FRENCH UNIVERSITIES

Quiet on the Boulevards

from our Paris Correspondent

THE Latin Quarter has seemed empty for a couple of months. The revolutionary posters have gradually disappeared from the walls and the few attempts at demonstrations (which used to be a regular thing on Saturday evenings) have easily been thwarted by the police. In the past few days, however, the streets adjoining the Boulevard Saint-Michel and the Boulevard Saint-Germain have again seen their usual activity. Will they also see again the upheavals of last spring? In the immediate future this seems unlikely.

The Government has taken a number of precautions to avoid a return to disorder and it has made no secret of them. Not only has it covered with road surfacing the cobblestones everywhere on the Left Bank which easily become missiles, but it has also put at the ready a police contingent unprecedented in the history of relations between the universities and the state—and there has often been violence since the Middle Ages. Thus there has appeared a kind of policeman missing so far from the colourful tradition of services controlled by the Ministry of the Interior. This is the beatnik policeman or hippy—bearded, long-haired, dressed in jeans and roll-neck sweater—who often at the start of a demonstration is something of a cheer leader and at the end takes part in arresting the “leaders”. Various extreme Leftist movements have already been broken up and their leaders arrested (though generally released through lack of evidence after a few days’ or weeks’ detention).

The French Government, however, knows that purely repressive measures would not be sufficient to ensure a peaceful start to the term, and there is general agreement over the competence of M. Edgar Faure who succeeded M. Alain Peyrefitte (after a short period of M. Ortolé) as Minister for Education. M. Faure, a class negotiator and a university man himself—he was a law lecturer at Dijon and has had numerous contacts with all interested parties, both lecturers and their students, including the most “enragés”—has put into practice all those things in the May movement’s programme that could be conceded by a non-revolutionary state. Thus he has conceded the participation of students in the running of universities (not enough for extremists but nevertheless very liberal); the breaking-down of France’s traditional centralization; the continuing reform of an examination system that everyone knows is deficient; and, above all, the abandonment of the rigid methods of selection which used to eliminate a large number of young people from higher education without offering them alternative openings appropriate to their capabilities. Furthermore, M. Faure has clearly stated that politics have a place in university life. Obviously this does not mean that he will give his blessing to hanging up black flags or pictures of Chairman Mao in the lecture halls, but it does mean a clean break with the idea of a “neutral” and aseptic university.

The minister’s good intentions have already been translated into deeds. New posts have been created to alleviate the financial hardship of lecturers. New building has been accelerated, and certain courses have been reorganized in such a way as gradually to under-

mine the feudal nature of professorial chairs and to favour interdisciplinary approaches. Although much remains to be done, most of those in the revolt last May seem now to be resigned to deriving satisfaction from these initial measures. And though here and there (for example, at the Faculty of Medicine in Paris) there are pockets of resistance, the beginning of the university term will be calmer than expected. Most students have agreed to sit the examinations they could not take on the normal dates in June.

The unions and related organizations, whose attitudes are harder, are forced in their strategy to bear in mind two new factors. First, the economic situation, which is better than anyone expected, does not suggest that any major social upheaval is forthcoming. If university people made a move, they would doubtless not find the workers at their side and they would therefore be in a situation of complete political isolation, confronted by well-organized repressive measures from the police. On the other hand, “apolitical” organizations, visibly inspired or supported by the Government, have grown up rapidly in the past three months and have absorbed a huge number of hesitant or moderate students. In the event of conflict, their followers would not therefore be so easily attracted by the spirit of the insurrection as they were last spring.

The relative calm which seems to be taking over is, however, superficial and could be violently disrupted. In the first place, the threat of an economic crisis is far from being eliminated. Second, the reform plans of M. Edgar Faure could come unstuck. Most of the Gaullist party relies on an electorate which is too far to the right to approve of the new Minister’s programme which therefore often comes under violent attacks from people who ought to support it. Despite the support of General de Gaulle (reaffirmed by the latter’s press conference on September 9), M. Faure’s plans are threatened by sabotage.

On the research side, the problems will be less spectacular but will arise more rapidly. No doubt there will be some short term advantage to be gained from the participation of research workers in decision making, whether at the laboratory or national level. Then, because urgent professional matters are preoccupying people (it is necessary to make up for time lost in work during May and June and aggravated by holidays), a fairly calm end of the year is expected. Beyond that, however, the future looks rather gloomy. In order to finance the programmes agreed to in education and the large salary increases given to all civil servants, the Government will have to make some rather depressing cuts in other areas of the budget. We already know that civil research in 1969 will be a poor relation. Investment grants will be substantially cut. The slight increase for government departmental spending will be absorbed mostly by the salary increases already agreed to. There are in the budget plans no new posts to be created at the National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS), nor at the National Institute for Health and Medical Research (INSERM).

It is not therefore surprising that one begins now to hear the gnashing of teeth. The SNCS, the largest union of research workers, has just voiced a protest against the budget proposals and asked its members to be “watchful”. Only a few reprisals against workers who played a leading part in May could make the situation very dangerous indeed.