

How far can the student's revolt in paris, 1968

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The aim of the study is to investigate whether the students' uprising in Paris, 1968, could be considered a success. It is possible to state that this revolt did not succeed because it did not manage to overthrow the government due to the facts that it was actually not prepared to do so. Because of its romantic origins and utopian requests the movement was not ready enough to deal with the governing of a country.

This hypothesis could be wrong, though, due to the fact that maybe their aims were not at all utopian, but rational, down to earth demands concerning only their university; and that they never considered destroying the system. We can only answer this question by examining the facts and then discovering the true nature of the uprising; its origin, its meaning, its aim and its outcome are some of the aspects that we'll analyze in order to see whether it can be considered a failure or a success.

Although in the beginning the revolt started out as a rational demand (the claiming of changes within universities), it ended up being the scapegoat of the unrest that had been cooking within the French dissatisfied society; especially within the subculture of the young students. Thus it quickly changed its logical and realistic aims into romantic ones.

Its romantic aims may have even included the destruction of the system. But the revolt did not manage to overthrow the government due to the fact that it was actually not prepared to do so. Because of its romantic aim and utopian requests the movement was not ready enough to deal with the governing of a country.

Summary of the Evidence

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During the 50's and first years of the 60's the internal situation seemed to be reasonably stable in most European countries. The 'status quo'¹ was rarely questioned. ² Students seemed to be apolitical and were almost suspiciously quiet. Many designated this as the 'end of ideology' and forecasted a minor troubled path to a technocratic, neo-liberal society. ³

Suddenly this apparent " exhaustion of political ideas was challenged by a wave of students' revolts that affected the whole of Europe" ⁴ through 1968. The very first quarrel that triggered the revolt occurred in the university of Nanterre; where sociology students and teachers declared themselves on strike due to overdue reforms⁵. The feeling of protest soon reached the universities of Paris and in February 1968 the students struck " demanding removal of restrictions on movements between boys' and girls' hostels" ⁶. Small ultra-radical groups slowly infiltrated into the protest and started throwing Molotov cocktails at building that represented the abhorred capitalist system.

The national student's union (UNEF) was then handed over to militant groups, whose leaders were Cohn-Benedit⁷, Sauvaget and Geismar, amongst others. Until now, the protest seemed confined to the university and it's internal affairs, it did not present any threats whatsoever to de Gaulle's government. When Pompidou left for Teheran there was no national crisis but soon the case scenario changed completely.

Four days later the protesting students tried to seize several university buildings and the police was ordered to interfere with the demonstration. The patrols didn't have any experience in controlling large mobs of

protesting people and "behaved with unnecessary violence". 8 Dozens were injured and many more were arrested. This led to bigger demonstrations that ultimately caused an intense and aggressive police repression.

Rebels from Nanterre and Sorbonne received the support of the teachers' federation⁹. On May 13, hundreds of thousands of Parisians demonstrated against the Gaullist regime, students occupied the Sorbonne and four days later ten million workers joined the movement and declared themselves on strike. Workers, footballers, television stars and even young rabbis had joined the protest. Students' soviets were established in most universities. ¹⁰ What had started as a simple protest turned out to be the most serious challenge the Gaullist regime had ever faced.

The 18th of May De Gaulle returned disgusted¹¹. The survival of his regime was doubtful. Authority was breaking up everywhere. Government's terms were slipping away¹², the bourgeois was paralyzed by fear and De Gaulle started to lose heart as the revolt reached its climax in the last days of May. The government began negotiations with the workers and finally reached an agreement but in the end it was turned down.

On May 29 De Gaulle left Paris for an unknown destination and it was rumored that he was going to resign¹³. Suddenly he then made a brief appearance on television announcing that he had a mandate from the people and was therefore not resigning. He also called civil action everywhere in defense of the Republic against the communist dictatorship. Within minutes millions filled the streets of Paris shouting "La France aux Français" and singing "La marseillaise".

The left had lost its vigor. The workers had stopped most of the strikes in the factories, the students started to leave the colleges they had seized, the ultra-radical groups were outlawed and the communists were accused of planning a revolution and retreated everywhere.

On June 23 elections brought victory to the party of order whilst all left-wing parties lost votes.

Before the movement had extinguished in France it had reached to Germany, Spain, Italy, etc. It " made itself heard and seen and one time or another in most European countries, even in Eastern Europe" 14.

One year later, De Gaulle resigned.

Evaluation of sources

Three sources were used as bases for this investigation, but given their different reliabilities one of them was used much more than the others: Europe in our Time, by Walter Laquer. This source has many advantages such as the fact that its author is a distinguished professor of history and has written more than twenty-five books. The source is extremely reliable but it does have a minor draw back related to its content. Because of its wide range of topics it may not give as much relevance to the student's revolt as another book that treated this as its main theme could. But, although it does not contain an extremely detailed account of what happened, it's detailed enough to suit this investigation.

The source that has Sartre as an author is not as reliable as Europe in our Time. Although it's a primary source (the book contains a series of articles <https://assignbuster.com/how-far-can-the-students-revolt-in-paris-1968/>

published at the time of the revolt) it could be considered to be somewhat biased. This is due to the fact that Sartre was part of the movement and would probably defend the revolutionaries' interests. Also, as Walter Laquer points out in *Europe in our Time*, "Sartre and his friends were usually less interested in the real facts and merits of a case than in the 'correct position' to be taken by intellectuals" 15.

The third source used was a rather unconventional one. The actual graffiti painted by the students was used as another primary source. This of course, has many limitations but it proves to be very useful also. It is extremely reliable when trying to find out what their real aims were, but evidently it only retells one part of the story.

Analysis of the Evidence

In the beginning, the revolt did not look like a revolt at all. It looked like a reasonable protest caused by reasonable demands. But why did it suddenly spark into full-out revolt that nearly made de Gaulle resign? It occurred because it suddenly became the medium that let out the "general European mood of boredom and feeling of impotence" 16 fused with an awakened social conscience. But did it succeed?

Taking into account that its aim was to alter the system in which they were living (although at first related to universities' overdue reforms) the revolt failed. They couldn't, in the end, alter anything within their system. Their enemy, that was not the Stalinist, the fascist nor even the conservative; had proven to be lethal. It was the liberal with its all-tolerant but repressive

character. The students perceived the small boundary that separated their democracy with a totalitarian government.

The educational reforms derived from fact that the students did not stand any longer the autocratic and oppressive rule of the universities. These autocratic and oppressive characteristics were present in all of France; that is why the educational reforms were soon forgotten: they were a mere symbol of the real ordeal. The French were tired of De Gaulle's paternalistic rule and his " Fahter knows best" attitude

It was their chance to manifest on anything they disliked, and, as it was grounded on romantic bases, they did not question what they were asking for, they simply asked for it (" Be realists, ask for the impossible" 17). The militant leaders also saw their chance to attract a large fraction of the population and quickly dived into the protest with full force. They did get a lot of support and this speaks for itself: Paris was not content with the current situation. But, just when things were starting to look good for the young revolutionaries De Gaulle appealed to a more mortal threat: communist dictatorship, thus igniting the French nationalism and strong liberalism. As the left's vigor slowly decreased so did its dreams of getting to power and overthrowing De Gaulle's regime.

Even though the students were truly catalyzing the general feeling of discontent, they presented no other alternative. Thus, faced with anarchy and disorder on one hand and on the other a democratic but nonetheless repressive regime, society chose the latter option. In the end, the general

public was more worried about what Cohn-Bendit had to offer than that of the right-wing's authoritarian reaction.

One could consider that deep down the students knew that they would never succeed in actually getting to power and maintaining themselves on top of it. The system was too solid and deeply rooted to be distorted and changed.

They did manage to change some aspects of the university, but as it was mentioned before, their original 'logical' requests were soon forgotten in the midst of the revolt. One could say that, ultimately, they failed for they did not manage to overthrow the government and establish a left-wing party.

But within their claims there was something that could not be drowned nor ignored: the French were tired of De Gaulle's rule (even though in the heat of the moment the people had chosen his autocratic rule over the student's one). This fact resulted in his resignation one year later. Thus, the revolt can be considered a success for " the movement had failed only for those who believed that revolution was at hand" 18.

Conclusion

As stated in the hypothesis, the revolt was, in its essence, a romantic protest against society; and as all romantic demonstrations, it relied more upon mood than on actual programming.

But the support it gathered and the echo it had in many European countries proves that there was a lot of truth in what they were demanding. As there was no alternative for the Gaullist regime the revolt failed in overthrowing the government, but it did not fail in the whole. The truth that was within
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their demands was heard and, most importantly, felt by the French; and it was this truth that caused De Gaulle's resignation one year later.