

This week in history: March 6-12

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.

5 March 2023

25 years ago: Pinochet made “senator for life”

On March 11, 1998, thousands of demonstrators clashed with riot police in the Chilean capital of Santiago and in the Pacific port city of Valparaiso for two days running as Gen. Augusto Pinochet, leader of the bloody 1973 military coup, traded his position as commander of the armed forces for a lifetime post in Chile’s Senate, which carried with it lifetime immunity from prosecution.

Pinochet was sworn in together with other new legislators in Valparaiso on March 11. The ceremony was delayed both by violent clashes outside the Senate and by a protest mounted by some of the other legislators who booed and held up enlarged photographs of people who were executed or “disappeared” under Pinochet’s reign.

A day before the swearing-in ceremony, the military organized its own farewell for Pinochet at the Military School of Santiago, one of the many institutions which were transformed into concentration camps and torture centers in the coup of 1973.

Speaking before thousands of Chilean officers and troops as well as Chilean government officials, including President Eduardo Frei, the 82-year-old general declared: “We in the armed forces can now declare: Mission accomplished!”

Referring to his own rise to power 25 years before, the former dictator declared that the armed forces had been compelled to take over because of an “ever more extensive, sharp and uncontrollable public conflict” gripping the country. He claimed that military rule had resulted in the “social, political and economic reconstruction of the country.”

While there was widespread feeling in Chile that Pinochet should be going to jail rather than taking a seat in the Senate, he sought even greater protection than the blanket amnesty for crimes committed by military assassins and torturers, since this could be overturned by the courts.

Pinochet surrendered his military command after 25 years in the post, but was guaranteed his lifetime Senate seat by the constitution he himself had forced on Chile in 1980, which reserved a lifetime Senate seat for former presidents with at least six years in office. Pinochet was the only figure who fell in this category, having proclaimed himself president in 1974 and surrendering the office only in 1989.

50 years ago: Nixon cites “executive privilege” to defy congressional inquiry into Watergate

On March 12, 1973, US president Richard Nixon released a statement declaring that he was invoking the principle of executive privilege and refusing to allow two of his aides, John W. Dean and Dwight L. Chapin, to testify before Congress. The subject of the congressional investigation was the burglary of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate complex in Washington D.C., on June 17, 1972.

Congress had only begun hearings into the Watergate scandal in February following the sentencing of G. Gordon Liddy and James W. McCord Jr., two other Nixon aides and former intelligence agents who had been arrested immediately following the break-in. With Liddy and McCord found guilty, the contours of Nixon’s conspiracy began to come into focus. Nixon’s own role in the plot, however, remained unclear. The details of the break-in at Watergate, who was behind its organization, and its motives, remained murky. The congressional select committee was established to find the answers to these questions.

Nixon was of course the chief organizer of Watergate and a whole slew of other “dirty tricks” operations carried out against anyone believed to be a political threat. In addition to the DNC, Nixon carried out these operations against thousands of Americans involved in left-wing and antiwar organizations.

Testimony from those within his administration before Congress would have rapidly brought the truth into the open and hastened the collapse of his presidency.

Hoping to keep any further damaging information from coming to light Nixon refused to cooperate in the congressional investigation or allow his staff to be questioned. He claimed that the president has the right to withhold information that he alone determined might harm the national security.

In his statement Nixon said, “Under the doctrine of separation of powers, the manner in which the President personally exercises his assigned executive powers is not subject to questioning by another branch of government. If the President is not subject to such questioning, it is equally inappropriate that members of his staff not be so questioned, for their roles are in effect an extension of the Presidency.”

Nixon would continue to invoke “executive privilege” against the

congressional investigation and refuse to provide requested evidence, including tape recordings of White House conversations.

The use of executive privilege delayed the investigation into Watergate but ultimately failed in preventing the truth from becoming known. In July 1974, the claim of executive privilege would be struck down by the Supreme Court, which ordered Nixon to release the tape recordings. Nixon would resign on August 9, 1974.

75 years ago: Nazi officials convicted over criminal racial policies

On March 10, 1948, American judges handed down guilty verdicts after presiding over a year-long trial of Nazi state officials accused of playing a central role in implementing the Third Reich's criminal racial policies. The hearings were the eighth of twelve held after the Nuremberg Trials. They were conducted by the American military.

There were 14 defendants in the trial that ended in March. All had played a prominent role in German state organizations controlled by the SS, the Nazi paramilitary wing. The organizations included the Race and Settlement Main Office (RuSHA), the office of the Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of German Nationhood, the Repatriation Office for Ethnic Germans and the Lebensborn society.

The defendants were charged with crimes against humanity, war crimes and membership in a criminal organization, that is the SS. The indictment explained that among the offenses were the kidnapping of "Aryan" children to participate in "racial purity" programs; coercing women of "mixed racial backgrounds" into abortions; the displacement of entire populations because of their ethnic background and their replacement by "Aryan" Germans; the dispatch of those accused of inter-racial relationships to the concentration camps; and general participation in the persecution of the Jews in the context of the Holocaust.

The RuSHA was the main SS branch responsible for maintaining "racial purity" of the paramilitary organization. It would supervise SS marriages, carrying out extensive genealogical studies of prospective spouses. It played a broader role after the outbreak of World War II. Following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the RuSHA was involved in the "Germanization" of occupied territories, involving killings and settlement.

The Lebensborn were a network of maternity centers established by the RuSHA and explicitly based on racist principles. The task was "to accommodate and look after racially and genetically valuable expectant mothers." The Lebensborn employed Joseph Mengele before his notorious acts of medical torture at the Auschwitz concentration camp and elsewhere.

Of the defendants, who included the executive officers of all of these organizations, eight were found guilty of the three charges. Five more were found guilty of at least one charge, while a female official who had served as a deputy was acquitted.

As with other US military trials concluding in 1948, the hearings were remarkable for their leniency. Of the defendants, only Richard Hildebrandt, the head of the RuSHA, was executed, after he was handed over to Polish authorities for his ethnic cleansing operations in that country. Five defendants in American custody were released on the basis of "time served." Of the rest, one died of natural causes behind bars in 1949. All of the others, including those who received nominally hefty sentences, such as 25 years imprisonment, were at

liberty by 1954.

The approach of the court was a political one, dictated by the turn of American imperialism towards an aggressive confrontation with the Soviet Union in the Cold War. This program increasingly involved an orientation to extreme right-wing and fascistic forces in Western Europe.

100 years ago: Lenin suffers third stroke

On March 9, 1923, V.I. Lenin, the founder of the Bolshevik Party and head of the Soviet state, suffered a third stroke. His previous two took place on May 25 and December 16, 1922. He had been convalescing and under strict orders by his doctors not to have visitors. Joseph Stalin, the leader of the bureaucratic faction in the Communist Party, attempted to ensure that Lenin was isolated from the party.

The new stroke paralyzed half of Lenin's body and deprived him of the ability to speak.

It was in December 1922 and January 1923 that Lenin dictated the notes that have come to be known as his "testament," in which he urged the party leadership to remove Stalin from leadership positions and take up a struggle against the increasing independence of the state and party bureaucracy from the working class.

January and February had been productive months for Lenin, according to historian Moshe Lewin, who noted that despite his illness he "worked out a vast program of political strategy for the Party Congress that was to be held a few weeks later."

It was on March 4 that Pravda published his crucial essay, "Better Fewer, But Better," a part of a letter to the 12th Congress of the party. It was to be Lenin's last article. It dealt with the problems of the cultural and economic development of the USSR and the role that a Workers and Peasants Inspection commissariat, fused with the party's Central Control Commission, could play in fighting bureaucracy. As Lewin observed, Lenin hoped it "would become an institution of an ability and efficiency unequaled in the state, a unique super-commissariat of organization and supervision, whose function would be to diffuse correct methods at every level of public administration."

As Lenin himself suggested in "Better Fewer, But Better:"

We must reduce our state apparatus to the utmost degree of economy. We must banish from it all traces of extravagance, of which so much has been left over from tsarist Russia, from its bureaucratic capitalist state machine.

Lenin's third stroke put an end to this work. Even though by May he was regaining his ability to read, he was not able to speak. He died on January 21, 1924 of a fourth stroke.



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