



NGCSU E-Text for History 1112
Essay Module
Whatever Happened to the Revolution?

1968 – The Year that ended the 1960s

The three images above, taken in Paris, France; Prague, Czechoslovakia; and San Francisco, California, in 1968 attest to the reach of 1960s culture as a global, youth-oriented lived experience.

Unit Goals

After reading this essay you should be able to:

- 1) Identify the origins and primary causes of the May 1968 unrest.
- 2) Explain important features of the student-led and other social movements that emerged out of the 1968 riots.
- 3) Outline and discuss features of the state responses to the 1968 protestors and their demands.
- 4) Understand and explain the significance of the effects—or limits—of the 1968 protest movements.
- 5) Discuss the legacy of 1968 for the twenty-first century.

In Class Exercise: What do you think of when you hear someone say the sixties?

JFK & LBJ	Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll
Woodstock	SDS
Civil Rights	Bay of Pigs Invasion
Student Protests	Cuban Missile Crisis
Space Race	Vietnam War
The Beatles	Berlin Wall

Introduction

Few decades of modern American and World History have been as notable as the 1960s. The 1960's are often looked back on—particularly by today's perspective—with a mixture of nostalgia, amazement, shame, and disbelief. Conservatives tend to see them as a decade when the country engaged in a bout of collective insanity, while liberals see it as a golden age. Both views are more accurate reflections of their own politics than of the 1960s.

Tension Boils Over: the 1960s in Europe

Europe entered a post war golden era in the 1960s. Virtually every Western Europe country had full employment. Britain and France had rid themselves of their colonial empires and were getting used to following America's lead in foreign policy.

The booming post-war economies meant that those born after the war, the baby-boom generation, had greater disposable income than any preceding generation. They were also better educated than their parents and were living in a time of peace and prosperity in a more liberal society. The 1960s saw the sexual revolution which was enhanced by the development of the birth control pill. More and more couples were living together as traditional morals and mores fell by the wayside. The laws restricting abortion, pornography, and divorce were slowly liberalized.

By the second half of the decade, Western Europe's economy, which had grown stringly for more than ten years, began to slow, just as the baby-boomers began flooding into universities. Germany was the first to feel serious student unrest. In 1966, the two main parties, the Christian Democrats (CDU) and the Social Democrats (SPD), formed a Grand Coalition, thus creating a government without an effective opposition.

To those on the far left, this was undemocratic. Rudi Dutschke, the leader of the far left students, argued the Grand Coalition justified extra-parliamentary opposition, be it protests or terrorism. Dutschke led a series of protests and was wounded by Berlin police in April 1968, becoming a martyr for the student movement. (See newsreel here: <http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=45240> .)

Despite these internal tensions, Germany never faced collapse. In West Germany, the Communist party was illegal and the presence of a Soviet satellite, East Germany, or the German Democratic Republic (GDR), on their border ensured that when the extra-parliamentary opposition turned to terrorism with the Red Army Faction in 1968, the center-left SPD would be as ruthless as any conservative regime.

France in 1968: On the Edge

In France, the situation was different. France had a large Communist party and several key unions were dominated by the Communists. The Party Communist Francaise (PCF) were not just communists but loyal to the Soviet line, and had supported the Red Army's crushing of Budapest in 1956.

Furthermore, the French intellectual tradition was dominated by the Left: philosophies such as **existentialism**, the **Annales school**, **deconstruction**, and **postmodernism** all came out of the post-war experience and were critical of post-war society.

But it was the exploding student population that shook France to its foundations, for few actually understood the philosophers. French university students were denied personal freedom through supervision of residences. An independent life, especially a sexual one, was impossible. Courses were outdated and professors were often ignorant and inaccessible, and their classes were packed. Buildings were outdated and inadequate to house and service the massive new student influx.

Throughout the spring of 1968, there were occupations and demonstrations for University reforms in Paris, Dijon, Bordeaux, and Clermont-Ferrand. But it was at the Sorbonne in Paris where the protests turned into revolution or as close to a revolution as the Children of Coca-Cola and Marxism could manage.

On May 6th, eight student agitators including Daniel-Cohn Bedit, the leader of the students advocating radical reform of the University of Paris system, were expelled. About five hundred students gathered in the courtyard to protest the disciplinary committee, and they soon grew discontented and disorderly. Tradition held that the *Gendarmes* (French Police) did not enter the Latin Quarter, where the university was located, but the administration panicked and called in the police who took control and began loading the protestors into trucks.

Unfortunately for the police, this was done at 5 p.m., when the neighbouring streets were filling with students. Incensed by the treatment meted out to their comrades, the students rioted. Barricades were erected and running battles fought between the police and students who were revolutionary and hedonistic, practising Free Love at the "Orgies in the Odeon." (See newsreel at <http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=45266> .)

The revolt soon spread to other universities, but it was largely self-contained in its first week. In mid-May it spread to the industrial sector and by May 22nd it had escalated into a general strike with eight million on strike, paralyzing France. Francois Mitterrand, the leader of the French Socialists, demanded that new elections be held.

Faced with these challenges, President Charles de Gaulle lost his nerve, and on May 29th he disappeared to Baden Baden to talk to General Massu, commander of the French Army, either

to ensure military support or get his courage back. He returned to Paris, gave a forceful radio address that called for new elections, and on June 30th his party received an overwhelming victory. The workers were back at work having received wage concessions, while the students would be dealt with slowly; devoid of popular support, they were far less troublesome.

May 1968 was bloody but it was not nearly as bloody as the events in Prague in August. Alexander Dubcek had assumed the secretaryship of the Czechoslovakian Communist Party in January 1968. He advocated complete democracy within the Communist Party which would continue to dominate political life. However, he also advocated freedom of speech and expression which horrified the Soviets. Dubcek claimed that the "Prague Spring" was merely an intellectual, not a political, opening. Many Czechs and others interpreted his message far more widely.

The Soviets were unconvinced. Dubcek made several concessions to appease the Soviets which robbed him of most of his support. These concessions also failed to appease the Soviets. Sensing Dubcek's weakness, 250,000 Warsaw Pact troops forcibly entered Czechoslovakia and ended the Prague Spring with ruthless efficiency on August 21st, 1968.

(See <http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=45415> .)

This marked the end of **destalinization**, a process that had seen the end or reduction of Stalinist terror and authoritarian rule across much of communist Eastern Europe. Soviet foreign policy was now dominated not by "Many roads to socialism" but by the **Brezhnev Doctrine** which claimed the right of the Soviet Union to "Restore orthodoxy when a communist state embarked on a deviant course."

The failure of the protest movements of 1968 sparked two new movements in the Western Europe: Terrorism and Eurocommunism. Most student protestors and radicals became terribly respectable, eventually becoming the yuppies. However, a tiny minority was determined to effect meaningful change. They embraced terrorism. Germany was the first to feel the impact of European terrorism in the 1960's. The **Baader-Meinhof Gang**, or **Red Army Faction (RAF)**, embarked on a series of bombings against NATO, the U.S. Army, and that most materialistic of all entities, the department store. Far from establishing a new leftist regime, the RAF's terror campaign robbed the left of support and forced the SPD onto a more conservative course as police powers were expanded. A collection of newsreels relating to Baader-Meinhof can be found at <http://www.baader-meinhof.com/videos/Videos4.html> .

Eurocommunism was slightly more successful. The Communist parties of Western Europe were horrified by the Soviet's ruthless repression of the Prague Spring and decided to follow an independent course from Moscow. Consequently, they decided that they would no longer oppose parliamentary government but would instead attempt to bring about a communist system from within the government. By rejecting revolution as the only means to establish Communism, the eurocommunists were also separating themselves from the left-wing terrorist groups. They were also indicating their independence from the Soviet Union. Eurocommunism

resulted in Italy enjoying a Christian Democrat-Communist Coalition government. It also forced communist parties into the mainstream. Some even went so far as to run stock quotes in their newspapers.

Turmoil Across the Atlantic: The 1960s in the United States

In the United States, the 1960s started with the election of President John F. Kennedy (JFK) in the closest presidential election of the century. Kennedy was the youngest president ever elected and the first elected in the television age. Nixon won the first debate amongst radio listeners, but Kennedy looked calm and relaxed on the television, in part because he wore makeup and Nixon did not. Television was now the dominant media. JFK used TV to convey the image of a young, vibrant president. He was aided in this by his stylish wife, Jacqueline, who invited Americans into the White House via television, and, of course, by his two young children. Kennedy was far from the Northeastern Liberal he was portrayed and remembered as. He was far more patrician than proletarian, having attended Harvard and lived in England while his father was the American ambassador to the Court of St. James in London.

In foreign affairs he was very much a hawk, who continued to build up conventional and unconventional forces and continued containment. He increased the American presence in South Vietnam markedly. And it was America's ongoing war in Vietnam that would fuel student unrest around the world.

By 1968 "Camelot" would be nothing more than a memory as the entire world seethed with revolution. In the US, conservative critics increasingly complained that the anti-poverty programs, such as those enacted as part of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" initiative, were ineffective and wasteful. They also criticized the economic and political costs of the escalation of the Vietnam War as well as the costs of these programs themselves. But critics were not just on the right; the Students for a Democratic Society, the SDS, were growing increasingly strident in their critique. In June 1962, 59 SDS members and sympathizers met in Port Huron, Michigan and issued a 63 page statement. *The Port Huron Statement* was a critique of the "affluent society" and materialistic complacency, and proposed that universities should be the locus of a new movement for "participatory democracy," though just what that meant was never defined.

In the summer of 1964 the SDS decided to put participatory democracy into practice, and 125 SDS organisers descended on 9 cities to "Mobilize the poor for the new insurgency." They acquired some influence in Newark and Chicago but not much. The SDS never resolved the conflict between an increasingly revolutionary attitude and the inescapable fact that most concrete gains came from cooperation with the government.

Unsuccessful at agitation, the SDS took up the anti-Vietnam banner and sponsored several large demonstrations. In 1968, the SDS achieved a level of power and prominence unprecedented for a student organisation. In a protest against Columbia University's participation in war-related research and its acquisition of public park land, SDS-led students occupied the campus

buildings. Similar occupations occurred at forty other universities. In the end the universities called in the police who arrested the occupiers and restored order.

The SDS, however, had switched to a bigger prize and a bigger stage: the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. It was a turning point in the 1960s. At Chicago the **Counterculture** would provoke a reaction. At its height there were perhaps 200,000 hippies with another 200,000 part-time and weekend hippies. The average Hippie spent only one year in the movement before rejoining society. Hippies were especially big in San Francisco, during the 1967 “summer of love.” (You can see a 1967 documentary on the Summer of Love at

<http://www.slashcontrol.com/free-tv-shows/nbc-news-time-capsule/3869837411-the-summer-of-love-1967.>)

Getting Weirder: Hippies and Yippies

The **Hippies**, one of our frequent and most familiar images of the 1960s, were influenced by the **Beat Generation** of the 1950s, with its defiant challenges to the moral order. The hippies expressed a highly self-conscious alienation from American society. They believed they were living in a society no one wanted. Pacifism, free love (though men outnumbered women in the movement by at least 3:1), and drug experimentation were all key elements of the Hippie movement. When they turned to hard core drugs the police and government became increasingly less tolerant, and the Hippie movement soon attracted very undesirable elements. “If you’re going to San Francisco be sure to wear some flowers in your hair” had been replaced by “you had better wear a gun” by 1968.

The Hippies were not a political movement. When the Hippies and the New Left merged in the arena of politics they created the **Yippies**. Founded by Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman in January 1968, the Yippies were as embarrassing as they were entertaining. They did not realise YIP could stand for Youth International Party until several months after they had created the Yippies. According to Hoffman, the Yippies were the product of an evening of marijuana: “We were all stoned, rolling around on the floor.” Hoffman was from an upper-middle class Jewish family and did not become politicised until he became a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley. He would become the Left’s clown. Jerry Rubin was from a blue-collar Cincinnati family, more political and less media savvy.

One critic described the Yippies as “Politicized acid freaks. The Yippies found their politics and their freedom through a lifestyle.” They were a parody of left-wing politics. Originally part of the SDS, the Yippies believed in many of the same leftist ideals. Hoffman became a militant for the privileged whites. He protested capitalism and commercialism by burning money. While this was unlikely to resonate with the poor, it did attract media attention.

The Yippies soon came to represent the violent, more reckless side to the leftist movement. They were strong advocates of street violence and drugs. Hoffman had a serious cocaine habit that would be his undoing. Hoffman proclaimed before the 1968 Democratic Party Convention, "We will burn Chicago to the ground!", "We demand the Politics of ecstasy!", and "Acid for all." As wild as these quotes sound, the Yippies were quite serious about their cause. They believed that street violence was the only means of changing government and civil organizations.

At the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, the Yippies achieved their greatest degree of fame. They began with a "Nude-in" at Lake Michigan, then threatened to contaminate the city's water supply with LSD. They even nominated their own presidential candidate, Mr. Pigasus, who just happened to be a pig. But typical of the Yippies, Hoffman and Rubin had both brought pigs—Hoffman's was cute, while Rubin's was very ugly. In the end the ugly pig was nominated. The Pig, Hoffman, and Rubin were all soon arrested for disorderly conduct. It might have been a media success but the Yippies' days were numbered.

Nowhere else during the 1960s were America's internal divisions as exposed as on the streets of Chicago during the Democratic National Convention in August 1968. Heads were cracked and tear gas billowed as the police attacked the demonstrators who called for "acid for all" and demanded an immediate end to the war in Vietnam.

For the Democratic Party, Chicago '68 doomed the candidacy of Hubert Humphrey. For the Left, Chicago '68 hastened the demise of SDS. The majority of Americans were horrified by Chicago, and the silent majority voted for Richard Milhous Nixon, the man they had rejected at the start of the decade.

Mayor Richard Daley was not about to let the insult to his city go unpunished. The ringleaders of the Riot, including Hoffman and Rubin, were charged under the new federal anti-riot law. The Chicago Eight Trial would destroy the Yippies.

On September 24, 1969, thirteen months after the riots that shocked America, the trial of the so-called "Chicago Eight" began. A jury of two white men and ten women, two black and eight white, was seated. It was clearly not a good jury for the defense. (After the trial, one female juror commented that the defendants "should be convicted for their appearance, their language and their lifestyle." Edward Kratzke, the jury foreman, also was angered by the defendants' courtroom behaviour: "These defendants wouldn't even stand up when the judge walked in; when there is no more respect we might as well give up the United States." A third juror put it more succinctly: the demonstrators "should have been shot down by the police.")

The defense and prosecution tables stood in dramatic contrast. At the defense table, defendants relaxed in blue jeans and sweatshirts, often with their feet up on chairs or the table

itself. Hoffman and Rubin sported headbands, buttons, beads, and colourful shirts. They munched jelly beans, cracked jokes, offered editorial comments, made faces, read newspapers, and slept. The area around the defense table was littered with clothing, candy wrappers, and even (on one day) a package of marijuana.

The Yippies spiced up the trial by wearing judicial robes, bringing into the courtroom a birthday cake, blowing kisses to the jury, baring their chests, or placing the flag of the National Liberation Front on the defense table.

The Trial had five "phases." First was the "The Jelly Bean Phase," a relatively uneventful stage, in which the defendants took a "gently mocking" stance toward the trial. It was followed by the "Gags and Shackles Phase," where the defendants sought to emphasize political issues in the trial, perhaps because they were concerned that the trial was being seen by their sympathizers as a mere joke. Phase three was the "Government's Day in Court." It was a relatively calm period when the defendants saw a surprisingly weak prosecution case based on the testimony of three undercover agents who had infiltrated radical ranks. They described plots to disrupt traffic, take over hotels, "sabotage" rest rooms, and other "hit-and-run guerilla tactics." Phase four was the "Sing Along with Phil and Judy Phase." This was the phase in which the defense presented its witnesses, a virtual "who's who" of the American left including LSD guru Timothy Leary, radical poet Allen Ginsberg, and singer Pete Seeger. The final phase of the trial, the "Barnyard Epithet Phase," was a two-week period marked by increasingly bitter outbursts by the defendants and their attorneys.

The defense tried to portray the defendants as committed idealists who reacted spontaneously to escalating police violence. It suggested that what the prosecution saw as dangerous plots were only play. Defense witness Norman Mailer probably made the point best when he said, "Left-wingers are incapable of conspiracy because they're all egomaniacs." Abbie Hoffman made the same point more colourfully when he said, "Conspiracy? Hell, we couldn't agree on lunch." The jury acquitted all defendants on the conspiracy charge, but convicted five defendants of crossing state lines with intent to incite a riot.

On February 20, 1970, the guilty were sentenced. Each defendant made a statement before sentence was imposed. Abbie Hoffman recommended that the judge try LSD: "I know a good dealer in Florida. I could fix you up." After listening to each defendant give his statement, Judge Hoffman sentenced each defendant to five years' imprisonment plus a \$5,000 fine.

The Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals reversed all convictions on November 21, 1972. The appellate court based its decision on the Judge's refusal to allow inquiry into the cultural biases of potential jurors as well as his antagonistic attitude toward the defense. But by then the Yippies were dead and the sixties were well and truly over; they had died in 1968.

Conclusion

Although many of the dreams and aspirations of the 1960s generation in general and the “68ers” in particular, did not translate into reality, it would be unfair to argue that the era and its actors did not leave behind a significant legacy for subsequent world history. Through the efforts of student activists and protest movements, issues that today are part of mainstream political debate, such as minority rights, environmental concerns, gender equality, and the reality of global youth culture, are all direct legacies of the 1968 movements. Indeed, many of the freedoms, rights and opportunities twenty-first college students enjoy today are direct benefits achieved by the struggles of their 1960s forebears.

Further Reading

For an eyewitness retrospective, see the multi-author essay “May 1968: 40 Years Later,” located at http://www.city-journal.org/2008/18_2_spring_1968.html.

For more on the May 1968 Paris riots in particular, see the images and attached articles within the “Paris, May 1968” retrospective on the *New York Times* website, located at http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2008/04/30/world/0430-FRANCE_index.html.

For images and posters produced by the French student protesters, see the online essay by Mark Vallen, “Demand the Impossible: Posters from the 1968 Paris Uprising,” located at <http://www.art-for-a-change.com/Paris/paris.html>.

For a good scholarly work on the U.S. in the 1960s, see Mark Lytle, *America’s Uncivil Wars: The Sixties Era from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006. Also useful is Mark Kurlansky’s, *1968: The Year that Shocked the World*, available as an e-book from the NGCSU Library. For a journalist’s eyewitness view of the 1960s in the United States, see Todd Gitlin, *The 1960s: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, Bantam, New York, 1997.