Understanding the Paris Commune On its 150th Anniversary

written by Dan La Botz | August 4, 2021

The Women of Paris on the barricades at Place Blance defend the Commune.

Introduction

The Paris Commune of 1871 only lasted from March 18 to May 28, just 72 days, yet it is one of the most celebrated events in socialist history. It is a legend. Yet, what was it? What is it for us today? A model for socialists? A heroic failure? Negation of the state? Or the first workers' government? Karl Marx wrote the most famous contemporary account, yet he failed to take up some of the Commune's serious problems. Why?

In Part I of this essay, below, I look at the events of the Commune as they developed, relying largely on the work of Jacques Rougerie, whom we might call a representative of the school of "history from below," and of Carolyn J. Eichner, a historian of women in the Commune. (Where quotations have no footnote, they come from Rougerie's books.) In Part II, which can be read online here or in print in the summer 2021 issue of *New Politics*, I look critically at Marx's interpretation of the Commune to examine issues he declined to take up and the reason he neglected some important issues.

Part I – The Commune as it Was

The Emperor and the War

War and a humiliating French defeat created the crisis that brought about the Paris Commune. On September 1, 1870 at the Battle of Sedan the French Emperor Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon III), his government, and the French nation suffered a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. The commander-in-chief, Bonaparte, was himself captured together with several of his generals. It was the end of his reign that had lasted for over twenty years, first as president beginning in 1848 then, after a coup in 1852, as emperor.[1] The Second Empire's Constitution of that year gave him all power, though he permitted and dominated an elected parliament. During his dictatorial rule French industry modernized and the urban population grew, while the country fought wars with Russia and Austria as well as extending the empire to Mexico and Indochina.

Allied with the bourgeoisie and the Catholic Church, Louis Napoleon stifled political life and limited democratic rights, outlawing meetings and suppressing newspapers. Still, he remained popular with both the very rich and the peasants. In 1868 the liberal and conservative factions of his Bonapartist Party won 78 percent of the vote and the Monarchists[2] another 15 percent, while the Republican Party headed by Léon Gambetta, an outspoken critic and opponent of the emperor and a genuine democrat won only 10 percent. When in May of 1870 Louis Napoleon put forward a plebiscite on proposed reforms, seven out of eight voted for them. It was the two-thirds of the French people who were farmers who voted overwhelmingly for Bonaparte's parties and his plebiscites, but Parisians of all social classes generally voted for the Republicans.

At the outbreak of the war with Prussia, patriotic, chauvinistic fervor swept the country and all of France seemed to be with the Emperor—except for a few leftist union activists of the International Workingmen's Association (the First International) who demonstrated against the coming war in July 1870. The war was short, just six months, the Prussians won virtually every battle, and with their victory and capture of Louis Napoleon, the empire collapsed. In Paris amidst boisterous demonstrations a group of moderate Republican politicians proclaimed France to be a Republic while the Parisian parliamentary deputies led by Jules Ferry declared the formation of a Government of National Defense. They chose to head the government General Louis Jules Trochu, a conservative Catholic, who became governor of Paris and commander-in chief of the military and the guard.

It was a new day in France: The Empire dispatched. The Republic declared. Yet the country was still at war and the Prussian army, its path paved with victories, was marching toward Paris. Eugène Varlin, the outstanding leader of the First International in Paris, declared:

> By all possible means, we will participate in the national defense, which is the most important thing at the moment. After the proclamation of the Republic, the horrendous war has taken on a new meaning; it is now a duel to the death between feudal monarchy and republican democracy…. Our revolution has not yet been carried out and we will do so, once freed from the invasion, and we will in a revolutionary way lay the foundations for the egalitarian society that we desire.

The emergence of the Commune as government of Paris would, however, be a slow and complicated process, with hesitation, missteps, and confusion as people tried to find their way forward.

Paris on the Eve of the Commune

Paris was a city of working people par excellence. In France as a whole, the population was 38 million while only 3.5 million were workers, but in Paris, a city of almost two million people, some 70 percent were wage-earners. The Parisian working class was not the industrial working class of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century that might come to mind. The working people of Paris were a diverse collection of artisans, workers, commercial employees, and the self-employed, largely small business owners with no employees. In 1866 some 57 percent of Parisians worked in industry and12 percent in commerce, but overwhelmingly they labored in small shops, less than ten percent of which had over ten employees. Businesses with 100 or 200 workers were very few, and only the railroad had more than 1,000. Still in 1866 there were 455,400 workers, male and female. 120,600 employees (such as clerks), and 100,000 domestic workers. Paris had 26,633 garment workers, most of whom were women. Almost 12,000 workers produced luxury goods and there were also almost 5,000 metal workers and just over 5,000 wood and furniture workers. But there were over 50,000 commercial workers. Then too there were 120,000 owners of shops and ateliers, but many had no employees and incomes and standards of living not much different than workers and artisans. There

were also many precarious workers who didn't have steady jobs. Below these groups, the numerous poor, the wretched, *les misérables*.

In 1853 Louis Napoleon Bonaparte had made George-Eugène Haussmann the prefect of Paris and charged him with rebuilding the city. Under his administration hundreds of buildings were torn down to make way for new avenues and boulevards, displacing 350,000 people. Real estate speculation and gentrification became serious problems, leading to limited housing and rising rents driving workers to the areas just outside the old city on its north, south, and east. While workers' wages and standard of living had risen since the Revolution of 1848, still many were poor; and gentrification created economic segregation as working people were driven out of the center of Paris. Historian Jacques Rougerie refers to the "pathologies" of the "red belt" around Paris at that time, among them the overcrowded conditions, higher levels of illness and mortality, and an epidemic of tuberculosis that took 10,691 lives in 1870.[3]

Facing increasing opposition to his government, in 1864-1866 Louis Napoleon permitted labor unions to organize and to strike and permitted some meetings and publications. Largely led by the First International, workers organized and there was hardly a trade in Paris that didn't have a union. For example, 6,000 of 12,000 bronze workers were organized, 12,000 of 30,000 mechanics, 1,000 of 1,500 iron workers, and 2,500 out of 3,500 typographers. During the late 1860s the International led waves of strikes and while some were victorious, many failed. As Varlin said, French workers had entered, "the epoch of resistance." So, by 1870 there was a working-class movement with tens of thousands of adherents throughout France and thousands in Paris, many affiliated with the First International, on whose leading council sat Karl Marx.

In fact, there were several left-wing groups active in Paris at the time. Most considered themselves to be Republicans, nearly all called for a decentralized federal government, while the radicals also advocated a democratic and social Republic, which many believed could come about through a peaceful revolution.[4] The left was to look to the two democratic Republics of the time, Switzerland and the United States, where slavery had recently been defeated, as models. The Jacobins were those on the Republican left who looked back to the French Revolution of 1789 for inspiration and saw their job as finishing it. The Proudhonians, whose socialist ideal was based on the artisanal atelier, and though Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had died in 1865, they were influential. During the strikes of the 1860s in France, the Proudhonians had largely allied with the Internationalists[5] in practice, though they maintained some of their old positions, such as opposition to women entering the workforce. There also still existed the pervasive influence of the old "communists" of the 1840s, utopian socialists each with an elaborate plan for the establishment of the perfect communist society.[6] The Internationalists, whose leaders were socialists, often took the initiative and played a leading role in organizing a mass, democratic movement. Marx, a member of the First International council, and Engels, who also later became a member of its council, were kept informed of developments by Internationalists in Paris during the Commune. Marx and Engles offered them information and advice, though they did not and could not have controlled developments.[7]

The Blanquists, a small group of followers of Louis Auguste Blanqui, known as "the old man,"[8] advocated the formation of a conspiratorial group to carry out armed actions.[9] Though Blanqui himself was in prison during the Commune, his followers played an active and sometimes leading role. The Russian revolutionary and a leader of the anarchist movement, Mikhail Bakunin, also showed up in France in 1871 and participated in unsuccessful uprisings in Lyon and Besançon. His ideas were influential and his followers active in Paris.[10] Finally, there was also Giuseppe Garibaldi, the "Hero of Two Worlds," the international fighter in Europe and Latin America for national self-determination and republican government, with his followers, the red shirts.

Women, socialist feminists *avant la lettre,*[11] could be found within some of these groups, such as the Internationalist Elizabeth Dmitrieff and the anarchist Louise Michel. All of these groups agreed on their opposition to Louis Napoleon and rejected any return to the old French monarchy by its various pretenders. Nearly all, based on the theories of the Jacobins and the Proudhonians and in reaction to the Bonapartist dictatorship, aimed to decentralize France and create a federation of communes. With the proclamation of the Republic, they all began to work to defend Paris and to reorganize the city and the country on a more democratic and socially progressive basis.

The People Organize the Defense of Paris

Working class and petty-bourgeois Parisians felt that the Emperor had dispossessed them, which is why the call for a Republic was first interpreted as the opportunity for working people to take back their city. Within hours of the proclamation of the Republic, the Internationalists showed up at City Hall with a list of demands including elections of a departmental government, abolition of the prefect of police, organization of a new municipal police, complete freedom of association, speech, and the press, the freeing of all political prisoners, and a draft of the able bodied to defend the country. They also published an address to the German people saying that they would defend their France from invasion and occupation, but that they looked forward to peace, liberty, equality, and fraternity in a future United States of Europe.

On September 5 the Internationalists called a meeting of Republicans to organize the defense of Paris. The 500 people who attended decided to organize "vigilance committees" in the Twenty Districts (*Arrondissements*) of Paris, headed by a Central Committee. Between September 5 and 10 they organized local committees and on September 11 the first meeting of the Central Committee. It in turn created several commissions: police, the schools, supply food to the population, defense, labor, and so on. Then on September 14 and 15, the Central Committee put up throughout Paris what is called "the first red poster," reiterating a call for democratic elections and suppression of the police, but principally—with the Prussians bearing down on Paris—calling for a mass levy to defend the city, including women and children. It called for commandeering whatever materials were necessary for the defense of the city, the owners to be paid later. Still, the Central Committee at this point saw itself as an auxiliary to the new national repubican government.

A week or so later, things had changed. The Central Committee meeting on September 20 voted unanimously to adopt the term "Commune" when referring to Paris, a term hundreds of years old that was associated with a rebellion in the fourteenth century and with the French Revolution of the 1790s. The Commune was defined as "a direct government by the citizens themselves," sovereign and autonomous, promising to provide for all citizens and their families and to organize the defense of Paris and the country. It was suggested that Paris was the leader of the French nation and even the defender of a European revolution! These notions of the Commune as a revitalized, democratic municipal government and as the center of a national and even international revolution exist side-by-side throughout this period. Yet, these first attempts to adopt the term "Commune" and to constitute a new government with that name fizzled.

Paris Besieged

Meanwhile, by September 19 the Prussians had blockaded Paris and the siege of the city began. The situation became increasingly desperate, yet at the same time the people of Paris exercised a new found freedom. Out of the Vigilance Committees came political clubs of various persuasions, newspapers proliferated, everywhere people held meetings and discussions. One group declared, "The State or the Nation is nothing more than the gathering of the communes of France… We have been a crowd; we shall finally be a city."

Throughout October the Prussians continued to win victories, seized territory and virtually destroyed the French Army. A few sorties by Parisian troops were defeated. Various groups led by the radicals brought crowds to protest at City Hall and even briefly seized it demanding elections and more serious attention to defense. The Government of National Defense retook the building but allowed the radicals to leave unharmed. Yet a plebiscite on November 3 found that 323,373 citizens still supported the Government of National Defense made up of moderate Republicans, while only 53,584 opposed it.

With the coming of winter, Paris remained blockaded, it became "a city of the unemployed." Cold, famine, and an outbreak of cholera doubled the mortality rate. On January 6, 140 members of the Committee of the Twenty Districts of Paris, which the Internationalists had left and which was now dominated by the Blanquists, put up another Red Poster proposing to substitute a government of the Commune for the government that was failing to provide adequate defense. A group of Blanquist and other revolutionaries, including the anarchist feminist Louise Michel, marched to City Hall on January 22, leading to gunfire and six deaths, the first of the revolution.

With the city blockaded, commerce halted, and many shops closed, membership in the National Guard became the economic mainstay for many Parisians. Patriotism and necessity led to a strengthening of the Guard, made up of men from 20 to 40 years of age; a levy *en masse* theoretically brought it up to 300,000 men. Men in the guard were paid 30 sous (about thirty U.S. cents) per day, the cost of three loaves of bread. The Guard did not accept women. The Paris National Guard, however, took the radical measure of paying pensions to the widows and the children of soldiers' *unions libres* (common-law marriages), that is, unmarried women and what had previously been considered their illegitimate children. At the same time, the guard was a pillar of Republicanism and radicalism since most of those in the guard came from the petty-bourgeoisie or the working class and reflected popular attitudes.

Still things got worse. During the month of January, the Prussians fired 12,000 shells into starving Paris, hoping to break the city's will. Parts of the city were reduced to rubble and 400 people were killed or wounded. Seeing no way out, on January 28 the Government of National Defense, now in Bordeaux and representative largely of wealthy rural landowners, signed a temporary armistice with Bismarck that provided that the Prussian Army would not occupy the city. French soldiers would give up their arms but would not be taken prisoner, and the City of Paris would pay reparations of 200 million francs. The National Guard would, however, retain its rifles and cannons in order to preserve order in the city.

The Thiers Government

With that truce established, elections to the French National Assembly were held on February 8, though, with many parts of the country occupied by the Prussian Army and communication with other areas disrupted, not all could vote. The Liberal Union of Adolphe Thiers, who had opposed the war with Prussia, which was made up of Liberals and moderate Republicans won 26 of the country's nominal 89 departments (all or part of five departments had been ceded to the Prussians), while Gambetta's Republicans won in only eight departments. The parliament was dominated by some 360 monarchists, semi-royalists, and Conservatives, and 15 Bonapartists; the success of these rightwing parties was principally due to the conservative, Catholic peasant vote, the rural people who made up two-thirds of the electorate. On the left were 150 Republicans, among them just 40 radical Republicans and a few socialists. In Paris, however, where 290,000 people voted, some 180,000 voted for Republicans, including such famous figures as the writer Victor Hugo; Louis Blanc,the hero of the Revolution of 1848; and Garibaldi, the international freedom fighter. Several Jacobins, Internationalists, as well as various socialists were also elected on the basis of about 40,000 votes.

The victory of Thiers and the conservative forces in the national elections was followed on February 17, 1871 by the humiliation of a Prussian Army victory parade through the streets of Paris. At the same time, honoring the armistice, the Prussians permitted trainloads of food to be brought into the city, while the Prussian Army began to withdraw to the east, though remaining near Paris. Thiers now became head of the new Third Republic and signed a mortifying treaty with Bismarck on February 26, ceding Alsace and Lorraine, agreeing to pay an indemnity of five billion francs, permitting the occupation of 43 French departments, and allowing 30,000 Prussians to occupy the department of the Seine. Victor Hugo called the treaty, "Hideous."

Thiers government also took three actions that would be devastating to the people of Paris. First, it reduced the pay of the National Guard. Second, it ended the de facto moratorium on evictions. And, third, it insisted on the payment of all bills due. The first would take away the income of hundreds of thousands of Parisians, the second would put tens of thousands of Parisians out on the street, and the third would bring bankruptcy to hundreds of small businesses. Shortly afterwards, fearing the reaction of the Parisians, on March 10 the National Assembly voted to move the government to Versailles. Thiers attempted to get the Prussians to occupy Paris for him, but Bismarck declined. Paris seethed. Defeated in war. Humiliated by the peace. Devastated by the new economic measures. And no longer the capital of the national government.

The Thiers government and much of the haute bourgeoisie having fled to Versailles, the people, the petty bourgeoisie and the working class—politically Republican, economically desperate, and emotionally raw—found themselves left to their own devices. What would the people do?

The Emergence of the Commune

Still, Paris had its Republican spirit and its National Guard with their rifles and the city's cannons. From February 24 to 27, while Bismarck and Thiers negotiated, some 100,000 members of the National Guard went to the Column of the People (the July Column) at the Bastille, to mourn the recent dead and to remember the martyrs of the Revolution of 1830, as well as to commemorate the Revolution of 1848 and the declaration that year of the Second Republic. Rougerie makes the interesting observation that at this moment, "All authority in Paris was gradually dissolving." Some new authority would have to come into existence.

In February, a non-commissioned officer named Courty and an officer named Georges Arnold began to organize the members of the National Guard into what was called the Federation, a movement that grew rapidly with the Prussian occupation. At first hesitant because of the mixed class character of the Guard, the leaders of the International were won over to the project and three of its members served on the Central Committee of the Federation, though many of the International's rank-and-file members had already joined. The Committee of the Twenty Districts also affiliated with the Federation.

How did the Federation organize? Each company of the Guard would send to the 500-member general assembly a soldier, an elected officer, and the company commander. Some 67 percent of the delegates elected were workers (some of them small shop owners), 15 percent were employees, and 8 percent were members of the liberal professions. From that group came the central committee made up of the 38 persons, similarly working class in composition but with more artists, writers, journalists. In addition, the central committee also contained 20 representatives of the trade unions, several of them Internationalists. This Federation described itself as "the barrier to any attempt to overturn the Republic, opposing all oppressors and exploiters." There was as yet no mention of the Commune.

Seeing that the city was radicalizing, Thiers himself personally led several thousand French

government troops into Paris to suppress any rebellious movements; one of their objectives was to seize the city's forty cannons. The newly formed Federation of the Guard had placed most of the cannons in parks in working class neighborhoods such as Montmartre and Belleville. When on March 18 the Versailles government troops under General Claude Lecomte arrived at Montmartre to seize the cannons, neighborhood women raised the alarm and joined with the National Guardsmen, refusing to let Thiers troops take the cannons. When Lecomte ordered his troops to shoot, they turned their guns on him and took him prisoner.

In all the working class districts the Federation of the Guard and the general population drove out the French troops. Two rightwing Republican French Army generals, Lecomte and Clément Thomas, who had been involved the suppression of the Revolution of 1848, were summarily executed by the National Guard. As Rougerie writes, all of this was "nothing like an insurrection," yet this was the beginning of the Paris Commune.

The Federation took over City Hall and several government buildings. Throughout Paris, the National Guard and the people fought defensively, the Blanquists beginning to organize offensive actions as well. When Thiers saw that the French troops were fraternizing with the people, he retreated with his soldiers to Versailles. That night the Central Committee of the Federation met in City Hall. The various leading political groups took charge of the new government's commissions: The Internationalists headed finance. The Blanquists took charge of the police. Émile Eudes, an anarchist headed up the ministry of war. The Blanquists proposed launching an immediate attack on Versailles, but the proposal was rejected. The majority was reluctant to start a civil war, especially with the Prussians still at the gates of Paris.

The Federation's Central Committee at City Hall, together with the existing moderate Republican city government—made up of the mayors of the districts of and the city's deputies to the National Assembly—hoping to find a legal resolution immediately sought to reach an agreement with the Thiers government in Versailles. They demanded municipal elections, the election of the officers of the National Guard, and a moratorium on the collection of overdue bills. The National Assembly in Versailles rejected the call for municipal elections. Paris and Versailles could reach no agreement. A couple of days later, rightwing law and order forces in Paris demonstrated at the Place Vendôme, clashing with the National guard and leading to deaths on both sides.

The Central Committee of the Twenty Districts, the Federation, as well as the various political organizations gradually became aware that the legal path that they sought was not possible. They represented a new Republican government in Paris. The real one they would have said. Eude commented, "After March 18, Paris has no other government than that of the People. Paris has become a free city." The Internationalists agreed. In late March, the Central Committee ordered a freeze on the payment of overdue bills, a moratorium on evictions, the freeing of all political prisoners, and the abolition of the standing army. It also sent the National Guard to occupy several forts on the outskirts of Paris.

On March 26, elections were held for the Paris city council; 48% of the 474,569 eligible male citizens participated, women being ineligible to vote. In the rich neighborhoods few voted, while turnout was good in the working class and poor areas, some as high as 70%. The Committee of the Twenty Districts published a manifesto three days before the election that expressed the views of many on the left:

> The Commune is the base of the political State, as the family is the embryo of society. It must be autonomous, govern and administer itself on the basis of its particular character, its traditions, its needs… allowing the national and federal political groups to

> exercise complete freedom, their character, and their complete sovereignty… This is the communal ideal that has existed since the twelfth century, affirmed by morality, law, and science, which will triumph.

People were voting for what many saw as the creation of the Republic of Paris, a democratic and social republic. On March 28 the new Paris government proclaimed the establishment of the Commune before a crowd of 100,000 as people sang “La Marseillaise” and other Republican anthems.

After a second election held on April 16, the Commune government was finally made up of 79 members though no more than 50 or 60 generally attended its sessions. The Blanquists held nine seats; the Internationalists and the unions numbered forty; and the Free Masons[12] twenty. There were also Jacobins, old communists, and Proudhonians. Most were working people: thirty-three were workers (a few of those small shop owners) fourteen were employees, twelve were journalists, and twelve came from the liberal professions.

The Commune’s Work

The Commune met 57 times during its short life, though breaking with France’s own radical traditions, its meetings were held in secret and it did not begin to publish the proceedings until mid-April. Among its first acts was the creation of nine commissions to carry out the enormous administrative work of the city: public services, finances, education, justice, public safety, subsistence, labor and commerce, war, and foreign relations. Over those bodies it established an executive committee. Blanquists headed up many of the commissions, but Internationalists in the subcommittees did much of the administrative work.

The Commune began to pass new laws, though it should be understood that given the situation, many of these were more aspirational than doable. The leftist leadership of the Commune, which loathed the Catholic Church, voted for an end to financial subsidies for the church, the complete separation of church and state, and the takeover of church property. Many political clubs appropriated churches for their meetings. The Commune made education lay, free, and obligatory and approved schools for both boys and girls. Men and women teachers were to be paid the same wage. Education was to be based not on religious dogma but on science. The justice system, headed by Blanquist Eugène Porot, was also overhauled, with all of the many old court positions abolished and with the establishment of elected juries, as well as an end to court fees.

The Commune immediately worked to alleviate the situation of working people, including small businesses, and the poor. The Commune stopped evictions, undid some that had taken place, and returned rents, it also stopped the collection of overdue bills, allowing them to be paid over three years. Conscription was abolished, but all male citizens were called upon to form part of the National Guard, which assured them an income.

During most of the Second Empire, labor unions had been suppressed, though in the 1860s a series of strike waves had revived them. Yet the unions did not play the leading role, which fell instead to the Commune’s Labor Commission. Two Internationalists, Leó Frankel and Benoît Malon, headed up that Commission that now undertook to improve workers’ lives. Workshops were created for the unemployed. The Commune abolished the practice of fining workers or withholding workers’ pay; it abolished night work in bakeries; and it forbade expensive initiation fees. The national pawnshop was transformed into a people’s bank and pawned items under 20 francs were to be returned to the owners. The Labor Commission called for work to be organized by workers themselves through the trade organizations of the artisans,[13] with an association of production for each trade, supported by

the Commune which offered financial credit.

The Commune took over state-owned monopolies such as tobacco and the national printing company, which were then turned over to be run by the workers. The Commune also confiscated (without indemnification) companies that had been abandoned by their owners during the siege; they too were turned over to the appropriate workers associations. Some of those then attempted to expand and bring other related shops under the control of the unions. Rougerie calls this a "*syndicalisation*" (union appropriation) of the means of production. Most of the means of production, however, factories, ateliers and shops, remained in private hands.

Everything in the economy depended, of course, on the Bank of France, which surprisingly provided credit and currency to both Versailles and Paris. During the period of the Commune the Bank provided Paris with 16.7 million francs, while Versailles received 257.6 million. The Commune apparently hesitated to seize the bank, because it held mostly paper bills, the gold and silver backing of the currency having been removed to the port city of Brest in Brittany in 1870. Communards apparently feared that seizure of the bank would disrupt the already delicate balance of the weak and unstable Paris economy.

No doubt because its leaders saw the Commune as the harbinger and the first expression of the future United States of Europe, they welcomed the participation of the foreign-born. Several foreigners played leading roles as military officers in the National Guard, among them two Poles, Jaroslav Dombrowski and Walery Antoni Wróblewski. Another Guard officer, the son of Spanish and Italian parents and a former fighter alongside Garibaldi, was Napoléon La Cécilia. Leó Frankel, a Hungarian Jew who had worked in Germany before coming to France was a leader of the Labor commission, while the Russian-born Elizabeth Dmitrieff, organized the Women's Union.

Women in the Commune

In addition to the Commune's official work, Parisians organized on their own. In April of 1871 Elizabeth Dmitrieff, an Internationalist, published a call to the women of Paris to join together in creating a new organization.

> *Citoyennes*[14], the decisive hour has arrived. It is time that the old world came to an end! We want to be free! And France is not rising alone, all the civilized people have their eyes on Paris.…*Citoyennes*, all resolved, all united.…to the gates of Paris, on the barricades, in the neighborhoods, everywhere! We will seize the moment.…And if the arms and bayonets are all being used by our brothers, we will use paving stones to crush the traitors![15]

The women of Paris then created the Women's Union to Defend Paris and Care for the Wounded with branches in each district of Paris, with some 130 women serving in the group central committee, and with an estimated 1,000 members.

In a world of strict job segregation and male resentment of women workers as low-wage competitors, Dmitrieff and others in the Women's Union advocated economic equality. They wanted to be able to do the same jobs as men and be paid the same wages. This led to a debate with the Proudhonists in particular (Rougerie calls them "anti-feminists") as well as others who believed that women should be excluded from wage labor and dedicate themselves to the home and children. Working with the Commune leadership, the Women's Union organized women's cooperative workshops, but in a way that allowed women to continue to work from home. They formed

producers' cooperatives in cloth production, garment making, and fine handwork in the luxury goods of seasonal flowers, and feathers. The Union appealed to the Commune for loans and for meeting spaces. Men such as the Internationalist Eugene Varlin of the International supported the women's demands.

The Women's Union desired opportunities for women to work in ateliers and factories, but also wanted to join in the military struggle, arguing that women should serve "in the ambulances, at the cooking stove, and on the barricades." While forbidden from joining the National Guard, they did all of those and some died on the Commune's barricades. Other women's organizations demanded education, the right to divorce, and the recognition of illegitimate children. There were demands that men's unmarried female partners have the same rights as wives and some women called for the abolition of prostitution. Women, especially those on the left, expressed little or no interest in the right to vote, perhaps because Louis Napoleon's plebiscites had discredited elections.

Much of what the Commune and organizations such as the Women's Union proposed remained aspirational in a city under siege and isolated from trade with the surrounding areas that usually provided food. Few of the Commune's resolutions could be carried out in full and the 72-days that it lasted would prove too short a time to do much of what they proposed.

The National Guard, which formed the foundation of the Commune, was itself weak. While there were nominally 180,000 men, many failed to show up and those who did were often undisciplined. Rougerie speculates that there may have been thirty or forty thousand actual troops or perhaps even less. Still, throughout Paris, even if incompletely, working people had taken the running of the city into their own hands.

The Crushing of the Commune

The attempts of Paris over two months to find support from provincial cities had failed. Several other cities in France had proclaimed communes, some even before Paris, but those communes, the most important one having arisen in Lyons and Marseilles, remained isolated or had been crushed. The peasants of the nation, two-thirds of the population, Catholic and conservative, supported Versailles or at least wanted nothing to do with Paris which was associated in their minds with landowners and creditors. At the same time, the moderate League of the Republican Union, made up in part of rural landlords, wanted to arrange a reconciliation between Paris and Versailles, but it was viewed by the Commune as a group of traitors; and when they tried to organize a national conference of Republican municipalities to resolve the crisis, Thiers prevented it.

The Parisian National Guard and other forces nominally numbered 234 battalion's and forty companies—including a battalion of women and one of children—theoretically about 250,000 troops. But in reality, only about thirty or forty thousand fought in April and May, and perhaps only 10,000 during the "bloody week" that ended the Commune. Thiers on the other hand had 130,000 soldiers and recruited 6,000 volunteers of the Seine district who would play a particularly vicious role in the attack on the Commune.

Thiers launched the attack on the Commune on April 11, the Versailles army first taking a number of outlying villages in the south. The army besieged and bombarded Paris just as the Prussians had done. Early on May 21 the army overran an untended outpost and then moved into the city. The Versailles invaders attacked the working-class neighborhoods where the Parisians had constructed five or six hundred blockades from cobblestones, most defended by cannon or machine gun. The battles were intense in the neighborhoods of Montmartre, Belleville, and Faubourg St. Antoine. Parisian men and women fought in the streets while some women threw objects from the upper floors of their houses on the invaders below. Whenever Versailles' soldiers took a blockade, they

executed the prisoners. By May 27 it had come down to hand-to-hand combat and the next day it was all over. The Commune was drowned in blood.

The Commune's defenders, at the urging of Blanquists, executed at least 100 hostages, including the massacre of 36 on Haxo Street. Varlin and other Internationalists tried to stop these pointless killings, acts of revenge that had not taken place in the earlier nineteenth century revolutions. In killing their prisoners, the Blanquists stooped to the level of Versailles, which had been doing the same thing all along.

While the fighting was still taking place, fires broke out, some caused by cannon fire and others by arsonists. The Communards intentionally burned down City Hall, "the people's house" rather than turn it over to the Versailles. They also set fire to the Tuileries, the haunt of kings, and to the Palace of Justice, the source of so much injustice. Louise Michel, the anarchist, who was called "*la petrolouse*" (the woman arsonist), proclaimed, "Paris will be ours or it will not be!" A third of Paris was burned.

Versailles claimed that in the taking of the city it had lost 877 men, 183 disappeared, and 6,454 wounded, while somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 Parisians died during the "bloody week." Officially, 43,522 people—men, women, and children—were arrested at the time and another 20,000 over the next several months. Eventually over 36,000 were tried, 87 were condemned to death and others to prison or deportation to French penal colonies. Thiers and the bourgeoisie, having destroyed the Commune, now ruled France's Third Republic.

For Part II and the interpretations of these events by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, click here.

Notes:

[1] Napoleon Bonaparte had become the first emperor in 1804; his nephew Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was the second emperor.

[2] Monarchists wished to reestablish the old French royal families, either Bourbon or its Orleans branch.

[3] "After averaging 8,250 deaths per year from pulmonary tuberculosis between 1865 and 1869, Paris suddenly saw this figure balloon to 10,691 in 1870 and 11,900 in 1871 before falling back to a mere 7,436 in 1872." David S. Barnes, *The Making of a Social Disease* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). From the Introduction. E-book available at: https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft8t1nb5rp&chunk.id=introduction&toc.depth=1&toc.id=introduction&brand=ucpress

[4] The word "social" meant with a concern for the social problems, principally poverty. We might think of it as meaning something like the word "progressive" as we use it in the United States today.

[5] I use the word "Internationalist" here to refer to those affiliated with or following the political lead of the First International with which Karl Marx was affiliated.

[6] Though Charles Fourier had died in 1837, he is the prototype of these communists of the 1840s. Marx and Engels called them "utopian socialists."

[7] Stathis Kouvélakis, "On the Commune," Part I, at https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5039-on-the-paris-commune-part-1 He argues that Marx and Engels, even though they were not in Paris, should be considered participants in the Commune.

[8] Blanqui was 65 at the time of the Commune.

[9] Blanqui represented the continuation of the tradition of Gracchus Babeuf, leader of the "conspiracy of equals" that organized to overthrow the Directory in 1796, a revolutionary theory passed down by Phillipe Buonarroti to Blanqui.

[10] Particularly through Bakunin's "Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis", which can be found at: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/1870/letter-frenchman.htm#s1

[11] The words *féminisme* and *féministe* in their modern sense did not exist in French until the 1880s.

[12] In France in the nineteenth century Free Masons generally advocated the Republic and opposed the Catholic Church, placing them on the left.

[13] *Les Chambres de métiers et de l'artisanat.* These were not unions but something like guilds.

[14] Women citizens.

[15] Cited in Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 17