

## Module 05: 1968 — A Generation in Revolt?

### Context

#### The Cold War

In 1968, the Cold War was already twenty years old. Europe had emerged from the Second World War a battered continent, greatly reduced in power. From the ashes of Berlin and at the conference tables of Potsdam emerged two new "Super Powers:" the United States and the Soviet Union. Allies in the war, the two nations soon became intractable enemies, and much of the world was divided into two camps by the 1950s. Although both sides managed to avoid a third global conflict, wars by proxy dominated the fifties and sixties as each attempted to thwart the perceived expansionist ambitions of their enemies. By the mid-1960s, the proxy-war and Cold War mentalities had garnered considerable opposition on both sides of the Berlin Wall. The rising dissatisfaction with the Cold War *status quo* reached a boiling point in 1968.

#### The Possibility of Change

For those who lived through 1968, events seemed to take on lives of their own. From reform movements in Poland and Czechoslovakia to student uprisings in Western Europe, North America, and Japan, from the chaos and violence of the "Cultural Revolution" in China to the ongoing war in Vietnam, change, whether gradual or cataclysmic, emerged as the uniting theme of the most tumultuous year in the post-World War II era. Many of the events took shape as reactions to world events. In Eastern and Western Europe, as in the United States, many interpreted the revolts and protests as a rejection of the organizing principles of the Cold War and of America's continuing war in Vietnam. Other contentious issues — including the demographic consequences of the baby boom, ineffective and overburdened higher education systems, and a growing distaste for entrenched economic orthodoxies — led many to seek alternatives.

#### Local Conditions

National and local contexts and historical precedents determined how the revolts in each country took shape. While French students in May 1968 drew on the traditions of the French Revolution and the Commune of 1871 (1), reformers in Prague attempted to recreate the humanistic socialism destroyed by the excesses of Stalinism and its seemingly monolithic bureaucracy. Students in Chicago,

enraged by the war and the inaction of the political elite, demanded an American-style revolution. Despite the national qualities of each revolt, the results everywhere were remarkably similar. In Paris, Prague, Chicago, Berlin, Mexico City, and Tokyo, to name only a few, the forces of law and order quashed the budding revolutions. Students, workers, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens seeking to overturn the political order proved no match for the concerted application of state power. In Chicago and Paris, the police and National Guard fought running battles with the would-be rebels, while in Prague, foreign armies crushed resistance with brutal force. Nevertheless, in the United States, the events of 1968 deeply divided the American populace. While many sympathized with the protesters' demands, many others — termed the "silent majority" by Republican presidential hopeful Richard Nixon — distrusted both the demands and techniques of student protesters and radical reformers. Even in Prague, after the invasion of the Soviet Army and its Warsaw Pact allies, many preferred public order to perceived chaos.

### **The Paris Revolt**

In Paris in early May, a seemingly insignificant student revolt at the Nanterre branch of the University of Paris led to almost nightly battles in Parisian streets and, ultimately, to France's largest general strike in the twentieth century. On May third, protests at Nanterre spilled over to the Sorbonne, France's oldest and most famous university. In a rash move, the Rector allowed the police to enter the university and evict the protesting students — an unprecedented act — and then closed the university for the first time in its seven-hundred-year history. The turning point came on May 10, a date that has become widely known as the "Night of the Barricades," when the revolt spread from students to members of the working class. On that day, students occupied the Latin Quarter in Paris and fought a brutal night-long battle with French security forces. Ripping cobblestones from the quarter's ancient streets, students built barricades that evoked the memory of the Commune of 1871. Widely televised, the brutal response of the police precipitated the revolt's spread to the provinces and, more importantly, to the working class. Within days, millions of workers walked out on wildcat strikes. The major unions, which aligned themselves with the French Communist Party, began to see the advantage of supporting the students. The government, led by President Charles De Gaulle and Prime Minister Georges Pompidou, met the student uprising and massive strikes with equivocation. Capitulating to many of the student demands and expressing a willingness to negotiate with the trade unions, French officials appeared inept. On May 24, President De Gaulle called for

a national referendum, which, for all practical purposes, would decide his leadership. Five days afterwards, De Gaulle secretly left the country, traveling to Baden-Baden, Germany, to meet with the heads of the French Fifth Army. Although the subject of the discussions remains veiled, De Gaulle returned to France with renewed confidence. In a televised speech on May 30, De Gaulle canceled the referendum, dissolved the French Parliament, and called for new elections. He also struck a new bargain with the trade unions that included a two-step, 35% raise for workers. Satisfied, the striking workers returned to work, leaving the students to fight on their own. This marked the beginning of the end for the student revolt. In a stinging rebuke to the students, the new elections at the end of June returned an absolute majority from De Gaulle's party; the Left (2) lost half its seats in Parliament. By July, the revolt in France had run its course.

### **The "Prague Spring"**

What became known as the "Prague Spring" actually began in the middle of winter. On January 5, 1968, after student revolts in November and December 1967, the unassuming Alexander Dubcek replaced hard-line Communist leader Antonin Novotny, then president of Czechoslovakia, as party chief. A careful reformer and Slovak nationalist, Dubcek was forced to try to balance the desire of intellectuals and others for reforms with both the Novotny loyalists in the government and oversight from the Kremlin. On January 27, 1968, a newsstand appeared in central Prague hawking newspapers from other Eastern Bloc countries and the capitalist West. Soon, a new national press sprang up and flourished. Exposés about Novotny's extravagant tastes forced him to resign the presidency on March 22, and he was replaced by retired general and World War II hero Ludvik Svoboda. As Dubcek's power increased, pressure from Moscow intensified. In April, Dubcek introduced a liberalizing program, which reconfirmed the Czechoslovakian devotion to socialism but denounced the police state, the abuses of the past, and the Communist Party's monopoly on political power. In June, a group of reformist intellectuals and artists signed an open letter published in a new literary journal and reprinted in a number of newspapers calling for further reforms and warning of the dangers ahead. The so-called "Two Thousand Words" became a rallying cry that raised profound concerns among Warsaw Pact (3) leaders. In July, the leaders of the Warsaw Pact met and sent a joint communiqué to Dubcek warning of their concerns about Czechoslovakia's path. Although not an explicit threat, the warning was a lightly veiled promise that further liberalization would be met with force. By mid-summer, Dubcek had lost control of the liberalization process. Despite protestations from Moscow, Dubcek proved unable

or unwilling to exert influence over the free press and new political parties. After dusk on August 20, troops from the Soviet Union, East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria invaded Czechoslovakia. Although Dubcek and Svoboda implored the populace not to resist the overwhelming invasion, days of fighting ensued, leaving parts of Prague in ruins and producing an untold number of casualties. The reforms of Prague Spring ended in August as the forces of order regained power and cracked down on dissent.

## **Chicago**

As Soviet troops occupied the streets of Prague and fought the resistance, another conflict brewed half a world away in Chicago. Over the course of the summer of 1968, a number of groups in America began organizing an unprecedented protest to take place at the Democratic National Convention. Comprised of traditional peace groups, such as David Dellinger's National Mobilization Committee to End the War, cultural radicals like Abbie Hoffman, and Jerry Rubin's Youth International Party, as well as stalwarts of the Students for a Democratic Society like Tom Hayden and Rennie Davis, the protesters all shared a dislike of President Johnson and the war in Vietnam. The powerful mayor Richard Daley ran Chicago at the time, and he wished the Convention to showcase Chicago's importance on the national stage. A tough political boss, Daley disliked disorder and feared a large-scale race riot like those that had swept through many American cities after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., on April 4 of that year. As protesters began arriving on August 20, the day of the Soviet Invasion of Czechoslovakia, the mix of cultural revolutionaries, political activists, and peace campaigners proved quite peculiar. Most of the young protesters had planned to sleep in Lincoln Park, but Daley refused to grant them permits and had signs posted announcing that the park would close nightly at 11:00 pm. On Saturday night, demonstrators refused to leave the park, which led to a standoff with the police. Tensions mounted. The next night, protesters again refused to leave and Daley ordered the police to clear the park. The police reacted with overwhelming force, coupling tear gas with night sticks and beating protesters, journalists, and by-standers with little discrimination. On the night Hubert Humphrey was nominated as the Democratic candidate, four thousand protesters gathered near Grant Park across from the delegate's hotel for a march on the Conventional Hall. The police surrounded the demonstrators and attacked savagely. Protesters in the park chanted, "the whole world is watching," and with the enormous press coverage already in place for the Convention itself, the violence was, indeed, broadcast around the world.

(1) A failed socialist revolt in Paris in 1871, crushed by the French military.

(2) In France, the political Left included the Socialist and Communist Parties, as well as several smaller parties.

(3) The mutual defense pact between Eastern Bloc countries, similar to NATO.