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1968: Student Riots in Paris - I

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

Content: In 1968 France was still led by Charles de Gaulle. He was 79 years old, had saved the nation twice, once during World War II as head of the Free French Army and then rode to the rescue during the Algerian crisis in the 1950s. He was still around. Many of the young saw him as old-fashioned, past his prime - an aging autocrat who needed to move on.

During in the early 1960s, radical left-wingers had gradually taken over formerly conservative French student groups and they had fertile ground in which to work. By 1968, France had 530,000 University students, among whom there was a 75% fail rate. The universities were overcrowded and impersonal. Few students felt they had meaningful interaction with their professors. Many former students hung around the periphery of their former Universities doing little and providing human combustion ready for ignition.

In January 1968, a group of students at the University of Nanterre (nn 'ter) was protesting the school's segregation of dorms by gender. The

Government's Minister of Youth visited the campus around that time, and a student named Daniel Cohn-Bendit confronted him, complaining that the minister had never addressed the "sexual issues of youth." The bureaucrat made light of his remark: "No wonder, with a face like yours, you have these problems. I suggest you take a dip in the pool." Cohn-Bendit replied "Now there's an answer worthy of Hitler's youth minister."

With this exchange, the young man became famous and was given the nom-de-guerre "Dany le Rouge" for his bright red hair. The agitation at Nanterre seemed to mimic similar protests in Berlin, Rome and Berkeley. The movement began with a group of

25 called the “enragés”. Their strategy was simple. Each time they staged a small rally, the police would create most of the action and outrage for them.

On March 22, a group of students, led by Dany, occupied the 8th floor faculty lounge of one of the campus buildings. As a result, Dany was called before the University of Paris’ disciplinary board. Naturally, student demonstrations only increased. The dean of the school asked the Ministry of Education to shut down Nanterre, which they did.

This merely prompted a student demonstration on May 3 at the Sorbonne in Paris, the center of the

university system. There the protests resulted in over 600 arrests and the first closing of that school in its 700 year history. Next time: students ignite a nation.

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

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**Kurlansky, Mark. *1968: The Year that Rocked the World*.
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Ric's Metropole Paris, "May '68 Dates"

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