoints along the Berlin Wall, which were inundated with people seeking to enter West Berlin. Uninformed and confused guards waved people across.

At Checkpoint Charlie, the most significant crossing point, celebrating crowds filled the streets on both sides of the border, with car horns honking and sirens blaring.

The Berlin Wall, which was erected by the Stalinist regime under Walter Ulbricht in 1961 to prevent defections from the GDR, was an object of hatred by the population on both sides of the border. In the course of the celebrations, which lasted into the next day, many climbed on top of the wall as a protest of its continued existence. Since its construction, some 200 people had been killed attempting to flee into West Berlin.

Many of the celebrants took sledgehammers to the wall, taking pieces of the edifice as souvenirs and beginning the process of its destruction.

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50 years ago: Johnson wins US election landslide

On November 3, 1964, Democrat Lyndon Johnson won the most lopsided presidential election in US history, in terms of popular vote, winning more than 61 percent to Republican Barry Goldwater's 38 percent.

It was the high-water mark for the electoral fortunes of American liberalism. Johnson ran the most avowedly pro-reformist campaign since Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal campaign of 1936, which had previously been the most lopsided popular vote in US history. In the months preceding the vote, Johnson called for the permanent eradication of poverty, the ending of racial segregation, with his signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and a new spate of social reforms, with his recently unveiled Great Society plan.

Goldwater ran a right-wing campaign that broached using nuclear weapons in Vietnam and supported Jim Crow segregation in the South. He gained the support of racist Southern politicians such as Strom Thurmond, and in so doing managed to carry the Deep Southern states where voting restrictions prevented masses of workers, black and white, from voting: Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Mississippi. Goldwater barely carried his home state of Arizona. These six states accounted for all of the Republican’s electoral votes.

With 62 percent of eligible voters casting ballots, the American electorate delivered a stinging rebuke to Goldwater's militarist and racist campaign and endorsed what appeared to be Johnson's call for a more equitable society. Yet contradictions were building up that would, within four years, destroy the Johnson administration and bring to a crashing end the epoch of liberal reform only 35 years after its emergence with FDR.

Johnson's criticism of Goldwater's war policy was dishonest. He had already, in fact, embarked on a drastic escalation of the US involvement in Vietnam based on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, passed by the Senate after an alleged attack on US naval vessels by the North Vietnamese that Johnson knew to be bogus.

While the economy continued to grow rapidly, the preeminent position of US capitalism in world affairs was being eroded by a growing balance of payments deficit and the reemergence of key rivals, Japan and West Germany. And 1964 witnessed the beginnings of the urban upheavals, with major riots having taken place in New Jersey, Harlem, Chicago, and Rochester, New York. The northern cities, as well as the Jim Crow southern states, were dominated by Johnson's own Democratic Party.

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75 years ago: Failed attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler

On the evening of November 8, 1939, at an event to commemorate the 16th anniversary of Hitler’s Beer Hall Putsch in

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Munich, an unsuccessful attempt was made on the life of the Nazi leader when a bomb went off at the end of his speech. Hitler was not harmed.

The next day two British agents, Major R.H. Stevens and Captain S. Payne Best, were arrested on the Dutch border and used in the Nazi propaganda campaign against Britain. Many groups fell under suspicion after the failed attempt on Hitler's life, including dissident fascists, communists, conservatives and clergy. Embryonic plans were indeed afoot to kill Hitler amongst German military figures dismayed with what they saw as his recklessness in provoking war with France and Great Britain.

"The truth was less elaborate—but all the more stunning," wrote Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw. "The attempt had been carried out by a single person, an ordinary German, a man from the working class, acting without the help or knowledge of anyone else. Where generals had hesitated, he had tried to blow up Hitler to save Germany and Europe from even greater disaster."

The worker's name was Georg Elser, a 36-year-old joiner from Konigsbroom in the southwest German state of Wurttemberg, who prior to the taking of power by the Nazis had given his support to the German Communist Party (KPD). Afterwards he noted the anger among the German working class as their living standards and wages deteriorated under Nazi rule. Elser spoke about these issues frequently with his fellow workers and about the danger of an impending war caused by Nazi aggression.

After the European powers capitulated to Hitler's demands over Czechoslovakia in 1938, Elser became convinced that only Hitler's death could save the European working class from disaster. While politically misguided as to the method, Elser's targeting of the Nazi leader was motivated by the noblest of causes: the emancipation of the working class.

On the night of the attempt on Hitler's life, Elser was picked up on the German border attempting to cross into Switzerland illegally. On November 14, he confessed and gave the authorities a full account of his actions and motivations. He suffered brutal torture at the hands of the Nazis, but refused to implicate comrades and fellow workers.

Subsequently interned by the Nazi's at Sachsenhausen concentration camp, Elser was intended to be the star witness in a Nazi postwar show trial designed to implicate British secret services. However, with the war virtually lost in early 1945, Elser was transferred to Dachau where shortly before liberation by American troops, he was shot dead on Hitler's personal orders.

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100 years ago: Britain annexes Cyprus

On November 5, 1914, the British government formally annexed Cyprus, which had previously been within the nominal sphere of influence of the Ottoman Empire. The move followed the outbreak of world war in August, and the alliance between Turkey with the Central powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, who were pitted against the Entente forces, including Britain, France and Russia.

Cyprus had been designated a British protectorate in 1878, having been a possession of the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman officials had signed over control of the island in exchange for a British assurance of support in the event that Russia attempted to seize Turkey's possessions in Asia. Over the ensuing decades, Turkey retained a strong influence on the politics of Cyprus, while its relations with the major powers, including Britain, deteriorated.

The British seizure of Cyprus followed a series of crippling military defeats for the Ottomans. In 1911-12, they had lost control of modern-day Libya to Italy, during the Italo-Turkish war. From late 1912, to early 1913, Turkey had been routed by a coalition of Balkan states, losing its longstanding dominance over the region. While France, Russia, and Britain had avoided direct participation in that conflict, they had tacitly backed the destruction of Ottoman authority in the Balkans.

The Ottoman Empire joined the Central Powers on August 2, 1914, signing a secret agreement with the German government. Underlying their adherence was a desire to retrieve possessions lost to Russia in Eastern Anatolia decades earlier, territory that today is part of Georgia and Armenia. Russia had also taken a particularly aggressive role in backing the Serbian campaign against the Ottomans during the first Balkan war.

The British annexation of Cyprus produced a crisis among many of the local officials who had sought to balance between the island's formal status as a British protectorate, and residual Turkish influence. Most of the Greek-speaking elite supported Britain and aimed for a postwar union with Greece. Roughly a quarter of the island's population was Turkish-speaking.

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