

This week in history: August 10-16

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

9 August 2026

25 years ago: Japanese PM Koizumi visits Yasukuni shrine

On August 13, 2001, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi traveled to the Yasukuni shrine to politically rehabilitate Japanese imperialism and its bloody atrocities carried out in East Asia during WWII. This public display of honoring the dead, including 14 Class-A war criminals, had an unmistakable purpose for Japanese society: sanitizing history to prepare society for greater crimes in the future.

Koizumi presented the visit as a simple act of respect for Japan's war dead, pledging that Japan would "never go to war again." He dismissed criticism that the shrine houses memorials to convicted war criminals by asking, "Why do we have to select among the dead?" But the fact that Japan's highest officeholder and leader of its dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) sent a wreath of flowers, was led into the shrine by a Shinto priest, took a bow and signed the visitor's book, contradicted any public disavowal about his intentions.

Koizumi had repeatedly signaled a desire to circumvent the "pacifist clause" in Japan's postwar constitution restricting the military, and had been embroiled in a controversy over a school textbook that covered up Japan's war crimes.

The political purpose of his homage to past war criminals was to establish a social base for the LDP in the face of popular opposition to his economic restructuring measures, and to shift Japan toward a war footing as it jockeyed for position among the imperialist powers, especially in its East Asian "back yard."

The visit provoked opposition within Japan and in Asia. A large portion of the Japanese public disapproved, along with the Buddhist Soka Gakkai organization (persecuted during the 1930s), the Komeito Party (part of the ruling coalition), and the opposition Democratic Party.

China summoned Japan's ambassador and issued a formal protest, stating the essence of the issue is "whether the Japanese side can sincerely repent that aggressive period of history."

In Seoul, protesters burned a picture of Koizumi, students marched, and about 20 young men cut off their little fingers. The South Korean government declared it "cannot find the words to express our concern that a Japanese prime minister would pay homage to war criminals."

Protests also emerged in Hong Kong and the Philippines, where women forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military said the visit "honours Japanese soldiers who raped women."

50 years ago: Thousands killed in the Tel al-Zaatar massacre in Beirut

On August 12, 1976, right-wing Christian militias breached and razed the Tel al-Zaatar refugee camp in East Beirut, committing one of the most gruesome atrocities of the Lebanese Civil War. After resistance forces defended the camp through a brutal 52-day siege that cut off water, food, medicine and electricity, the militias entered and slaughtered an estimated 1,500 to 3,000 Palestinian refugees and poor Lebanese civilians.

The attackers—the Phalange militia led by Pierre and Bashir Gemayel and the National Liberal Party's "Tigers" militia under Camille Chamoun—carried out summary executions, murdered wounded patients in their hospital beds and committed widespread sexual violence as part of a campaign to ethnically cleanse East Beirut of Palestinians. Bodies were bulldozed into mass graves, and the camp, which had housed between 30,000 and 50,000 people, was completely leveled.

Established in 1948 in the wake of the Nakba, the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs that accompanied the establishment of the Israel, Tel al-Zaatar was a densely populated enclave housing Palestinian refugees alongside impoverished Lebanese workers who had migrated primarily from the south. During the early phase of the civil war, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) aligned itself with the Lebanese National Movement (LNM), a coalition of left-wing and predominantly Muslim forces.

The destruction of the camp was made possible by the intervention of imperialist and regional powers. Israel, backed by the United States, supported the Phalangists' campaign to eliminate the Palestinian armed presence in Lebanon. Earlier that year, Hafez al-Assad's Syrian regime had likewise intervened to suppress the PLO-Lebanese National Movement (LNM) alliance, seeking to avert a left-wing victory that threatened Syria's own bourgeois order. After initially deploying forces covertly in January 1976, Damascus escalated its intervention into a full-scale invasion on May 31–June 1, when some 12,000 regular Syrian troops entered Lebanon. In doing so, the Syrian regime entered into a de facto alliance with the far-right Christian militias against the PLO and the LNM, helping to create the conditions for the camp's destruction.

Official commentary has consistently depicted the Lebanese Civil War as a purely sectarian conflict. In reality, the destruction of Tel al-

Zaatar was a class crime. The Lebanese bourgeoisie, fractured along communal lines and tied to competing imperialist patrons, deliberately cultivated sectarian militias to divide the working class and crush the Palestinian refugees. The Phalangists and their allies, armed and financed by Israel and the United States and given cover by Syria's intervention against the PLO-LNM alliance, carried out the massacre as part of a deliberate strategy to ethnically cleanse East Beirut of Palestinians and poor Muslims.

The tragedy also exposed the bankruptcy of the PLO's bourgeois-nationalist leadership. By subordinating the Palestinian struggle to diplomatic maneuvers with Arab regimes, including Syria, the refugees and workers were isolated and at the mercy of class forces who were actively moving against them

75 years ago: American author J.D. Salinger publishes *The Catcher in the Rye*

On August 12, 1951, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* was published by Little, Brown and Company. Salinger, born in New York City in 1919 to an affluent family, had been publishing short stories since 1940. Drafted into the US Army in 1943, he saw extensive combat in Europe—including the Normandy invasion and the Battle of the Bulge—and was hospitalized for “battle fatigue.” The novel was his first and only full-length book. It would become one of the most significant and widely read American novels of the postwar period.

The story is narrated by the character Holden Caulfield, a teenager expelled from an exclusive boarding school who spends several days wandering New York City rather than face his parents. The novel was, as the WSWS later wrote, “a narrative of adolescent contempt for the hypocrisy of official society.”

The book struck a deep chord with postwar youth. Generations of readers, in the United States and internationally, were drawn to its indictment of a society whose self-professed values rang hollow.

The novel appeared at the height of the Cold War. The year 1951 saw the trial and conviction of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg on charges of conspiring to pass atomic secrets to the Soviet Union, the escalation of the Korean War, and the consolidation of McCarthyite repression directed against trade unionists, Communist Party members, left-wing intellectuals and artists—anyone suspected of anti-capitalist sympathies.

Under these conditions, the ideological offensive against politically rebellious and subversive ideas in American public life was at its peak. The book's censors were aghast at its derision of official morality, as well as its liberal use of profanity. It was banned from schools and libraries across the country and denounced as subversive and obscene. It became at once one of the most taught as well as one of the most banned books in the United States.

Salinger recoiled from the celebrity the book brought him. In 1953 he retreated to Cornish, New Hampshire, where he lived in seclusion, publishing only sporadically—the story collection *Nine Stories* (1953), the Glass family novellas *Franny and Zooey* (1961) and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: An Introduction* (1963)—before ceasing to publish altogether after 1965.

Salinger died in 2010 at the age of 91. *The Catcher in the Rye* has sold over 65 million copies and remains a landmark of postwar American literature.

100 years: Mexican troops execute four Catholic rebels

On August 14, 1926, federal soldiers arrested three local leaders of the Mexican Catholic Youth Association (ACJM) in Chalchihuites, a municipality located in the state of Zacatecas in north-central Mexico, after they sought the release from custody of their organization's spiritual adviser, Father Luis Bátiz Sainz, who had been detained as a leader of the National League for the Defense of Religious Liberty (LNDLR).

All four were accused of organizing anti-government resistance to the Calles Law, which put severe restrictions on the Catholic Church, including banning public religious ceremonies, outlawing clerical dress in public, and closing Catholic schools. The law had gone into effect on August 3.

The ACJM and the LNDLR had helped to organize a national boycott of government-owned transportation, and of state-controlled items like tobacco, alcohol and postage stamps. The LNDLR also urged the boycott of theaters, luxury goods, public events and non-essential shopping as well as the withdrawal of savings from government-aligned banks and the refusal to buy government bonds.

On August 15, under the guise of transferring the prisoners to Zacatecas City, soldiers drove the four to an isolated road intersection at Puerto de Santa Teresa, pulled them from the transport and executed them by firing squad.

The immediate result of the August 15 executions was to cause a band of local ranchers led by Pedro Quintanar to seize the Chalchihuites municipal treasury and declare themselves in open rebellion, sparking one of the earliest armed uprisings of the Cristero War. More broadly, the incident fanned the flames of the rebellion, which would gain momentum throughout Mexico over the next months.

The Church in Mexico had called for accommodation with the Calles Law and approached the government for a compromise, warning that the development of an armed conflict might draw in the intervention of the United States. The US had already begun an embargo of weapons to Mexico.

Pope Pius XI, however, issued a statement that said: “No negotiations are possible between the civil and ecclesiastical authorities,” feeding the Catholic revolt throughout Mexico. In 2000, the Vatican canonized Father Bátiz.



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