

Home / World History / May 1968: The French...

May 1968: The French Revolution That Never Was

by Jonathan Fenby

The mass demonstrations and strikes in France in May 1968 severely challenged De Gaulle's legitimacy and even fears of revolution.

Charles De Gaulle's government was criticized within France, particularly for its heavy-handed style. While the written press and elections were free, and private stations such as Europe 1 were able to broadcast in French from abroad, the state's ORTF had a monopoly on television and radio. This monopoly meant that the government was in a position to directly influence broadcast news. In many respects, Gaullist France was conservative, Catholic. There were few women in high-level political posts (in May 1968, the government's ministers were 100% male). Many factors contributed to a general weariness of sections of the public. Particularly the student youth, which led to the events of May 1968.

A Timeline of Key Events

10 May 1968

A huge student crowd congregated on the Rive Gauche. When the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité blocked them from crossing the river, the crowd again threw up barricades, which the police then attacked at 2:15 in the morning after negotiations once again floundered. The confrontation, which produced hundreds of arrests and injuries, lasted until dawn of the following day. The events were broadcast on radio as they unfolded and the aftermath was shown on television the following day. Allegations were made that the police had participated, through agents provocateurs, in the riots, by burning cars and throwing Molotov cocktails.

The government's heavy-handed reaction brought on a wave of sympathy for the strikers. Many of the nation's more mainstream singers and poets joined after the heavy-handed police brutality came to light.

12 May 1968

At a 6 a.m. meeting at the Élysée, de Gaulle asked if the army should be called in. The answer was negative. Arriving back in Paris, Pompidou told ministers he was going to order the reopening of the Sorbonne. When it was pointed out that this was contrary to the president's wishes, the prime minister replied, according to the historian Éric Roussel: 'The General doesn't exist anymore; de Gaulle is dead.' Going to the palace, Pompidou threatened to resign if his plan was not accepted. 'If you win, so much the better,' the president told Pompidou. 'France will win with you. If you lose, too bad for you.'

13 May 1968

The Sorbonne opened its gates. The result was not what Pompidou had hoped for. Students immediately occupied the college, which became their base, the 'citadel of the revolution' and its 'ideological drugstore', as Pierre Viansson-Ponté of Le Monde put it. Each evening an 'Occupation Committee' was elected which ran things for the next twenty-four hours. There was endless talk on how to construct an ideal world in marathon debates in the lecture halls. Sexual liberation was taken for granted. A poster culture proclaimed, 'It is forbidden to forbid'. 'Be realistic, ask for the impossible', and 'I am a Marxist, Groucho factor'. It was, as the writer, Claude Roy, put it 'a revolution that is something of a party, a party that is something of a revolution'.

Seeing the weakness of the administration, the trade union federations swung into action. Transport and electricity workers went on strike in Paris. A vast procession marched to the Place de la République, accompanied by big demonstrations in other major cities, proclaiming that power lay in the street and attacking the man in the Élysée with cries of 'Goodbye de Gaulle. Goodbye de Gaulle. Goodbye'. The student and labour leaders were in the vanguard, with the politicians of the left well behind.

14 May 1968

Despite the crisis, de Gaulle decided to go ahead with a scheduled visit to Romania; he saw the country, which seemed to be showing some independence from the Soviet Union, as an important element in his policy of breaking down the divisions between East and West. He could hardly allow the students to interfere with his role of the global statesman. But he may also have wanted to be away from a situation he could not control.

As he flew east, workers concerned with pay and conditions rather than freedom went into action, occupying Renault factories and two aviation plants.

15-17 May 1968

In danger of being outflanked by factory floor militants, the CGT had to move into the struggle. Occupations and the sequestration of management added a revolutionary tinge to the movement, evoking echoes of the Popular Front thirty-two years earlier. The most militant areas were at the Renault plant in Boulogne-Billancourt and around Toulouse, Lyons, Grenoble and Nancy, as well as northern coalmines. There were big demonstrations in Le Mans, Clermont-Ferrand and Nantes, where protestors attacked the prefecture. Work stopped at a big shipyard on the Seine. The railways and postal services were affected and broadcasts on the state ORTF network were hit.

There was a clear distinction between the approaches of the two main labour federations involved. Under Communist leadership, the CGT drew a line between workers and students; it stressed the classic demands for improved pay and conditions and made a point of exercising all the control it could over the strikers. Renault workers at Billancourt closed the factory gates against a delegation from the Left Bank. There were scornful jibes about young people from the Sorbonne. They drove to demonstrations in sports cars and wearing cashmere sweaters. The politically independent CFTD, on the other hand, showed an interest in broader social and workplace reform, and had talks with the students.

18-19 May 1968

The president was highly irate when he got back to France - 'Playtime is over,' he told ministers who welcomed him at Orly. The authority and dignity of the state had been ridiculed and his efforts over the previous ten years had been undone in five days, he complained. 'It's a shambles,' he exclaimed to Pompidou, who offered to resign. Shrugging his shoulders, de Gaulle replied: 'No question of that!'

The General ordered that the Sorbonne and the occupied Odéon theatre be cleared immediately. The interior minister, Christian Fouchet, pointed out that this would involve use of firearms. There might be deaths and the unrest would gain a fresh impetus as a result.

Raising his arms in exasperation, de Gaulle conceded that action should be taken only at the Odéon. The Sorbonne could wait. Before the meeting ended, the General gave the information minister, Georges Gorse, a sentence to relay to journalists: 'La réforme, oui; la chienlit, non'. He meant 'chienlit' in its long forgotten eighteenth-century sense of a carnival or masquerade, but the term was unknown to most people, some of whom assumed it meant 'shit in bed' - chie en lit. The president had been too erudite by half.

20 May 1968

The number of strikers was estimated to have reached 6 million; in the following week it would rise to 10 million. Households stocked food, and petrol became scarce. Wealthy people headed for Switzerland with cash and valuables. The gap between the president and prime minister widened. De Gaulle spoke to his faithful follower, Alexandre Sanguinetti, of forming a 'combat government'. A new approach was needed, he said, based on the vague notion of 'participation' to get the population to feel more involved in the destinies of the nation.

But the head of government had decided on his own strategy based on an agreement with the PCF and CGT, which he saw as 'the last guarantors of a peaceful solution'.

His protégé, Jacques Chirac, established contact with the number three in the CGT, Henri Krasucki. The union leader told him to go to a square near the Place Pigalle. Chirac drove there in his own car rather than using an official vehicle. A man smoking a pipe approached and gave an agreed password. Chirac told him the government was ready to open talks on wages and welfare payments. After further exchanges, he drove to a hotel in a poor part of northern Paris with a revolver in his pocket because of worries that the Communists might try to kidnap him. Police agents watched from a distance. Led to a room on the third floor where Krasucki was waiting, Chirac began to hammer out a settlement to the strikes.

24 May 1968

De Gaulle tried to gain the initiative with a broadcast promising a referendum on 'participation'. A theme much pushed by left-wing Gaullists such as the jurist René Capitant who disliked Pompidou's market-oriented policies. But the speech fell flat, only provoking a major student demonstration that ended in street battles on both banks of the Seine. Fighting also flared in Strasbourg and Bordeaux. In Brittany and central France, farmers set up roadblocks and waged a five-hour fight with police in Nantes. The first fatalities of the unrest came in Paris, where a young man died, probably as the result of being hit by a tear gas grenade, and in Lyons, where a lorry set rolling by demonstrators crushed a policeman.

The radio reports sat up all night in the Élysée listening to radio reports of the violence. 'It's my departure they are calling for,' he acknowledged. He could only stand aside as Pompidou presided over the opening of talks to end the strikes at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour on the rue de Grenelle. The eighteenth-century hôtel particulier which had housed the Austrian embassy in Appony's day and had been given to the church by Napoleon III. This was before being taken by the state under the anti-clerical measures at the start of the century.

Charles De Gaulle. By Bundesarchiv. Image is in the public domain via Wikimedia.org

27 May 1968

At 4 a.m., a deal was reached between government. Unions and employers for an average salary increase of 10 per cent and a small reduction in working hours to come into force in 1970. Strikers would be given half pay for the time they had been off the job.

As with his opening of the Sorbonne, Pompidou's emollient approach initially backfired. Renault workers at Billancourt voted to continue the strike. Thirty thousand people attended a meeting at the Charléty Stadium in Paris organised by the small but highly active PSU left-wing party whose patron saint, Mendès France, watched silently from the stands. Demonstrators stormed the prefecture in Toulouse and withdrew only when the Prefect apologised to them. Though banned from France, Cohn-Bendit made his way back to Paris and popped up at the Sorbonne with dyed hair and a broad grin. After Communist leaders went to see him, Mitterrand said he would stand for the presidency if de Gaulle resigned. He called for a provisional government headed by Mendès France.

The CGT announced a massive demonstration for the next day. Pompidou ordered an 'armoured gendarmerie' of 1,000 men with tanks to move to the Paris suburbs. They canvassed the idea of a general election. Shopping at the Madeleine, Yvonne de Gaulle was insulted by a group of shop workers and a motorist. 'Things can't go on like this,' she said on her return to the Élysée. 'It is becoming infernal.' She went on about it so much that her husband left the dining room that evening and had his meal served in an adjoining salon. Opinion polls showed support for the president slumping while backing for Pompidou rose by 25 per cent. The old man said he had not slept for three days, at times he changed this to six.

29 May 1968

The Communist daily, L'Humanité, called for 'a government of the people and a democratic union with Communist participation'. Mendès France had said he was ready to head a new cabinet as proposed by Mitterrand. De Gaulle called off a cabinet meeting and told his staff he was going to Colombey. He telephoned Pompidou to say that he needed to clear his mind; he would be back the following afternoon. 'I am old, you are young, and it is you who represent the future,' he added and then, in an uncharacteristically personal sign-off, added 'Je vous embrasse.' There was immediate speculation that, as in 1946, he was quitting. In a television interview a week later, he admitted that 'Yes! On the twenty-ninth of May 1968 I was tempted to retire. . . . I questioned myself.'

In fact, executing a well-laid plan, he was driven to a military base at Issy-les-Moulineaux outside Paris and then disappeared. 'We've lost any trace of the General,' Tricot, the Élysée secretary general, told Pompidou in the early afternoon after arriving unannounced at Matignon, white as a sheet. 'He's not at Colombey.' It was just as he had written in his 1934 book on military theory - 'Surprise has to be organised . . . under a thick veil of deception.'

His destination was French army headquarters in Baden-Baden, West Germany. He wanted to sound out the commander there, Jacques Massu, on the loyalty of the army. But his main purpose was to deliver a mass psychological shock, as he told his son-in-law Alain de Boissieu with whom he had conferred before leaving Paris. 'I want to plunge the French, including the government, into a state of doubt and worry in order to be able to take control of the situation once again. I will win them back through fear.'

'Everything is done for,'

Accompanied in two helicopters by his wife and son, a military aide, a bodyguard, a doctor and a police inspector, the General landed at the base outside Baden in the early afternoon. The aide telephoned Massu who said he was having a siesta after staying up late the previous night drinking vodka with a visiting Soviet delegation. De Gaulle flew on to touch down on the lawn of Massu's villa.

'Everything is done for,' the president told the general.

'Don't think that way, mon Général,' the long-time loyalist replied. 'A man of your standing still has means of action.'

Sitting with Massu while their wives went off elsewhere, the president lamented how the Communists had paralysed France and how he was not wanted any more. As was his habit, he was really seeking encouragement from a straight-talking soldier he trusted. 'Mon Général, what do you want? You're in the shit and you have to stay in it.' Hearing this, 'Massu said, 'Go back. There is nothing else to do. You are still in the game; you've got to stay in it.' A bit longer, the General's spirits seemed to revive and he murmured 'Go on, go on. . . . He got up and walked towards his host. 'I'm going,' he said. 'Tell my wife.'

Charles De Gaulle on Tour

Reaching Colombey, he telephoned Pompidou to say he had been on a 'tour', without giving details. Everything had gone well, he added. He wanted to rest and reflect, and hoped to get a good night's sleep. 'Mon Général, you have won,' the prime minister replied. 'After the scare the French had in seeing you disappear, we are going to see a prodigious psychological reversal.' Dining at Colombey that evening, the General seemed happy, reciting a poem he had written as a young man about the Rhine and drafting a speech to the nation.

The CGT demonstration in Paris brought out several hundred thousand protestors but passed peacefully. Moscow did not want regime change in France. Washington was more ready for a switch. The CIA predicted a presidential election which would take Mitterrand to the Elysée at the head of an administration which would be 'more positive, less grandiose and more in harmony with American policy'.

30 May 1968

Returning to the capital in the morning, de Gaulle broadcast in the combative tone. It was in striking contrast to his unconvincing appearance six days earlier. Broadcast only on radio as the television service was on strike. Banging his fist on the desk in front of him, shaking the microphone, he denounced the 'intimidation, intoxication and the tyranny of groups organised from afar. By a party which is a totalitarian enterprise'. He called for 'civic action' to combat the PCF. He was playing on the 'ambition and hatreds of politicians on the scrapheap'. Saying he intended to continue his mandate, he announced a general election and said the referendum on participation would be delayed. 'No, the Republic will not abdicate,' he concluded.

The civic action took the form of a huge crowd of tricolour-waving supporters who marched down the Champs-Élysées from the Arc de Triomphe, headed by Malraux and Debré. Outside the presidential palace, 50,000 cried 'De Gaulle, you are not alone'. Unconvinced, CIA director Richard Helms told Lyndon Johnson France was on the brink of disaster and possible civil war.

'At last, I have slept'

'At last, I have slept,' de Gaulle told Pompidou when they met before a cabinet session. But the gulf between the president and prime minister had been further widened. 'I had been treated with what seemed to me at that moment as a particular off-handedness,' Pompidou wrote in his memoirs. However, de Gaulle again waved aside his offer of resignation and the prime minister stayed in office at the head of a reshuffled government. Strikes and street violence continued into June when workers called off the occupation of the Renault plants and accepted the Grenelle agreements.

JONATHAN FENBY is a former editor of the UK Observer and of the South China Morning Post. He is the author of several books including the acclaimed The General: Charles de Gaulle. The France He Saved and Chiang Kai-shek: China's Generalissimo. In 2013 Jonathan was awarded the Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur by the French government. This was for his contribution towards understanding between Britain and France.

Buy Now

[iBooks](#)
[Amazon](#)

[Barnes & Noble](#)

Search...

New Releases

Connect with The History Reader

[f](#)
[t](#)