

This week in history: November 27-December 3

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.

26 November 2023

25 years ago: Kenneth Starr refuses to answer questions from Judiciary Committee Democrats

On December 3, 1998, Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr refused to submit written answers, under oath, to questions submitted to his office by Democratic members of the House Judiciary Committee.

In a letter to the Republican chairman of the committee, Henry Hyde, and the ranking minority member, John Conyers, Deputy Independent Counsel Robert Bittman stated that Starr would not respond to written questions sent by Conyers and three other Democrats on the committee, Zoe Lofgren, Jerrold Nadler and Robert Scott.

Bittman's letter contradicted a directive given by the chair during Starr's November 19 appearance before the committee, as well as Starr's own assurances that he would respond in writing to inquiries sent to his office by committee members.

This issue arose with particular sharpness during Starr's appearance before the committee when Lofgren, a congresswoman from California, asked whether Starr had had discussions in November 1997 concerning a tape recorded conversation about a sexual relationship between Clinton and a woman.

Although she did not elaborate, Lofgren was referring to a November 21, 1997 telephone conversation with one of Paula Jones's lawyers secretly recorded by Linda Tripp, in which Tripp spoke of Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, without mentioning Lewinsky's name, and informed the lawyer that she had tapes of her conversations with the woman.

Starr was taken aback by the question and replied with a series of evasions. In his referral to Congress and his sworn statement to the Judiciary Committee on November 19, Starr said his office first learned of Tripp's tapes revealing Clinton's relationship with Lewinsky in early January of the same year. If he knew of such tapes earlier, he would have been guilty of lying under oath to the committee. Such knowledge would have, moreover, demonstrated the collusion between Starr's office and the Paula Jones camp.

Starr's refusal to submit to questioning was part of the broader effort to drive Clinton out of the White House, as the vote to impeach him occurred just a few weeks later, on December 19, 1998.

50 years ago: Death of Ben-Gurion, founder of Israel, overseer of the *Naqba*

On December 1, 1973 the first prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, died in a hospital in Ramat Gan after suffering a brain hemorrhage. He was 87 years old. Born 1886, Ben-Gurion was the principal Zionist leader during the *Naqba*, the forced dispossession and expulsion of 700,000 Palestinian Arabs that made possible the founding of the state of Israel.

After Ben-Gurion's death the Israeli government attempted something of a canonization. The former prime minister was laid in state and his body made available for public viewing. The government ordered an official state of mourning that included a nationwide two minutes of silence and the temporary closure of places of entertainment.

Already by the time Ben-Gurion proclaimed the establishment of Israel and became its prime minister in 1948 he had decades of history in the world Zionist movement. Born in Poland, Ben-Gurion came under the influence of Theodore Herzl and other Zionist writers. He joined the Poalei Zion, a reactionary party that formed in opposition to the Jewish Labor Bund after the latter had rejected Zionism as a viable strategy for Jewish workers.

In 1906 he left Poland for Palestine, then governed by the Ottoman Empire. There he came into the leadership of the Jewish Social Democratic Workers' Party. Ben-Gurion's faction of the party opposed the unity of Jewish and Arab workers and promoted segregation between the two groups.

After a three-year stint in America raising funds for the Zionist movement, Ben-Gurion joined the Jewish Legion of the British Army in 1918 and participated in the Palestine campaign against the Ottoman Empire. In 1920 he was one of the founders of the Zionist trade union organization, the Histadrut.

Acting as Histadrut's general secretary from 1921 to 1935, Ben-Gurion consistently opposed the establishment of a democratic republic in Palestine that granted Jews and Arabs equal political rights. He again insisted on the segregation of workers and the partitioning of Palestine into separate Arab and Jewish governments.

In 1948 Ben-Gurion played the leading role in planning and executing the forced expulsion of Palestinians from their homes. He

founded the Israeli Defense Forces by consolidating all the various Jewish militia groups into one central organization. This included the fascist organizations like the Irgun, who called for the ethnic cleansing of all Arabs in Palestine and Lebanon.

With only a brief 22-month hiatus Ben-Gurion remained prime minister for the next 15 years. During his tenure he ordered the construction of new Israeli settlements encroaching on Arab lands and continual attacks on Palestinians, including a massacre of 69 villagers in Qibya in 1953.

In 1956, Ben-Gurion ordered the invasion of Gaza and Sinai and joined in the attempt by France and Britain to seize the Suez Canal from Egyptian control. The plan failed after immense pressure from the Eisenhower administration to end the invasion. At the time, the United States was still hoping to bring Egyptian President Gamel Abdul Nasser under the influence of the imperialist camp.

By the time Ben-Gurion died he had overseen the establishment of Israel and immense crimes against the native Palestinian population. He was the loyal servant and attack dog of imperialism in the Middle East. He died never facing any charges for the hundreds of thousands of Arabs massacred or displaced by his Zionist government.

75 years ago: Campaign against firing of American Trotskyist as part of Cold War purges

This week in 1948, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), then the American Trotskyist organization, reported on a developing campaign against the victimization of one of its members, James Kutchner. He had been fired from his job as a clerk at the Newark Veterans Affairs department, explicitly because he was a member of the SWP. The party launched a campaign against the sacking, winning support from various union and civil rights organizations.

On November 27, Kutchner was a featured guest speaker at the third national convention of the American Veterans Committee. The SWP's publication, the *Militant*, reported that the 1,500 delegates gave Kutchner "a stormy ovation."

According to the *Militant*, Kutchner "told the story of his experiences in the Army, of how he was discharged after losing both his legs in action five years earlier, of how he got a job as a clerk with the VA in Newark and how he had been fired from that job the previous month because he belonged to the Socialist Workers Party." This, he explained, was bound up with the Attorney General's placement of the SWP on a "subversives watchlist."

Kutchner "demonstrated that his own case was a touchstone for the whole government purge, and promised to fight it to the end as a matter of principle because its outcome could determine the fate of thousands of other victims of the purges," the newspaper wrote.

Dubbed "the case of the legless veteran," Kutchner's victimization would become widely known as a symbol of the brutality of the anti-communist witch-hunt associated with the launching of the Cold War. The *Militant* reported on union locals, as well as civil liberties groups, issuing resolutions demanding his reinstatement and calling for a campaign in his defense.

The same week Kutchner spoke to the American Veterans Committee delegates, the witch-hunting House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) issued a pamphlet entitled "100 Things You Should Know About Communism and Education."

It hysterically warned that an "army" of 800 teachers had been secretly trained in Moscow to indoctrinate American students in communism upon their return. That was a signal for, and was bound up with, a broad purge throughout government departments and public institutions of workers suspected of affiliation with socialist, communist and radical organizations.

100 years ago: Zionist leader blames increase in anti-Semitism on Bolsheviks

On December 3, in an interview with the *New York Times*, Chaim Weizmann, the head of the World Zionist Organization, claimed that Jews and Arabs would be living in peace in British Mandate Palestine if the Bolsheviks had not "attempted to stir up the smaller nations of the Near East against Great Britain," and added, "crude anti-Semitic propaganda has exacerbated every slight bit of friction between Arabs and Jews," equating socialist anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism.

Weizmann had come to the United States on a tour to raise support for Jewish colonization of Palestine.

Palestinians had conducted mass protests against the British in 1922 for creating a council that allocated them only 43 percent of the seats, though they constituted 88 percent of the population. By 1920, the Zionists had created the paramilitary organization, Haganah, that would become the core of the Israel Defense Force after 1948.

Much of the interview was devoted to the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe by which, Weizmann said, 8 million Jews were endangered. He posited an ever-expanding anti-Semitism without identifying any social causes or acknowledging the blows dealt to anti-Semitism by the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Republic. Weizmann predicted that the anti-Semitic wave would spread to the United States.

Weizmann had been born in what is now Belarus in the territory of the Tsarist Empire in 1874. He joined the Zionist movement in Berlin while he was studying there in the 1890s. He became a well-known chemist and was instrumental in persuading Lord Alfred Balfour, whom he had met in 1906, when Balfour was a Tory MP, to support the Zionist project. While Balfour was foreign minister in David Lloyd George's wartime cabinet in 1917, Weizmann was asked, along with Walter Rothschild, to draft a statement declaring that the British government favored "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." Now known as the Balfour Declaration, the statement was issued on October 31, 1917.

Weizmann became the first president of Israel in 1949.



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