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OCCUPYING THE MINDS OF STUDENTS: A REVOLT IN FRANCE, 1968

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Glossary

CFDT- French Democratic Confederation of Labor

CGT- General Confederation of Workers

CRS- French riot police

FER- Federation of Revolutionary Students

FO- Workers' Force

IUT- University Technology Institute

JRC- Young Communist Revolutionaries

PCF- French Communist Party

SNESup- National Union of Professors of Higher Education

UNEF- National Union of French Students

Introduction

While studying in Caen, France, a city two hours west of Paris, during the spring of 2006, I witnessed the most recent country-wide student events. After walking home from class in early March, I heard the chanting of people and the honking horns of cars. I walked a couple hundred feet to the end of the parking lot. And there, right on the freeway was the afternoon traffic in a complete standstill. Thousands of students were marching on the freeway. They were chanting, singing, and holding banners. “Retraite, retraite, retraite, le CPE.” I couldn’t believe it. Students were running down the hill onto the freeway and joining in the action. I kept asking people what was going on and they explained to me about the labor bill, the CPE (or the Beginning Workers Contract), that made it legal for employers to terminate employment for workers under the age of twenty-six without due cause. The French government charges employers and owners of businesses a tax on each of its employees, but not until after the employee’s first two years of working for that business. Students became worried that this bill would jeopardize their future economic stability if they could not hold employment opportunities. The bill was approved by Dominique de Villepin, but later rejected by Jacques Chirac on April 10, 2006 due to the mass protests.

Just a couple days before, my classes on the lower campus were cancelled due to the blockage of the buildings. My classes were moved to rooms in the International Center building on the upper campus of the university. Within the next week the French students patrolled every door of the International Center building and we had to show our passports everyday. The French students camped out in the lecture halls and had mass demonstrations and marches throughout the city. No one anticipated the protests to last

as long as they did. On March 28th, 2006, at least two million demonstrators marched to protest the Contrat Première Embauche (CPE). The University of Caen-Basse Normandie was closed for over two months. Fortunately, the International Center for exchange students was not closed and our classes remained in session. I recall whole days where businesses failed to open and the public transportation systems never started to run. How could these students shut down an entire thriving city? In all eighty-nine of France's universities, sixty-eight were on strike by March.¹

I could never imagine myself, or even another classmate, ever taking such drastic measures in the U.S. Walking in the middle of a highway, closing the university by blocking the entrances with chairs and tables stacked to the ceiling, and marching on the tramway sounded completely radical, foreign, and irrational to me. Little did I realize, American history is also filled with radical students. After taking a class last semester, I began to understand that the American students were just as radical as these French students fighting and protesting for their rights. During the late fifties and even into the early seventies, American students became more involved in politics and social justice issues. But, the Americans were not the only people to demonstrate and protest. Many other countries' peoples were involved in these types of activities. I embarked on a research mission and found out that the French student protest of 2006 was not a new concept for the French. In the spring of 1968, the French students had the largest student movement in France's history.

The radical decade of the sixties illustrated the ever-changing world in an inventive perspective. With the shadow of the Algerian War and the newly organized Fifth Republic lurking in the recent past for the French, the sixties became a turbulent

¹ Jef Costello. "68 French Universities On Strike" (libcom.org, April 2, 2006).

time filled with needs and wants, confusions and confrontations, and revolts and revolutions. The driving force of one of the most famous revolutions in history, the French Revolution of 1789, was the middle class bourgeoisie. The same can be said for the student revolt in 1968. As in the revolution of 1789 that not only changed France's future but also paved the way for other nations' citizens, the revolutions of 1968 were also influential.

On the global scale, on almost every continent, there were many revolutions during the sixties. They were based on different attitudes but ultimately resulted in many of the same outcomes. Such countries as Germany with Rudi Dutschke, Italy and the Red Brigades and the neo-fascists, America with Martin Luther King, Jr., Czechoslovakia and Alexander Dubcek, and of course France and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, pioneered the "nouvelles idées." These countries became overwhelmed as many of their citizens fostered the revolutionary beliefs. Ideas soon sprang into actions, and nations were enthralled with difficulties. In France, these difficulties peaked during the ten million worker strike on May 23rd, 1968. The general strike immobilized the country.

I will attempt to uncover the history of French student involvement in their universities and in politics by mainly looking at four primary sources. A newspaper, a book assembled of interviews, a book written about the chief group associated with the students which includes a complete list of events, a compilation of the graffiti and poems about the events of May, will help me discover and infer that the student movements of 1968 were in fact influential and changed France's situation at the time.

Le Monde, the premier daily French newspaper, plainly illustrates the revolutionary events of 1968 in France. In 1968, *Le Monde* had lengthy pages devoted to

global topics in the news, and also had a small column on student and university life. Focusing my research on these columns throughout a six-month period displayed a fascinating account of the French student's avant-garde behavior. As the months from January to June unfolded, *Le Monde* committed whole pages and spreads on the students' actions as well as the students' needs and wants.

Interviews with the main leaders of the student movement in France prove to be a vital element in discovering not only the goals, but also the aims to achieve the students' goals. Compiled in 1968, Hervé Bourges's *The French Student Revolt: The Leaders Speak*, contains interviews with Alain Geismar, Jacques Sauvageot, and Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who were the leaders of the March 22nd Movement. One of the interviewers is Jean-Paul Sartre, the influential French existentialist writer and philosopher, who supported the student movement.

Enrages and Situationists in the Occupation Movement clearly illustrates the intense involvement of the Situationist group in the student movement. This book was written by an insider, Rene Viénet, a member of the Situationist International, and "provides an eyewitness account" into the events of 1968. Although there is a bias in the text, Viénet offers an informative and compelling version of the events.

In looking at the material evidence of 1968, the graffiti, slogans, and pamphlets of 1968 played a major role in the revolution. There are dozens of books and articles dedicated to describing and analyzing these phrases; many of them are still used today. The largest organized group sponsoring and producing the pamphlets and graffiti are the Situationist International. The "writing on the wall" was truly radical and expressed the concerns, wants, and goals of the students. *When Poetry Ruled the Streets*, by Andrew

Feenburg and Jim Freedman, illuminates the slogans and leaflets into the goals of the student organizations and the eventual worker solidarity.

There are countless aspects to the student movement in France and many key players. Students, teachers, general sympathizers, political parties and groups, workers, and worker unions, all generated significant contributions to the events of 1968. The workers played a remarkable role in the student movement. Although they had different goals, the workers and their trade unions went on strikes and occupied their factories with fervor for revolt and an inspiration for the overthrow of the de Gaulle regime.

The presence of the PCF, the French Communist Party, was major not only in its association with the students, but also a heavy aspect in French life in general. As Nanterre fell within the “Red Belt,” so did the workers’ thoughts. The “Red Belt” is a suburban ring that surrounds the capital and in 1968, included at least one million workers - representing the largest zone of working-class people in France. The belt symbolized the eventual rise of the proletariat supported by the French Communist Party since the twenties. There is so much obvious correlation between the PCF and the students and workers. How did the size and influence of the Communist Party affect the student’s uprising? With the direct links to political parties, the UNEF, the largest student union in France, had some political support, which gave the students more drive.

Focusing primarily on the students and their actions at Nanterre, a northwestern suburb of Paris, will give me insight to the causes of the May-June events. I will discuss how the actions of the university administration, the National Education system, and the CRS and police force influenced and inspired the students. The goals and actions of the students were imperative to understanding the meanings of 1968. How did the students

plan to make a difference and what are they willing to offer in hopes of getting from their situation to the outcome they envisioned will be the basis of this paper.

Section one of my paper will be a necessary history on the higher education system in France and how it played into the students' aims and goals discussed in chapter two. For the second section I will delve into the key players of the student movement starting at Nanterre. The students' aims and goals, as well as their involvement in the university and politics will be crucial in laying the backdrop for the revolution.

In the third section, I will connect with the workers and examine their reasons for their eventual solidarity with the students. The one-day general strike and all of the smaller strikes leading up to May 23rd will be helpful in illustrating the consequences economically, politically, and what it actually meant for the students and workers.

The last portion of my paper will be devoted to the graffiti and pamphlets displayed and distributed throughout France. The authors and producers of these radical phrases and slogans expressed many different aspects of the situation not only in France, but all over the world. I will also look at some of the pictures taken during the occupations of the Sorbonne and the street warfare.

Although the revolution of May '68 was full of adventure and questionable measures, the students and their action were the impetus for future change. And, as the saying goes, "the personal became the political," has immense importance to the events of 1968. The student desire was initially something different, but as 1968 unfolded, the student movement became a struggle in opposition to the old de Gaulle regime and French society as a whole.

Part One: It All Starts With A Spark: The French Students Speak Out

After World War Two, France, like many other industrialized countries, experienced the baby boom. As a result, the majority of the population was in its twenties and enrolled in the university system during the sixties. By the time of the May movements, France had tripled its student population from 175,000 in 1958 to over 500,000 in 1968.² In a decade, universities became unprepared to accommodate the students' needs. In efforts to subdue the population in the universities, the Gaullist regime constructed more universities and adopted a new law, the Fouchet reform.

One of the schools the Ministry of National Education constructed was the University of Nanterre X, situated about seven miles from Paris' inner-circle. But there was no time to create a campus and university life in the suburb of Paris. The University of Nanterre was built in a place full of low-rent housing units, construction, shanty towns, factories, railroad tracks, and empty lots.³ Nanterre's creation "isolated the students from every cultural center."⁴ The Ministry of Education "...parked thirty thousand students in a semi-slum suburb with no life of its own and no attractions."⁵ The University of Nanterre life and Parisian life were a dichotomy. On one hand, people think of Parisian life as eclectic and urban; but on the other hand, the students were living in the banlieue, the outskirts of a city, remote from its night life. In fact, Nanterre looked more like a factory than a university comparable to any of those in Paris.

The other solution that the Gaullist regime implemented was the Fouchet reform. To fully grasp the Fouchet reform and the situation the students faced, it is imperative to

² Daniel Singer, *Prelude to Revolution* (New York, New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), 45.

³ Alain Touraine, *The May Movement* (New York: Random House, 1971), 122.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁵ Singer, *Prelude to Revolution*, 60.

understand the intensity of the already difficult university - entrance selection criteria. At the end of a student's last year in high school, the student is tested in a nation-wide exam. This exam, the baccalaureate, is comparable to American ACTs or SATs, but much more demanding. The "bac" is the exam as well as the diploma that the students receive. Students can sign up for different series of the "bac" depending on which subject area they are interested in pursuing. Some of the series include science, engineering, economics, and literature. Although, once a specific "bac" is chosen and students are admitted into university, it is especially difficult to change specializations and courses. Already there were strict regulations, but the Fouchet reform wanted a more severe selection method.

The reform, invented by Christian Fouchet, the Minister of the Interior from 1962 to 1967, proposed to install more difficult entrance exams, a more intense selection process, and a sort of "second-rate" degrees, which would be available after two years of study.⁶ These two-year degrees would be for students in lower-level jobs in the governmental, education, and industrial sectors. This reform was a slap in the face for the students who worked hard to pass the "bac." They wanted a chance to improve their personal situation and the new reform cheapened their degree. The reform also took away a student's right to admittance into a university even if the student passed the "bac." In America, we are not guaranteed acceptance into any school, but the French student who passed, was admitted- as their right as a French citizen.⁷

The students were outraged and actual resentment of the University of Nanterre began in October of 1967. Although the University's locale was an issue, the Fouchet Reform was

⁶ Singer, *Prelude to Revolution*, 46.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

of more importance at the beginning of the new school year. At first some of the students and professors were involved in discussions to “solve problems related to course schedules, grievances, and the lack of communication between the administration and the student body.” However, the university administration did not take them seriously.⁸ Another group resisted the Fouchet Reform from the start. These students became known as the “Enragés.” The students wanted “reform of the ‘bourgeois’ university system and an end to the ‘police state’.”⁹ The Ministry of Education denied the student voices so the students were moved to strike. On the 21st of November, 1967, nine thousand to ten thousand students boycotted classes.¹⁰ But, the student strike failed and the higher education system demonstrated its “power of opposition.”¹¹ The Enragés began to interrupt university lectures and declare the problems within the university system were not only due to the structure of the university but more so due to the structure of society. Their goal was political.

The students also had problems with the routine of everyday university life. The universities were controlled by the over-centralized administration obsessed with “order and principle,” and the exams and lectures became monotonous.¹² Nanterre was severely understaffed in teachers as well as administration, and it showed. There were large class sizes - too large to handle for professors as many classes and lectures were taught not by the professors, but their teaching assistants. It took four years for the Ministry to begin to

⁸ Andrew Feenburg and Jim Freedman. *When Poetry Ruled the Streets: The French May Events of 1968* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 5.

⁹ 1968: *Workers join Paris student protest.* news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4865034.stm. May 13, 1968.

¹⁰ Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 56.

¹¹ Touraine, *The May Movement*, 135.

¹² *Ibid.*, 83.

construct the library at Nanterre. While the students were waiting they had to travel to the Sorbonne's library - at least a two hour journey round trip.¹³

The students wanted more freedoms too, especially with regard to dormitory restrictions. The university enforced rules that prohibited students from visitation rights in the dorms. There would be no men in female dormitories and women only allowed in male dormitories only at specific times and until 10:00 p.m., even though many of the students were post-graduate students, adults and "hardly uncontrollable teenagers."¹⁴ The students were denied the right to any sort of political activity and political meetings within the dormitories. In January, women at Nanterre protested by occupying a male dormitory. The idea of sexual freedom had the students involved.

Another important issue was of unemployment. Demographic growth prompted unemployment problems. Between 1962 and 1968, the number of unemployed persons under twenty-five increased three-fold.¹⁵ Students all over the world believe that a university or college graduate will be able to find a job after graduation, but the French students were becoming worried. Fewer people were finding jobs and more were becoming unemployed as a result.

University tuition cost in France is rather inexpensive compared to American universities and colleges because education is funded by the Ministry of National Education, also known as the state. As in America, French students who need financial aid for books or living expenses could apply for scholarships. But, unlike American students, many of whom have part-time jobs, the Nanterre students were unemployed.

¹³ Ibid., 124.

¹⁴ Rohan, Marc. Paris '68: Graffiti, Posters, Newspapers, and Poems of the Events of May 1968 (Great Britain: Impact Books, 1988), 18.

¹⁵ Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution*, 19.

There were no trendy bookstores, boutiques nor cafés to work at like their sister university at Sorbonne.

Because of the massive student population, the Fouchet Reform, and basic human freedoms, the problems at Nanterre and even within the Gaullist Republic, the student crisis was well underway in the late sixties. The students at Nanterre awoke the sleeping discontents and created the foundation of a movement that would endure even to the present day.

Part Two: From January to April: The Gathering of Kindling

After the failure of the first student strike in November 1967, the Nanterre demonstrators knew that they had to form a single, moving body of ideas and beliefs. The events of January through April 1968 built the fire that led to the explosion of May. Certain groups and people also shaped and influenced the May and June events. Groups like the UNEF, FER, a Trotskyite student organization, MAU, the militant student group, FEN, a teachers' union, FNEF, a rightist student union, the Enragés, and the Situationist International, all supported specific views and helped to develop the student movement.

The UNEF, the National Student Union of France, was the largest student union in France. It was a student-led group with leftist ideals. Formed with the merger of two other student groups in 1907, the UNEF has had a century-long history of demonstrations and protests. After the Second World War, the UNEF started to appeal to workers' rights, stating that students are "young intellectual workers," and began to take part in labor union activities. The UNEF led demonstrations for Algerian Independence and condemned the Vietnam War. The active student participants were often connected with political parties and workers' unions such as the CGT, the largest union in France and a Communist Party-oriented trade union, and the FO, a moderate trade union.¹⁶

The Situationist International was a student group with Marxist views and the groups meaning literally meant to engage and construct situations. The group was formed in 1957 and in 1966 the Situationist International wrote "On the Poverty of Student Life" that was published at the University of Strasbourg. The students at Nanterre found this article to be a direct illustration of their situation and published and circulated the article.

¹⁶ Michael Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), viii.

Historically, the Enragés were members of a radical group against the Jacobins during the French Revolution of 1789. The Jacobins were the ruling party at this time and instituted the Reign of Terror in order to unify and “cleanse” the French population. The Enragés believed in the equality and liberty for all groups of people and supported the working class. Centuries later, a group of pro-Situationist students became known as the Enragés during the events of January 1967 at Nanterre. Enragés literally means the “angry ones” or enraged. The Enragés launched a mission to change university policies and reform their university society.

On January 8, 1968 there emerged a new influential leader. At the dedication ceremony of the newly constructed athletic facility at Nanterre, the Minister of Youth and Sports, M. Missoffe, was questioned by a young sociology student. Missoffe had recently written a paper (Papier Blanche) on student life and student activities and was welcomed by Nanterre to be the speaker at the ceremony. This student, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, inquired why the Minister had not addressed the issue of “sexuality and its problems” in university life in M. Missoffe’s “Papier Blanche.”¹⁷ At first, the Minister was tolerant of the outspoken attack, but then he gave in to Cohn-Bendit and made a comment about the appearance of Cohn-Bendit and made correlation to Cohn-Bendit’s personal life and students’ sexual problems. Although the event was not a landmark for the student cause, it became one of the first and many incidents that reminded the students of their reasons for the revolution.

Daniel Cohn-Bendit was born in France in 1945. His parents were Jewish-Germans who fled Germany before the Nazis came into power. The family returned to Germany and Cohn-Bendit began elementary school. When he was 18 he was able to

¹⁷ Alain Touraine, *The May Movement* (New York: Random House, 1971), 139.

choose his citizenship, and chose German instead of French. In 1966, he returned to France to study sociology at the University of Nanterre.¹⁸ He quickly became interested in university politics and joined the anarchist federation. The Federation Anarchiste proved too large for Cohn-Bendit so he left and joined Noir et Rouge, an anarchist group founded in Nanterre. Cohn-Bendit was heavily influenced by other European nations' activists, like Rudi Dutschke, and even the United States' activists. Cohn-Bendit's focuses were to "break down structures" and uncover the problems where they stem.¹⁹ Michael Seidman believes that Cohn-Bendit's incident at the pool with Missoffe was a "media breakthrough."²⁰ The use of Cohn-Bendit as a spokesperson for the students made him a hero among the students and they became more aware of the problems within university life. The students began questioning the university authority. The administration increasingly worried, saw student actions emerging on the campus.

On January 26th, Dean Grappin asked for the help of police to mediate and monitor the security of the university. The police were not in uniform, but the Enragés demonstrated their feelings against the use of the police presence on the campus. The Enragés chased the police off the campus and police cars were ignited.

Another incident happened in the beginning of February. The UNEF, the national student union in France, proposed that students should protest the dormitory regulations on Valentine's Day. The UNEF was so successful that over six hundred students gathered to discuss the methods and tactics. This was a main issue of the students. They

¹⁸ Daniel Cohn-Bendit, <http://www.cohn-bendit.de/dcb2006/fe/pub/en/dany/lebenslauf>, retrieved March 5th, 2007.

¹⁹ Tourraine, *The May Movement*, 142.

²⁰ Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution*, 60.

wanted to protest the “restrictions on visiting rights and other dormitory rules.”²¹ The activists wanted to establish their own social norms and express their rights and freedoms. In all, there were four hundred and fifty people who occupied the female dormitory.

The occupation worked to an extent because the Minister of Education, Alain Peyrefitte, agreed to relax and revise the “outdated system of rules.”²² But, days later, Peyrefitte announced that there were risks involved with permitting males to enter female dormitories; however, female students would be allowed to visit male dormitories. Peyrefitte retracted his initial decision to amend the university policy. Students were outraged at Peyrefitte’s vacillation. The new reform would eventually entail the installation of electric doors to the dormitories and the students would be required to show identification at certain hours.²³ After the Valentine’s Day occupation, the Enragés were threatened with expulsion.

On March 22, twenty students marched into Nanterre’s administrative offices and demanded the use of the public address system to announce a 5:00 p.m. meeting at the administrative building. By 5:00 p.m., hundreds of students arrived and occupied the ninth floor.²⁴ Some of the agitators looted and defaced the school’s property, while others drank the liquor found in the cabinets. Because of the intense differences in ideas between the students, the Enragés left the building. After their exit, the remaining students discussed and left before the police and Alain Peyrefitte arrived.²⁵ One of the students to occupy the administrative building was Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Peyrefitte

²¹ Ibid., 67.

²² Ibid., 68.

²³ Ibid., 71.

²⁴ Ibid., 72.

²⁵ Ibid., 74.

wanted him expelled, but instead was convinced by other administrative colleagues to let Cohn-Bendit be “subject to a disciplinary hearing.”²⁶

Actions by the students continued throughout the rest of the month. The Enragés interrupted classes and took over microphones, chanted, held signs, and wrote on the walls. Finally, Dean Grappin decided to close the university until Monday April 1st. On Friday, the students demonstrated their opposition with four to five hundred students who met to protest the closure. The dean alerted the riot police, the CRS, and they were present in uniform on Nanterre’s grounds. In the following days, 1,500 students would discuss the police presence on the campus and the closure.

On May 1, Dean Grappin shut down the university indefinitely. His justifications were the personal threats to teachers and administrators, the attacks on the university’s property, and the violation of the people who wanted to express their right to teach, learn, and work.²⁷ The closure of Nanterre grew to be the pivotal point in the student movement.

The events from January to April developed into the kindling that led to the explosion in May. Although the different groups varied greatly, the students had to make amends to build for a common goal. Nanterre was closed on May 2, 1968, but that didn’t stop the March 22nd Movement. The group planned a demonstration at the University of Paris at Sorbonne in the days to follow.

²⁶ Ibid., 74.

²⁷ Ibid., 84.

Part Three: The Fury of May

On May 3 students gathered at the University of Sorbonne in the heart of the Latin Quarter. The students were members of the March 22nd Movement, Revolutionary Communist Youth (JCR), Federation of Revolutionary Students (FER), and a few unaffiliated students. The students were meeting and discussing what actions they would take, as well as chanting. At 4:00 pm, Rector Paul Roche, the head of the Parisian Académie, called in the police and riot squads. Over 600 students were arrested and as a result a riot broke out outside the university walls which lasted until 11:00 p.m.²⁸

During the night, the University of Sorbonne was closed. There was a general strike protesting the closure, but a large riot was planned for the sixth. As “one of the bloodiest days in May,” the sixth was marked with barricades, street fighting, and looting of local businesses.²⁹ It “was the first intervention of workers, unemployed, and high school students,” who also organized demonstrations.³⁰ The morning started with marches in the streets around the university but as the students rounded the corner of Rue St.-Jacques in the afternoon they were met with the CRS.³¹ Without warning the CRS, armed with clubs, rifles and tear gas, charged the student mob.³² Injured students laid on the ground while the others pulled up pavement stones to throw at the police.³³ An article from *Le Monde* on the 8th recalled that “des jeunes gens poussent des automobiles en

²⁸ Vladimir Fisera. *Writing on the Wall: May 1968 A Documented Anthology* (St. Martin's Press: New York, 1979) 36.

²⁹ Daniel Singer. *Prelude to Revolution* (Hill and Wang: New York, 1970) 124.

³⁰ Rene Viénet. *Enrages and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68* (Editions Gallimard: Paris, France, 1968) 30.

³¹ Singer, 125.

³² Andrew Feenburg and Jim Freedman. *When Poetry Ruled the Streets: The French May Movements of 1968* (State University of New York Press: Albany, 2001) 15.

³³ Singer, *Prelude to Revolution*, 126.

travers de la chaussée, arrachent des pavés, des grilles d'arbres et assaillir les policiers.”³⁴

The night ended with 422 arrests and was termed “Bloody Monday” by the Parisian paper.³⁵

The next day, “Le Long Marche,” had a different atmosphere than the previous one. The UNEF organized the students and followers to meet at the Belfort Lion situated at Place Denfert-Rochereau.³⁶ They marched to the Latin Quarter which was blocked by trucks and police so they continued marching until they found an open bridge toward the Concorde and rushed towards the Arc de Triomphe.³⁷ Singing the “Internationale” at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and marching past the Elysée Palace, the official residence of the President of France, with the red and black flags, marked a visual radical point in the May movements. The “Internationale” is the most widely-known song and anthem of socialism and has been used in many countries. It was written by a Frenchman, Eugène Pottier, a member of the Paris Commune, in 1871.³⁸ The refrain translated well for the student movement and represented an anarchist movement:

This is the final struggle

Let us join together and tomorrow

The International

Will be the human race³⁹

The students continued their chants and expressed the need for their “comrades” to be freed from jail. The CFDT and the CGT, France’s largest labor union and also associated

³⁴ *Le Monde*, 8 May 1968, page 8.

³⁵ Singer, *Prelude to Revolution*, 129.

³⁶ Viénet, *Enrages and Situationists in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68*, 32.

³⁷ Singer, *Prelude to Revolution*, 129.

³⁸ *The Internationale*. <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/int/internationale.html> (April 9, 2007).

³⁹ *The Internationale*. <http://www.anu.edu.au/polsci/marx/int/internationale.html> (April 9, 2007).

with the French Communist Party, also supported the students' chants. The march did not become uncontrollable until midnight and again cars were overturned, police stoned, fires ignited, and tear gas used.⁴⁰ Clashes continued long into the night.

On the 8th, the students as well as teachers and organizations like the CFDT, the UNEF, the Syndicat National de l'Enseignement Supérieur (SNESup), and the French Communist Party met to demand the opening of the universities, the release of the students, and an end to the police violence and repression.⁴¹ Not only did the organizations support the student cause, but so did many of the French citizens.⁴² Because the radio broadcasted minute by minute accounts throughout the night of the 7th, Parisians were well-informed and sympathized with the students and were shocked by the police tactics and their extensive use of chloride gas grenades (tear gas).

On Thursday morning Alain Peyrefitte, the Minister of National Education promised the opening of the Sorbonne. "L'essentiel est de parvenir à ce que les cours puissent reprendre dans des conditions normales et d'assurer la liberté des examens et concours (the essential is to reach beyond the agitators to normal conditions and to ensure the liberty of the exams and classes)."⁴³ Rector Paul Roche, also agreed for the Sorbonne's opening. A rather peaceful demonstration was planned for the 9th to march into the Latin Quarter and eventually to the university, but demonstrators were met with barricades and an increased police force. Peyrefitte failed to alert President de Gaulle on

⁴⁰ Michael Siedman. *The Imaginary Revolution* (Berghahn Books: New York, 2004) 106.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁴² Viénet, *Enrages and Situationist in the Occupation Movement, France, May '68*, 43.

⁴³ *Le Monde*, 9 May 1968, 8.

his decision to open the doors and de Gaulle remained staunch in his opposing decision, so the doors were not opened.⁴⁴

As a result, several meetings were held to decide the next step they would take, which would be a massive demonstration from the Place Denfert-Rochereau to Boulevard Saint-Michel on the 10th. The group had grown from just university students and teachers to high school students, sympathizers, immigrants, and workers. Their aim was to march until their needs were met.⁴⁵ The group was met with 60 barricades and an incredible force from the police. The night became known as the Night of the Barricades. There were over 400 injuries and 500 arrests.⁴⁶ The group built harmful barricades out of any material nearby including boards with nails sticking out, wires stretched across the road, and gasoline dumped in front of the barricades, to obstruct police access.⁴⁷ The group received support from the Parisians through “food, drink, and building materials for the barricades.”⁴⁸

On the afternoon of the 11th, the UNEF, CGT, and CFDT met to organize a general strike for Monday the 13th to protest the police brutality. The strike included 600,000 workers from various occupations in Paris.⁴⁹ The first factories to strike were the car and metallurgy industries.⁵⁰ An article in *Le Monde* recalled the event as “un spectacle de désolation.”⁵¹ The government had finally given in to the student’s demands, as they removed the police force from the campus and the demonstrators retook the Sorbonne. The next days were planned for meetings and discussion for the students

⁴⁴ Feenburg and Freedman, *When Poetry Ruled the Streets*, 20.

⁴⁵ Fisera, *Writing on the Wall*, 135.

⁴⁶ Siedman, *The Imaginary Revolution*, 113.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁹ Fisera, *Writing on the Wall*, 21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵¹ L’Evolution de la Crise Universitaire. *Le Monde*, 12-13 May 1968, page 3.

to regroup and refocus their energies into deciding how to change their current state into their desired state.

May 13th marked the turning point of the May Movement from a purely student movement to student-worker solidarity. The strike grew more each day as factories and offices joined the movement. The general strike reached its peak on May 23rd and 24th. France became immobilized as ten million workers went on strike which affected the communication and transportation systems and general, everyday life activities. The workers involvement forced the government to listen. Workers represented the bulk of the population. The workers' struggle had many voices and wants. Some wanted an overthrow of the de Gaulle government; others wanted basic union rights and self-management. Many of the workers were not focused on the political aspect like the students, but were more interested in wage increases and reduced work weeks. On Friday the 24th, the government invited the unions to join in the discussions and negotiations.⁵² When the workers joined, the fight became a struggle for the government to control its people. There were issues that dealt with all of the social and political problems that had been going on throughout the years after World War II. The students and workers were a united political opposition.⁵³

⁵² Singer, *Prelude to Revolution*, 160.

⁵³ Alain Touraine. *The May Movement*, 350.

Part Four: The Graffiti, Pamphlets, and Posters

Of the material utilized to study the May '68 movements, the graffiti, pamphlets, and posters are the best resources. Throughout the student movement starting in 1967 there was an increased extensive use of written, drawn, and distributed material by student groups and supporters of the movement. The students created many posters, pamphlets, and even a newspaper. Students used their creative and eccentric minds to express their desire to change society.

The first document, produced in 1966, by the Situationist International and the UNEF was the pamphlet “On the Poverty of Student Life: Considered in Its Economical, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Particularly Intellectual Aspects, and a Modest Proposal for its Remedy.” This pamphlet was first introduced at the University of Strasbourg and consisted of three lengthy sections. The pamphlet described the despair of the student life as well as solutions to defeat the oppression. It illustrated the means for effectively overcoming the student-life struggle. In the first section, the student is defined as being a “despised creature,” and explained that there is a new struggle forming.⁵⁴ The second section revolved around the youth as a source of revolt and revolution. It also explored the capitalist society of France. Section three demonstrated the problems in student-led revolutions.

Comites d'Action, created on May 3, 1968, was the group initially formed in order to organize the students' responses to the hundreds of arrests that took place the day before. The group grew and held meetings all around Paris in dormitories, university department buildings, high schools, and even factories. The group developed a formal

⁵⁴ Situationist Internationale and the University of Strasbourg. *On the Poverty of Student Life: Considered in its Economical, Political, Psychological, Sexual, and Particularly Intellectual Aspects and a Modest Proposal for its Remedy* (University of Strasbourg: France, 1966).

newspaper and the first issue was on May 7. Written in bold print, their newspaper was cleverly titled *Action*. The first issue displayed the student struggle with “REPRESSION: STAND UP TO IT!”⁵⁵ Many of the issues presented whole pages with one large photograph and perhaps a quote describing the photo. This newspaper showed the physical struggle of the students.

“The power is in the streets” was a chant and was also found on posters. The students literally brought their fight into the streets and out of the classrooms; while the government of the Gaullist regime remained in their offices and sent the police to control and eventually battle the students. The students had to resort to revolutionary tactics and actions to facilitate their goals. In November, 1967, students learned that discussions and talks would not be enough of a force to make a difference in their lives. They needed a physical presence to match their intellectual desires.

Some of the graffiti written on the walls and printed on posters of the Sorbonne and Nanterre as well as other buildings in the area were:

We want to live.

Barricades block the streets but open the way.

Action must not be a reaction, but a creation.

We are all German Jews.

May '68: the beginning of a prolonged struggle.

All power to the imagination.

Poetry is in the street.

It is forbidden to forbid.

⁵⁵ Rohan, Marc. Paris '68: Graffiti, Newspapers, Posters, and Poems of the Events of May 1968 (Great Britain: Impact Books, 1988), 14.

CRS=SS.

Power to the people.

Occupy the factories.

French and immigrant workers united; for equal work, equal salary.

How can one think freely in the shadow of a chapel?

Let us be realistic and demand the impossible.

I came. I saw. I believed.

Are we going to spend our time at the Sorbonne speculating about the revolution? Or are we going to act in accordance with our words?

Groups like the UNEF, Comites d'Action, the Situationist International, and students from the Ecole des Beaux Arts produced these texts and distributed them all over Paris. These phrases each have their own meanings that add amazing context to the student revolution. These witty slogans and phrases will remain a reminder of the student movement forever and will be celebrated by students all over the world.

The phrase "We want to live" evokes many meanings in the student movement. It began as one of the first slogans written on the walls at the Nanterre campus. In the beginning the students called for a more relaxed campus with more freedoms in the dormitories. The students wanted longer visitation hours and freedom for males to stay with female residents in the female dorms. The students also wanted new forms of examinations as well as their lectures. The students were bored with the monotonous university system, they wanted to live. Students wanted to live and experience life in their own way. They wanted to be creative and use their imaginations to guide them through everyday life. The students wanted to be treated as adults. At Nanterre,

university life was not as student-centered as it was at the Sorbonne. Nanterre was situated on the outskirts of town with almost no nightlife nor the artistic cafés and boutiques like in the Latin Quarter. Students were bored with the mundane university at Nanterre. The oxymoronic “forbidden to forbid” quote was a favorite among the movement. With university regulations and rules that held students in a “cage” and suppressed student thought, it is no wonder why the students loved this slogan. But the students couldn’t influence the opposition by only using phrases and words. The students had to be physically active in their solutions.

When the students blocked the roads with overturned vehicles to prevent the police from advancing, they also wrote it on the walls. “Barricades block the streets but open the way.” The barricades opened the way for students in that the students were taking a forceful stand against the opposition. The students believed this street warfare was the only method for the government to listen.

“We are all German Jews” derives from Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s background. Cohn-Bendit, the “spokesman” for the movement and a German citizen actually born in France, was Jewish. The students respected the involvement of people in their movement of different nationalities and embraced Cohn-Bendit’s differences. The students adapted his nationality and ethnicity as their own in the struggle against the government. This was their method of implying that they were a minority being manipulated by the authoritarian government.

In November 1967, the students at Nanterre realized the problems within their university and the higher education system. They began to talk about the problems openly and were silenced by the administration. The students continued to find new

ways to discuss their needs and wants and finally in May they were heard. The students created the actions to deal with the university's problems.

Although the phrase is "May '68: The beginning of a prolonged struggle," I believe the struggle began a year earlier. Nevertheless, the student movement is a struggle that continues yet today. The students tried many ways to deal with the problems and issues in the university and most were met with resistance from the government or administration from the university.

The violent CRS, riot police, became a main target for the student's aggression. The movement began associating the CRS with the Nazi German Schutzstaffel, the SS. The SS were a protective squadron for the Nazi party and members believed in racial purity as well as allegiance to the Nazi party. In connecting these two police forces, the students managed to display the CRS as an evil force through pictures and speeches, and consequently the students gained support from citizens all over France.

Another slogan represented on many posters throughout May was a call for unity of the worker, student, and immigrant. The students wanted to unite forces with not just the workers, but with the immigrant workers as well to increase support for their cause. With the support of other oppressed groups, the students thought their struggle would endure longer and make an impression on the government. Daniel Cohn-Bendit knew that the students could not succeed on their own, that they "cannot make a revolution" by themselves.⁵⁶ The students needed the workers and immigrants to establish the workers as self-managers and as a group with self-governance. The students encouraged the workers to become involved in the total struggle against the de Gaulle regime with slogans like "Occupy the factories" and "French and immigrant workers united; for equal

⁵⁶ Bourges, Here. *The French Student Revolt*, Hill and Wang: New York, 1968, 51.

work, equal salary.” In all societies, in any day and age, students are defined by their age, their relationship to knowledge, and if they have “real” jobs. Cohn-Bendit and the March 22nd Movement believed they had to “reject the distinction between the student and worker” in order to change the definition of the student.

For many of the students, who would never have thought about the power of the student before May 1968, the student movement became new inspiration. They started thinking about their own lives and thinking of ways their lives could be improved. They started leaving the classrooms at the universities to think freely, without the rules of the university administration. They began to act on their ideas and moved their battle into the streets and factories.

Conclusion

Although the month of May was an explosion, the student movement failed as a revolution for a change in society. Because of the lack of a united, organized student front and the lack of a continued revolt, the student movement had become just another page in France's history book. Students were hopeful of the future and believed that the workers would remain "on the road to revolution."⁵⁷ At the end of May, the government met the needs of the workers and the student movement was lost. In June, the businesses involved in the strikes and protests reinstated the "authority of the supervisory personnel over" the worker activists.⁵⁸

For the students' needs however, there were some reforms. Edgar Faure, the newly appointed Minister of Education, planned to restructure the higher education system. He promoted a decentralized and autonomous university, student participation in university decision making, and new administrative departments called "units of teaching and research."⁵⁹ There is no question that the students gained more personal freedoms, but it was only a reform within the universities – not a complete revolutionary change for society.

The French student movement was not a single isolated event. There were many revolts and revolutions during the sixties in the developed nations of the world. The French movement did not start in May as a freak explosion – it was based on years of enclosed emotions that began to leak out in 1967. Explosions do not happen until a spark is ignited and that spark was the student voice expressing the need for change.

⁵⁷ Seidman, *The Imaginary Revolution*, 272.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 274.

⁵⁹ Seidman, 277.

As recent as the spring of 2006, French students remind us of the fact that the students involved in the events of 1968 pioneered the course for extinguishing injustices and people standing up for their believed rights. Although the May movement came as a shock for most, it was not a surprise attack on the French society and government. The movement actually started a couple years before and had grown. The French students of the sixties started the new period of political and social justice for the students of the years to come. They demonstrated their ideas with self-expression, the newest and most revolutionary aspect in the whole movement. I believe the student movement in France had a more profound effect on its own society than did other student movements around the world. The student's initial goal, which grew to mean much more, became an encompassing societal problem. The student movement became an enthusiasm for linking everyone and everything together. The students became the lens through which we see this story in French history.

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