

# This week in history: February 27-March 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.

## 26 February 2023

### 25 years ago: Ethnic killings increase danger of Kosovo war

On February 28, 1998, 25 people were killed, including women and children, in the Albanian village of Drenica. Serbian paramilitary forces attacked the village with helicopter gunships and armored cars. A number of the victims were abducted and tortured before being executed. The Serbian forces carried out the slaughter in retaliation for an ambush by the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in which four Serb officers were killed.

Tens of thousands of people took to the streets in Kosovo's capital of Pristina to denounce the killings. Serbian police responded with water cannon, tear gas grenades and baton charges. Many civilians were reported injured, and Albanian sources claimed that Serb police executed one student protester at point blank range.

This was the biggest demonstration in Kosovo since 1989, when Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic stripped the territory of the extensive political autonomy which it had enjoyed under the Tito regime as a province of the Serb republic. That earlier confrontation in Kosovo presaged the civil wars which were to wrack both Croatia and Bosnia in the 1990s. It also provided the basis for Milosevic's own rise to power, based on a program of Serbian ethno-chauvinism.

The renewed upheavals in Kosovo posed the sharp danger of reigniting the ethnic conflicts temporarily suppressed by the imperialist intervention in Bosnia, and of spreading military conflict throughout the region. Albanians made up 90 percent of Kosovo's 2 million people, and a quarter of the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, both bordering Albania itself.

Any major conflict pitting Serbs and Macedonian Slavs against Albanians over an attempt to redraw borders along ethnic lines also posed the danger of drawing in the region's traditional antagonists, Greece and Turkey, backing Serbia and Albania, respectively.

The 1998 clashes in Kosovo prompted emergency meetings of both NATO and the European Union, together with threats to tighten sanctions against the Belgrade regime.

On the eve of the Serbian counterinsurgency operation, Robert Gelbard, the senior US envoy to the Balkans, visited Pristina, where he denounced the Kosovo Liberation Army as a "terrorist organization." At that time, Washington was still engaged in pressuring Belgrade to support a new Bosnian Serb government which was more accommodating to US demands.

Within a year, however, the KLA "terrorists" would be rebranded as "freedom fighters" and hailed by the Clinton administration, even though it remained the same group of gangsters and drug runners as before. The shift in rhetoric tracked the shift in US foreign policy, which now sought the overthrow of Milosevic and saw the KLA as a useful instrument to

weaken Belgrade by ripping away Kosovo from Serbia.

Following these events of early 1998, the fighting between the KLA and the Serbian military escalated into a guerrilla war, the Kosovo War, which continued for more than a year until the NATO bombing of Serbia began in March 1999.

### 50 years ago: American Indian Movement occupies Wounded Knee

On February 27, 1973, members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) began a 70-day armed occupation of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, the site of the 1890 massacre of 150 to 300 Lakota Sioux Indians by the United States 7th Cavalry. The occupation demanded a federal investigation into conditions of widespread poverty and political corruption on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation.

AIM was formed in 1968 as a militant Native American protest organization that fought to expose the miserable conditions facing Native Americans living both on and off of the reservations. AIM had organized two other high-profile occupations in prior years. From November of 1969 to June of 1971, AIM members occupied Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay and called for it to be transformed into a Native American cultural and social welfare center. In November, 1972, AIM also briefly staged an occupation at the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) building in Washington, D.C., to protest conditions on reservations.

On the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, opposition to the tribal chairman Dick Wilson had been brewing since his election in April, 1972. Wilson was a gangster-like politician who cornered funding from the BIA to enrich himself and his supporters.

Conditions of life on the Pine Ridge Reservation were abysmal. Some 10,000 Lakota Sioux resided there during the 1970s, many living in tarpaper shacks without electricity or running water. The annual median income was just \$800, the lowest of all Indian tribes.

Using federal funds, Wilson formed the paramilitary Guardians of the Oglala Nation, known as GOONs, to intimidate and often murder his political rivals. Much of Wilson's support came from mining companies who bribed him into leasing resource-rich native lands for mining operations.

Over 200 AIM members from Pine Ridge and other reservations took part in the occupation of the small village. The protest immediately turned into a standoff between AIM and US marshals and FBI agents. Armed with high-powered sniper rifles the federal agents surrounded Wounded Knee. Over the course of the 70-day standoff that followed, two FBI agents and two of the occupiers were killed in gun fights.

AIM's tactics, inspired by Third World guerilla movements and intended to pressure federal and state governments into concessions, proved to be a trap for militant youth. When the occupation ended in May the federal government made hundreds of arrests and used the courts to target AIM with heavy legal fines. Dick Wilson remained in power on the Pine Ridge reservation until 1976. Following the occupation, he ramped up his GOON political violence on the reservation. AIM activists identified at least 60 murders of their members and supporters connected to Wilson, that have never been fully investigated.

### **75 years ago: Britain represses anti-colonial protest in Ghana**

On February 28, 1948, a group of African soldiers who had served in the British Army during World War II were brutally attacked in Accra, the capital of modern-day Ghana, when they demanded the payment of their outstanding war pensions. The incident, which sparked rioting against the British colonial authorities, has been credited by some historians with setting in motion the process of Ghanaian independence, achieved almost a decade later.

Ghana was then part of the Gold Coast. It had been a British colony since 1821. The colony had contributed a regiment that had fought for Britain during the war, including in Burma. The soldiers had been promised pensions and other benefits in exchange for fighting, but these had not been forthcoming. They resolved to march to the residence of the British governor of the Gold Coast to present their grievances and to request restitution.

The rally coincided with a series of social upheavals. In response to sharply rising inflation, African nationalist leaders had initiated a boycott of imported European products in early 1948. The increase in the cost-of-living had also provoked spontaneous protests and riots. This was part of a broader anti-colonial movement in the years following the war that spanned from Asia, to Africa and the Americas.

The petitioning soldiers were confronted by colonial police and blocked from approaching the governor's residence. Seeking to send a message that any civil disobedience would not be tolerated, police superintendent Colin Imray ordered his officers to fire on the demonstration. When they wavered, Imray took out his gun and shot three of the protesting Gold Coast soldiers: Sergeant Cornelius Adjetei, Corporal Patrick Attipoe, and Private Odartey Lamptey. All were killed. In the ensuing melee and gunfight around 60 more were injured, some seriously.

The brutal assault inflamed anti-colonial sentiment and threatened broader disturbances, with riots immediately breaking out. The nationalist leaders grouped in the United Gold Coast Convention sent a telegram to the British Secretary of State in London, warning: "unless Colonial Government is changed and a new Government of the people and their Chiefs installed at the centre immediately, the conduct of masses now completely out of control with strikes threatened in Police quarters, and rank and file Police indifferent to orders of Officers, will continue and result in worse violent and irresponsible acts by uncontrolled people."

The Convention expressed its willingness to participate in the formation of an interim government and called for the establishment of a Constituent Assembly. Its leaders, dubbed the Big Six, were rewarded for their entreaties with imprisonment. They were detained for a month on bogus accusations of being responsible for the violence. The authorities instated a new Riot Act that amounted to martial law.

The British would hold a series of inquiries into the violent clashes and would very slowly move towards granting greater autonomy, and eventually independence in 1957. The first president of the new country, Ghana, was Kwame Nkrumah, who in 1948 had been one of the Big Six.

### **100 years ago: Rockefeller buys precious medieval tapestries**

On February 27, 1923, the *New York Times* announced in a front-page article that John D. Rockefeller, Jr. one of the richest men alive at the time, had purchased the six medieval tapestries known as "the Hunt of the Unicorn" to hang in his mansion in New York City. He paid \$1,100,000 for them, about 19 million in 2023 dollars.

The article ended speculation in the European press about the mysterious American purchaser of the tapestries, which had included rising indignation from the French press, since the tapestries were widely regarded as a national treasure of France.

The tapestries (seven in all since the fragments of one were not sold), now dated to 1495–1505, were probably woven in the Netherlands. They were owned by the aristocratic Rochefoucauld family, seized during the French Revolution, and returned to the family by 1850.

They depict what is believed to be a mixture of pagan and Christian symbolism, with the mythical pagan figure of the unicorn as an allegory for Christ, since it was an animal that could only be tamed by a virgin. They are generally considered one of the great artistic accomplishments of the late European Middle Ages.

Rockefeller was a financier and the son of John D. Rockefeller, one of the founders of Standard Oil. He is widely believed to be responsible for the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, during the coal strike in Ludlow, Colorado against the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, of which Rockefeller was part owner. Company thugs and the Colorado National Guard killed 21 people in a miners' tent encampment, including the wives and children of strikers.

The purchase of the tapestries by an American capitalist was a token of the rise to global hegemony of American imperialism in the aftermath of World War I.

"The Hunt of the Unicorn" can now be seen in the Cloisters in New York City, a part of the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



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