

MUSIC

Bonjour. We are back in Paris, Dominic.

Bonjour, madame. Bonjour, monsieur.

For the second part of our episode on the events of 1968.

And we are literally in Paris.

We're in the heart of... The Latin Quarter.

The Latin Quarter, where the students all kicked off.

Today, we're going to be...

We're going to be sitting in the café. We are.

Continuing our chat.

We're going to be heading off to the Champs Elysees.

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you can spend like a local Dominic.

Have I ever said that before? Never.

I think I might have done in 150 countries.

Have I mentioned that as well? Always.

150 countries. Brilliant, Tom.

So, you may remember, dear listeners,

that last time we were talking about the events of May 1968,

we were talking about the outbreak of the student protests

at Nantes outside Paris,

about the way in which they spread to the heart of the left bank,

to the Sorbonne,

the overreaction of the French authorities,

the violence of the police,

the violence of the students in response,

the sense that the government had lost control,

then the wave of strikes.

And we ended by saying...

And two-thirds of the country is on strike.

Two-thirds of the country is on strike.

And this sort of sense that...

Well, revolution is in the air, Tom, I suppose you would say.

And the man we haven't really talked about very much...

It's the general himself.

It's the general himself, the president of France.

He's been president...

I mean, you quoted that line to me last time.

Once he was 10 years, that's enough that people were chanting.

So, De Gaulle, he's been in power for 10 years,

but, of course, his career is so much longer.

So, for those people who don't know,

De Gaulle was born in the northeast of France in Lille in 1890.
He served a distinction in the First World War.
He was captured by the Germans at Verdun
at the great kind of symbolic showdown
of the French and German armies.
He became, in 1940,
the embodiment of French resistance to the occupation.
Of course, he went to England,
famously not a great fan of England or the English,
I think it's fair to say, Tom.
And then he came back, famously marches down to Champs-Élysées,
where we'll be later, in the liberation in 1944,
and claims that France has liberated itself,
doesn't want to give the British...
Any credit to the Americans or British, yeah.
Any credit at all,
which is all part of his belief in the glory of France.
He knows that's a bit of a fiction,
but he thinks it's a necessary fiction for France to be itself.
And then he very briefly runs France in 1946,
but he's impatient with parliamentary politics.
He's not cut out for it.
And then he disappears into retirement.
But then in 1950...
Les Désiglés is his country hideaway, isn't it?
Which is in the sort of...
The France profile.
Yeah, it's in the heart of France, at Colombe.
This is the place that gives him his mystical connection
to the soul of France, to ordinary French men and women.
And it's partly because he has this supposed mystical connection
that in 1958, when France has got itself into a terrible mess in Algeria,
there's a coup, effectively.
The Fourth Republic is replaced by the Fifth Republic,
and De Gaulle comes in as a pretty autocratic president.
Because the Fifth Republic enshrines the president as basically a monarch.
As a monarch?
He's filling that king-shaped hole in the French constitution.
Exactly, exactly.
And De Gaulle is also...
I mean, he's not just the personification of France and French patriotism.
He's also the personification of what we talked about last time,
which was that paternalistic, patriarchal,
sort of quite authoritarian public culture

that governs French life more generally.

You know, the general, everybody looks up to the general, the president.

But he has... I mean, famously, he has a certain sense of France.

Yeah.

And he means that in an almost mystical sense.

The idea that there is a French identity that transcends the actual lived reality of people who live in France.

Yes, to a degree.

Yes, absolutely.

And his sense of France, I think, does not include poets and mime artists, long-vading university people.

No, definitely doesn't involve long hair.

So you may ask, well, what's he doing during all this?

So his first reaction is that this is just childishness.

And he says to his ministers, the 5th of May, when a child gets angry and oversteps the mark, the best way of calming him down is by giving him a smack.

So excellent parenting advice there.

Very good parenting advice.

Two days later, he's been sent a petition by French Nobel Prize winners, telling him to go easy on the students and to give the students what they want.

And he is enraged by this.

And he says to his ministers, you seem terrorized in front of these children.

Do not forget that a minister of the interior must know how, if necessary, to give the order to fire.

So he's coming out with this very sort of ferocious stuff.

But actually, of course, he knows that this will never, no one's going to act on this.

And in some ways, I think Gargaule is actually paralyzed.

He doesn't know what to do.

He's really out of touch.

I mean, he's actually a very literate and very cultivated man who's always gone out of his way to read the latest fiction, to be up with the latest cultural developments.

But he's in his mid-seventies.

And by the late 1960s, for completely understandable reasons, he is out of touch with the mood in French universities.

But also, the Suasenuita are defining themselves against the kind of ideals of patriotism that Gargaule embodies. And that must be bewildering to him.

Absolutely, it is. Absolutely.

So as you said, he's been off to Romania on a state visit.

He insists on going ahead with this visit to Romania.

Well, because he's very keen, isn't he,

on situating France between the NATO and the Warsaw Pact.
And Cecezcio in Romania is a kind of slightly loose cannon.
I mean, to a degree.
And so he's kind of hoping to convert Cecezcio
to a goalist understanding of the...
I think it's best to say Nicolae Cecezcio,
not a friend of the rest of history.
No, not at all.
So, yeah, right, exactly.
Gaugule has been to Romania.
He returns to France on the 18th of May.
And he says, you know, he's been...
When in Romania, by the way, he hasn't been sleeping.
He's been lying awake at night, sort of full of anxiety
about what's going on, what on earth is going on in Paris.
He returns and he says,
this anarchy is absolutely nonsense, never stands.
And he calls it, famously, chi-en-li.
Which is a dolphin's shat in the bed.
Basically, it's soiling the bed,
which is obviously not...
I mean, it's a very famous remark,
but it's not best calculated to endear him
to the student protesters.
Because it's basically, I mean, the way of translating,
I suppose, would be to say, they're bedwetters.
They're wetting the bed.
On the 24th of May, he gives a very...
He decides he's going to break the logjam.
He gives this very, very rambling speech,
wittering about everybody wants more participation in life,
we're set up councils, all this stuff.
This is no good at all.
More protests, people shouting,
adieu, de Gaulle, in the streets.
Now, actually, at this point, he's also got into difficulties.
Because Daniel Cohn-Bendie, Danny the Red,
the student radical who's become the face of the sort of,
the left wing of the student protests,
he has been on a speaking tour.
You know, is that one of those very late 60s speaking tours
where he's probably pitching up on panel shows
with Mick Jagger and Mary Whitehouse or something.
Yeah, etcher of the times.

Exactly, exactly.

And the French, no, you were saying last time, he's actually technically a German citizen.

Yeah, and he's Jewish.

Right.

So the spectacle of Jews being deported from France by the French police is an incendiary...

That is a very raw wound.

Raw wound.

Exactly.

So the government bans him from returning to France.

This inflames the students.

So you have yet more violence.

The violence is now spreading to the right bank of the river,

Has anyone died?

Yes, so two people die in total, I think it's fair to say.

One guy is killed by a fragment of a grenade

and the other person, I can't actually remember how he died,

I think he's run over by a van or something.

OK.

But actually, you know what, Tom?

I mean, compared to the commune, Paris commune.

Compared with the Paris commune,

compared with the repression of the Prague Spring,

later in the year, compared with the riots in the US.

So the riots that summer that greet the news of the assassination of Martin Luther King, where scores of people die.

I mean, the death toll, the CRS are cracking people's heads.

But actually, they don't really...

So to that degree, they're not behaving like the SS?

No, they're not like the SS.

I mean, there's an irony here, isn't there?

We talked in the last episode about the memory of the Parisian police killing Algerian demonstrators in 1961.

You know, that's barely remembered.

As mentioned in that film,

Caché that we were talking about.

But the events of May 1968 in which, effectively...

Well, Caché is made by an Austrian director, Annika.

But it's May 1968.

It's the theatre.

It's the spectacle of the student occupations that lingers in the memory.

But of course, at this point, if you're a French politician or a police chief, you don't know that this is going to...

That it's pure spectacle.

And you think, given France's history, this is really running out of control.

I mean, this is going to be the Paris commune.

So it's at this point that the army are making consensual plans to reoccupy the capital.

Which is what happened with the commune.

With the commune.

The bloody... I mean, if that had happened, of course, you can only imagine what the death toll would be.

They are planning their readying troops outside the city to retake the capital.

Now, at the same time, they're pursuing different tracks.

So at the same time, the government said, OK, let's talk to the unions.

Let's get the workers back to work.

Now, we mentioned this last time.

They have what's called the Grinnell Accords, which is in the 25th and 26th of May.

One of the negotiators, actually, is a friend of the rest of his history, Louche Lounge Lizard, Jacques Chirac.

Yes.

What was he?

Monsieur Ciesminut.

Well, there's different claims, right?

Or, say, is either Mr. 3, 4, 5 or 6 minutes shower included.

Which is a reference to his interactions with his...

Lady friends.

With his lady friends, exactly.

OK, that's a complete tangent.

Chirac and Co. they negotiate to deal with the unions.

We mentioned this last time.

They'll get an increase in the minimum wage.

They'll get all these sort of goodies.

The head of the CGT, the big communist union, Georges Segui, he goes to Belancourt to the Renault plant and says,

Brilliant news.

I'm negotiating this fantastic deal.

And people say, no, not good enough.

You know, at that point, the mood has become...

It's this...

The intoxication of protest.

Drunk with the sense of its own possibility.

I think that's a very good way of putting it, actually.

I mean, the references to intoxication

may sound that we're being, you know, unfair, too critical.

But I think there is always a sense with any protest,

with any revolution, that these things acquire a momentum that nobody can quite explain.
Nobody knows what's going on.
And great fun.
And great fun, exactly so.
So, I mean, that is a key part of it.
Well, we're here in May, right?
I mean, it's a beautiful day.
It's a lovely place.
You can absolutely see that people are having a tremendous time.
They're occupying buildings.
They're wearing polo necks.
They're talking about obscure philosophers.
What could be more fun?
They are demanding the impossible.
Yeah.
Now, the government faced with this and the rejection of its offer to the unions has basically run out of options.
There is a sort of sense at this point, at the end of May, that, you know, nobody knows what's going on.
Nobody knows how it will be resolved.
And that De Gaulle has shot his bolt.
That he is an old man.
He is completely irrelevant.
François Mitterrand, who had lost the last presidential election to De Gaulle in 1965, he says, there is no more state.
You know, the state has failed.
I am ready to assume power.
His rival on the left, Caïcourt-Pierre Méndez-France, he says, I'm also ready to assume power and I'll work with the communists.
And the communists at this point, having previously stayed out of it, they now say, right, let's organize a massive demonstration.
So they're jumping on the bandwagon.
Yeah.
I mean, I know you were surprised when I said this.
The communists have never been a fan of all this business.
They had always thought, this is bourgeois nonsense.
But right now, they think the government has collapsed.
The government has failed.
The Fifth Republic is dead.
We need to put ourselves in pole position for what comes next.

So they plan this big demonstration for the 29th of May.
Now, on the night of the 28th of May,
De Gaulle is at the Elise Palace.
He has completely lost control of events.
He is in what his rival for June...
And the Elise Palace is not far from where we're sitting now.
No, we could...
We'll get a taxi to a laser.
But we could walk.
I mean, the violence has already spread
onto the right bank of the river.
So it is coming closer and closer to the Elise.
The prospect of people storming the Elise seems very real.
I mean, it's happened before in French history.
Well, say the shadow of Versailles,
of the storm in the Bastille.
I mean, these are the canonical events in French history.
And De Gaulle has a profound sense of French history,
as we've mentioned.
So that night, his biographer, Julian Jackson, says,
he spends the night in a state of,
and I quote, apocalyptic despair.
He makes three, or several,
interesting historical comparisons.
First of all, his wife is, by the way,
Yvonne is in floods of tears.
She thinks they're going to be lynched.
They're going to be guillotined.
Who knows what's going to happen?
He says to his aides, this is like 1940.
I remember 1940.
This is a moment of decision.
But he then says to his aides,
I don't have the energy anymore to deal with this.
I'm an old man.
I'm not a young man anymore.
The second thing he says to his aides,
he says, the roots of this are deep in France.
So we, as a nation, have never recovered
from being beaten at Waterloo by the English
and at Sedan by the Prussians.
You know, this is deep, this is deep stuff, Tom.
And then his aides say to him,
you, we should flee to Versailles.

You know, go to Versailles, get out the city.
And he says, I am not Louis-Philippe,
who we talked about in, looked like a pair.
The pair shaped last king of France.
We talked about him in our 1848 episode with Chris Clark.
He ran away.
De Gaulle says, I'm not going to run away.
So he lies awake all night, 29th of May.
This is the day that the communists
and the big communist union, the CGT,
are prepared for a big march.
The police are expecting 50,000.
The communists claim there are about 400,000 people there.
Marching through Paris, chanting adieu de Gaulle,
goodbye de Gaulle, farewell de Gaulle.
It's interesting, this is a real turning point in history.
Have they tried to occupy key buildings?
The communists.
The communists.
The police are prepared for that.
There probably would have been shooting.
There probably would have been massive street violence.
At that point, there would have been a lot of bloodshed
and possibly the whole thing could have
spiralled massively out of control.
Okay, so they didn't do that, actually.
It's a huge what-if.
It's a huge what-if.
Meanwhile, De Gaulle, he was meant to be meeting
his ministers on the morning of the 29th.
He postpones the meeting.
He says, no meeting.
He starts to take all his personal papers,
get them all ready to remove them from the Lise Palace.
He says to his son-in-law, who is a man called
Alain de Boissier.
He says, I don't want to give the protesters
a chance to attack the Lise.
It would be regrettable if blood was shed
in my personal defense.
I've decided to leave because nobody attacks an empty palace.
And he says to his aides, I'm shattered.
I'm leaving the capital.
I'm going to Colombes-les-de-Singles,

which you talked about.
Yeah, his country hideaway.
Yeah, he's the soul of France.
I'm going to commune with the soul of France
at my country house.
Meanwhile, he's actually got something up his sleeve.
He gets a general to come to him and he says,
go to Baden-Baden, to the French forces in Baden-Baden,
over the border in West Germany.
Right, so this is like the British Army and the Rhine,
the US forces in Germany.
France also has been given a portion of West Germany
to a minister in Germany, as it was in 1945.
Exactly, and French troops are still in situ there.
So there are French troops over the border in West Germany.
And he says, I want you to talk to the guy who's in command
of the French troops, who's a man called General Massou.
Now, General Massou had been part of the Free French
in the Second World War.
He'd served in Indochina.
He'd served at Suez in 1956.
He was a paratrooper commander.
Most famously, I mean, people who went to our show,
Tom at the Leicester Square,
when we talked about our favorite historical films,
those people who were inspired by that
to watch the Battle of Algiers,
will remember Colonel Mathieu,
I think he's called the paratrooper commander.
Very charismatic in the Battle of Algiers.
Well, he is inspired by Jacques Massou.
Massou had a breach with De Gaulle over Algeria.
He said that De Gaulle had sold out Algeria.
But on a personal level, he remains loyal to De Gaulle.
He's very loyal.
They have a shared experience of the liberation.
Because of 1940.
Out of 1940.
And basically, De Gaulle now has sent this guy,
General Alond, to say to Massou,
can we rely on you?
We need you.
We need the troops in Germany.
You're going to have to basically march on the capital.

Everything's got out of control.
Meanwhile, De Gaulle is still at the Elise.
He has a meeting with Georges Pompidou, his prime minister.
There's actually loads of tension
between De Gaulle and Pompidou.
Pompidou, it's a bit like the tension
between Anthony Eden and Winston Churchill or something.
Yeah, or between the king and the dofer.
The king and the dofer.
Pompidou basically thinks De Gaulle is a busted flush,
wants him to leave.
De Gaulle is very cross with Pompidou
and thinks he's always sort of undermining him and stuff.
De Gaulle calls in Pompidou, his prime minister,
and he says to him,
I am old, you are young, you are the future.
Au revoir, je vous embrasse.
Very strange, you know?
Pompidou thinks, what's going on here?
Then De Gaulle takes off by helicopter with his wife.
They're going to Colombe to his country house,
but as soon as they've taken off,
he tells the pilot something he hasn't told Pompidou
or anybody else.
Okay, we're not going to Colombe.
We're actually going to Barden, Barden.
We're going to Germany, back in Paris.
Pompidou and Co discover
that De Gaulle is not going to his country house after all,
that he's not going to Colombe.
And they're like, what's going on?
Pompidou is in a complete,
everybody's in a complete funk.
Well, you would be, wouldn't you?
The general has fled, the general has vanished.
You know, we can't find where he is.
People are running around, shouting,
he's fed the country, it's all over.
One of Pompidou's friends comes in with a gun for Pompidou
and says, you know, you're going to need this.
There are people burning documents.
There are people planning their journey out of the city,
saying, how do we get out?
The petrol stations are closed because of the strikes.

You know, we're going to have to take petrol.
What happens when the revolutionaries storm the palace?
You know, all this sort of stuff.
People are trying to get fake ID cards.
It's like the episode we did on full of Saigon.
It's absolutely, it's very American embassy.
Eventually, word comes to Pompidou.
We know where De Gaulle has gone.
He has gone to Germany.
He's gone to Barden, Barden.
De Gaulle's helicopter lands at Barden, Barden,
at the military airport at 2.40pm.
Meanwhile, of course, the communists are marching
through the city.
At three o'clock, Massou, who's not been forewarned
about this at all, really, he gets to, you know, see De Gaulle.
And De Gaulle starts the conversation by saying,
it's finished, it's done.
Il est fitu, jude fitu, everything is screwed.
And he just goes on this massive rant
and he says to Massou, it's finished,
I've lost control.
I don't know what's going on.
And I think at most, you know, certainly,
Julian Jackson, De Gaulle's biographer says,
you know, it's Massou who says to him, who stiffens him.
It'll be all right.
It's going to be fine.
I promise you, the troops will be loyal.
Because that's why De Gaulle has gone.
Yeah.
If the army turns against him, it's lost.
To test the loyalty of the army, go back to Paris.
We are with you.
You can rely on us if the shooting starts.
So, De Gaulle's still dithering a bit.
He thinks, well, will I address the nation from Germany?
Will I address the nation from Strasbourg?
Eventually he decides, no, I will go back to Colombia.
He flies back to Colombia.
Now, interestingly, part of De Gaulle still fears the worst
because his wife, Yvonne, has given the family jewels,
the De Gaulle family jewels, to his son and his daughter-in-law
and they stay in Barden-Barden at the military base.

Right.

So, with the aim of keeping it as a bolt-hole.

A bolt-hole.

Should the worst come to the worst?

Should the worst come to the worst?

They're going to leave Paris, flee to Germany, and then who knows?

Anyway, in the meantime, De Gaulle has come back to Colombia.

He is then going to go back to Paris.

And the next day, he is going to make his decisive intervention.

And Tom, I think, not least because a huge mob of tourists

have assembled surrounding the cafe.

They've obviously heard that Hollywood's Tom Holland is here.

Or maybe they're about to engage in some situational street theatre.

So, I think we should go and see the general.

Because there's a statue of De Gaulle just by the Elysees Palace
on the other side of the river.

And I think we should take a cab to get there.

Because I know you're not a great one for walking.

And what absolutely decides me that that's what we should do
is the ease of use of wise.

Because we are now paying with our digital cards.

And if you want to order a physical card,

you can get that in just five minutes.

Oh, brilliant. I've done that. I've tried.

I've got one. Yeah, I did.

So, either way, whether you are in a shop,

whether you're in a cafe as we are now,

whether you're online,

you always have the right kind of money for the right price.

So, let's go and get the cab.

And when we come back, we will be on the Champs Elysees.

Allons-y.

All right, Tom, we've just jumped into the cab.

We were on the left bank, not far from the Sorbonne.

We're now on our way across the river,

across the Ressinne, onto the right bank.

And we're going up to the near the Elysees Palace

and the statue of General De Gaulle.

And I'm going to pay for the cab journey.

And of course, that's made much easier for us, Tom, with wise.

Now, we're paying with our digital cards,

but you can order a physical card in just five minutes.

Now, either way, whether you're in store or online,

you've always got the right kind of money for the right price.

Right, here we go. Let's use the app.
Well, monsieur.
That's so easy. Merci.
Merci, monsieur.
So, Dominic, we have crossed the Seine.
We've left the Rive Gauche behind us.
And we've arrived really in the great centre of Paris,
the Champs Elysees in the distance.
Yes, so we've got a nice quiet spot here,
but we can just see the statue de Gaulle.
We were looking at earlier, Tom.
So, he's this sort of lanky, striding figure.
Not unlike yourself, I have to say.
Man of destiny.
So, there's the statue.
Now, over there.
Obviously, I don't know why I'm pointing out,
because the viewers can't or the listeners can't see it.
But anyway, for the sake of completeness,
the Elysees Palace is just a minute or so up there.
And there's the Champs Elysees stretching into the distance.
And that's where the great drama is about to unfold, Tom.
So, we left it on the evening of the 29th of May, didn't we?
The Gaulle, back at Colombie.
And the morning of the 30th finds him at the Elysees Palace.
And his aides come in,
and they find him a man transformed.
He's lost all the sort of ditheriness
and the anxiety and the uncertainty.
And he seems, you know, basically,
that visit to Jacques Massoud and the army.
Once he knows he's got the army,
he knows he's not going to suffer the fate of Louis Philippe
or, you know, Louis XVI or whatever.
And they say,
well, we've got this big Gaullist demonstration planned.
A counter demonstration in answer to the Communist demonstration yesterday.
Great.
And he says,
well, I'm going to give a speech in the evening.
I've decided I'm going to speak to the French people.
And then this guy called Foca has a very good suggestion.
He says, don't do the speech in the evening.
Do the speech before the demonstration

to kind of fire up your people, your France.
The other person he meets is George Pompidou,
friend of the show,
who is Prime Minister.
He says, I want you to dissolve the National Assembly
and let's have elections.
And to go, just like, great, let's do it.
So finally, they have some clarity.
So the first thing is the speech.
And to go gives the speech at 4.30 in the afternoon.
And crucially, he doesn't speak on TV.
So he's speaking on radio
as he had done in 1940 from London.
So what people don't,
they don't see a tired old man on television.
They hear the voice that they associate
with broadcast from London.
With resistance and liberation.
With resistance, with liberation.
And it's a very short speech.
It's only four minutes.
The brevity is important because it's,
at this time of vacuous slogans,
the Monde L'Amposib and stuff.
De Gaulle has really clipped and precise.
He says, you know, go back to work,
go back to the universities.
I'm going to settle this now.
I'm dissolving parliament.
We will have elections.
The choice is very clear.
It is between the intimidation and intoxication
and tyranny of a party
that is a totalitarian enterprise,
meaning the communists, or it is me.
That is the choice.
It's a bit kind of, it's a stupid comparison,
but it's a bit Britain in 2019.
You know, there's a sort of a clarity.
You're with me or you're with them.
Decide.
You know, it's the sort of get Brexit done,
which of course we know didn't turn out to be a recipe for certainty.
And requires comparing General Gaulle to Boris Johnson,

which is a really bad...
It was a ridiculous comparison,
but that's what we're for in the rest of this history.
Anyway, he says, the choice is very clear.
It's me or them.
He also says, if there's any more protest
that disrupts the elections,
I will not hesitate to use my emergency powers
in the Constitution under Article 16
to declare a state of emergency and rule as a word by decree.
So there's a real sense of like,
this is the moment of decisiveness.
The general has kind of, you know,
stepped up to fulfill his part in the drama as he did in 1940.
And for his supporters,
this is absolutely the Gaulle they've been itching to see for weeks,
I would say.
I mean, Julian Jackson in his biography says,
it's not just about Gaulle turning the tide single-handedly.
The tide was already beginning to turn
because the protests were great fun.
But there are people that you do want petrol.
And they, you know, the shopkeepers in Paris
who are sick of having their windows smashed in
and actually would just like to get back to business as usual
and all of this stuff.
But the Gaulle speech has an incredible,
it's one of those instances in history of a speech
having a genuine galvanizing effect
because they're expecting, you know,
300,000 people on the streets, on the Champs Elysees.
Historians disagree about how many there were.
But I think many would agree
this is probably the single biggest demonstration.
At that point in Parisian history,
maybe 800,000 people, mainly half a million people.
It's hard to know.
But they're a huge crowd.
They're Nixon's silent majority, Tom.
And are they generally older?
They're not all older.
There are young people there.
Because don't forget, there are a lot of...
I mean, do you know what?

My French teacher at school, Rene Filot,
he was a piennoir.
His family were piennoirs who had come from Algeria.
He was very cool. He wore a polo neck.
Okay, so why is he not on the side of the orager?
I think because he loved...
I tell you who he loved, he used to say Chirac Simonum.
You know, Chirac is my man, kind of.
He loved Chirac.
He despised the radicals of 68.
And I think there are an awful lot of people like that.
There are a lot of conservative students.
So people are listening on their little radios
as de Gaulle is speaking.
They've gathered in the Place de la Concorde.
And they are absolutely...
I mean, people describe it as electrifying.
You know, they are...
Cross of Lorraine, all that kind of thing.
The hero of France's past has re-emerged.
And of course, the other thing,
they marched down the Champs Elysees.
They filled the Champs Elysees.
Just a few steps from where we are now.
And the point about that is, again, it's the liberation.
That's the street down which de Gaulle marched in 1940.
And the crowds...
So actually, I mean, the weird thing is, you accused...
Well, accused.
I mean, you described the students as, in a way,
playing a part in a drama.
And in a sense, de Gaulle is reprising a drama
in which he was the star,
kind of retracing his steps.
Isn't that what politicians do there, Tom?
You know yourself from your books on Rome.
Of course.
That's what Augustus...
But he's using the set of Triumph's Past.
But it is literal street theatre.
It is. It is exactly.
It is. It's genius.
And actually, it's so often the way with these sort of...
These growing bubbles of kind of revolution and enthusiasm.

It just takes one prick.
And suddenly...
And which prick is it?
I was regretting that metaphor as soon as I embarked upon it.
I knew you'd enjoy that.
The whole mood changes.
I think basically it's a shock for a lot of the students
and for their radicals.
As is so often the way when all these other people
pitch up waving French flags and saying,
hurrah for the president, hurrah for the general.
They're like, where did all these people come from?
You know, they crawled out from under their rocks.
And the other key thing, actually,
which is so always underestimated
in all accounts of revolutions, riots and such.
It's a holiday.
A holiday is coming.
It's going to be the Whitsun holiday weekend.
And lots of people are going to go to the beach
or to their country houses
because it's the beginning of June.
And actually, what happens?
My extremely mean-spirited thought
is that a lot of people here from their parents
that they're going to the holiday home,
they're like, oh, right.
Wow, that case.
We'll put the revolution on hold.
We'll put the revolution, exactly.
And then when they come back,
so there's one more night at the barricades
in the 10th and then at the June,
but that's really a bit of a last spasm, I would say.
The Sorbonne is cleared by the 13th of June.
The next day, a lot of students are locked up
by the Odeon Theatre and they had said,
this is going to be a kind of national assembly type thing.
The police clear that as well.
And so what happens in the election?
When is that held?
Well, so the election, De Gaulle frames it brilliantly.
He says, it's me or the communists.
And the communists, ironically,

who had not been keen on the whole thing.
He says, that is the choice.
The forces of order against communism.
And what about Mitteroi, Mendes France,
who had both kind of tried to put themselves at the head?
They both lose their seats, ironically.
So it's the biggest, at that point,
the biggest legislative landslide in French history.
So in the first round, 486 seats.
De Gaulle's party went 353.
The communists went 34 and the socialists went 57.
So for the left, it is an absolute disaster
and actually anticipates what's going to happen in America.
Where Nixon wins the presidential election.
So 1968 is the year the Beatles released Revolution.
And famously, they record two versions of it.
The first of which, you know,
count me in for a revolution.
And then they do one, count me out.
And in a sense, they are speaking for France.
So first of all, count me in.
And then suddenly they change their mind
and think, count me out.
Well, the funny thing is people did opinion polls
and they found that 20% of the French public
said they'd like a revolution.
I think that's true of all moments in French history.
That the fifth of the French public would like a revolution.
About the same proportion would have said,
you know, I'd take to the streets to oppose it.
And the rest, like, you know, don't care, would stay out.
And these are the Sandbrook masses.
The subjects of your books.
Yeah, they're thinking about the sound of music.
Yeah, it's a very complex.
Whatever the French equivalent of Bernie Inns are.
Yeah.
Absolutely.
So from a purely political perspective,
I would say, and it won't surprise you
or anybody else to hear me say this,
that to my mind, the event more of May 1968 are cul-de-sac.
There are failure.
The result is, I mean, De Gaulle does step down a year later,

but he's tired.
He was probably going to do that anyway.
I don't think that's...
And friend of the show, George Pompidou, who takes over.
Yeah.
But I mean, after that, what happens?
It's not like the left are kind of, you know,
waiting in the wings.
So Mitterrand does become president in the 1980s,
but even Mitterrand, I would argue,
ultimately turns out to be a much more conservative figure
than many people anticipated.
By and large, I would say politically,
what happens with France is that sort of English
or rather British left of centre people tend to idealise France.
And to imagine that it's this kind of social democratic paradise.
But actually, I would say France is in many ways
a remarkably conservative country.
I mean, just to give the example of the CRS.
The CRS is still out there bashing people over the head
at the slightest sign of protest.
Yes, but you could advance an argument
that the impact of May 68
is actually, I mean, it may sound a bizarre argument to make,
but most radically felt in the English-speaking world.
Yeah.
I knew you'd made this argument,
which is why I went hard on the alternative.
So we talked about Foucault in the first part.
He's been away, but he does come back.
So I think you do have a sense in the wake of 68
that a lot of the kind of the celebrated French philosophers,
Derrida and Lacan and Julia Kristeva,
but most famously Foucault,
kind of trying to wonder why did it go wrong?
Why did nothing happen?
And Foucault gets very interested in kind of prisons,
the state apparatus for repression, surveillance.
So the famous image that he comes up with
in his book, Discipline and Punish,
as it's translated into English,
comes out in 1975, is this idea,
it's actually English.
So Jeremy Bentham, the panopticon,

the idea that the state is always watching you.
So a prison where you are always being surveyed.
And he advances the theory that the state
constructs these apparatuses
to generate what he calls docile bodies.
So in other words, everything that within a state
is structured to gelled and pacify the revolutionary spirit.
And you might think that this is exactly
the kind of thing that the French would go for,
but I think you're right that by and large,
Foucault is regarded as a bit of a charlatan in France.
That actually it's in British university.
No, it's in America, really.
It's in America.
Because in America, as I don't need to tell you in the 70s,
intellectuals likewise, particularly on the left,
are wondering, well, what the hell happened?
How have we ended up with Nixon?
How have we ended up with Ford?
That's very cruel to Gerald Ford.
And so they apply this kind of insight
to what they see as the apparatus of repression.
And I mean, America is jailing a lot of people
and they're often black.
And so that then feeds into theories
about intersectionality and so on,
the obsessions with power and oppression
which we see all the time.
Which then had a kind of huge impact in 2020
with the Black Lives Matter protests,
which in a way has a kind of 68 feel, I think.
Well, there's an argument, isn't there,
that the spirit of 68 became institutionalized
because basically the Maimartists and PoloNex
ended up running cultural institutions.
But they're all bourgeois.
Yeah.
Yeah, they are, of course they are.
I mean, that's the sort of the standard story
is of the 68er who just ends up selling out
and becoming a university bureaucrat or something.
And I think all of those people,
I mean, effectively they did end up
with the levers of cultural power

from the 1980s.
But I think in the United States or in Britain,
the idea of things like institutional racism,
the idea that there are structures
that are inherently repressive,
I think you could trace the origins of that philosophy
back to Foucault and back to the way
that Foucault is trying to make sense of 68.
Maybe I'm overreacting it.
So I think the claims that were made
for the influence in 1968 are,
well, they lost on the streets, as it were.
They lost in the legislative elections,
but they won in the long run.
They won the battle for culture
that are in the United States.
Are we talking about France here or...?
France and the West, and the West generally, I would say.
But I think all of those changes,
and in fact, even those arguments
about power and oppression and so on,
I think they would have happened
even if the students at Nantes
had been able to visit the other people's halls of residence.
I don't think it took the street protests
and then the moment of excitement to...
I think it's slightly false self-congratulation.
Well, I know you love to diss this philosophy.
I think you can see that there is
a kind of intellectual influence there.
And I think also what's interesting is
that it does also influence conservatism,
because famously, a British student in May 1968
who looks out of the window at the students ripping up
the cobblestones is Roger Scruton.
Yes, yes.
Who becomes...
I mean, he's probably not an influential figure in Britain,
but he's a massively influential figure
for conservatives in Europe.
I mean, he's a huge influence on Victor Orban
on George Malini.
Particularly in Eastern Europe, isn't he?
I mean, yeah, because what did he say?

Middle-class hooligans.
What I saw was an unruly mob of middle-class hooligans.
When I asked my friends what they wanted,
all I got back was ludicrous Marxist gobbledygook.
So that's from his essay, Why I Became a Conservative.
And what Roger Scruton does in that essay
is he contrasts it with Prague,
about going the experience of going to the Czechoslovakia.
Because that's going on at the same time, isn't it?
So to my mind, actually, for people in Britain in particular,
where there is no real 1968,
the events of May 1968 in Paris seem so exciting,
intoxicating, you know, indelibly French.
A sign of all the things that are fun and romantic
and glamorous about France,
whereas we in Britain are, you know,
driving to and from Milton Keynes or whatever.
But actually, in the grand scheme of things,
they are eclipsed massively by what happened in Prague,
which is very, very devastating for the moral claims
of the Soviet Union and the Autopact
and probably communism generally.
Yeah, so the Mexico Olympics,
there was a terrible massacre in Mexico City,
which is kind of eclipsed in the popular imagination.
Dozens, I think maybe even hundreds of people are massacred.
And again, one of these events of this extraordinary year,
or indeed in America, Tom.
So Martin Luther King is assassinated.
I think we talked about this already.
I think something like 43 people die in the riots
that follow in the police versus rioters in American cities.
Again, by those standards,
do the events of May 1968 in Paris,
exciting and dramatic and spectacular as they are,
do they really?
As we discussed in our episode with Christopher Clark
on the revolutions of 1848, it's because it's Paris.
It's because Paris is the home of revolution.
It is.
The French Revolution is the primal example of this.
And so whatever happens in Paris reverberates
across the world.
But is this not the last time that ever happened,

don't you think?

It seems so.

I mean, France has really swung to the right, I agree.

Because don't you think that I said in the first episode,

I think that this was the most exciting moment

in kind of post-war French history.

But actually it's the only moment in French history

that most people outside France in modern French history
have ever heard of.

Because what's happened since then?

The Mitterrand presidency, the Sheridan presidency,

Sarkozy, Hollande, Macron.

I don't think anybody outside France could name

a single event that happened in any of those presidencies.

Because actually, I mean, obviously there have been riots
since 1968.

So there was some very, very serious urban rioting in 2005.

That's right, I remember.

Then I think 2012 again.

But they were largely children of immigrants

out on the Bonn-Lew, the periphery.

And there were kind of swastvawitar

who were trying to speak the language of 68
when they analyzed this.

But actually it meant nothing to the people
who were rioting in 2005.

I mean, the language of the revolution

and of swastvawit meant nothing to them.

And actually maybe, Tom, you could say here we are in 2023.

We're probably the last generation

that could make this podcast on their subjects

and think it's a really big, interesting subject.

Because don't you think in generations to come,

these events will dwindle compared with 1848

with the Paris Comm Union?

I think, I mean, 1968 as a year still has a kind of glamour.

I think it's the Che Guevara, Martin Luther King.

Yeah, Robert Kennedy, exactly.

And the music as well.

So the music of 1968, I think, provides a soundtrack to it.

And Richard Nixon, Tom, let's not forget.

I always like to remind people that the big winner of 1968
is Richard Nixon.

That's how I like to do.

That's what makes me so popular at dinner parties.
Right, so we will return to 1968, I think, next year
because we're going to, for the American presidential election,
I have all kinds of great notions at my sleeve
about American presidential elections.
And 1968 is the chronicle one.
But also I think we will return to France,
the subject of France in due course,
because we have to finish the French off in the Hundred Years War.
We do.
And we've talked a lot about the French Revolution.
Yeah.
And we're aware that we've done two episodes
on the events of 1968.
We've done one episode on the whole of the French Revolution.
So we must maybe come back to Paris.
We have loads of French history.
And if we do come back to Paris,
then we will know what card and what app to bring.
Remind me, Tom, I've forgotten.
So we've been using WISE.
And WISE brilliantly have created a travel guide to Paris
that includes lots of the locations
that we've talked about in today's episode.
I mean, certainly talks about the Champs-Élysées,
where we're not far from that now where we're sitting.
And so to learn more about how you can travel
like Dominic Sambrook, a great historian,
and yet to spend like a Parisian,
you can visit WISE.com
slash Restis History or click the link in today's episode.
And on that note, Tom,
I'm going to go off down the Champs-Élysées right now
to buy a souvenir.
Do you know what I'm going to buy?
I'm going to buy a little Eiffel Tower.
Are you?
Yeah.
You're not going to buy a chunk of cobblestones?
No.
Chuck it as a...
No.
Right, please.
OK, I might actually buy a little,

see if they've got a general de Gaulle effigy or something like that.
Of course you are.
On that bombshell, we say,
Merci et au revoir.
Au revoir.