

Interview

Bruno Barbey's best photograph: the Paris protests of 1968

By Interview by [Karin Andreasson](#)

'I went with Cartier-Bresson to buy helmets to protect our heads from stones. But they made it impossible to use our Leicas'

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Workers and students demonstrate in Paris's 11th arrondissement on 13 May 1968. Photograph: Bruno Barbey/Magnum Photos

There were riots all over the world in 1968, mainly protesting against the Vietnam war. In France it was different – there was a desire to change society. It started with students in Paris but quickly spread to workers across the country. At one point over 10 million were striking and the entire country was paralysed.

Paris 1968 was a major event for my generation, so it was something I felt I had to document. I was 25 at the time and close to the student movement politically. I wasn't militant but I sympathised with them, especially when I saw how brutal the French police could be. I once saw policemen beat a pregnant woman on the ground.

I wasn't the only photographer recording the revolution. At one point I went with Marc Riboud and Henri Cartier-Bresson to buy helmets to protect our heads from all the stones being thrown. We quickly realised that they made it

impossible to use our Leicas properly, so we threw them away. In the beginning we could work quite freely, but then Paris Match magazine published photographs that showed police violence against protesters and this led police to chase photographers and take their cameras. There were cases when photographs of students throwing stones were used by the police to identify and arrest them. So the students also started to be nervous around us. I made sure that any recognisable faces in my photos had black marker over them.

This picture was taken on a boulevard leading from Avenue de la République to the Bastille about two weeks into the strikes. The streets were packed with people, as far as the eye could see. You can see from all the banners that this crowd wasn't just students. In the distance stands the famous Colonne de Juillet, a symbol of liberty after the French Revolution. The guy on the traffic light is raising his hand with a closed fist – a communist gesture. I had climbed on to another traffic light to get the picture. It wasn't easy to balance because I had a long lens and I had to focus with one hand at the same time as holding on to the traffic light.

My pictures from Paris were published all over the world. I was with the Magnum photo agency and it was quite a procedure getting our photographs out of the country. We had an old BMW motorbike and every other day a messenger rode it with our best images to Brussels to catch the air freight to our agents in Europe and New York.

French television was nationalised at the time and they were on strike too, so no news of the revolution was being broadcast. I got together with some friends including the great film-makers Chris Marker and Jean-Luc Godard to make short films. In all, about 30 of these were made and sent out to striking factories and big cities like Marseille and Bordeaux, so the whole country could see what was going on in Paris.

At the beginning I was surprised to see people of all social classes speaking to each other. Out on the streets a concierge would be marching with a company director and speaking to students. There was an incredible desire for communication and dialogue across the generations. In the beginning it was a kind of like a big festival, but it was strange that it happened at all. The economy in France and the rest of Europe was doing very well at the time. There was no joblessness; in fact the economy was growing. The youth at the time were well off compared with the youth of today. Nevertheless there was a desire for change, but this was a bit of luxury especially when you compare it with what happened soon after in Prague.

Bruno Barbey's CV

Born: Morocco, 1941

Studied: École des Arts et Métiers in Vevey, Switzerland

Influences: Robert Frank and Henri Cartier-Bresson

High point: "Shifting from black and white to colour photography in 1966 and the emergence of the digital world."

Low point: "The drop in archive sales because most agencies have collapsed or disappeared."

Top tip: "I always discourage people from being full-time photographers if they have other ways of making money. If you really want to do personal work you may be better off doing it as a hobby."