

1968

Discover the events of 1968, one of the most turbulent years in a turbulent century

The Vietnam War

The epicentre of the cultural, political and social earthquake of 1968 was the war in Vietnam. The war was increasingly unpopular in America because no clear reason for involvement had emerged and, by early 1968, some 500 American soldiers were being killed in the worst weeks of the conflict. Taking advantage of the Chinese Lunar New Year (the festival of Tet), North Vietnam launched an assault. Dramatic scenes of the American embassy in Saigon being invaded gave the lie to official statements that the US was nearing victory.

The black civil rights movement also grew in strength in the atmosphere of political instability and innovation but the devastating assassination of the charismatic black leader, Martin Luther King, followed by that of the great hope of the Democrat Party centre-left, Bobby Kennedy, brought the prestige of America's self-proclaimed democracy and freedom to one of its lowest ever levels.

Worldwide turmoil

In China, the ongoing Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution had set the country on a renewed radical path. In Africa, anti-colonial movements and wars continued to shake the grip of the old imperial powers of Britain, France and Belgium and threatened white supremacist rule in South Africa.

In Europe, criticism of the barbaric spectacle of the Vietnam War — brought into every home by unprecedented TV coverage — spread to Germany, Italy, France and Britain. Student movements went beyond criticising the war and aimed at new forms of society beyond corporate capitalism. In May 1968, French students occupied many prestigious universities and set up barricades in central Paris. Workers from the Renault factory just outside the city also joined in, but labour unions and established left-wing political parties opposed the disorders. Even communist-dominated Eastern Europe was shaken. In Prague, reform communists came to power in February but, after much hesitation, the USSR and allies sent tanks in to crush the reforms and restore party orthodoxy. In Northern Ireland, 'The Troubles' began after civil rights groups organised peaceful marches modelled on their American counterparts.

Consequences

The explosion of radicalism and revolution by and large exhausted itself and was apparently defeated. In France, for example, president de Gaulle ordered parliamentary elections and, in 1969, a presidential election, in which he and other right-wing conservatives won an overwhelming victory. However, seeds had been sown. Efforts to end the Vietnam War were eventually stepped up, leading to US withdrawal in March 1973.

Though the Prague Spring was repressed, a small group of Soviet communists had been inspired by it and, under the leadership of one of them, Mikhail Gorbachev, had, by 1986, begun a reform process (*perestroika*) in the Soviet Union itself, which resulted in the ending of all the communist systems in Europe by 1991. Culturally, the 'sixties' continued, and many of the issues of the time — black civil rights in the USA, feminism, environmentalism, anticolonialism — became mainstream and continue to influence the world today, from Black Lives Matter to climate change and postcolonial struggles like the Russia-Ukraine War and many others.

5 January

Alexander Dubček elected first secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, initiating the Prague Spring of reform communism.

16 March

US ground forces massacre more than 500 Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai. The event was covered up for a year.

5 April

Martin Luther King Jr., a leading activist for civil rights, assassinated in Memphis.

5 June

Leading Democrat presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy assassinated in Los Angeles.

23 and 30 June

French parliamentary elections, called by French president de Gaulle, result in a massive victory for the conservative right.

2 October

Troops open fire on unarmed protest by students and others in Mexico City prior to Olympics. 350–500 protestors die. Olympic Games go ahead regardless.

16 October

US athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos make the Black Power salute from the Olympic victory podium.

5 November

Richard Nixon (Republican) elected US president by a very narrow vote margin, but a wide victory in the Electoral College.

Jan

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Dec

30–31 January

North Vietnam launches Tet (Lunar New Year) offensive.

31 March

US president Lyndon Johnson withdraws from the presidential election race because of the unpopularity of the Vietnam War.

6 May

Student protests against the Vietnam War and corporate capitalism peak in Paris. Workers began to strike in support.

20–21 August

Soviet and allied forces begin suppression of Prague Spring, ending the experiment of 'socialism with a human face.'

5 October

Derry March for civil rights in Northern Ireland suppressed violently by Royal Ulster Constabulary. The 'Troubles' escalated from this point.

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