



Police subdue rioter: did fringe groups provoke the trouble?

JACQUES BOISSINOT/ANAPRESS

CANADA

Violence erupts in the heart of a charmed city

As in past years, an estimated 30,000 young French-speaking Quebecers gathered on the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City last week for a boisterous open-air party to usher in the St-Jean-Baptiste Day holiday. When the free concert and traditional *feu de joie* ended around 12:30 a.m. on June 24, as many as 2,000 people, many of them draped in Quebec flags and chanting nationalist slogans, converged on Place d'Youville, a public square less than a kilometre away in the city's historical district. Within minutes of their arrival, fights broke out, rocks were thrown and 240 municipal police officers in riot gear moved in, firing tear gas and employing a newly acquired water cannon to disperse the crowd. What followed was a four-hour riot that resulted in 81 arrests, widespread looting, two fires, and more than \$1 million in damages to local shops and the Quebec national assembly. "These were deplorable and degrading events," a haggard-looking Mayor Jean-Paul L'Allier told reporters a few hours after the rioting had ended. "The population does not want these things repeated."

In the days that followed, public debate centred on what had sparked such an ugly confrontation in a normally tranquil city that is a magnet for tourists from across

the globe. Both L'Allier and Quebec City police Chief Normand Bergeron blamed a mix of alcohol, drugs and visiting troublemakers—the latter a pointed reference to the fact that more than a third of the 81 people arrested came from outside the Quebec City region. More ominous, Bergeron alleged that the attack on the national assembly was proof that "professional agitators" had led the rioters. Police later confirmed they were conducting investigations into two fringe groups who may have played a role in the violence. The first is the Northern Hammer Skins—a loosely knit, North American-wide coalition of right-wing extremists that is believed to be associated with the neo-Nazi Heritage Front. The second is an anarchist group that produces a bilingual, underground newspaper called *Démanarchie*, or "walk towards anarchy." According to Peter Vorias, secretary of the Montreal-based World Anti-Fascist League, an organization that monitors extremist groups, the anarchists basically publish "hate propaganda against government and police that glorifies rioting and justifies violence."

Quebec City looks for clues to the St-Jean-Baptiste riot

Repères, an education centre for the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS among substance abusers and street people, many of whom frequent Place d'Youville. "Many of the kids who were involved have no job, no faith in the system and no hope for the future. If they attacked the assembly, it's because they're frustrated and their voices are not being heard. The violence was like an abscess that broke open. Unfortunately, everyone is examining the pus on the floor rather than the virus that caused the infection."

Others took a more sanguine view. "An event like this only confirms everything that everyone thinks about everyone else," said Bernard Arcand, an author and anthropologist at Laval University. "The incident was really just an accident, like a fire: all the elements were in place and it just took a spark to get it going." Perhaps. But it is chain of events that Quebec City residents, who take great pride in their community's beauty and historical charm, would dearly like to avoid revisiting.

MARK CARDWELL in Quebec City