

This week in history: August 5-11

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.

4 August 2024

25 years ago: Rebels march into Dagestan from Chechnya

On August 7, 1999, Islamic rebels under the leadership of the former Chechen field commander Shamil Basayev and the Jordanian Khattab marched into Dagestan in small groups from adjoining Chechnya. After occupying seven villages in the mountainous regions of Botlikh and Tsumada, they proclaimed the foundation of the “Islamic Republic of Dagestan” and threatened Moscow with jihad (holy war), until all “non-Muslims,” i.e., Russians, left the country.

The occasion for these events and the beginning of the undeclared war was the alleged incursion of Russian troops into the Republic of Chechnya, which had been effectively independent since 1996 as a result of the Chechen war, but officially still formed part of Russia. In previous months, bloody clashes repeatedly occurred along the Russian-Chechen border.

The government in Moscow, whose policies had further impoverished the population of both Dagestan and Chechnya, reacted to the occupation with bombings. While Russian reports claimed that over 600 of the 1,200 separatist guerrillas were killed within the first few weeks, Chechen sources claimed just two dozen dead. The UN counted the refugee flood at almost 10,000, the greatest part of which went to Makhachkala.

That September, a series of bombings at four apartment blocks in Russia, alongside the August invasion of Dagestan, was used as *casus belli* for the launching of the Second Chechen War. The Russian government justified their brutal aggression to maintain Moscow’s grip on the land, resources and impoverished peoples of the northern Caucasus as a police action against terrorism.

The dissolution of the former Soviet Union loomed over the tragic fighting in the Caucasus. What was actually being played out was a great-power struggle instigated by the US and the Western European powers for control over the strategically vital Caucasus, which borders on the Caspian Sea, site of the world’s largest deposit of untapped oil reserves. At stake in this contest were billions of dollars in oil and gas revenues and vast military and geopolitical advantages.

50 years ago: Nixon resigns as US president

On August 9, 1974, US President Richard Nixon resigned from office following the release of evidence which proved his direct connection to the cover-up of the break-in at the Democratic National Convention Headquarters at the Watergate complex in June 1972. Nixon was the first, and so far the only, US president to resign the office.

The resignation was the conclusion of over two years of the political crisis known as the “Watergate Scandal.” In a national address announcing his decision Nixon told the public that while he had been determined to remain in office, “In the past few days ... it has become evident to me that I no longer have a strong enough political base in the Congress to justify continuing that effort.”

The resignation followed a series of definitive political blows against Nixon in the course of which virtually every significant figure in the US ruling establishment, including within his own Republican Party, turned against him.

On July 24, the Supreme Court handed down a unanimous decision ruling against Nixon’s claim that the president had unlimited power, based on “executive privilege” to withhold evidence from Congress. While accepting the existence of a limited privilege, the court held that this was overridden by the necessities of the criminal investigation into Watergate.

On July 30, the US House Judiciary Committee approved three articles of impeachment against Nixon and set a date for the House to begin the official process.

On August 5, the White House tape recordings that Nixon had withheld were finally released to the public. The so-called “smoking gun” tape contained a conversation where Nixon ordered the CIA to lie to FBI investigators to prevent them from investigating the break-in.

The tapes confirmed what was long suspected. That is, Nixon had sanctioned the break-in of the Democratic headquarters in an attempt to find dirt against his political opponents. Then, after the plot was discovered, he attempted to use the powers of the presidency to block an investigation and prevent his crimes from becoming known.

Nixon was forced to step down only after a delegation of Republican congressional leaders made a visit to the White House to inform him that the House would impeach him and that in any ensuing Senate trial, nearly every Republican would join the Democrats in approving his removal from office.

To replace Nixon, Vice President Gerald Ford was sworn in as the new president. In his speech assuming the office, he stated that

Nixon's cabinet would remain and that he would continue all the same basic policies of Nixon's administration. He specifically noted that Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Nixon's closest adviser, would remain in office and continue to play a leading role.

75 years ago: CCP launches Lanzhou Campaign amid series of victories

On August 9, 1949, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of the Chinese Communist Party launched a major offensive that was known as the Lanzhou Campaign, aimed at securing control of substantial swaths of northwestern China. The battle occurred amid a series of PLA victories in the protracted civil war against the right-wing nationalist Kuomintang (KMT) of Chiang-Kai Shek.

PLA divisions numbering some 200,000 troops launched simultaneous attacks on KMT positions. The PLA rapidly secured smaller towns such as Dingxi, as they approached Lanzhou from several directions. Their initial assault on that city, the largest in northwestern China, was repulsed, incurring heavy losses.

PLA commander Peng Dehuai decided to bide time. He directed PLA units to attack several neighboring towns and cities, including Linxia, isolating the KMT forces in Lanzhou, jeopardizing their supply lines and raising the specter of a PLA rout of the vast northwest. A second dawn raid on Lanzhou was successful on August 25, with the PLA offensive causing the disintegration of the KMT forces and their defeat within a day.

KMT casualties were estimated at 42,000 dead, comprising an estimated half of their fighting presence in the northwest, while the PLA lost more than 10,000 soldiers.

The massive KMT toll was part of a broader collapse of its forces. In January, the PLA had captured Beijing with minimal resistance. In April, the PLA had crossed the Yangtze River, capturing the longtime KMT capital Nanjing. That action and the increasing disintegration of the KMT cut across the calls of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin for the CCP to form a bourgeois coalition government with the right-wing militarist outfit, a perspective that had also been shared by Mao Zedong.

100 years ago: US trade unions endorse third-party presidential candidate

On August 10, 1924, two officials of large railway unions presented themselves to the headquarters of Senator Robert La Follette's independent presidential campaign in New York City.

T. H. Hart, the General Chairman of the Brotherhood of Railway Carmen and Thomas A. Rodgers, the General Chairman of the International Association of Machinists, with a combined membership of 125,000, came to offer their support to La Follette's independent campaign. Hart told the press, "Never before among railway workers has there been such spontaneous and solid support for political candidates."

This followed the endorsement of La Follette, a former Republican from Wisconsin and his vice-presidential candidate, former

Democratic Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana, by the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the largest trade union Federation in North America.

The AFL, which was headed by Samuel Gompers, was careful only to endorse La Follette and Wheeler as individuals and not as a political party (formally they had none) and were at pains to point out that they supported Democratic and Republican candidates in other elections.

La Follette, in a statement on August 4, accepted the AFL's endorsement. He had been nominated by the Conference for Progressive Political Action (CPPA), originally established in 1922 by railway union bureaucrats with the support of the Socialist Party (now dominated by its pro-war right wing since the expulsion of its Communist left wing in 1919) at its Progressive National Convention in Cleveland in July.

Along with representatives of the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, the Socialist Party and some trade unions, the nominating convention was attended by various liberal and middle-class radical organizations. Representatives of the Workers (Communist) Party were banned from even entering the building where the conference was held.

The conference set up no formal political party and La Follette and Wheeler ran under several ballot lines, including Progressive, Socialist, and Independent, in all 48 states.

La Follette's reformist program opposed the "combined power of the private monopoly system over the political and economic life of the American people," but did not disavow the capitalist system. He called for the nationalization of the railways and utilities, the banning of child labor, cheap credit for farmers and a mandatory national referendum on any declaration of war. He opposed immigration quotas and spoke publicly against the Ku Klux Klan.

La Follette had been both a member of the House of Representatives and Senator from Wisconsin and served as the state's governor from 1901-06. He was the leader of the progressive wing of the Republican Party and sought the presidential nomination repeatedly after 1908.

In the general election, in which he ran against Republican Calvin Coolidge and Democrat John W. Davis, he took nearly 17 percent of the popular vote (almost 5 million votes) and finished second in 11 states.



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