

This week in history: January 30-February 5

This column profiles important historical events which took place during this week, 25 years ago, 50 years ago, 75 years ago and 100 years ago.

29 January 2023

25 years ago: State of Texas executes first woman since Civil War

On February 3, 1998, Karla Faye Tucker, 38, was executed in the state of Texas after a unanimous decision by the Board of Pardons and Paroles. Hers was the first execution of a woman in Texas since the Civil War. Tucker became the second woman executed in the US since the Supreme Court allowed the death penalty to be resumed in 1976.

Tucker's life story, in its harrowing circumstances, was typical of many on death row. At age 14 she was introduced to the life of a prostitute by her mother, with whom she shared drugs "like lipstick." In 1983 Tucker, then 23, and her boyfriend committed a brutal double murder, while the two were on drugs.

Fourteen years later, having undergone a religious conversion, Tucker claimed to be rehabilitated. In a clemency appeal to then-Texas governor (and later US president) George W. Bush, and the state Board of Pardons and Paroles, she wrote: "I feel that if I were in here still in the frame of mind I got arrested in, still acting out and fighting and hurting others and not caring or trying to do good, I feel sure you would consider that against me.... I don't really understand why you can't or won't consider my change for the good in my favor."

Not one member of the Board of Pardons and Paroles voted for the commutation of her death sentence. The Board turned down her appeal on February 2 by a vote of 16-0, with two abstentions.

The Board, six of whose members were appointed by the previous governor, Democrat Ann Richards, and 12 by Bush, heard 16 appeals for clemency in 1997. Not one member of the board voted for clemency in a single case. Nor did Bush commute a single one of these executions. Texas executed 37 people in 1997.

After the Board's decision David Botsford, one of Tucker's lawyers, declared: "Texas has no mercy. The clemency process in this state is a farce." In an earlier statement Botsford noted that the Board did not even meet in person. "Those that vote," he noted, "vote by fax, telephone, or letter.... They won't give Karla Tucker a chance to plead her own case with them personally." Her execution underscored the increasing resort to capital punishment nationwide.

50 years ago: Nixon aides found guilty in initial Watergate trial

On January 30, 1973, two former officials of US president Richard Nixon's re-election campaign committee, G. Gordon Liddy and James W. McCord Jr., were found guilty of charges related to their role in the Watergate burglaries. The two men had been charged with various counts of conspiracy, burglary, and wiretapping at the Democratic Party's headquarters in June 1972.

Liddy and McCord were the two highest ranking members of the Republican Party implicated in the conspiracy to that point. Prior to serving as general counsel to the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP), Liddy had held positions in Nixon's treasury department, and earlier had been an FBI agent and on the personal staff of J. Edgar Hoover.

McCord had spent time in both the FBI and CIA. As a CIA agent he led counter-intelligence operations against the Fair Play for Cuba Committee and held high positions in the CIA's Office of Security. In 1972, after resigning from the CIA, McCord was hired as a security officer by the Republican National Committee and Nixon's re-election campaign.

The two had been arrested after the June 17, 1972, break-in at the Watergate office building, where the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee was located. McCord had been arrested at the scene of the crime, while Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, another former CIA agent, who had planned and led the plot, were indicted later.

While McCord and Liddy were only two of seven men charged with crimes related to Watergate, they were the only two to plead "not guilty" and have their case go to trial. Despite the jury returning a guilty verdict, the trial was staged to avoid implicating higher ranking members of the Republican Party, most notably Nixon himself. The prosecutors intentionally ignored establishing a motive for the crime and focused solely on the immediate charges regarding the break-in. The hope was that McCord, Liddy, and the others could serve as scapegoats, and the investigation would go no further up the ranks of the Republican Party.

When the trial concluded, the direct role of Nixon's White House in the crime still remained murky, but it became clear there was more to the conspiracy than had been made known to the public. The following week, the US Senate would vote to establish a select committee to carry out its own investigation into Watergate.

Threatened with decades of prison time, McCord would eventually agree to cooperate with the investigation and had his sentence reduced, serving only four months in prison. Liddy would refuse to cooperate with the congressional investigation and in 1974 was

charged with contempt of Congress. He was sentenced to 20 years, but had his sentence commuted by President Jimmy Carter in 1977, allowing for his release from prison on parole after serving just four years.

75 years ago: Mahatma Gandhi assassinated by Hindu extremist

On January 30, 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by far-right Hindu extremist who thought that his activities were obstructing an all-out war against Muslims, following Britain's communal partition of India the previous year.

The British, while granting nominal independence, had presided over the division of the sub-continent into a Muslim-majority Pakistan and a Hindu-dominated India. This program of divide and conquer, aimed at ensuring continued imperialist dominance, was embraced by the venal elites of all communal groups. Within months, partition in August 1947 had led to the killings of hundreds of thousands, in communal fighting and pogroms, and the displacement of millions.

Gandhi, a nationalist leader associated with the tactic of non-violence, had bemoaned the bloodshed. He launched a series of hunger strikes and visited areas that were the site of particular communal conflict.

By January 1948, the Indian and Pakistani armies were in full-blown war over control of the disputed province of Kashmir. Gandhi was in the midst of another hunger strike and appealed for a pause in the hostilities. Leading members of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a fascistic paramilitary organization, entered into a conspiracy for Gandhi's assassination. An unsuccessful attempt was made on January 20, when a grenade narrowly missed him.

The second attempt, on January 30, was successful. Nathuram Vinayak Godse, an RSS member, entered Gandhi's New Delhi mansion on the pretext of being a follower. Godse approached Gandhi, forcefully pushed aside his young niece and repeatedly shot the Indian leader at point-blank range. The murder of such a well-known pacifist figure provoked shock around the world, shining a spotlight on the brutal character of the communal politics that had developed on the sub-continent.

Yet Gandhi himself was responsible for those politics. In 1939, on the eve of World War II and amid India's continued subjugation to British colonialism, the Marxist leader Leon Trotsky had written an "Open Letter to the Workers of India." He warned:

"The Indian bourgeoisie is incapable of leading a revolutionary struggle. They are closely bound up with and dependent upon British capitalism. They tremble for their own property. They stand in fear of the masses. They seek compromises with British imperialism no matter what the price and lull the Indian masses with hopes of reforms from above. The leader and prophet of this bourgeoisie is Gandhi. A fake leader and a false prophet! Gandhi and his compeers have developed a theory that India's position will constantly improve, that her liberties will continually be enlarged and that India will gradually become a Dominion on the road of peaceful reforms."

Gandhi and the other leaders of the Indian bourgeois-nationalist movement responded with intense hostility to a naval mutiny and mass strike movement of the working class in 1946. They were particularly aggrieved that the struggle had crossed communal lines, involving Hindu, Muslim and other workers in a joint fight. The Indian ruling elite, including its figurehead Gandhi, rapidly moved towards full support for communal partition, leading to the horrors of 1947-48.

100 years ago: Greece and Turkey agree to population exchange

On January 30, 1923, the Greek and Turkish governments signed the Lausanne Convention, formally known as the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations, that authorized the transfer of some 1.5 million Greeks from Turkey to Greece and 400,000 Greek Muslims from Greece to Turkey.

The treaty was the outcome of the end of the Greek invasion of Turkey in 1919, in collaboration with the imperialist powers, in a war on the forces of the Turkish nationalist movement led by Kamal Ataturk.

Pogroms against both Turks by Greek troops and of ethnic Greeks by Turkish soldiers—notably in Smyrna in 1922—had taken place. Pontic Greeks (those on the Turkish mainland) had been subject to a genocide by the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, much as the Armenian and Assyrian populations were in that period. Most Pontic Greek survivors had left Turkey by 1922.

The Greek and Turkish governments, under the auspices of the imperialist-dominated League of Nations, had demarcated areas of control and national boundaries by 1922. Both the Greek and Turkish governments had independently proposed a population exchange, in what has been called by historians an episode of mutual ethnic cleansing.

An additional 50,000 ethnic Greeks migrated to Greece from the Caucasus, as well as 50,000 from Bulgaria and 12,000 from Crimea. By 1924, some 350,000 ethnic Greeks remained in Turkey, most of them in the capital of Istanbul, which had been exempted from the population exchange. Turks and other Muslims in the Greek region of Western Thrace were also exempted from the exchange.

Most Greeks from Turkey were settled in Macedonia, a region that had only been acquired by Greece after the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. The government settled them in squalid refugee camps and their animosity to the Greek state became so intense that large numbers joined the Greek Communist Party.

While most of the Greeks deported from Turkey spoke Greek as their native language and were Christians, those people removed from Greece to Turkey were largely Muslims who spoke Greek and no Turkish, and had converted to Islam during the Ottoman occupation of the region they lived in.



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