

Essential Lens: Analyzing Photographs Across the Curriculum

Protest and Politics: 1968, Year of the Barricades

Activity 4 Lesson Plan

This modified lesson plan was created by middle school teacher Kim Kanoff who is featured in the Essential Lens video, *Story*.

1. Prior to lesson, make a “visual thinking wall” by posting one iconic photo from each of the four countries discussed in the Protest and Politics collection on the bulletin board, giving room between them for students to post captions.
2. Start class by reviewing the background on 1968 and show students the photos
3. Split students into “country” groups, one group for Mexico, U.S., France, Czechoslovakia
4. Have students annotate primary source documents for the country they are representing
5. Next have students engage in small group discussion and write captions for the photos choosing from a “newspaper” or “interior monologue” perspective
6. Ask students to post their captions on the bulletin board next to the photo chosen to represent the country (“visual thinking wall”) and share
7. Project the essential question, and have students engage in a culminating discussion in response to the question: **What role do young people and ordinary citizens have in bringing about social change?**

Background notes:

In 1968, students throughout the world challenged their governments’ policies and practices. Students organized demonstrations in Japan, Egypt, Italy, Yugoslavia, Mexico, France, the United States, Uruguay, and France. Protestors raged against governments and the state raged back. Students demanded change from institutions and leaders who in return fiercely fought to maintain the status quo.

Young people were ready for change. Revolutions in Russia and China before World War I showed the power of groups of people working to change their governments. Countries were fighting against colonialism and worked to gain independence. The increase in population post-World War II, economic growth, and technological innovations had a large group of young people ready for change. International events such as the Vietnam War provided fuel for protest movements of 1968. Another unifying factor was the example of African Americans’ struggle for civil rights in the U.S. The Civil Rights movement showed how ordinary citizens could stage non-violent protests. The many events and activists of the Civil Rights movement were covered in the media—in newspapers, magazines, and on radio and television—and served as models for other protest movements at home and abroad.

In many nations, more and more students were being admitted into the university system, stretching physical capacity to the limit. University years offered many young people a period between adolescence and adult life in the workforce, a time in which many experimented with lifestyles that challenged previous cultural norms and mores. As this new, larger, more diverse generation of students matriculated they began to question the hierarchical nature of the education system and demand a say in everything from housing to curriculum.

In the late 1960s television was undergoing a technological transformation from the use of cameras that shot 16-millimeter film, an expensive medium that needed to be processed before being aired, to videotape. Videotape was cheaper, so more footage could be taken. The year 1968 also saw the first satellite transmission of videotape: for the first time ever an event could be broadcast around the world on the same day it happened. Still photography continued to play an important role in informing people about this increasingly violent year. In 1968, for the first time, the *New York Times* published multiple photos in a “spread.” The magazines *Harper’s* and *Atlantic Monthly* both published issues dedicated to the Vietnam War, with graphic imagery. *Time* magazine printed color pictures of dead U.S. soldiers. In 1968 people were inundated with images of and information about world events from multiple sources, and the dramatic nature and historic importance of these events was thus continually reinforced. Worldwide, the increasing access to all these forms of media generated a greater level of awareness of events and created a storm of protest spread around the world.

Each country had its own historical reasonings and national events that sparked the protestors. The news media fueled the protest by capturing photos and reporting on the events around the world. All of these groups contributed to shaping history.

Case Study: Mexico

Mexico was no exception to protest in 1968. Students organized the protest the lack of true democracy in Mexico. The political system had been dominated by one party. Every president of Mexico since 1929 had been from the same party. Every effort students made to raise a voice of protest was met with anger. The students gained worldwide attention and exposed injustice. The Mexican government was threatened by the protest movement as the world’s gaze shifted to the upcoming Olympics in Mexico City. In an effort to silence the voices of students, the police and army occupied the university campus.

The tension began in July, but the climax came on October 2, 1968, ten days before the Olympic games were to begin in Mexico City. The police and army fired on thousands of demonstrators. Hundreds were killed, thousands were beaten and jailed, and the government did its best to sweep the incident under the rug.

Note: If possible have a student read this in Spanish (<http://tlatelolco.canciones.free.fr/Memorial.htm>)

Poem Memory of Tlatelolco by Rosario Castellanos

And who saw that brief, vivid flash of light?
Who is the one who kills?
Who are the ones who breathe their last; who die?
Who are the ones fleeing without their shoes?
Who are the ones belonging to the deep well of jails?
Who are the ones rotting in hospital?
Who are the ones struck dumb, forever, with horror?
Who? Who are the ones? Nobody. The next morning, nobody.
They found the square was swept clean. The front pages of the newspapers were full of the state of the weather. And on the television, on the radio, in the cinema, there was no change of programming, no special announcement. Not any meaningful silence in the midst of the banquet, because the banquet went on.
Don't look for what isn't there: traces, bodies, it's all been given as an offering to a goddess, the Great Devourer of Excrement...
There are no official records.
Yet the fact is I can touch a wound.
In my memory it hurts, therefore it's true.
I remember. We remember.
That's our way of helping the very brave on so many a stained mind...
I remember.
Let's all remember until justice becomes clear among us.

If possible and if time allows, listen to a radio story about 1968 Protest in Mexico:

<http://www.radiodiaries.org/mexico-68-a-movement-a-massacre-and-the-40-year-search-for-the-truth/>

Case Study: USA

Protest had a long history in the U.S. before 1968. The Civil Rights movement, more than a decade old, offered a model of non-violent tactics and had mobilized and organized huge numbers of participants, many of them young people. As opposition to the war in Vietnam grew, citizens had turned out in droves, marching in the streets. And, fuelled by numerous economic and other injustices such as lack of access to fair housing, education, and jobs, black Americans had staged riots in cities from Los Angeles to Detroit to Newark, to name but a few. In response, urban police departments militarized their forces, in some instances acquiring helicopters and surplus military vehicles. As tumultuous as things had been to date, in 1968, they would get worse. As in countries around the world, students in the U.S. would play a key role in demanding change.

Access to activist Mark Rudd's letter:

<https://exhibitions.cul.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/1968/item/5521>

Case Study: France

In 1968 French students strode onto the world scene and created a French Revolution to rival the country's previous revolutions. This protest movement would set in motion the toppling of long-standing power structures and propel an old world society into the modern era. Like their counterparts around the world, the French rallied around international outrage against the Vietnam War, but students here—and the workers they managed to form an alliance with—were first and foremost expressing their dissatisfaction with France and its outdated institutions, and their actions were rooted in French history and culture.

Primary Sources

Note: These are quotes from the Fraser book:

My most vivid memory of May '68? The new-found ability for everyone to speak—to speak of anything with anyone. In that month of talking during May you learnt more than in the whole of your five years of studying. It was really another world—a dream world perhaps—but that's what I'll always remember: the need and the right for everyone to speak.

René Bourrigaud, student at the École Supérieure d'Agriculture, Angers, France

The unthinkable happened! Everything I had ever dreamt of since childhood, knowing that it would never happen, now began to become real. People were saying, fuck hierarchy, authority, and this society with its cold rationalist elitist logic! Fuck all the petty bosses and the mandarins at the top! Fuck this immutable society that refuses to consider the misery, poverty, inequality and injustice it creates, that divides people according to their origins and skills! Suddenly, the French were showing they understood that they had to refuse the state's authority because it was malevolent, evil, just as I's always thought as a child. Suddenly they realized that they had to find a new sort of solidarity. And it was happening in front of my eyes. That was what May '68 meant to me!

Nelly Finkielsztein, student at Nanterre University, Paris

It's a moment I shall never forget. Suddenly, spontaneously, barricades were being thrown up in the streets. People were building up the cobblestones because they wanted—many of them for the first time—to throw themselves into a collective, spontaneous activity. People were releasing all their repressed feelings, expressing them in a festive spirit. Thousands felt the need to communicate with each other, to love one another. That night has forever made me optimistic about history. Having lived through it, I can't ever say, 'It will never happen...'

Dany-Cohn-Bendit, student leader at Nanterre University, on the night of the Paris barricades, May 10-11.

I felt our time had come at last. There was a sort of magic island coming out of nowhere, and it was us, the young ones, who were pulling it out. I was with my young brother and his high school friends. They were all in tenth grade and I was in twelfth. My brother's best friend, Nicolas, and I fell in love. And on that famous Friday, 10 May, I helped them bring out their school on strike, going from classroom to classroom. All the kids ran into the streets...

Lily Métreaux, Paris

Note: See Janet Flanner excerpt in the Protest and Politics appendix.

Other great sources on France are some of the slogans the students came up with, printed as posters and posted all over town. One example is "Under the cobblestones, the beach."

Case Study: Czechoslovakia

The term “Prague Spring” may have a familiar ring, especially due to the coining of the similar “Arab Spring” in the twenty-first century. However, events and circumstances in Czechoslovakia in 1968 are probably less well known than their name. Like each of the youth protest movements around the world, the Prague Spring and subsequent resistance to the summertime Soviet invasion was both linked to and distinct from movements in other countries. In Czechoslovakia citizens of all ages supported their internal government's reform intended to create “socialism with a human face” and actively opposed the Soviet invasion. However, as in other countries, students and artists were primary agents of change leading to the internal reform and fearless defenders of their beliefs in the face of Soviet aggression.

Czechoslovakia became a country in 1918 amid the shifting of national borders in Europe after the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Czech and Slovak regions, ethnically distinct, formed an uneasy union. Following the Soviet liberation of Czechoslovakia from Nazi occupation during World War II, the country's Communist Party nationalized banks and major industries, and in tone and politics took its lead from the Soviets.

Czechoslovakians wanted a say in the running of their country. Membership and participation in the official Communist Party was high. This fostered an atmosphere of debate and openness leading into the 1960s. Also, Prague was becoming a tourist destination. Students began creating and distributing leaflets. Their actions were infectious, causing open discussion in the streets and factories. People asked for free elections. Prague Radio publicly criticized the censorship to which it submitted itself. Television programs began airing political debates.

The Czech Black Book excerpt is in the Protest and Politics appendix.