This week in history: November 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 November 2026

25 years ago: Afghanistan falls to the US-backed Northern Alliance

On November 13-14, 2001, the US-backed Northern Alliance captured Kabul, Afghanistan's political, administrative and cultural center. Outmatched Taliban forces disintegrated under heavy US-British airstrikes and fled south, leaving the capital undefended. The advance by the Northern Alliance, a Washington-backed coalition of battle-hardened factions, warlords and ethnic minorities, dealt a major blow to Taliban control, accompanied by defections of troops, commanders and the governor of Bamyan province.

The victory exposed the character of Washington's allies. Northern Alliance forces summarily executed Taliban fighters in view of Western journalists. UN spokeswoman Stephanie Bunker confirmed the massacre in Mazar-e-Sharif of more than 100 Taliban fighters, mostly young, inexperienced recruits caught hiding in a school. Numerous incidents of looting were also reported. US-British bombing killed thousands of civilians in the war's first days and destroyed infrastructure and essential supplies.

Seeking to control the political vacuum and secure its influence over resource-rich Central Asia, Washington sought assistance from a UN-backed coalition of Muslim nations, including Turkey, Indonesia and Bangladesh. It would not leave the outcome to Afghan factions and their foreign backers—Russia, Iran and India. These maneuvers also sought to reassure Pakistan's military ruler, General Pervez Musharraf, a key US ally who opposed a government dominated by the Northern Alliance.

President Bush had initially warned against taking Kabul, saying the US would "encourage our friends to head south but not into the city of Kabul itself." But the collapse of Taliban resistance made the undefended capital too tempting for Northern Alliance forces.

Washington's proposals aimed to prevent the alliance from consolidating a de facto administration in Kabul. Secretary of State Colin Powell called for an "open city," while British Prime Minister Tony Blair urged the UN to establish a presence "as soon as possible" and placed several thousand British troops on standby. Behind the rhetoric of democracy and self-government, these arrangements excluded the Afghan population from determining the country's future.

50 years ago: Indian rump parliament rubber-stamps Indira Gandhi dictatorship

On November 11, 1976, the upper house of the Indian Parliament, the Rajya Sabha, voted 191 to 0 to approve the 42nd Amendment to the Constitution. The sweeping bill had passed the Lok Sabha on November 2 by a vote of 366 to 4, with most opposition MPs either imprisoned or boycotting the proceedings. MPs from the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) supported the dictatorship and voted alongside the ruling party. The vote was the formal constitutional codification of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's dictatorial "Emergency" regime into permanent police-state rule.

Gandhi's rule by dictatorship had begun 16 months earlier, on June 25, 1975, after the Allahabad High Court convicted her of electoral corruption and nullified her 1971 election. Facing mounting economic strikes and mass student protests, Gandhi invoked emergency powers, jailing over 100,000 political opponents and placing an outright ban on strikes. Often called the "Mini-Constitution," the 1976 amendment established total executive supremacy, stripping the courts of judicial review and preventing citizens from legally defending basic civil liberties against state repression.

A central weapon of the legislation was Article 31D, which empowered the central government to ban any organization or activity deemed "anti-national." This measure was aimed directly at the working class, criminalizing strikes and creating a legal dragnet against socialist and independent trade unions following the brutal suppression of the 1974 railway strike.

Among the most hated policies of the dictatorship was the compulsory "population-control" campaign spearheaded by Indira's son, Sanjay Gandhi. Holding no elected or governmental position, Sanjay exercised unchecked extra-constitutional powers as the regime's de facto enforcer, dictating orders to state ministers and civil servants through the Youth Congress apparatus. This brutal campaign was encouraged and heavily financed by Western capital and the World Bank, which tied developmental assistance to rigid population-reduction quotas.

These quotas translated into systematic police terror against the rural peasantry and urban poor, as officials threatened to withhold salaries, food rations, and trade licenses unless assigned sterilization targets were met. Armed police squads conducted pre-dawn raids on working-class neighborhoods and rural villages, exemplified on November 6 in the Meo Muslim village of Uttawar, where hundreds of police surrounded the town and dragged nearly 800 men to makeshift clinics for forced vasectomies. Over 6 million people were coerced into sterilization in 1976 alone, with thousands dying from infection and medical neglect in crude, unsanitary facilities.

The Stalinist CPI made Gandhi's assault on the working class possible. Its support came directly from its subordination to the foreign policy of the Kremlin. Moscow saw the Gandhi government as its most important strategic partner in South Asia. The two governments were bound together by the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty of

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Peace, Friendship and Cooperation, which India signed as a counterweight to its arch-rival, US-backed Pakistan.

75 years ago: US army spreads inflated atrocity claims amid Korean War armistice talks

On November 14, 1951, Colonel James M. Hanley, head of the US Eighth Army's war crimes section, declared at a press conference in Pusan, South Korea, that Chinese and North Korean forces had massacred thousands of captured American and other Allied soldiers.

Hanley claimed that Chinese forces alone had executed 2,513 American prisoners since November 1950. Two days later, he raised his estimate of Americans murdered since the beginning of the war to 6,270. He described the alleged atrocities as "a record of killing and barbarism unique even in the Communist world."

The sensational accusations rapidly came under scrutiny, including from within the American military command. On November 20, General Matthew Ridgway, the supreme UN commander in Korea, acknowledged that the figures combined unconfirmed estimates with more firmly established cases, giving a misleading impression of accuracy.

The military could point to only 365 recovered bodies classified as American victims of atrocities, of which 259 had been identified. Ridgway nevertheless maintained that thousands more might have been killed.

The contradictions extended to the highest levels of the military command. A report by Ridgway submitted to the United Nations earlier in November had alleged that as many as 8,000 American military personnel had been killed in atrocities. The wildly varying figures exposed the character of the sensational accusations, which were presented as established facts despite the absence of evidence.

The allegations were issued at a critical stage of negotiations to end the Korean War. Armistice talks had resumed on October 25, following a two-month suspension, and the opposing sides were approaching agreement on a military demarcation line.

Senior American officials immediately recognised the political implications. On November 15, US Army Chief of Staff J. Lawton Collins warned Ridgway of the widespread repercussions of Hanley's statement and called for an urgent clarification, including a disclaimer of any connection to the armistice negotiations.

President Harry Truman, who had ordered the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, denounced the alleged massacres as "the most uncivilized thing that has happened in the last century," while acknowledging that he had no official facts establishing the accusations and adding, "if it's true."

The hypocrisy of US imperialism was staggering. American forces were conducting a devastating bombing campaign against North Korea, systematically destroying cities and towns and inflicting enormous civilian casualties. In South Korea, the US-backed dictatorship of Syngman Rhee had carried out mass executions of political prisoners and suspected leftists. American troops had themselves massacred civilian refugees, including at No Gun Ri in July 1950.

Hanley's intervention was part of a campaign to portray North Korea and China as uniquely barbaric at a decisive stage of the armistice negotiations, while concealing the immense crimes committed by American imperialism and its South Korean ally.

100 years ago: Indonesian Communist Party leads uprisings

On November 12, 1926, the Communist Party of Indonesia (Partai Komunis Indonesia, PKI) led revolts by workers and peasants in Batavia (now Jakarta), Padang, Bantam and Surabaya against the Dutch colonial government which had ruled the southeast Asian island nation since the 18th century.

The PKI had been active among workers, especially railway workers, in 1925 and led a series of strikes, most of which were broken by the Dutch colonial government. In places like Padangpandang, Emmahaven, and the Ombilin coal-mining hub, railway employees organized under the Railway and Tramway Employees Union (VSTP) served as underground liaisons and organizers. However, their action was continually hampered by police measures and preemptive dismissals by the railway.

During the 1926 revolt, armed insurgents from the PKI launched coordinated assaults in Batavia. Militia stormed the main telephone and telegraph exchange, attempting to paralyze intercity communications, and marched toward the central government buildings, police posts and Glodok prison to free political prisoners and seize weapons. Government street patrols and local garrisons responded with rifle fire, repelling the insurgents after localized shootouts. Colonial forces foiled attempts to sabotage railways and prevent the transport of troops.

The armed actions in the urban center such as Batavia and Surabaya, however, failed to mobilize the working class.

The PKI had already retreated from the urban working class and focused its work in the countryside, where the uprisings of 1926 proved to be largely isolated revolts. The forces that rose up were not organized factory workers, but peasants, rural traders, village youth and Muslim religious fanatics mobilized against land-tax surveys and livestock head-taxes.

On the day of the rebellion, Islamic rebels allied with the PKI across Bantam, a predominately rice-growing region on the western tip of Java, put on white religious garments to signify martyrdom and assembled in small units near major mosques and communication junctions, carrying bludgeons, cutting weapons and homemade explosives. These revolts, too, were quickly suppressed by the better-armed colonial police and military.

The administrative and judicial apparatus followed up with mass arrests, summary dismissals, and administrative exile to the Boven-Digul penal camp. The PKI organization was almost completely destroyed and did not re-emerge as a major, legal open party until after the Japanese occupation and the onset of the Indonesian National Revolution in 1945, by which time it had become thoroughly Stalinist. Later it become responsible for the much greater defeat of 1965**.**

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