

This week in history: March 9-15

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.

8 March 2026

25 years ago: Museveni wins Ugandan presidential election

On March 12, 2001 presidential elections were held in Uganda, pitting incumbent Yoweri Museveni against Kizza Besigye, the former physician of the president. Museveni, who transitioned from a guerrilla fighter to president, had been in power since 1986. He won the election with nearly 70 percent of the vote, over 5 million in the popular vote. Besigye obtained almost 28 percent, for a total of over 2 million votes. Over 70 percent of eligible voters participated.

Museveni drew heavy support from the south and northeast of the country. Born and raised in Uganda's southwest, he cultivated a network of local government patronage through local government appointments and targeted economic investments, buttressing a strong base of supporters.

By contrast, Besigye drew much of his support from northern Uganda, particularly from the Acholi—a Nilotic ethnic group native to the northern region of the country. Years of conflict and military operations in the region had displaced more than a million people and deepened poverty, alienating large sections of the population. The country ranked 158 out of 172 on the UN's Human Development Index.

Long-standing political and ethnic tensions between the Nilotic north and the predominantly Bantu south intensified opposition to Museveni in northern regions. Ugandans in the north saw Museveni's government as southern domination over the country rather than a popular national government.

Both candidates ran under the National Resistance Movement (NRM) that proscribed oppositional parties, calling their political system a no-party system—in other words, a one-party dictatorship without working class representation. For Museveni, the election was the first time that he encountered a formidable challenge since being elected president in 1996. Besigye ran under a reformist pretense to end corruption and poverty, but no substantial differences existed between them. The former physician attempted to channel discontent over government policy to his own loyal faction within the ruling class. Both NRM candidates intended to accept IMF-dictated loans and cuts, integrating the country in global capitalism and kissing the boots of Western and US imperialism.

The election was mired in voter fraud, intimidation and inconsistencies. Independent observers estimated that between 5-15 percent of the vote was suspect, benefitting Museveni. Several pipe bombs exploded and killed civilians on election day. Besigye challenged voter suppression through the court system, but Museveni remained president.

50 years ago: Egypt ends treaty with Soviet Union

On March 14, 1976, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat appeared before the People's Assembly in Cairo to announce the termination of the 1971 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union. The move marked the definitive end of the era of so-called "Arab Socialism" associated with Sadat's predecessor, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and signaled the Egyptian bourgeoisie's realignment with imperialism.

In his address, Sadat denounced the Soviet leadership, accusing them of "cat-and-mouse" games regarding military supplies and using the large debt Egypt had accumulated for political leverage. He told the Assembly that the Soviets had refused to overhaul Egypt's aging MiG fighter jet engines and was refusing to negotiate a debt payment settlement. Sadat derided these as failures equivalent to "an economic blockade and military pressure."

Sadat made explicit a pivot toward Washington. He declared that "99 percent of the cards in the Middle East game are in the hands of America," arguing that only the United States possessed the leverage to force Israeli concessions. Referring to the US as the "sole peacemaker," Sadat set in motion the transformation of Egypt from the supposed leader of Arab nationalism into that of open collaborator with American imperialism.

The break with Moscow was the culmination of the crisis of the Nasserite project and an expression of the political bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalist politics. After coming to power via an officers' coup in 1952 that ended the rule of the imperialist aligned monarchy, Nasser utilized the Cold War rivalry between the US and the USSR to secure deals that served Arab nationalist interests. Initially, Nasser had hoped to partner with the US but found that the USSR was willing to offer a better deal.

The major achievements of Egypt in this period, including the construction of the Aswan High Dam—a historic civil engineering achievement that modernized the Egyptian economy—and the successful defense of the nationalized Suez Canal against US-Israeli attack, were only possible through the massive technical, financial and military aid provided by the USSR.

The shift under Sadat was driven by significant changes in the global political landscape in the preceding years. Following the imperialist defeat in Vietnam and the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the United States was forced to make certain tactical concessions. This period of "détente" saw the Nixon and Ford administrations reach significant accommodations with the Soviet bureaucracy.

Fearful of upsetting its new favorable agreements with Washington, Moscow began rolling back support to anti-imperialist states like Egypt.

Sadat concluded that the wealth and stability of the Egyptian ruling class was best served by opening the door to a partnership with American imperialism. In 1971 Sadat launched the “Corrective Revolution,” purging pro-Soviet rivals from high offices. By 1974, he would introduce the Infitah (“Open Door”) policy, which invited foreign investment, dismantled state subsidies and sold off nationalized assets.

75 years ago: United Nations forces recapture Seoul

On March 14, 1951, a combined United States and South Korean military force recaptured Seoul, marking the fourth and final time the city had changed hands since the beginning of the Korean War.

The broader military operation of which the battle of Seoul was a part followed Operation Killer in late February. It began to reverse the US losses of the war since China’s Second Phase Offensive in December 1950, including the loss of Seoul at the start of 1951. Operation Killer, under the command of US General Matthew Ridgeway, forced the Chinese and North Korean troops north of the Han River, and paved the way for the subsequent offensive.

On March 7, Ridgeway’s forces in the U.S. Eighth Army began Operation Ripper. Its objectives were to capture Seoul and other key towns to the east and north, as well as advancing US and South Korean troops to the 38th parallel. With the explicit command by Ridgeway to inflict maximum possible casualties on Chinese and North Korean troops, they reached their first objective, line Albany, by March 13, bringing them just east of Seoul.

Anticipating a complete encirclement, the Chinese troops retreated northwards before the city was reached by the US on the night of March 14. Seoul had taken severe damage over the nine months of war; its original population of 1.5 million was reduced to just 200,000. The remainder had either fled their homes or had been killed in the fighting. Many buildings had been reduced to rubble from bombings and shelling, and the damage sustained to communications and utilities systems had rendered the city almost unlivable.

The other objectives of Operation Ripper were achieved in the next several days, including the capture of nearby cities such Hongch’on and Chuncheon. By the end of the month the United States had once again reached the 38th parallel.

These were the first major victories for US-led forces since China’s intervention in the war in late 1950. They were achieved at the cost of almost 600 American lives, and an estimated 7,000 Chinese and North Korean lives. At this point in the war, over 8,000 US soldiers had been killed, with estimates of Korean military and civilian death toll in the hundreds of thousands.

100 years: Fascists ban strikes in Italy

On March 11, 1926, the Italian Senate voted by 129 to 27 for a bill, the so-called “Rocco Law,” that effectively banned strikes and lockouts, established compulsory arbitration for labor disputes and decreed that only Fascist-controlled unions could legally represent workers. The bill was approved by the king and became law on April 3.

It was the foundation of the fascist corporatist state, in which the national state sought to regulate conflicting class interests, supposedly bringing every part of the economy under its direct control. Workers could be imprisoned for up to three years for striking, though as the law was applied, not only were workers imprisoned, but they were

also often sent to internal exile in remote villages or islands.

The law was named after the nationalist politician and President of the Chamber of Deputies and later Mussolini’s Minister of Justice, Alfredo Rocco, who pioneered the theory. In his view, trade unions should be organs of the state rather than representatives of the workers.

While the theory of corporatism supposedly put labor and capital on an equal footing, to be mediated by the state, at the end of the vote in the Senate, Mussolini in a speech made it clear that the law was a defense of capitalism:

We here are all distinctively and positively anti-Socialist. According to the Socialist doctrine, capitalism is dying and the capitalist is a vampire, a Shylock. According to our doctrine, all this is nothing but bad literature. Not only is capitalism not declining but it has not even reached its dawn. ... No greater mistake could be made than to represent capital and labor as two necessarily opposed principles. On the contrary, one complements the other.

Italian fascist corporatism served as a model for other fascist states, such as Nazi Germany. It was the Bolshevik leader, Leon Trotsky, however, who saw the fusion of the capitalist state and the trade unions as a part of an objective development. In his famous essay, “Trade Unions in the Epoch of Imperialist Decay,” which lay uncompleted on his desk at the time of his assassination by a Stalinist agent in Coyoacan, Mexico in 1940 he wrote:

“There is one common feature in the development, or more correctly the degeneration, of modern trade union organizations in the entire world: it is their drawing closely to and growing together with the state power. This process is equally characteristic of the neutral, the Social-Democratic, the Communist and ‘anarchist’ trade unions. This fact alone shows that the tendency towards ‘growing together’ is intrinsic not in this or that doctrine as such but derives from social conditions common for all unions.”



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