

The Paris Commune at 150

150 years ago today, in the jaws of defeat in war, a revolutionary militia took over the city of Paris and began an experiment in democratic government – the Commune they built continues to inspire radicals today.



On the 1 March 1871, after France was defeated in the war with Prussia, Adolphe Thiers' newly elected government accepted harsh settlement terms. On 18 March, an attempt by the National Assembly to disarm the Parisian National Guard, a citizens' militia which had defended the besieged capital, was met with resistance. The soldiers sent by the National Assembly joined the rebellion. The mainstream British press depicted the rebels as criminals and rascals, and rumours of atrocities abounded. In contrast, the former [Chartist](#) GWM Reynolds hailed the challenge to the rich and powerful in his popular newspaper, *Reynolds News*. Support came too from the *Republican*, which declared 'Paris To-day: London Tomorrow', and from the Positivist historian, Professor Beesly, in the radical *Bee-Hive*.

Among these defenders of the Paris Commune were members of the Central Committee of the International Working Men's Association who headed off to meetings of republicans and radicals at the Wellington Music Hall in East London and the Owenite socialist Hall of Science in Old Street to gather allies.

In April, several thousand demonstrators marched from Clerkenwell Green to Hyde Park carrying the red cap of liberty and banners declaring 'Long Live the Universal Republic, Social and Democratic'. They sent an address to the French Commune abjuring 'the impious lies' of 'our venal and corrupt press', and tendering 'the honest, uncompromising hand of friendship and fellowship.' James Murray, a veteran of the Chartist movement, denounced 'the ruling classes of this world'. He was later to become a socialist.

In 1871, 'socialism' was still associated with the co-operative projects of Robert Owen, but the connection of the 'social' with democracy was significant. Not only did the Commune demonstrate the possibility of linking representative and active popular democracy, its brief existence—72 days in

all—presented a fragile but precious sketch of a new social possibility.

The Communards burned the guillotine, and they destroyed the Victory Column made from guns captured by Napoleon, breaking symbolically from both institutionalised revolutionary violence and nationalism. The salaries of public officials were reduced; religion was declared a private matter, schools were secularised, plans were begun for co-operative workplaces.

The collection of debts was postponed for three years and interest abolished on them, bakers' night working ended, goods deposited in pawn shops could not be sold. Evictions were banned and the houses abandoned by the rich requisitioned. Allowances for the children, wives and unmarried partners of National Guardsmen were introduced and public canteens and assistance to the poor established. These measures were in the interests of workers and of tradespeople, and appealed to women as well as men.

Though women were not able to vote, they played a key role as teachers and nurses. A small group emerged who had gained experience through organising for women's rights and radical social change, and towards the end of May, in the final days of the Commune, they, along with thousands of working-class women, prepared defences, cared for the wounded, and fought alongside men on the barricades.

The revenge of the French government was horrific. Thousands of Communards were killed and cast into mass graves; many thousands more were exiled. Among those transported to the island of New Caledonia was the schoolteacher and passionate revolutionary Louise Michel.

On 30 May 1871 Karl Marx read his address to the International Working Men's Association. It later was published as [The Civil War in France](#). His close friend, the Communist Gustave Flourens, had been murdered. All three of his daughters were in France. [Eleanor](#), aged 16, had gone with her sister Jenny to help Laura and Paul Lafargue who were in danger. Marx struggled to draw hope from despair, heralding the Commune as 'the social republic', a 'harbinger of a new society'.

News of the Commune and the severity of its suppression reached people far beyond the organised radical groupings. In the early 1870s, a young Edward Carpenter was a curate in Cambridge, troubled by doubts and by his own sexual attraction to men. His sermon notes agonise about the class system. He calls on the rich members of the congregation to relinquish their wealth and worries about whether the workers have been 'hoodwinked'.

He was soon to leave the Church and Cambridge to teach workers in the North of England, eventually discovering the newly formed Social Democratic Federation in the early 1880s and donating £300 to the first 'Marxist' paper *Justice*.

Several thousand refugees from the Commune settled in Britain. Their presence helped to keep the memory of the Commune alive: some became active in the revolutionary socialist groupings of the 1880s. The Commune's heroes and martyrs continued to be celebrated, fostering a shared sense of outrage despite the schisms in the socialist movement.

In the mid-1880s the police began to break up the socialists' open air meetings. During October 1887, demonstrations of socialists and the unemployed in Trafalgar Square were cleared by mounted police. When the Radicals, the Irish National League and the socialists combined on 13 November in defence of free speech, they were met by soldiers and a regiment of Guardsmen with fixed bayonets. 200 people were treated in hospital for their injuries, and three died.

On the following Sunday, Radical Alfred Linnell was killed by a charge by mounted police. News also reached London of the execution of the Chicago anarchists. The Commune began to assume a new relevance.

But the implication of these memories was ambivalent. An insurrectionary minority embraced total defiance; the majority struggled to create a mass labour movement. Both were influenced by the internationalism of the Commune, a theme that continued in 1889 when the Second International agreed to commemorate the men executed in Chicago on May Day.

This was the year the Irish socialist Jim Connell [wrote *The Red Flag*](#), which signalled both militancy and sacrifice for it 'shrouded oft our martyred dead'. It was adopted as the anthem of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) which formed in 1893, and passed on to the Labour Party.

Ideas and memories were carried not simply through the ceremonies and songs, but through personal contacts. When Louise Michel was released from prison, she came to London and started a school. A young ILPer, Margaret McMillan, found Michel strange and eccentric, but she and her sister Rachel

later pioneered ideas of play and fresh air in the education of small children.

The legacy of the Commune continued to be contested on the Left. In *The Conquest of Bread*, the anarchist communist Peter Kropotkin argued that 'the people' had been more democratic and more social than their elected representatives; for Leon Trotsky in 1921, the weakness of the Commune was its lack of clear leadership.

In 1969, I came across a book by the French historian Edith Thomas called [*The Women Incendiaries*](#). Thomas, who had been part of the women's resistance to the Nazis, paid tribute to the women of the Commune.

It made me see history through new eyes, and inspired the talk I gave at our first Women's Liberation Conference in 1970 at Oxford on 'The Myth of Inactivity'. I could not conceive then that I would be writing about her and the Communards 51 years on.