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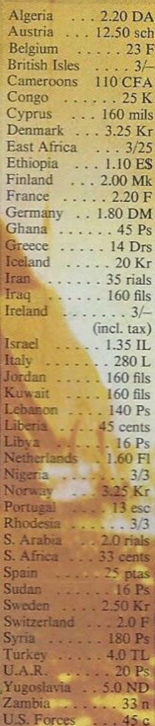
FRENCH REVOLUTION 1968



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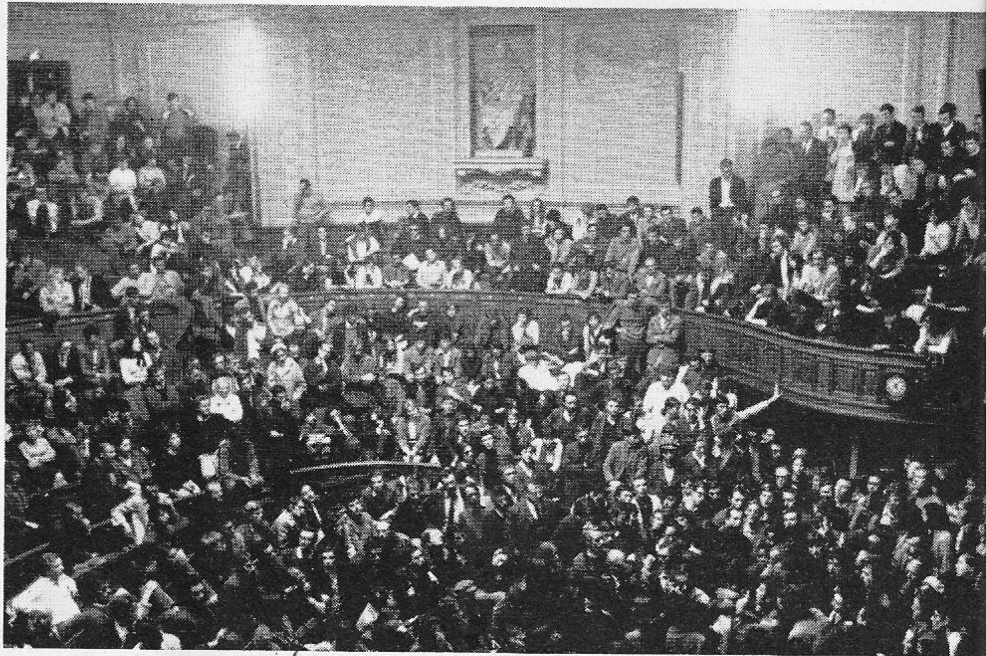


Photos by Bruno Barbey—Magnum

Student power in Paris: A red flag drapes the Latin Quarter statue of Victor Hugo; inside the Sorbonne, students pack a revolutionary teach-in

FRANCE AT THE BARRICADES

Like some relentless contagion, anarchy crept across the face of France last week. From the length and breadth of the country, the incredible reports trickled in: another university seized by its students, another factory barricaded by its workers, Orly Airport shut down by a technicians' strike, newspaper deliverymen on strike, the St. Nazaire dockyards paralyzed. And in Paris itself the tension mounted ever higher: feverishly, the regime worked to forestall a rebellion by the employees of the state-owned radio and television network. Most ominous of all, there were whispers of a strike by members of the Paris police force—a step that could herald the final breakdown of order.

So massive and so diffuse were the assaults on "the system" that the government of France scarcely knew where to begin its counterattack. Late in the week, Premier Georges Pompidou went before the television cameras to calm his seething countrymen. Dutifully, he assured them that they would be addressed "within a few days" by Charles de Gaulle—who, in a supreme display of cool, was off playing international politics in Rumania (following story). That genuflection made, Pompidou proceeded to state his own position. "I have given proof of my desire for peace," he began, alluding to the conciliatory gestures he had made toward France's rebellious university students who had furnished the tinder for the conflagration sweeping the country. But, he quickly admitted, "my appeals have not been heeded at all." Grim-faced, he concluded: "Groups of enraged men now propose to make the disorder general with the avowed goal of destroying the nation and the very foundations of our free society. Frenchmen! Frenchwomen! The government must defend the republic; it *will* defend it."

This was the direst public alarm sounded by any French leader since the dark days of the Algerian war when the armies of France rose in mutiny. And Pompidou's concern was in no sense exaggerated. For in dreamlike, almost surrealist fashion, things were falling apart in France. Charles de Gaulle's proudest boast has been that he restored political stability to a country long considered ungovernable—and three weeks ago no rational observer would have dared to challenge that boast.

Revolution: Yet last week, the world was witnessing a latter-day French Revolution—not a revolution in the traditional sense of armed uprising but nonetheless, in the developing political style of the second half of the twentieth century, an authentic revolution. And it was a revolution with implications that extended far beyond France. For its underlying causes —the growing rigidity of conventional techniques of government and the inchoate, unsatisfied aspirations of the international underground known as "the younger generation"—were present in every Western nation. What had happened in Paris was, after all, simply an exaggeration of events which have already occurred in Berlin and New York.

Improbable as it seemed in retrospect, the convulsion that tore France last week began late last month as a seemingly harmless student protest against the nation's woefully inadequate education system (page 41). But when this protest escalated into bloody street battles of incredible violence between police and students in Paris, Frenchmen of many walks of life began a general assault on the whole political and social system.

If the French student rebellion can be said to have a birthplace, it is undoubtedly Nanterre, a dreary working-class slum 10 miles outside Paris. A liberal-arts annex was built there by the University of Paris a few years ago to alleviate the hopelessly overcrowded conditions at the Sorbonne. But as it turned out, Nanterre became a veritable hothouse of nihilists, Trotskyites, Maoists and other extreme left-wing student militants. Locked out of Nanterre a few weeks ago because of their violent political activism, a group of these militants moved into Paris with the intent of continuing their protest inside the stately quadrangle of the Sorbonne. Hardly had they begun their sit-in there, however, than they were forcibly ejected by a contingent of Paris police called in by the Gaullist government. And when, in the aftermath of the sit-in, the Sorbonne

AFP from Pictorial

Danny the Red: 'Give us time'

Escalation: Police block a bridge; workers seize an auto factory

Associated Press

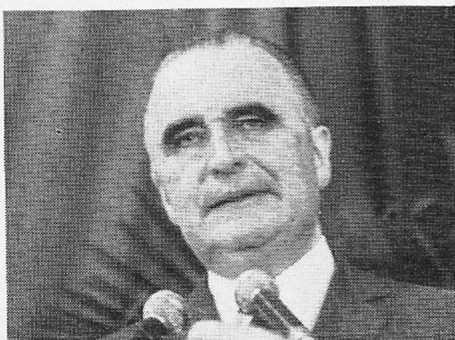
was closed for the second time in its 700-year history—the only previous occasion on which it had been closed occurred during the Nazi occupation of Paris—masses of students, leftists and non-leftists alike, began to clash with police in the streets of the Latin Quarter.

Both sides escalated the conflict remorselessly. The government's mobilization of France's awesome police apparatus swelled the ranks of the capital's 30,000 *flics* with an additional 20,000 hard-bitten, specially trained riot police brought in from the provinces. Meantime, the number of student demonstrators grew to some 30,000. After days of violent encounters that left the Latin Quarter a grim no man's land of burned-out automobiles, uprooted trees, smashed windows and ripped-up paving, the adversaries achieved a sort of paroxysm of violence. Ordered by the government to rout the students from their barricades—many of which resembled those thrown up by the Paris Commune of 1871—the police launched a full-scale, predawn assault that turned into a five-hour pitched battle.

The casualties were heavy on both sides of the barricades. Scores of police, some suffering from concussions and severe lacerations, were counted among the injured as were hundreds of students, some of whom went for hours without medical attention because Red Cross workers were unable to move through the battlefield to reach them.

Significantly, bystanders in their overwhelming majority sympathized wholeheartedly with the students. For however vague might have seemed the cause for which the students fought, most French adults were shocked and horrified to see teen-agers and undergraduates bludgeoned unmercifully by cops and by men of the black-helmeted Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (CRS)—the tough troops specially trained in the ungentle calling of suppressing riots. Time and again, occupants of Latin Quarter apartments overlooking the barricades gave vent to their partisan feelings—sometimes by dropping flower pots on heads of policemen, sometimes by dousing the exhausted students with refreshing pitchers of water.

Amnesty: In the immediate aftermath of the climactic Latin Quarter battle, as both sides withdrew to lick their wounds, it appeared that the government might find a way of defusing the crisis. Indeed, the moment he returned to Paris from a two-week trip to Iran and Afghanistan, Premier Pompidou decided to give the students all they had been demonstrating for and then some. At his order, all students arrested for rioting were released, the doors of the Sorbonne were reopened, the police were withdrawn from the Latin Quarter and an amnesty bill was hastily prepared for submission to the French Parliament. Then, in yet another gesture of conciliation, Pompidou went before a turbulent session of the National Assembly where, in a notably gracious speech, he agreed that student unrest was profoundly justified and promised sweeping reforms in the French educational system.



London Express

Pompidou: Unheeded appeals

But even these liberal measures were too late to prevent the deluge. Other elements of French society—unionists, workers, teachers, intellectuals and even pint-size schoolchildren—were already making common cause with the bloodied student veterans of the Latin Quarter riots. The first evidence of this new alliance came early last week in the form of a 24-hour general strike and a massive, eight-hour march through Paris. The procession, intended to protest police brutalities against the students, quite possibly was the biggest of its kind ever seen in France. An estimated half million men, women and children joined in, 40 abreast, to march from the Place de la République on the Right Bank, across the Seine, through the Latin Quarter and finally to the Left Bank's Place Denfert Rochereau. And, although the demonstration went off peacefully enough, it was apparent from such shouted slogans as "De Gaulle, assassin!" and "Ten years are enough!" that the real target of public outrage was not the educational system or the police but France's aging President.

Appeasement: Anxious to avoid fresh violence that might only backfire against the government, Pompidou decided at this stage to stick with appeasement. Police, therefore, were kept well out of sight all along the route of the protest march. And, evidently hoping the fired-up students would soon drop from sheer emotional exhaustion, the Premier ordered that the youthful protesters be given virtual carte blanche.

The students lost no time in picking

up this official invitation to do as they liked, and, for awhile, they seemed to be the real rulers of France. In Strasbourg, Rennes, Nantes, Grenoble and other large university centers, students occupied classrooms and dormitories. University faculties—eager to survive the reign of student power—dutifully lined up in support of most undergraduate demands. In Nanterre, the birthplace of the revolution, some student extremists, playing at the role of Maoist Red Guards, obliged professors to stand up and "confess" their "errors."

It was in the embattled Latin Quarter, however, that students made the most of their fresh-won victory. The university was christened the "autonomous and popular Sorbonne," and lecture rooms were named in honor of the late Che Guevara. Iconoclastic posters such as "it is forbidden to forbid" went up and "no smoking" signs were replaced by others declaring "you may smoke—including pot." And, having staged their own cultural revolution, some student admirers of Chairman Mao covered the Sorbonne's venerable walls with big-character posters—all excessively violent in tone and most containing misspellings. "One does not compromise with a society in a state of decomposition," shouted one such poster. "We are inventing a new and original world," proclaimed another.

Debates: Inside the university, thousands of students, sight-seers, hippies and offspring of well-to-do French families watched and listened as student leaders engaged in marathon debates on where the student rebellion should go next. "Revolutionary committees" by the score—nearly all of them with political programs that had little or nothing to do with university reforms—engaged in a flurry of activity. Statues of Pasteur and Victor Hugo were draped in red flags. A jazz band played night and day in the Sorbonne courtyard. And, although red flags seemed to be everywhere, the black flag of the anarchists was also seen flying from a Sorbonne rooftop.

To top all this off, several thousand students one night marched down to the Théâtre de France at the Place de l'Odéon, overwhelmed the nightwatchman and occupied the premises after the curtain fell on a performance by the Paul Taylor ballet, on tour from the U.S. Later, a banner was flown from the roof of the theater proclaiming it "Closed to bourgeois audiences."

Then, with astonishing abruptness, the anti-establishment revolt took on a new and foreboding dimension. Perhaps emboldened by the government's failure to suppress the students, unionists and white-collar workers by the thousands went on strike or seized factories all across the nation. The wave of labor unrest that ensued had no precedent in Gaullist France and could only be compared to the widespread social upheaval of the early 1930s which produced Léon Blum's ill-fated "popular front." Then, tens of thousands of workers had locked themselves in their factories and camped there for weeks at a time. Last week, they did just that again—and on a far larger scale.

The "lock-in" movement began in Nantes, near the Atlantic coast, when some 1,200 workers closed the gates of the Sud-Aviation factory (which makes Caravelle jets) and made the plant manager prisoner by soldering metal bars over his office door. (While they kept him liberally supplied with food and wine, the workers also reminded the manager of the revolutionary nature of their strike by playing songs of the Viet Cong and the French Revolution outside his window.)

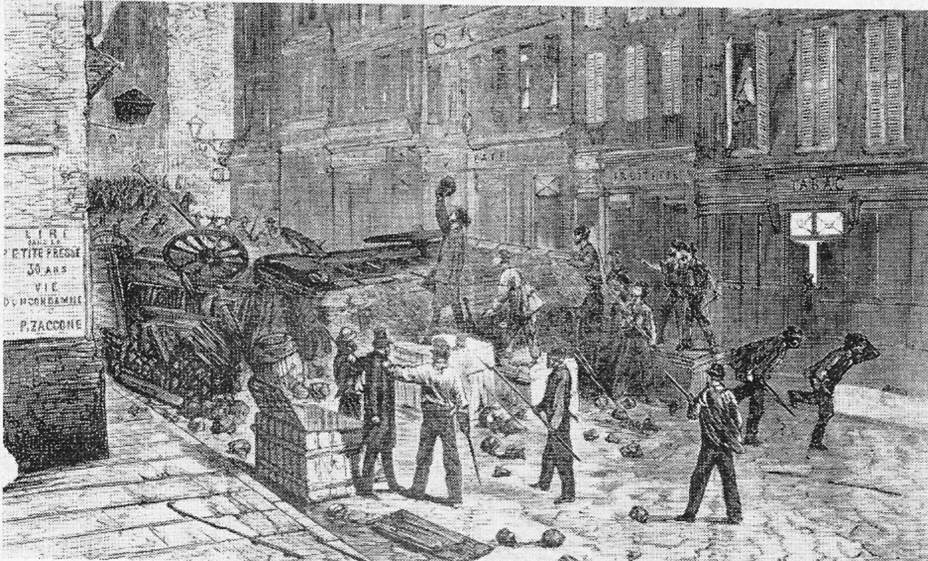
Twenty-four hours later, the lock-in had spread to the Renault works in Boulogne-Billancourt, Flins and Le Mans and by the following day more than 60 factories all across France had closed, in most cases with the workers locking themselves inside. Among the plants shut down: the huge Rhodiaceta synthetic-fiber plant at Lyons, the Berliet truck and road-machinery factory and the great Schneider-Creusot steelworks. More than 400,000 men were involved—and that seemed to be only the beginning. Strikes were also expected in the nationalized railroads and among postal employees and municipal workers in Paris. "It's a general strike all right," said a senior French official, "and the worst thing about it is that nobody really knows what they're striking for."

Unrest: The strike wave was by no means confined to factory workers. A 48-hour walkout by ground technicians brought air traffic to a halt, first at Orly and ultimately at every airport in France. Even the Cannes Film Festival—disrupted by jury resignations and fist fights in the audience—was forced to close. More surprising still was the spread of unrest among the French police, who traditionally consider themselves overworked, underpaid and unendingly maligned—and whose tempers have been badly frayed by the extraordinary burdens of the past two weeks. (The first portent of the collapse of the Fourth Republic, some observers gloomily recalled, came when Paris policemen staged a demonstration outside the National Assembly building early in 1958.)

But perhaps the most telling blow of all against the Gaullist regime was struck in the studios of ORTF, the government radio-TV network, where, for the past decade, announcers and broadcasters had faithfully churned out Gaullist propaganda in the guise of news. Now, abruptly, radio men demanded an end to slanted coverage, while TV editors, technicians and directors threatened to take over the network unless the student uprising was more "objectively" reported on ORTF screens.

The demand for objectivity, at least, was quickly met. Early one night last week, three extremist student leaders dominated by an engaging, freckle-faced nihilist named Daniel (Danny the Red) Cohn-Bendit faced a panel of French reporters in what was probably the most free-wheeling confrontation ever seen on French TV. Brimming with confidence, the three young men blithely admitted their aim was to overthrow de Gaulle and all of "bourgeois" society—overthrow of the "bourgeois universities" being but one step along the way. "Of course it won't happen overnight," grinned Danny the Red. "We have only been at it ten days. Give us time."

Mobilization: And that, for the moment, was precisely what the regime was doing. Cognizant though they were of the explosiveness of the situation—privately, one high-ranking Paris police officer even asserted that a "national insurrection" was likely—government officials seemed at something of a loss as to how to cope with it. After a morning-long meeting with top Cabinet ministers and police officials, Pompidou did decide to



Culver Pictures

The Paris Commune of 1871: Reminiscences of a revolutionary past

mobilize 10,000 reservists of the Gendarmerie Nationale. Beyond that, however, the government's policy—for the time being, at least—was to leave the locked-in strikers alone but to dissuade students from occupying any more buildings. As a precautionary measure, strong detachments of police and CRS were posted by all Paris bridges and also guarded the Eiffel Tower and the Opera (where a performance of "Rigoletto" late in the week was canceled).

The government, it seemed clear, was on the horns of a peculiar dilemma. It could scarcely accede to the students' demands for the total overhaul of French society. And so far as the disaffection of the working class went, one of the more extraordinary aspects of the new French revolution was its relative paucity of specific new grievances. After a slight recession, the French economy had been picking up nicely. Unemployment was down appreciably and consumer prices had stabilized somewhat after a sharp climb in the cost of living. There was, of course, considerable hostility toward the government because of police brutality against the students. But by the middle of last week, sympathy for the students had begun to taper off, too; a half hour of Danny the Red on TV, plus the rowdy occupation of the Odéon theater, led many French adults to conclude that the students were getting above themselves.

Sclerosis: But still the unrest persisted—which suggested that its real causes were so deep-seated as to be almost incurable. A commonly heard criticism of nearly all Western democracies is that their governments have grown increasingly unresponsive to the needs and aspirations of their citizenry. And in France, this unresponsiveness has undoubtedly been exacerbated by the stultifying nature of the Gaullist regime. "Perhaps the greatest failing of de Gaulle," cabled NEWSWEEK's Paris bureau chief Edward Behr last week, "is that he induced a feeling of sclerosis felt by all parties. He did this by repudiating traditional democratic processes in favor of a paternalistic, liberal but essentially authoritarian regime which treated parliamentarians like puppets—and which, like Big Brother, always knew best."

It was also quite possible that Frenchmen had grown monumentally bored with a decade of Gaullist "grandeur"—its ceaseless oratory and its seemingly irrelevant posturing. When the students burst into revolt, they may have been expressing openly a sense of frustration and aimlessness which many of their seniors—somewhat inarticulately—had certainly been feeling. And, beyond all challenge, the students of France were expressing a frustration felt by mid-twentieth-century youth everywhere. "The trouble with the world," complained one Sorbonne undergraduate last week, "is that youth isn't being listened to and isn't being used—in Russia or France or the United States."

With these explosive forces on the loose in his homeland, Charles de Gaulle at the end of the week finally cut short his Rumanian visit and returned to Paris 24 hours ahead of schedule. Although he made no immediate public statements on the magnitude of the challenge to his regime, there seemed little doubt, following a meeting Sunday with his key Cabinet ministers, that De Gaulle intended to deal firmly with the demonstrators. Georges Gorse, Information Minister, said De Gaulle ended the meeting by declaring, "Reform yes, but not a mess." Also in on the emergency session were Armed Forces Minister Pierre Messmer and Police Chief Maurice Grimaud.

Take-over: Presumably, the general would advance his plans to address his nation over radio and TV on the crisis. But he might well find even his oratorical magic unequal to the task. For by the end of the week, French labor unions—with the Communist-dominated CGT in the van—had virtually taken over the anti-Gaullist movement from the student rebels. From the start, the Communist Party, and many workers, had considered the student leftists dangerously "idealistic" and "romantic." And now the unions were determined to convert the goals of the uprising to something more practical than the overthrow of bourgeois society. "The situation has changed," said a CGT communiqué. "It is now a conflict between the forces of labor on one hand and, on the other, the regime faced with the bankruptcy of its policies."

What the unionists evidently hoped to win were general elections that would usher in a new (and, needless to say, non-Gaullist) government. In the meantime, they assembled a massive set of economic demands. If de Gaulle gave in to any substantial number of these demands, he would lose enormous face—and, no less important, so undermine the economic policies of his regime as to virtually destroy its *raison d'être*. Yet if he adopted a rigid and uncompromising posture, he might well find himself obliged to resort to such massive use of force that his government would be totally discredited.

No one yet knew what the general would do. But one thing was certain: almost overnight he had lost both his credibility as a father figure and much of his political rationale. "This is without doubt the most critical moment we have ever faced," admitted one top Gaullist. "The whole foundations of Gaullism must be rethought and brought up to date."

But there was considerable question whether that was possible. The Gaullist regime might well survive for some time to come. But that de Gaulle could ever again capture the passionate support of the French masses was uncertain. Curiously, throughout all the turbulent events of the last weeks, the nightclubs of Paris were as crowded as ever and the shoppers and strollers along the boulevards seemingly unconcerned. Parisians, in short, appeared to accept the possibility of the end of the Gaullist era with equanimity. "Ten years," shrugged one official, "is a long time. And as you see, we are not an easy people to govern."

Gilles Caron—Gamma

De Gaulle and Ceausescu (right): The high priest and the converted

The Bloc Buster

It was a matchless opportunity for the high priest to preach to the converted. And from the moment his white Caravelle touched down at Bucharest airport last week, Charles de Gaulle wrung every ounce of propaganda value out of his long-heralded state visit to Rumania. Beaming happily at shouts of "*Traiasca* de Gaulle" ("Long live de Gaulle"), he plunged head-on into the enthusiastic Rumanian crowds, pumping hands and waving exuberantly. And whenever he found himself within range of a microphone, the general hammered away at a theme dear to Rumanian hearts—the need to end the "artificial division" of Europe into Eastern and Western blocs.

Though de Gaulle had to cut short his visit by a day because of France's raging civil disorders, he nonetheless managed to maintain his sangfroid before his hosts in Bucharest. Raising