

**Volume 14**

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**1968: Paris Student Riots II**

**Introduction: *A Moment in Time, 1968:* A special series on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a year of upheaval, in a world seemingly out of control.**

**Content: In spring 1968, led by Daniel Cohn-Bendit, called Dany “le rouge” for his flaming red hair and left of center politics, radical students came from all over the country to Paris to take on the government of Charles de Gaulle.**

**For leading student protests at the University in Nanterre, Dany was hauled in front of the Disciplinary**

**Board of the University of Paris and in his support over a thousand students gathered around the Sorbonne. The students were supported by a group of young left wing professors called the Syndicat National de L'Enseignement Superieur (“SNE-Sup”). The government banned demonstrations that day, which led, of course, led to massive demonstrations. The students squared off against the anti-riot arm of the French secret police who clubbed them mercilessly. The students in turn built barricades out of cars and hurled cobblestones. They continued for a week or more, with the fighting becoming more violent every day. Dany Le Rouge remarked that “the message was getting lost in the**

**violence, the way it always does. The way it did with the black panthers.”**

**On May 13th, the anniversary of President de Gaulle’s return to power in 1958, the major trade unions in France began a general strike. The workers were taking advantage of the unrest to put pressure on the government for a whole different set of social demands. France seemed to be on the brink of social collapse.**

**In response to this crisis, de Gaulle took the opportunity to leave the country. He went on a scheduled trip to Romania, leaving Prime Minister Georges Pompidou to deal with the emergency. Pompidou placated the students by freeing those arrested,**

**withdrawing the police, and re-opening the Sorbonne. Of course, this only led to a reoccupation of the school. On the other front, Pompidou attempted to appease the workers with higher pay and better benefits.**

**About this time, the government saw fit to deport Cohn-Bendit, a Jew and a German national, back to his native country. This evoked for the French the horrible image of deporting French Jews to Germany during World War II. They had hoped they would be able to forget that. All the memories came rushing back as young people rallied around the image of Dany “Le Rouge” as they chanted “We are all German Jews!”.**

**When students attempted to burn down the national stock exchange, de Gaulle acted. He dissolved the National Assembly, called for elections and actually won a huge conservative mandate. France had shown that while it may have wanted a little reform, it was not ready for revolution.**

**The student riots gradually died out and Paris quickly returned to normal, yet the-so called “May events” left their mark. As Jean Paul Sartre put it, they “enlarged the field of the possible.” De Gaulle was himself gone within a year having misjudged the nation’s fear of turmoil as genuine, universal acceptance for all his policies. Having lost a referendum in**

**April 1969, he retired to his country estate and died in November 1970.**

**Research assistance by Tim Litzenburg. At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

**Resources**

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**Kurlansky, Mark. *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2004.**

**Ric's Metropole Paris, "May '68 Dates"**

**<http://www.metropoleparis.com/1998/318/chron318.html>**

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