

After 150 years, the legacy of the Paris Commune continues to divide France

The uprising, long mythologised by the far left, is increasingly becoming part of the national conversation, but not without controversy.



To be a communist is to be, often, on the defensive. Faced with countless historical precedents, from the initially brutal and later stagnant Soviet Union to the now successful but undeniably capitalist People's Republic of China, the communist generally defends themselves by claiming their ideology was misapplied and corrupted; that the cause was betrayed. The Paris Commune, which began 150 years ago today, is different. The short-lived government – 72 days from start to bloody finish – proclaimed any number of progressive causes. Equality between men and women; citizenship for foreigners; the requisitioning of empty housing stock for the homeless; separation of church and state. A century and a half later, many of the values of the Commune, radical for the time, are standard across the democratic world.

Crucially, the socialist Commune did not have enough time to compromise on its socialism or its democratic character as its government matured. It was brutally repressed by the national government of Adolphe Thiers, which had by then retreated to Versailles. Between 8,000 and 10,000 *communards* were killed by government forces, according to some estimates, and thousands more were exiled to New Caledonia, a territory in the South Pacific annexed by France not long before.

“In general, the process which occurred after other revolutions, which fell back on liberalism or conservatism – that is something that the Commune cannot be accused of,” Mathilde Larrère, a historian of revolutions, told me. “The members of the Commune did not betray it. It was not lost to the bourgeois republic, nor to a dictatorship. It has an [ideological] purity to it that means that it can more easily be cited in retrospect.”

The Commune's resonance is still felt across France today. A series of events to mark its anniversary began in Paris this Thursday with the opening of an exhibition about the events. The city's mayor Anne Hidalgo will plant an araucaria tree, native to New Caledonia, in Montmartre, the site of the beginning of the revolt. (Mass events will be limited because of coronavirus restrictions.)

But debates about how exactly the anniversary should be marked also reveal how uneasily the Commune still sits outside of the country's national narrative. One of the most contentious episodes in French political history, it has long been mythologised in far-left circles. Yet other groups are increasingly finding new relevance in it, raising the question: 150 years later, what remains of the Commune?

The social conditions of 19th-century Paris made the city fertile ground for revolutionary ideas. Its working-class population – more than half of the total – was crammed into its central and north-eastern arrondissements. Population density in the central district of the Marais reached 15,000 people per square kilometre – about four times more than Paris [today](#) – in squalid, unhygienic conditions. Baron Haussmann, known for giving the city its distinctive wide boulevards and ornate buildings under Napoleon III, noted that more than half of Parisians lived in “poverty adjacent to indigence” even if they worked 11-hour days. Socialist and anarchist ideas spread rapidly within the working-class neighbourhoods. “Skilled workers’ strong sense of their own worth as citizens... caused them to sympathise with democratic and, particularly from 1848 onwards, with anti-clerical and radical republican politics,” the historian Robert Tombs argued in *The Paris Commune*.

A short war with Prussia, which broke out in 1870, ended disastrously for France, with the government of the recently declared Third Republic capitulating to the Prussians early the following year after a four-month siege of Paris.

Elections held in February 1871 returned a large monarchist majority of some 400 of 638 deputies. The political chasm between the capital and the rest of the country, however, was obvious, as Paris returned 37 republican representatives of 43 in total. The election of Thiers, a republican but remembered by the working classes for his role in violently suppressing an 1834 workers’ revolt, to head the government was the final straw.

On 18 March 1871 the National Guard of Paris, drawn largely from the working people of Paris, expelled the forces of Thiers’s government. For the next 72 days, the self-declared Paris Commune would capture imaginations around the globe. As the historian Quentin Deluermoz [wrote](#) in his book *Commune(s)*, for the short span of its existence, “Paris was at the centre of the media world”.

The government swiftly announced a raft of progressive policies. War widows were given pensions and women the right to equal divorce. Foreigners were granted citizenship. Workers rights were advanced, with night-time work banned. The separation of church and state was declared.

Representatives to the Commune Council were elected to fulfil “imperative mandates”, which the political theorist Jean-Jacques Rousseau had advocated in his *Social Contract*, published a century earlier. Members of the Commune Council were to follow a defined role, with no right to vote according to their own beliefs and values.

Many of the policies remained largely theoretical and were never applied during the Commune’s short existence. The Versailles government fought to recapture Paris throughout April and May, and on 21 May 1871, its troops entered the Porte de Saint-Cloud, marking the beginning of the “bloody week”, in which thousands of *communards* were executed by the Versailles army.

Gaston de Galliffet, one army official charged with rooting out former insurgents, was nicknamed “the Executioner of the Commune” for his unsparing brutality. A historian has

estimated that De Galliffet alone was responsible for some 3,000 deaths. Thousands more were deported to New Caledonia.

The question of how to remember the Commune has vexed France virtually since its collapse. “The national narrative does not have much space for the Commune. The republic is almost remorseful about the repression, even though responsibility lies mostly with a monarchist parliament and army,” Larrère told me. The uneasiness explains why the government amnestied most convicted *communards* less than a decade later, she added.

Most historians today agree that though there was violence on the *communard* side, with hostage-taking and summary executions, the lion’s share of the killing was committed by the Versailles government during bloody week. (The Commune’s *fédérés* did set fire to several buildings, including the Louvre and Palais Royal, as the Versailles government’s army advanced.)

Yet virtually as soon as the Commune had been defeated, the victorious Versailles government began crafting a narrative to justify their violence, Larrère says. “Take the idea that the Commune destroyed swathes of Paris. Almost immediately, the *Versaillais* began disseminating books of photographs taken by the Appert brothers... of Paris in ruins. But almost half of the album shows destruction which has nothing to do with the Commune.” The 19th-century building of the marble-domed Sacré-Cœur Basilica in Montmartre, where some of the most significant opening and closing events of the Commune played out, is widely viewed by the left as an insult to the memory of the *communards*. “The basilica was built by Catholic ultra-reactionaries to expiate, in their view, the sins of the Commune and all the revolutions since 1789,” Eric Fournier, a historian of the Commune, told me.

A decision on whether to list the basilica as a historical monument was initially intended to be taken this summer, but has been [pushed back](#) to avoid coinciding with this year’s anniversary after some Green politicians [bemoaned](#) “the link between this edifice and repression of the Commune”.

“[The government] built this monstrosity right on the place where they had beaten to death and tortured people in the Commune,” says John Merriman, the author of *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune*.

The debates within the Paris municipal council over how to commemorate this year’s anniversary have been tense. A series of events – limited because of Covid-19 – planned by Hidalgo’s administration were met with ferocious opposition by conservatives such as Rudolph Granier, a conservative councillor. “The Commune was an episode of brutal violence and destruction. It should be commemorated but not celebrated,” Granier told me. Whereas other episodes of French history have by now been absorbed into the national story, the task of remembering the Commune was mostly taken up by the far left. This reading of events was largely shaped by Karl Marx’s [assessment](#) of the uprising as the first instance of the working class holding political power anywhere in the world. It is the French Communist Party, for example, which leads annual May Day marches to the Communards’ Wall, a section of the Père Lachaise cemetery where 147 *fédérés* were executed and thrown into mass graves during bloody week.

“The Commune, for us, represents progressive values. The subjects raised – such as the rights of migrants, wage equality between men and women, the requisitioning of empty housing – are still relevant today,” Raphaëlle Pinet, a communist councillor, told me.

In 1911, on the 40th anniversary of the Commune and six years before he overthrew the Tsar, Vladimir Lenin wrote admiringly of the uprising. Though he criticised it as badly organised, he still saw in it a model for Russia and the world. “The cause of the Commune did not die. It lives to the present day in every one of us,” he [wrote](#).

Yet the ideological legacy of the Commune is also increasingly found in more unexpected places. Placards referencing 1871 appeared during the anti-government *gilets jaunes* protests of 2018, which did not grow out of the traditional left. The functioning of the movement's proposed citizens' assemblies would have drawn from the Commune's model of Rousseauist imperative mandates, explicitly banned under the French constitution.

The historians I spoke to were mostly sceptical about the relevance of the Commune to contemporary politics, beyond the broad general themes. Discussions of women's rights, for instance, are vastly different today. At the time, "women were treated as minors, deprived of the right to vote and paid half of what men were," Larrère said.

But this relatively little known event in French history still resonates. "The Commune remains a conflictual topic. It offers no possibility for reconciliation," said Fournier. "This utopian revolution, mostly remembered by the far left and hated by the Catholic right, cannot easily be integrated into a consensual national story behind which the French people could unite."

[See also: [How Covid turned Paris into a city of fear](#)]

Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Artillery on Monmatre during the Paris Commune.