

This week in history: March 17-23

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.

16 March 2025

25 years ago: Uganda cult kills over 400 people in mass suicide

On March 17, 2000, a Ugandan Christian cult group called the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God corralled people into a church, nailed windows shut, boarded-up doors and ignited bombs, killing more than 400 people, including 78 children. Additional heinous crimes included strangulations, slashing and hacking members to death, and starvation.

The founders of the doomsday cult, Joseph Kibwetere, a former wealthy farmer and leading member of the Catholic-oriented Democratic Party, and Credonia Mwerinda, a former prostitute, escaped before the blazing inferno consumed the building. They left the country with enormous sums of money and financial assets donated from cult members they had convinced to end their “sorrow and misery.”

The atrocious event was the outcome of nearly 70 years of British colonial rule, followed by a series of open or thinly disguised dictatorships entirely subservient to British and American imperialism. Both colonial and neocolonial regimes manipulated tribal divisions to sustain the looting of the country’s natural resources to enrich a tiny bourgeois aristocracy.

After nominal independence from Britain in 1962, Milton Obote, the first prime minister of the country, representing the Ugandan People’s Congress (UPC), forged a fickle alliance with the tribal-based Bugandan royal establishment. Several years later Obote dissolved the alliance, using the military and police to set up his own dictatorship. Growing popular unrest led military chief Idi Amin to oust Obote in an imperialist-backed coup in 1971. After Amin’s regime invoked mass terror as state policy, killing upward of 500,000 people, the Tanzanian army invaded and ousted his government in 1979.

This opened the doors for Obote’s return in a rigged election in 1980. Opposition arose from several armed guerrilla movements and leaders, the most prominent being Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Movement (NRM). Espousing Marxist and socialist phrases to the masses gave the NRM a degree of popular support in a guerrilla war from 1981 to 1985 in which another half a million Ugandans died.

But Museveni’s championing of Pan-Africanism was just another form of adaptation to imperialist domination, based on upholding the arbitrary borders drawn by the colonial powers, and accepting the dictates of the IMF and World Bank. He dismantled and privatized

state-run enterprises, opening the country to international investors to exploit its natural resources and cheap labor.

The transformation of left-talking populists like Obote and Museveni into kleptocratic dictators produced widespread disillusionment among the Ugandan masses, which led to the formation of dozens of millennialist religious sects. Some, like the group led by Kibwetere, focused on the year 2000 as the promised end of the world. Others, like the Lord’s Resistance Army, became sizeable guerrilla forces that waged brutal warfare against equally brutal repression by governments in Uganda, Sudan, Congo, Rwanda and the Central African Republic.

50 years ago: Trial of the Baader-Meinhof group begins in West Germany

On May 21, 1975, the trial of the Baader-Meinhof group began inside Stammheim Prison in Stuttgart, West Germany. The defendants—Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, Ulrike Meinhof and Jan-Carl Raspe—members of the militant Red Army Faction (RAF), faced charges including murder, bombings, bank robberies and other crimes allegedly committed by the organization.

The RAF emerged in the late 1960s out of the West German student movement which had mobilized hundreds of thousands of youth against the Vietnam War. The group, while motivated by anti-imperialism and opposed to the rehabilitation of Nazi officials into the West German state, was hostile to the construction of a socialist movement in the working class. Instead, the RAF carried out bombings and other “urban guerilla” terror activities with the desperate aim of pressuring for a change in imperialist policy.

The first major arrests of RAF members began in 1972. Those accused of crimes, like the Baader-Meinhof group, were held for years in solitary confinement before trials were organized. One prisoner, Holger Meins, was killed after being force fed by prison guards while attempting a hunger strike.

When the trial was finally prepared, it was held under unprecedented security measures. The courtroom had been specially built adjacent to Stammheim Prison where the defendants were held. It featured bulletproof glass partitions and reinforced walls. Public access was restricted, and journalists could only observe proceedings via closed-

circuit television.

The West German government went as far as to pass special laws restricting the Baader-Meinhof group's access to attorneys. Specifically, attorneys suspected of any political sympathies for the RAF were not permitted to represent the defendants. The conditions of the trial were criticized by civil rights attorneys as prejudicial. They argued that the isolation of the defendants and the construction of special restrictive facilities prevented the group from receiving a fair trial.

The court proceedings proceeded slowly. The defendants refused to recognize the legitimacy of the hearings and were often forcibly removed. In May 1976 Meinhof was found hanged in her cell. The death was officially ruled a suicide, but many suspicions remain about state involvement. At the very least, the inhumane conditions of prolonged solitary confinement were undoubtedly a factor in her death.

The trial concluded nearly two years after it began on April 28, 1977, with life sentences for Baader, Ensslin and Raspe. Meinhof was convicted posthumously. Months later Baader, Ensslin and Raspe would also be discovered dead in their cells. All four deaths were officially ruled as suicides.

75 years ago: Belgian government collapses following referendum on monarchy

On March 18, 1950, the government of Belgium collapsed with Prime Minister Gaston Eyskens and his cabinet resigning following a national referendum over whether King Leopold III could return to the country from his exile in Switzerland.

One week prior, voters were asked: "Are you of the opinion that King Leopold III should resume the exercise of his constitutional powers?" Some 57 percent of the country's population voted in the affirmative, with most of this support from more rural areas and the conservative middle class. By contrast, large sections of the Belgian working class opposed the reinstatement of the monarch, with industrial regions such as Wallonia voting against it.

A conflict emerged within the ruling Catholic-Liberal coalition government. The Liberals pulled out of the coalition after refusing to call a joint session of parliament to make the legal preparations for Leopold's return. Eyskens resigned shortly after, handing the government's resignation to the regent, Prince Charles, who would dissolve parliament until the June elections that brought the Christian Social Party (PSC-CVP) to power.

The opposition on the part of the Liberals to Leopold's was borne out of tactical considerations. The monarch was a widely despised figure among the Belgian working class. In 1940, Leopold unconditionally surrendered Belgium to the Nazi Germany invasion, an act declared unconstitutional by the former prime minister, Hubert Pierlot. Leopold met with and shook hands with Hitler in November 1940, which earned him further hostility from the Belgian population.

The promised return of Leopold prompted a resurgence of working class struggles and strike actions under the slogan "Stop Leopold." Strikes involving over 10,000 workers in total broke out in the working class regions of Charleroi, Mons and Liege, which all voted almost 70 percent against the return of the monarch. Even in Antwerp, where a majority had voted in favor of the referendum, 15,000 dock

workers walked out on strike against the decision.

100 years: Fascist kidnapping of British Communist leader raised in Parliament

On March 17, 1925, in the British House of Commons, Joseph Kenworthy, a Liberal MP, raised the issue of the March 14 kidnapping and detention of Communist Party leader Harry Pollitt by eight men at a train station.

On March 14, Pollitt had been on a train bound from London to Liverpool where he was scheduled to speak at a meeting. He was seized at Edge Hill station by the individuals, who refused to identify themselves, and moved him to a room at the Liver Inn in Rhydtalog, Flintshire, North Wales, where he was imprisoned over the weekend. Although he was not physically abused, Pollitt was certain that his abductors were members of an organization called the British Fascists (BF), founded in 1923 by Rotha Lintorn-Orman.

After Kenworthy presented the issue to parliament, Home Secretary William Joynson-Hicks confirmed the kidnapping and claimed that railway officials did not intervene because they believed Pollitt was under legal restraint. He assured Kenworthy that the inquiry was ongoing. ?

Kenworthy's complaint was, according to the *New York Times*, received by "the majority of members of the House" as a "good joke that the Communist should have been treated to a little of his own medicine."

On March 19, Joynson-Hicks reported to parliament that warrants had been issued for the arrest of individuals suspected of involvement in Pollitt's detention, with three already in custody. ?

Five men associated with BF were eventually arrested and charged with the kidnapping of Pollitt. During the trial, the defense characterized the kidnapping as unserious, and the head of the Liverpool branch of the British Fascists denied authorizing any such action. All five defendants were acquitted.

Pollitt himself would rise to the post of general secretary in the British Communist Party and later become the principal spokesman for Stalinism in Britain and the defender of horrendous crimes against the Trotskyist movement and the British and international working class.



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