

The Communards Were More Than Just Beautiful Martyrs

150 years since the Paris Commune, the militants who built the world's first working-class government are often commemorated as martyrs rather than taken seriously as revolutionaries. Yet in the years after 1871, socialists sought to draw practical lessons from this experience — and build the organizations that could turn the Commune's promise into lasting social change.



Illustration depicting the women of Montmartre marching to defend a barricade and carrying a banner saying "The Commune or Death" during the Paris Commune of 1871. (Universal History Archive / Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

What to make of the Paris Commune? At the end of the nineteenth century, this was one of the key questions facing socialists. While the Commune had ended in a terrible defeat in May 1871, the executed Communards were celebrated as martyrs who had fallen in the front line of struggle. And in the decades after its crushing, socialists and anarchists reached for lessons from what they took for a unique practical experience.

In late nineteenth-century France, both survivors of the Commune (Louise Michel, Benoît Malon, Édouard Vaillant) and those who supported it from outside Paris (like future Socialist leader [Jules Guesde](#), in Montpellier during spring 1871) played a major role in shaping the multiple tendencies of French socialism. But the Commune's [memory was also kept alive](#) by militants far beyond French shores, with March 18 commemorations each year celebrating the Communards' glorious actions. From Berlin to Moscow, from London to Budapest, and soon even in [Tokyo and Shanghai](#), the word "Commune" meant the Paris revolution and the heroic Communards who had fallen in combat.

The anniversary of the Commune was marked with particular ceremony in Germany, where the Social Democrats (SPD) had by the 1880s become Europe's most strongly rooted workers' party. In fact, this date had a rather particular meaning in Berlin. The Paris Commune's own history was inextricably linked to the Franco-Prussian War; most Communards had made their patriotism clear,

with the call to defend France, and Paris itself, mixed in with more properly social objectives. This international conflict made German displays of solidarity with the Commune — as organized by Social Democracy’s founding fathers Wilhelm Liebknecht and August Bebel — all the more heroic. Coincidentally, March 18 invoked not only the start of the Paris uprising in 1871 but also the barricades erected in Berlin back in 1848. This date thus provided militants an opportunity to celebrate the two countries’ shared revolutionary heritage. Each of these insurrections had ended in defeat — and victory for the counterrevolutionary forces. But they also marked out a path to the future and the bases of a new society.

In an era where both countries’ ruling classes were cultivating a harsh chauvinism, the celebration of this both French and German anniversary was one of the first concrete attempts at building an internationalist culture. This was no merely theoretical proposition: the gigantic marches that the German and Austrian Social-Democrats organized in Berlin and Vienna (and many other industrial towns) in 1898 to mark the half-centenary of 1848 also honored the French experience.

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Such events show how attached militants were to this shared memory. Yet, it would be wrong to consider these demonstrations as a simple appeal to put up barricades like in 1871. For the Paris Commune also provided an experience of defeat, from which socialists had to learn.

A Critique of the Commune?

In *The Civil War in France*, Marx had hailed the Commune as a political experience of a new type. His solidarity was all the more keenly felt given that the Communards had just been mercilessly crushed (he wrote this text just after the end of the uprising). But, while the Communards’ contribution was not in doubt, once the flames had been snuffed out Marx and Engels also showed themselves prepared to express criticisms of some of the Commune’s methods.

For instance, on January 14, 1871, Engels wrote to Italian Bakuninite Carlo Terzaghi (later found to have been a police informant) that “If there had been a little more authority and centralization in the Paris Commune, it would have triumphed over the bourgeois.... And when people tell me that ... these are two things to be condemned outright, it seems to me that those who talk like this either do not know what a revolution is, or are revolutionaries in name only.” In this sense pushing back against some of the passages in *The Civil War in France* which most leaned in the direction of decentralization, Engels insisted that any political revolution lacking a centralized authority was doomed.

A few years later, Marx himself offered a critical examination of this experience. On February 22, 1881, he wrote to the Dutchman Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis: “Apart from the fact that this was merely the rising of a town under exceptional conditions, the majority of the Commune was in no sense socialist, nor could it be. With a small amount of sound common sense, however, they could have reached a compromise with Versailles useful to the whole mass of the people — the only thing that could be reached at the time. The appropriation of the Bank of France alone would have been enough to dissolve all the pretensions of the Versailles people in terror, etc., etc.”

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In an October 29, 1884 letter to Bebel, Engels was even more abrupt: “While the Commune was the grave of *early* specifically French socialism, it was, for France, also and at the same time the cradle of a new international communism.” Yet, in other texts, the Commune was still taken for an example. In an 1891 preface to *The Civil War in France*, Engels concluded that the Commune had been an example of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” — the dictatorship of the majority over a minority of exploiters. So, the Commune was doubtless something to be celebrated. But was this a model, or an experience that socialists had to go beyond?

Ten years after this preface (and following Engels’s death in 1895), in 1901 Marx’s son-in-law Charles Longuet (husband to Marx’s daughter Jenny) published a new edition of Marx’s text, with a

telling change of title: *The Civil War in France* was now *The Paris Commune*. Longuet clearly sought to avoid the reference to “civil war” and instead promote a gradualist perspective within socialist ranks.

Indeed, at this point a major trend in several socialist parties was raising questions over the revolutionary road to socialism which most had previously pursued. The leading representative of this current was the German Eduard Bernstein, whose 1899 text *The Preconditions of Socialism* had bemoaned the popularity of the “Blanquist” tradition (named after Louis Auguste Blanqui, with whom many of the Communards had close ties). Bernstein also mounted a wider attack against the French revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1871; he held that it was time to put an end to a certain insurrectionary spirit that, he claimed, undermined the gradual development of organized socialism. What could explain such a turn? First, it is worth emphasizing that a large share of the workers’ movement rejected Bernstein’s perspective, from Jules Guesde to Rosa Luxemburg. But doubtless, since 1871 the political context had changed a great deal. By the turn of the twentieth century, the workers’ movement had built up its own parties, union organizations and co-ops. Male universal suffrage had been enacted in several European countries. So, would it be possible to conquer power by other, legal means?

One telling example was Jean Jaurès, alongside Guesde the main founder of France’s unified Socialist Party in 1905. He was unabashed in celebrating the Commune’s achievements, in particular its social and political measures. But upon the March 18, 1907 anniversary, in his column for *l’Humanité* (titled “Yesterday and Tomorrow”) he argued that “even if the Paris Commune had been victorious it would not have been able to fundamentally transform society ... it could perhaps have advanced the development of the Third Republic by ten years, but it could not have made socialism spring from the ground.”

Jaurès emphasized that socialists now had to take two other major realities into consideration: universal suffrage (allowing the Socialist Party to conquer positions within the existing society) and the general strike (one of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) union’s main means of action, which allowed the proletariat to mount a coordinated offensive action that nonetheless stood distant from a desperate insurrection). In short, while Jaurès hailed the Communards’ “heroic efforts,” it was necessary to find other ways forward.

Some former Communards, like Benoît Malon, were themselves among the originators of socialist reformism. Ten years after the Paris events, in 1881 Malon invoked the Paris Commune in order to exalt the concrete politics that could be done at the municipal — in French, *communal* — level: “[s]een in these terms, the *communal* question is more than half of the social question.”

And after him, a whole current of French socialism — including Albert Thomas, future Armaments Minister during World War I — placed their hopes in this “municipalist” perspective. Through such men, a “reforming socialism” took shape, with the rise of an idea of a Republic that provided public services. They mourned the insurgent Commune’s martyrs but took only a few concrete measures from this experience — thus hollowing out its more properly subversive content.

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Going Further Than the Commune?

Whatever the differences between socialist currents, they all more or less agreed that they needed organization, in order to allow them to overcome the Commune’s shortcomings.

This fact should not be taken lightly. Indeed, put in its proper context, the success of the “party-form” in the late nineteenth-century socialist movement owed a great deal to the lessons drawn from the Commune. The Paris revolutionaries of 1871 were honored for having shown the way. But it was also urgently necessary to go further than the Commune had, and take a different approach that could avoid fresh defeats. If it had not been for the trauma of 1871, it is far from clear that socialist currents like the Russian Bolsheviks or the French Guesdists would have theorized — and put into practice — such structured and hierarchical forms of organization.

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Lenin showed his intense admiration for the Communards' bold attempt. But he wanted the future "dictatorship of the proletariat" (of which Marx and Engels have spoken) to adopt means adequate to its revolutionary politics, in order to avoid fresh "Bloody Weeks" and further proletarian defeats. Yet while he was critical of the Commune's methods, he also drew on this experience to define "proletarian democracy" in his *State and Revolution*, written a few months before the insurrection of October 1917. From Marx's *The Civil War in France* he took the idea of "smashing the state" in order to fight against "bureaucracy":

Let us learn revolutionary boldness from the Communards; let us see in their practical measures the outline of really urgent and immediately possible measures, and then, following this road, we shall achieve the complete destruction of bureaucracy.

When Soviet power had lasted one day longer than the Paris Commune, Lenin celebrated the passing of a key threshold for the Russian Revolution. The Parisian experience was widely discussed and studied in the young Soviet Russia: for all its limits, hadn't the Commune shown the way, in many fields?

The young communist movement adopted themes from the Commune like "proletarian democracy," workers' control, educational progress, and the fight against religious obscurantism. From 1917 onward, Commune was all the more keenly commemorated because it appeared to whole generations of militants, of all tendencies, as the event which had heralded the new times.

It is rather less clear which aspects of the Commune continue to inspire the socialist movement today, and which are instead considered out of step with our contemporary realities. In this sense, the strategic debates which Jaurès and Lenin launched — centering on the Commune, the state and the forms of social and political change — are still ongoing. Indeed, they complement the reflection and the insights of the actors from the period that immediately followed the Commune.

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Today, historians tend to look back to the Commune as an experience unto itself, distinct from the wider course of the revolutionary movement. This is a perfectly legitimate approach — allowing us a closer understanding of the Communards as actors, and their motivations. Yet it would be mistaken to overlook the interpretations and disputes that raged in the workers' movement of subsequent decades, taking 1871 as a point of departure. For the debates around the Commune posed major political questions facing any project of social transformation — problems that are still far from resolved.

This article is also appearing in French in *l'Humanité* and on the website of the Fondation Gabriel Péri.