

FRENCH RIOTS: NIGHTS OF RAGE AND FIRE

Introduction

Focus

This *News in Review* story examines the wave of rioting and violence that erupted in Paris and other French cities in fall 2005. We explore the causes, evaluate the government's response to it, and reflect on its implications, both for France and for other countries.

For over three weeks, from late October to mid November 2005, Paris and other French cities were rocked by rioting, violence, and destruction. The rioters were mainly young, French-born men of North African background living in the economically depressed outer suburbs of Paris—areas that visitors to the French capital rarely see first-hand. Their targets were schools, community centres, stores, and especially automobile dealerships and parked cars—thousands of which were torched. They fought pitched battles with police on the mean streets of the suburbs, hurling stones and Molotov cocktails, and occasionally even firing shots.

Overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the uprising, the police appealed to the French government to take drastic steps to restore order. In response, President Jacques Chirac declared a state of emergency throughout the country on November 8. This authorized the deployment of the army in areas where riots had broken out. By this time this included not only Paris's outer suburbs but also many other cities throughout France, from Arras in the north to Toulouse in the south.

The initial spark that set off the riots was a tragedy that may have resulted from a misunderstanding. On the evening of October 27, two black teenagers in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois were fleeing from police they believed were chasing them. Seeking refuge in an electrical substation, the boys, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, were electrocuted. The two victims, plus a third teen who was badly injured but survived the incident, had been spotted near the scene of an apartment

break-in just as police arrived. Although the police strongly denied they were pursuing the teens, anger over their senseless deaths quickly spread throughout suburban Paris. Thousands of people, many of whom were of North African or Caribbean origin, took to the streets in protest, some wearing t-shirts with the boys' pictures and the slogan, "They died for nothing" on them. The protests soon turned violent. By the beginning of November gangs of angry youths were rampaging through the suburbs ringing Paris, burning cars, vandalizing buildings, setting fires, and battling with the police.

The riots caught the country and much of the world by surprise, but the roots of the discontent that provoked them had been visible for a long time. France's large community of people of North African background, the second generation of which was actually born in France, had long complained about discrimination, unequal access to jobs, and continual police harassment. The suburbs where the riots broke out are huge areas of decaying apartment buildings, with poor schools, few social services, and serious problems of drugs and gang-related violence. Many of their residents felt that the French state and society had ignored and marginalized them. While most opposed the violence of the rioters, they at least felt that the uprising might finally attract national attention to their issues.

The response of the French government to the wave of rioting was a mixture of firmness and a promise to address the problem. The comments of Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy, who called the rioters "scum," and urged that

Definition

Molotov cocktail refers to a makeshift incendiary grenade named after Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Molotov (1890-1986), the Soviet Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1939 to 1949. The name was given to bottles filled with gasoline by Finns during the Winter War of 1939-40. Molotov was reviled in Finland as the man who engineered the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact that allowed the Russians to attack Finland. The name comes from Finland, but the credit for inventing the device goes to Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War.

their neighbourhoods be “hosed down,” did little to calm the situation. Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin, who cancelled a planned trip to Canada in order to deal with the crisis, declared that the primary duty of the government was to restore law and order, however harsh the means required to do it. One widely criticized measure the government adopted was the revival of a curfew law originally used in the mid-1950s to deal with a revolution in Algeria, then a French colony. This only served to underline the impression that the state was approaching the riots in Paris with the same colonialist mindset. At the same time, however, President Jacques Chirac committed his government to doing more to provide economic and social assistance to riot-plagued areas. Further, he acknowledged that not enough had been done to address such problems as youth unemployment, poor social services, lack of educational opportunities, and rampant discrimination. While he continued to champion the “French model” of equal citizenship without regard to race, religion, or country of origin, he did admit that the country needed to become more tolerant, inclusive, and accepting of its minorities. Before the riots, many French people of North African and Middle Eastern background had felt that this model did not treat

their culture and Islamic religion with the respect they deserve. One example of this was the decision to ban from French schools the *hijab*, or head covering, worn by some Muslim women. In a country like Canada, where multiculturalism is official government policy, such a ban would likely never occur.

By mid-November, it appeared that the riots had run their course. Whether because of sheer exhaustion or as a result of a firm military presence and thousands of arrests of suspected rioters, the young men who had roamed the streets burning cars and destroying property had returned to their apartment buildings. But the mood in the outer suburbs, while subdued, was deeply suspicious and distrustful of the government’s intentions. Many residents felt a grim sense of satisfaction that at long last their grievances were being recognized and that the government had promised to take them seriously. But there remains a deep gulf of misunderstanding and hostility that divides French society along racial and religious lines. The recent wave of violence has, if anything, only inflamed this with growing resentment on both sides. It remains to be seen whether the government’s words can be translated into meaningful deeds in time to prevent any future wave of civil unrest.

To Consider

1. What was the initial cause of the riots? Why was it both a tragedy and a possible misunderstanding?
2. What are some of the long-term, or background, causes of the riots? What areas of France did they mainly affect?
3. How would you describe the French government’s response to the riots? How effective do you think it has been in a) dealing with the violence, and b) addressing the causes of the unrest?

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Video Review

Respond to the questions as you view the video. Be sure to check with your teacher for any questions to which you did not find answers.

Further Research

To stay informed about events in France, consider a visit to the following Web sites for the French government. All have sections in English: President of France – www.elysee.net; Prime Minister of France – www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/en/.

1. What words are often used as France's motto? _____,
_____ and _____.

2. What event launched the riots in France?

3. Describe the neighbourhoods that Don Murray visited.

4. Who is Nicholas Sarkozy and why is he such a controversial figure?

5. What appear to be the sources of this recent violence?

6. Why is Europe having so much difficulty integrating immigrants?

7. What steps is the French government taking to end these riots?

8. What lessons might Canadians take from the recent riots in France?

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The Riots: Background and Overview

Further Research

For more information about the French Ministry of the Interior visit www.interieur.gouv.fr. There is an English module.

Here is a timeline of the main events of the riots that swept Paris and other parts of France in late autumn 2005, along with some background on the areas where they took place and the problems that their residents confront in their daily lives.

October 25 – While visiting the poor Paris suburb of Argenteuil to examine new measures to deal with urban violence, French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy provokes the anger of local residents, who throw stones and bottles at him. In response, he states that crime- and drug-ridden areas such as this suburb should be “cleaned with a power hose,” and calls the young male trouble-makers “gangrene,” “scum,” and “rabble.” Sarkozy, widely believed to be a contender for the French presidency after President Jacques Chirac’s term in office ends, received both condemnation and praise for his remarks. To some, they illustrated the arrogance, racism, and lack of understanding of the government in the face of a serious urban problem. To others, they expressed a growing mood of frustration and resentment over the violent behaviour of young men of North African background in the outer suburbs.

October 27 – Two black teens of African background, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, are electrocuted after climbing into an electrical substation in the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois while hiding from police. Their deaths immediately trigger riots in Clichy, home to large communities of Africans and Arabs. Fifteen vehicles are burned. The fact that the two boys believed the police to be pursuing them, even though this was officially denied, only highlighted the tragic lack of trust, widespread suspicion, and deep misunderstanding that exist between the state and

the non-white communities in the outer suburbs.

October 30 – After the unrest and violence spread from Clichy to other nearby suburbs, and noisy protests condemn the police and government for the deaths of the two boys, Sarkozy vows “zero tolerance” for rioters. He orders the police into affected areas. A tear-gas grenade, similar to those the Paris police use to disperse rioters, explodes near a mosque in Clichy, arousing even greater anger. Azouy Begag, a junior minister in the French government who is responsible for promoting equality of opportunity, condemns Sarkozy for his use of language. Begag is one of a small handful of people of North African background holding important political positions. This in itself is a cause of much resentment among France’s large non-white communities, who rarely see themselves reflected in the mirror of the country’s political, professional, or business power structure.

November 7 – The first fatality of the riots occurs when Jean-Jacques Le Chenadec, 61, dies of injuries sustained during the unrest in Seine-Saint-Denis. By this time the violence has spread from Paris and engulfed other parts of France. Thousands of vehicles have been burned, hundreds of rioters arrested, and many police officers injured. The next day, the French cabinet, meeting in an emergency session, authorizes a number of measures to crush the unrest, including the reissuing of a 1955 law originally used to curb unrest in Algeria. This action arouses considerable opposition, especially among French people of North African descent who recall the brutal suppression of the Algerian independence

Quote

"There had better not be a police blunder, or the town will go up / The city's a time-bomb / From the police chief to the guy on the street – they're all hated."
— From a French rap song "In Front Of The Police," by the group 113.

movement prior to that country's winning freedom from France in 1962. Many of the rioters are the children of Algerian immigrants who settled in France during the economic boom of the 1950s and 60s, when their labour was in high demand in the construction and manufacturing industries. Since then, many have seen their living standards decline as a result of changes in the French economy. To make matters even worse, the employment situation for the second generation of North African immigrant families—born in France—has become increasingly bleak in recent years. The jobless rate in the poor suburbs of Paris is many times the national average of 10 per cent.

November 14 – French President Jacques Chirac makes his first national televised address on the situation. Police across France report a considerable drop in the level of violence, with fewer arrests, car burnings, and other acts of violence. Authorities in the central city of Lyon use tear gas to disperse rioters there—the first time unrest breaks out in the central part of a major French city. Paris's downtown, the tourist hub of the capital, has been spared any serious violence. This is a great relief to the country's tourist industry, a major income earner for France. When the riots broke out, there was serious concern that the negative image they conveyed to the world might cause potential tourists to cancel their planned trips to the "city of light." Chirac pledges his government to addressing the causes of the riots, including serious youth unemployment, economic and social distress in the

suburbs, and widespread racism and discrimination against non-white minorities. He especially promises to provide greater opportunities for young people who have become disaffected and alienated from society and who see violence as their only means of gaining attention for their issues. As he notes, "these events bear witness to a deep malaise" in French society.

November 15 – After 20 consecutive nights of rioting, an uneasy calm descends on France's cities. The cabinet votes to extend the state of emergency for an additional three months in case the violence should flare up again over the Christmas period. By this time, almost 10 000 cars have been burned, 3 000 people arrested, 200 buildings damaged, 125 police officers injured, 600 convicted rioters jailed, and one person killed. In response to the wave of rioting and the responsibility of the government to do more to prevent future outbreaks of civil unrest, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin states that, "our collective responsibility is to make difficult areas the same sort of territory as others in the republic. France is at a moment of truth. What is being questioned is the effectiveness of our integration model." By this he means the "French model" of citizens that, in theory, treats all French people the same, regardless of their race, nationality, religion, or country of origin. But the riots and the deep wells of resentment and frustration on which they drew have cast that noble ideal into serious question, especially among the young, unemployed, and marginalized non-white residents of Paris's poor suburban belt.

Analysis

1. After reading the passage above, discuss the differences between immediate, or short-term, causes of major events, and background, or long-term, causes. Why is it important to understand both types of causes when one attempts to explain events such as the recent riots in France?
2. What steps do you think the French government should take after the riots to reduce the likelihood of similar disturbances occurring in the future?

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Eyewitness Accounts of the Rioting

Did you know . . .

Some members of the French government blame some leading members of France's rap movement for the violence. For several years, French rappers have told the story of the frustration and anger in the French ghettos.

Here are the views of six residents of the Paris suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois, where the riots first broke out following the deaths of two youths of African origin who were fleeing police. They express the views of many non-white French people about why the violence occurred, their feelings about it, and what they think needs to be done in order to prevent future disturbances. Which do you think most accurately reflects what happened? Why?

"I don't think it was racism, just a mistake by the police, which they should admit. But I do see racism every day. People's faces change as soon as they see a black or Arab face. The death of those boys was the straw that broke the camel's back." — Ziwyana Cherif, student

"My sweatshirt says 'Dead for nothing.' It's in memory of the dead boys, Bouna and Zyed. I left school two years ago but have never had a job. As soon as I say my name and where I'm from the vacancy has been filled. I am happy to do any job except be a policeman. I hate the police. As soon as they see blacks or Arabs, they just try and cause trouble." — Mamadou Nygang, unemployed

"My parents came from Algeria and could not read or write, so they could only do menial jobs. But the kids now don't want to suffer like their parents and grandparents did. The state is being tough at the moment, but later it will have to listen. In the long term, these riots will force the government to act. Otherwise, the next round of violence will be even worse. The police are very

rude—they don't understand our problems. There is a dangerous cocktail here." — Ahmed Belmokhtar, taxi driver

"We just want to be recognized as human beings, instead of being seen as Arabs or blacks. We don't all want new mosques—that's only important for a few people, yet that's what the state does. Burning cars does not help. It only gives a bad impression. We are not animals." — Maratt Sabek, office worker

"Even in the civil service we are victimized. We have to work twice as hard as white French people. That's the problem with France—institutional racism. I don't approve of the violence, but it's the only way of sounding the alarm. We demand equality of opportunity. The police did nothing to stop those kids running a thousand metres to their deaths at an electricity substation. If they want peace, we need justice. Respect must be mutual." — Bilal, civil servant (did not want to give his last name)

"The police come and hassle us all the time. They ask us for our papers 10 times a day. They treat us like delinquents, especially [Interior Minister Nicolas] Sarkozy. That's not the answer. It would be good to have youth clubs and other places to go—then there would be less trouble. It's not good to burn cars, but that's one way of getting attention so people can come and solve our problems." — Mehmet Altun, high-school student

Source for all quotes: "In pictures: Paris riot suburb residents," BBC News online: <http://news.bbc.co.uk>

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Paris: History Is Made in the Streets

Definition

Coup d'état is a French term for a blow to the state. It generally refers to a violent, usually illegal, seizure of power at the highest levels.

Paris is a city that has seen more than its share of violent upheavals over the centuries. On some occasions, riots that first broke out in the French capital eventually led to the overthrow of the government and launched major revolutions. The history of France has frequently been made in the streets of Paris. Local residents have not hesitated to take to them in protest against economic, social, or political conditions. And all too often, these protests have turned violent, leading to considerable loss of life and destruction of property. The riots that flared around the outer suburbs of Paris in the late autumn of 2005 are just the latest example of a long tradition of street protests in the French capital. Here are some earlier ones:

1789 – On July 14, a Paris mob, enraged by rising food prices and the corruption and arrogance of the government of Louis XVI, storms the Bastille, a royal prison. This event is still commemorated today as France's national holiday, "Bastille Day," the beginning of the French Revolution. During the decade following the attack on the Bastille, Paris was the epicentre of the dramatic events of the Revolution, including the infamous "September massacres" of royalist prisoners in 1792, the execution of the king in January 1793, and frequent clashes between competing revolutionary factions. These continued until 1799, when a young general named Napoléon Bonaparte finally restored order to the capital and the country at large, preserving the major gains of the Revolution while curbing its violent, chaotic excesses.

1830 – Paris again sparks a revolution, this time against the hardline conservative regime of King Charles X, who is forced to abdicate and flee into exile in England following three days of violent demonstrations against him. This time, the middle class joins the urban workers and engineers in the transfer of power to Louis Philippe, a relative of the king's with a more liberal outlook toward government. The "July Revolution" entrenches the power of the rising urban middle class of business people and professionals, but does little to address the problems of the urban poor, including low wages, substandard housing, oppressive working conditions, and a lack of political influence.

1848 – Yet another uprising breaks out in February, against Louis Philippe, who is forced to join his cousin in exile in England. A "second republic" is proclaimed in Paris, and a revolutionary government assumes power. The workers, demanding guaranteed jobs and higher wages, clash with the authorities in the "June days," leaving thousands dead. Troops from rural parts of the country are dispatched to the capital to crush the uprising. By the end of the year, weary of another round of revolutionary turmoil, French voters turn to Louis Napoléon, nephew of the great Bonaparte, and elect him president. Three years later, he stages a *coup d'état* that abolishes the second republic and makes him emperor.

1871 – Following France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, invading Prussian forces besiege Paris, causing much hunger and suffering.

The provisional government that has replaced the toppled Emperor Napoléon III is based in Versailles, where it can do little to help the people of Paris. In response, an urban radical movement known as the Paris Commune takes control of the municipal government, establishing the first socialist state in history. The Commune passes a number of progressive measures, including a ban on night work, rights for women, and greater grassroots democracy. But its attacks on private property and religious institutions soon turn the rich sections of the middle class against it. With Prussian approval, the Versailles government launches a brutal all-out military assault, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths. The Communards make their last stand among the gravestones of Père-Lachaise Cemetery in eastern Paris, which is still a political shrine to left-wing and socialist groups in France to this day. When Karl Marx, the German philosopher widely regarded as the father of communism was once asked how the theory he advocated would look in practice, he is said to have replied, “Just look at the Paris Commune.”

1936 – As France reels from the effects of the Great Depression and resulting political clashes between left- and right-wing political groups, Paris again becomes the flashpoint for public discontent. Workers’ unions, supported by the Communist and Socialist parties, stage mass shutdowns and sit-ins at factories, demanding improved wages and paid vacations. The factory occupations force the government and business groups to negotiate the Matignon Accord, which becomes the founding document of labour relations for the country. Workers soon begin to enjoy the fruits of their victory and elect a

left-wing Popular Front government, led by Socialist politician Léon Blum, to office. The tradition of the annual August vacation for most Paris workers dates from this time. But Blum’s government soon runs into problems financing the generous concessions it has made to the workers and is replaced by a more conservative regime. France’s bitter internal political power struggles distract the country’s attention from the growing threat of Nazi Germany, and the country easily falls to Hitler’s onslaught in the spring of 1940.

1961 – The bitter war in Algeria is in its final phase as the government of President Charles de Gaulle seeks an honourable exit from what has become a futile conflict against the determined Algerian independence movement, the FLN (Front de Liberation Nationale). Inside France, and especially Paris, there is a large community of Algerian immigrants who sympathize strongly with their people’s struggle for freedom. On October 17, a call goes out to the Algerian community in Paris to leave their suburban shantytowns and head into the centre of the city for a massive, peaceful protest against the war. As tens of thousands of unarmed men and women descend on central Paris, the police panic and attack the crowd, injuring many and causing widespread panic. Thousands are arrested and taken to a sports stadium that was used to hold Jews on their way to the death camps during the Second World War. Even worse, many of those arrested are severely beaten. Some are even dumped, unconscious, into the River Seine from the Pont St-Michel, very close to the Paris police headquarters. Maurice Papon, the Paris prefect of police and the man responsible for the brutal repression of the protest, is later charged and found guilty of war crimes during the Second World War, when he

Did you know . . .

French President Charles de Gaulle caused a huge diplomatic stir when he visited Montreal in 1967 and repeated the separatist cry of "Vive le Québec Libre." The actual clip is available on the CBC Digital Archives site at www.cbc.ca/archives.

signed the death warrants for many French Jews on behalf of the Nazi occupiers. Only then does his role in what comes to be known as the "Battle of Paris" come to light, after years of official police denials of any wrongdoing. It is now believed that at least 142 Algerians died as a result of police brutality. Finally, in 2001, Paris's socialist mayor, Bernard Delanoë, officially opened a memorial to the victims near the bridge from which so many had been thrown to their deaths.

1968 – Paris becomes one of the major flashpoints for a wave of youth protest that sweeps the world at the end of the 1960s. University students from the huge, sprawling campus of Nanterre take to the streets, demanding a greater say in their education, better facilities, and a curriculum more relevant to their needs. The "left bank" of Paris, long a hotbed of left-wing radicalism, becomes a battleground, as students and their supporters set up barricades, vandalize cars, and engage in pitched battles with police. All the main universities are occupied, and the students call on workers in outlying factories to join their movement. Some workers, angry that their wages have not kept up to the

cost of living, join the protest, causing the government of Charles de Gaulle much concern. For almost a month, whole areas of Paris are under the control of ultra-radical student groups who cover buildings and public places with inflammatory slogans. Among them are "Be realistic, demand the impossible," and "Underneath the pavement you can find the beach." The French Communist Party and other more traditional left-wing forces are caught off-guard by the protest, over which they have no control or influence. They quickly denounce it as "ultra-leftist" and misguided. Soon, De Gaulle regains his confidence and appeals to conservative French public opinion outside Paris to help him put down the protests. The government concedes to some of the students' demands regarding the structure and operation of the universities and promises the workers higher wages. These strategic compromises take some of the wind out of the revolutionaries' sails, and the protest eventually fades out. But the events of "May '68," when anything seemed possible, remain enshrined in the memory of the French left, and inspired a generation of young radicals around the world.

Inquiry

1. For each of the Paris protests described above, explain a) its causes, b) the main events, c) how it ended, and d) what were its long-run consequences.
2. What similarities and differences do you notice in the protests that are described above, from the French Revolution of 1789 to the "May '68" events?
3. What similarities and differences do you notice among all of these past protests in Paris and the riots that occurred in the fall of 2005?

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Activity: Could It Happen Here?

Images of gangs of violent youths burning cars, vandalizing stores, and battling with police in the economically depressed suburbs of Paris shocked and disturbed those Canadians who saw them on television during the French riots in fall 2005. But to many, there was also a sense of security, even complacency, in the belief that such serious unrest was highly unlikely to occur in a country like Canada. But according to Michael Valpy, a columnist with *The Globe and Mail*, such complacency may be misplaced. In a recent article, entitled "Could it happen here?" (*The Globe and Mail*, November 12, 2005), Valpy questions the belief that Canada is a much more tolerant, open, and multicultural society than France, and that immigrants and their children have adjusted much more easily to their new society than their French counterparts. He writes:

For Canadians, smug in their mythology of inhabiting the planet's most successful multicultural society, the riots of France have been a cause for national tsk-tsking and self-satisfaction. At least, goes the script, we've got social inclusiveness right.

At least we've avoided the creation of racial underclasses: no endless ugly suburbs of brown and black people imprisoned in poverty from which scant hope of escape exists. At least we've embraced into our national culture the notion of postethnic equality, woven into the values of anti-discrimination and equality into not only our laws but into our hearts and national idiom.

Well, hold the complacency, eh?

To be sure, a Canadian mirror held up to the car-BQs of France shows no violent mass unrest brewing in, say, Toronto's Jane-Finch or Jamestown neighbourhoods, Montreal's quartier St-Michel, or patches of Greater Vancouver's Surrey and the Downtown Eastside.

But what recent research reveals is an alarming and disquieting analogue to the demographic portrait of the French suburban cities. It shows an emerging population of Canadian-raised daughters and sons of visible-minority immigrants à la France whose accents and cultural reference points are as Canadian as maple syrup, but who in many respects feel less welcome in the country than their parents.

The data show, in fact, a generation raised in the milieu of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and multiculturalism's rhetoric, who expect to be treated as equals in Canadian society and who angrily are discovering that they are not.

To Do

As a class, discuss your reactions to these comments. Use the questions on the next page to guide your analysis of these difficult issues.

