

PRIMER ON THE 1871 PARIS COMMUNE

ON ITS 150TH ANNIVERSARY
By PRISM Editors

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Part I. Historical background

This primer starts with major events that shook Europe in the 19th century and set the stage for the war that broke out between France and Germany in 1870—the Franco-Prussian War. This war directly resulted in the fall of Napoleon III and the Second French Empire, and the rise of the Third Republic—which in turn triggered a rapid chain of events leading to the Paris Commune of 1871.

1. What situation brought France and Germany to war in 1870?

From the 16th to the 19th centuries, great bourgeois revolutions had been shaking the foundations of the feudal order in Europe and North America. They had paved the way for the capitalist-led industrialization of major cities and entire countries, the gradual rise of the modern proletariat from the mass of peasants and artisans, and resultant class struggles and crises. Many governments in Europe, however, repeatedly faltered in democratic reforms, slid back to autocracy, and retained feudal vestiges.

In France, the revolution of 1789-1799 mobilized the masses of the people, especially the peasantry, to overthrow the feudal aristocracy and monarchy and to create the first French Republic. However, this first republic was cut short by Napoleon Bonaparte's coup d'état. He became dictator, at first as head of the Consulate (1799-1804), then as "Emperor of the French" under the First French Empire (1804-1815).

Napoleon I's type of politics (popularly called Bonapartism) skillfully used the various class struggles in France to perpetuate his own dictatorial rule and dynasty while also building a military-bureaucratic caste that satisfied the class interests of the old and emergent elites.

Napoleon's overreaching ambitions to expand his Empire eventually backlashed. His abdication led to the restoration of the French monarchy: first the Bourbon kings Louis XVIII and Charles X (1815-1830), followed by the "July Monarchy" (1830-1848) of the Orleanist King Louis Philippe I. But these new regimes, unlike the *ancien regime*, were now constitutional monarchies. They could no longer halt the fundamental changes in French society and economy, especially the continuous expansion of capitalism and growth of the proletariat.

In 1848, revolutions swept through many European states—this time with more distinct proletarian

undercurrents mixed with the bourgeois-democratic. The 1848 worker-led people's uprisings, in most instances, were suppressed in blood and fire. At the same time, the social upheavals also put in motion the forces that placed militarist autocrats in power.

In France, the February 1848 revolution replaced King Louis Philippe with the Second French Republic. This was followed by the June 1848 worker-led people's uprising in Paris, which ended in bloody failure. In its aftermath, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte—Napoleon I's nephew, also known as Napoleon III—rose to power by end-1848, first as elected “prince-president” of the republic, then as dictator.

Like his uncle and namesake, Napoleon III stopped a revolution in its tracks then extended his rule to become dictator via coup d'état in December 1851. A year later, he dissolved the Second Republic, replaced it with the Second Empire, and again like his uncle, made himself “Emperor of the French”. (Marx analyzed the 1848-1851 events in his works, *Class Struggles in France* and *Eighteenth Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte*.)

At that time, the map of Europe was a crazy patchwork quilt of small nations, independent provinces and blurred boundaries. Napoleon III's own brand of Bonapartism could thus exploit the many narrow nationalist aspirations and lust for war under the banner of “liberty and order”. Meanwhile, French capitalism underwent rapid growth, economic crises and militarism, showing signs of an early transition towards imperialism.

During those decades, Germany as a nation was extremely disunited. It was fragmented into many small states, and also riven by rivalry between its two large components, Prussia and Austria. The Germans were constantly bullied by tsarist Russia in the east and by Bonapartist France in the west. Nonetheless, after the 1848 bloody counter-revolution, Germany began to consolidate under the leadership of the militarist Junkers (landed nobility), at first economically through customs unions and trade treaties, then politically.

Germany's political unification was hindered by Napoleon III's many interventions among its localized states. But under Otto von Bismarck, who became chancellor in 1863, Prussia regained lost territory by winning against Denmark (1864) and against Austria (1866). Bismarck at the same time succeeded in his own coup d'état to get absolute power. Finally, a North German Confederation dominated by Prussia was founded in 1867. This signaled the rise of a unified Germany while France lost its dominant position.

Both countries—France under Napoleon III, and Prussia under King Wilhelm I and chancellor Bismarck—lusted for wars to expand their territories and made rapid war preparations. The rich Alsace-Lorraine region was among their biggest bones of contention. A relatively marginal issue (on the succession to the Spanish throne) became the convenient alibi for France to push harder against Prussia, and for Prussia's Bismarck to further pique French warlust.

This time, a unified Germany was ready for war. Old rival Austria did not join, but was also reluctant in supporting France. (The German southern states would soon join the Prussia-led North German Confederation, turning German unification into full-blown reality.)

Within France, Napoleon was opposed, on the one hand, by a fast-rising bourgeoisie which chafed from the regime's economic exactions and political domination. But the bourgeoisie was divided into conservative republicans, who tended to ally with those who wanted to restore the old monarchy, and

the radical republicans who spoke for the lower classes. Further to the left, the regime was also opposed by the fast-growing working class, which suffered much worse—from capitalist and employer abuses, taxes, unemployment, and grinding poverty. Their sons became cannon-fodder in the regime's wars abroad, while their socialist and radical-republican leaders were hunted down and thrown into France's notoriously brutal prisons.

We must especially note the rapid growth of the French urban population during those decades, particularly of the industrial proletariat and other non-agrarian workers. Of the estimated 2 million population of Paris in 1869, around 500,000 were industrial workers, 300,000-400,000 non-industrial or craft workers, and some 165,000 domestics. There were also 100,000 immigrant workers and political refugees, the largest number from Italy and Poland. They were the natural, large, and highly concentrated social base of various strains of proletarian-socialist and radical-democratic political thought and groups, in Paris and a few other major cities as well.

Paris, in particular, already had a long history of uprisings by workers and lower-middle classes since the 1790s. These uprisings combined economic and political demands, with local neighborhood districts (arrondissements) organizing into communes and fighting with arms and street barricades. The term "commune" merely meant a self-governing local district and its council. But in Paris and other French cities, it invoked the peak of revolutionary action by the masses as what happened in 1793, 1830, and 1848.

Amid the growing political ferment, incipient mass-based political parties ("clubs" or "societies") rapidly grew in number, influence, and revolutionary activism. These espoused various trade-union and socialist platforms, especially the hundreds of local groups across France that eventually joined the (First) International.

During the last years before the Paris Commune, Napoleon had amnestied political prisoners and loosened up on public meetings. Thousands of such meetings were held from 1868 to 1870, enabling various revolutionary groups to influence their content and growth. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out, public meetings were banned, but the more militant "Red Clubs" took their place. Thus a vigorous mass movement continued all the way through the siege of Paris, providing physical and organized rallying points for the people to rapidly disseminate and respond to the daily events.

2. How did the Franco-Prussian War lead to the French defeat and collapse of the Second Empire?

France and Prussia rapidly mobilized their respective armies on July 15, 1870. The next day, the French parliament declared war on Prussia and sent it formal notice several days later. By the first days of August 1870, both France and Germany had crossed each other's borders in the Alsace-Lorraine region. An early French offensive soon threatened Saarland.

But Napoleon III badly underestimated the Prussians and overestimated his own strength. He had hoped that Austria (Prussia's rival for German hegemony), Denmark and Italy (in pursuit of their own national interests) would give him aid; but they just stood aside. Bismarck's army turned out to be much better-trained, and able to maximize its political and technical home base. It mobilized 470,000 in just over a week and advanced 22 km a day, while France took three weeks to mobilize 300,000 and advanced only 9 km a day. Less than a month into the war, the French offensive quickly faltered and shifted to the defensive, while the Prussians won major battles in quick succession.

In France, the government on Aug. 10-11 hastily created a *Garde Mobile* (Mobile Guard), and drafted into it all single men and childless widowers not already in the main armies. All the other remaining male citizens above 18 were enlisted into a reserve *Garde Nationale* (National Guard), with its battalions organized as local units that remained in their home districts.

The attitude of the workers' movement on the war. The French and German workers and other toiling masses were generally opposed to the war. Their anti-war attitude was reflected and amplified in propaganda and mass campaigns of the International Workingmen's Association (First International, founded in London in 1864 and led by Karl Marx). The International was growing more popular and had growing national sections throughout Europe despite persecution by the French, German, and other states.

Although he was in British exile, Marx utilized all available means of communication to follow every twist and turn of the war, and shared his analysis with the rest of the International. Starting with his address of the General Council on the declaration of war, his series of communications to the workers' movement through the International and the press were spread widely throughout France, Germany and elsewhere.

Shortly before war was declared, the Paris section of the International launched antiwar protests. Napoleon III in turn had his gendarmes raid its French branches and arrest 60 of its leading activists. Nevertheless, the International continued its antiwar campaign throughout France.

As for the German working class, Marx and Engels recognized that they could join the nationalist groundswell "so long as it is limited to the defense of Germany" and differentiated "between German national interests and those of the dynastic Prussians." The leaders of the International called on the German workers to oppose the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine and to work for "an honorable peace for France" under a democratic-republican government that would replace the Bonapartist regime.

Marx reminded the German workers that if they were to "allow the present war to lose its strictly defensive character and to degenerate into a war against the French people, victory or defeat will prove alike disastrous." He also predicted that, however the war turned out, "the death knell of the Second Empire has already sounded at Paris. It will end, as it began, by a parody."

When the North German parliament voted on war credits, Liebknecht and Bebel (also members of the International) filed a protest vote of abstention. They joined a German workers' conference, which issued a resolution denouncing the war and called on the German workers and democrats to join the antiwar protests. Similar resolutions were adopted in mass meetings in Berlin and many other major German cities.

The French defeat at Sedan, Napoleon's surrender, and his Empire's collapse. On August 18, the Prussian forces won another decisive battle at Gravelotte. They trapped the battered French Army of the Rhine (113,000 men under Gen. Bazaine) at Metz and began to lay siege. The other French Army of Châlons, 103,000-strong and personally led by Napoleon himself, attempted to break the siege. But on Aug. 30, it was caught in a giant pincer attack by the 250,000-strong Prussian Third and Fourth Armies.

The Emperor's army was trapped in the vicinity of Sedan, and was shredded to pieces throughout the day of Sept. 1. Napoleon offered surrender, which the Prussian command formally accepted the next day. He and his surviving 84,000 troops were taken into captivity.

Back in Paris, the news of the Sedan defeat and Napoleon's surrender fired up the masses, now armed and organized as National Guard units. On Sept. 4, a big crowd led by National Guard riflemen stormed the Palais Bourbon and took over the Chamber of Deputies. The French Second Empire collapsed in a whimper.

The Third Republic under the Government of National Defense. That same day, leading members of the Chamber (which only had limited powers under Napoleon) gathered at the historic Hôtel de Ville that housed the Paris Town Hall. There they declared the Third Republic, and set up a Government of National Defense to continue the now-defensive war. The new government, with monarchist General Louis Trochu as head, was dominated by conservative republicans and double-faced monarchists.

Marx hailed the creation of the new Republic but weighed its prospects with misgivings. In the second address of the General Council of the International (Sept. 9), he noted that this Republic was in the hands of a government "composed partly of notorious Orleanists [former king Louis-Philippe's supporters], partly of middle-class Republicans." On the other hand, he reminded the French workers not to set itself the aim of overthrowing the government ("a desperate folly") but to proceed with "the organization of their own class" for longer-term goals.

Indeed, Marx had the insight to see that the French proletariat was not yet ready to seize power nationwide, even as it had to confront the new "Government of National Defense" as the latest incarnation of the French bourgeois state sworn to preserve capitalist rule. This state intended to block proletarian power that was brewing in Paris, even bow down to Prussia if it came to that.

The International's second manifesto called for German working-class demonstrations to end the war, to recognize the French Republic and reach an "honorable peace," and to oppose the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine. But the German social-democrats who signed the manifesto were promptly arrested and dragged to prison in chains. Liebknecht and Bebel, the main anti-war advocates within the German parliament, were also arrested for high treason. Thus, the mass agitation for peace was drowned by the ultra-nationalist German urge for more territory; Prussian armies thrust deeper into France.

With the bulk of its main armies disabled at Metz and Sedan, the new French government scrounged around to gather all types of military units, including raw Mobile Guard conscripts and the localized National Guard, in order to strengthen the defenses around Paris. It fortified the city and built up enormous stocks of food and ammunition to last the duration of the expected siege.

Paris standing alone but armed. Traditionally, the National Guard was a middle-class-dominated militia that was supposed to fight together with the Mobile Guard (likewise middle-class-dominated) in support of the main French armies (which were predominantly recruited from the peasant masses), and to undertake police tasks as well.

But now, with the capital in danger of Prussian attack, impoverished Parisian masses swelled the National Guard's ranks to a total of 330,000 men. To its 60 old battalions were added 130 newly created battalions. They were paid 30 sous (1 franc 50) per day, and armed with the same infantry rifles and guns carried by the regular army. The Paris public also paid for 400 bronze cannons for its National Guard units.

By Sept. 18, German forces completely surrounded Paris, cut it off from the rest of unoccupied France, and began to lay siege. The National Assembly had left Paris earlier, moving to Bordeaux nearly 600 km to the south. The minister of the interior Léon Gambetta escaped by hot-air balloon to the city of

Tours some 300 km to the south, with a mandate to raise a new Army of the Loire and direct the war effort from there.

In effect, the French government had two distant arms that barely coordinated with each other—Gambetta in Tours, the National Assembly in Bordeaux—and both were cut off from the besieged capital and its governor, General Trochu (also overall military commander for the defense of Paris, and nominal President).

3. How did the bungling Government of National Defense handle the Paris siege and trigger the Paris Commune?

The siege of Paris. While the hastily raised French armies of Gambetta were being defeated on most fronts, the people of Paris and their National Guard battalions braced for the worst. With Gambetta and the National Assembly too detached from Paris, Jules Favre (as vice president and foreign minister) and Adolphe Thiers, another conservative republican with monarchist links, became the Government's de facto leaders. They were more concerned about the rebellious city than about the enemy knocking at its gates.

For most Parisians, food stocks were starting to run out while disease stalked the poor neighborhoods under severe winter conditions. Many of the wealthy, on the other hand, were able to retain their comforts by escaping to safety through the Prussian lines or by replenishing their supplies at sky-high prices. The people grew more frustrated at the Government for its incompetence, cowardice, and signs of capitulationism. They were in fact on the brink of revolt.

On Oct. 27, 1870, the French army trapped in Metz under Gen. Bazaine surrendered without a fight. News spread that the real political leaders of the Government (Favre and Thiers) were in fact negotiating with the Prussians for a peace that would disarm Paris. Outraged Parisians massed in the streets and called it a “government of national betrayal.”

On Oct. 31, crowds backed by worker-dominated National Guard units stormed the Town Hall and temporarily ousted the Government. But middle-class battalions quickly came to the Government's rescue. To avoid civil war and preserve French unity against the Prussian siege, Auguste Blanqui and other leaders of the uprising withdrew. The Government promised to hold elections. But instead it held a plebiscite on its continuance—which it handily won. It then proceeded to arrest 25 leaders of the Blanquist-led uprising. (Blanqui himself would be captured on the eve of the Paris Commune and remain prisoner beyond its fall.)

The people scoffed at the Paris military governor, General Trochu, who publicly vowed “not to cede an inch” but privately said from the outset that any defense of Paris was “heroic folly.” He came up with a very passive “defense plan,” and failed to unite the various Guard forces and armed civilians who were ready to fight. Increasingly, the people blamed the Government for the bungled conduct of the war.

In defending the besieged city, the people began to place more hope on their National Guard units, which were ill-trained although well-armed. As more and more rich and middle-class people left the city for safer sanctuaries, most of Paris *arrondissements* (local districts) and their National Guard units turned increasingly proletarian and radicalized. The battalions were commanded by officers who were elected by the rank and file troops themselves. Some National Guard units were led by socialist workers and members of the International. Often on the initiative of women (who were excluded from National Guard duty), the masses organized themselves, converted public halls and theaters into soup

kitchens and Red Club centers, which housed refugees and became the regular venues for daily discussions.

French military units and armed workers had tried to break the Prussian siege twice (in November 1870 and January 1871) but both ended in disaster. Massive daily bombardment by Prussian artillery began, battering the city for 23 days. On Jan. 18, on the outskirts of Paris, Versailles fell to the Prussians. The new German Empire was formally proclaimed, and its emperor Wilhelm crowned, in its Hall of Mirrors. When General Trochu's Jan. 19 sortie failed to break the siege and incurred terrible French casualties, he resigned as Paris governor. Thiers and Favre remained as the real Government decision-makers; they quickly prepared to capitulate.

French surrender, rise of Thiers regime. On Jan. 28, 1871, the French Government signed an armistice with Prussia. Favre (on behalf of France) and Bismarck (on behalf of Emperor Wilhelm) signed the Convention defining the terms of armistice and capitulation. The humiliating terms included the payment of huge amounts of French money for indemnity and war reparations.

Upon Prussia's urging that France quickly set up a new government to legitimately ratify the peace treaty, national elections were held on Feb. 8. (All male citizens were allowed to vote, but women were not.) The vast mass of rural electors, attracted to the slogan "peace at any price" and still charmed by the old nobility, were swayed to support monarchism and reject the intransigence of radical and proletarian Paris. They chose a new government overwhelmingly composed of monarchist, capitalist, middle-class, cleric and landed-gentry deputies.

Of the Assembly's 750 deputies, fully 450 were diehard monarchists and Bonapartists; the rest were conservative republicans, and only about 100 were radical republicans. One-third of the deputies had titles of nobility. On Feb. 12, the Assembly elected Adolphe Thiers as president and chief executive. On Feb. 26, it ratified the treaty with Prussia, putting the final seal on the onerous peace terms. The treaty required France to cede Alsace and part of Lorraine to Germany, and to pay 5 billion gold francs as war reparations.

Sensing the rebellious pulse of Paris, Bismarck decided to march his Prussian troops into the city on March 1 but only for a brief and symbolic two-day occupation. He astutely decided not to fully occupy it, only to guard its eastern approaches, and let the French shoulder the task of keeping order within the city through National Guard units. But this decision had its consequences. As Engels noted: "The forts were surrendered, the city wall stripped of guns, the weapons of the regiments of the line and of the Mobile Guard were handed over, and they themselves considered prisoners of war. But the National Guard kept its weapons and guns..."

The Thiers regime appointed monarchists as high functionaries. It appointed its own choices as National Guard commander (the Jesuit general de Paladine), Paris police prefect (the Bonapartist Valenin), and for other key military posts. It sentenced to death (later commuted to life sentence) August Blanqui as leader of the Oct. 31 uprising. It suppressed six Republican papers for preaching "sedition and disobedience to the laws."

On March 10-12, the Assembly passed four laws that further crippled Paris. (It also imposed other new financial measures, in an effort to squeeze the French people dry to pay war reparations and hopefully to persuade the German occupiers to leave earlier.)

- First, it slashed the pay of National Guard troops to almost nil, leaving them penniless since the ruined economy could not provide them other incomes.

- Second, it lifted the moratorium on the sale of goods at pawnshops, where many workers had pawned their meager valuables.
- Third, it required all bills overdue for the past four months to be paid unconditionally and with interest within the next three days—many of them unpaid rents of over 200,000 workers' households.
- And as a fourth and final humiliation, the new government decided to move its national seat to Versailles, just 17 km outside Paris and directly under Prussian eyes.

These measures further fueled the growing resentment of the workers and other toiling masses, and began to ruin even lower middle-class livelihoods. The tinderbox was about to explode into the historic Paris Commune. It would also spread across France through more short-lived armed uprisings in several other cities.

Part II. The rise and fall of the Paris Commune, March 18 – May 28, 1871

To summarize, the following factors combined to create the conditions for civil war between the worker-led toiling masses of Paris and the Thiers government: (1) the shameful defeat in the war against Germany; (2) the general state of economic ruin among the masses during the Paris siege; (3) deep social discontent among the workers against capitalist exploitation, together with vague but growing aspirations for a socialist system; (4) widespread indignation of the masses against the upper classes and government authorities, which were reactionary-monarchist, incompetent, and wallowing in their luxurious lifestyles.

1. How did the Paris Commune rise up in defiance of the Versailles regime?

From the time of the Prussian siege until the new National Assembly was formed, the masses of Paris led by a militant working class had organized and armed themselves into National Guard units of 200,000 men, and with a capacity to make independent political decisions. The masses' armed strength was estimated at 450,000 rifles and other firearms, 2,000 cannons, and immense stocks of ammunition.

The National Guard units in Paris, now composed of 215 battalions except for one or two Bonapartist battalions, constituted themselves into the Federation of the National Guard (thenceforth they were also called the Federals).

On March 3, the Federation's program and statutes were approved by delegates elected from all Paris arrondissements. On March 15, the Federation elected a Central Committee (CC) to which they now reported instead of the Versailles-appointed commander. All able-bodied citizens were enjoined to organize committees of battalions, councils of legions, and to send delegates to the CC.

Paris was now an armed camp of the proletariat defying the government at Versailles. A situation of dual power existed. The most urgent questions were these: How would the Versailles regime defuse the bomb that was Paris? And would Paris just bow down and disarm?

The Versailles regime, backed by the Prussian state, knew it had to disarm Paris. But the people had paid for the city's defense with their own blood, sweat and tears. They asserted their right to bear arms. In fact, they had paid for 400 pieces of artillery with their own money at the start of the siege. They could not just be ordered to stand down, disarm, and allow the arrest of their leaders, especially by a

monarchist regime with Prussian backing.

People of Paris defend the National Guard cannons. Thiers brought his provocations to high pitch by demanding the surrender of Parisian arms, including the 400 cannons which the masses deemed as theirs. Arriving in Paris on March 15, Thiers' real aim was to seize the fortifications and fully disarm the National Guard. But his immediate focus was on getting the cannons.

On the early dawn of March 18, Thiers mobilized 20,000 army troops and loyal Guard units to seize the artillery pieces: 171 cannon emplaced on the Montmartre heights, 74 on the Belleville heights, and the rest in 16 other locations. Through posters all over the city, he also called on all Parisians to side with Versailles and condemn the CC of the Federals. Army teams of the 88th Regiment under Gen. Lecomte disabled the Montmartre guardsmen, seized some pieces, and moved them with difficulty to the foot of the heights. But a great number of cannon remained on the heights.

Meanwhile, a big crowd composed mostly of women and children began to gather and shame the troops who struggled to move the cannon pieces, offering bread and wine to persuade the hungry troops to stand down. Others used drums to sound the alarm, and soon the main streets were echoing with church bells and bugles. National Guard forces arrived from all directions. Together with the crowd, they convinced the army troops not to fire (despite Lecomte's repeated orders) and to fraternize instead with the Federals.

The Federals arrested Lecomte and forced him to order his troops to evacuate another fort. At 9 am the Federals retook the Montmartre heights and replaced the cannon pieces. Similar tugs of war to control other cannon occurred elsewhere. The army units sent by Thiers were dissolving. At 11 am, the Federals had retaken nearly all the cannon except for 10 pieces. At around 3 pm, Thiers and his ministers fled back to Versailles. In the Chaussee des Martyrs later that afternoon, the 1848 butcher Gen. Clement-Thomas was spotted and arrested by the crowd. He and Lecomte were both executed by some of their own mutinous soldiers.

Central Committee acts as provisional government. The CC of the Federals, representing the people of the city, was now the sole power in Paris. That same day (March 18), crowds gathered at the Hôtel de Ville amidst shouts of "Vive la Commune!" By midnight, the CC began to function as organ of political power. In its proclamation of March 18, it said:

The proletarians of Paris, in the midst of the defeats and betrayals of the ruling class, have come to understand that they must save the situation by taking the conduct of public affairs into their own hands. ... They have realised that it is their highest duty and their absolute right to make themselves the masters of their own fate and to seize the power of the government.

Some CC members were hesitant to openly declare that they were now the provisional revolutionary government of Paris. However, with the full support of almost the entire population and seeing no other choice, the CC began to take its first tentative and often unsure steps in that direction. Despite the worry that it had no authority to legislate, it was already performing the acts of a provisional government.

Its earliest measures were related to occupying and strengthening the forts around Paris, and preparing for the elections to the Commune. It also created a de-facto ministerial cabinet, delegating specific leaders to take on specific official functions—often simply because the Thiers camp, in its move to Versailles, had fully stripped Paris of its administrative apparatus.

The March 21-22 reactionary march. Some conciliatory mayors, especially in the wealthy 1st and 2nd arrondissements, instigated a mob of royalists, Bonapartists, reactionary students and bullies on March 21 and 22. Their aim was to challenge the CC's authority and capture the headquarters of the Federals. At the Place Vendôme, on March 21, National Guard forces under Jules Bergeret's command peacefully dispersed the mob. The next day's reactionary march proved more violent, when the mob returned with firearms and other weapons. Bergeret's forces had to disperse them with a single volley—with casualties on both sides.

Municipal elections held, Commune proclaimed. The CC had been reticent in immediately holding municipal elections throughout Paris, hoping to get first the mayors' (heads of arrondissements) consent and thus gain some legality for the elections. After having postponed the vote twice, the CC was now pressured by the Federal rank and file to finally hold it on March 26. The handful of delegates elected by wealthy districts waived their seats, leaving the overwhelming majority of 60-80 revolutionary delegates of working-class districts to carry the work of the Commune.

On March 27, practically the whole Paris population turned out to welcome the election results with joyful singing, dancing and cheering. The next day, some 200,000 gathered around the Hôtel de Ville to the sound of cannon salutes, bugles, and drums. Red flags waved in the air, and the revolutionary songs "Marseillaise" and the "Chant du Depart" were sung. The National Guard's CC turned over the power to the newly-elected Commune, and the members of both CC and Commune appeared together on the hotel balcony, with red scarves over their shoulders.

Amid the noise of drums and cannon, a Federal's voice boomed: "In the name of the people, the Commune is proclaimed!" A united response reverberated from the thousands who gathered: "Vive la Commune!"

Some of the better-known leading members of the Commune and their main assignments or roles were the following:

- **Émile Eudes** (medical doctor, journalist, member of the International, Blanquist), as commissioner for war; later, with Paul Antoine Brunel (French army lieutenant, Blanquist);
- **Charles Delescluze** (lawyer, journalist, revolutionary veteran Jacobinist of 1830 and 1848, politician of the Second Republic, political prisoner of long standing, member of the International), as commissioner for foreign relations and for war;
- **Jarosław Dąbrowski** or Jaroslav Dombrowski (member of the Polish nobility, former Russian army officer, old Narodnik revolutionary, refugee from Siberian exile), as a leading general and later commander-in-chief of the Paris Commune's military forces
- **Émile-Victor Duval** (worker, member of the International, Blanquist), prefectory of police;
- **Raoul Rigault** (journalist, revolutionary since his youth), prefectory of police;
- **Louis-Eugène Varlin** (bookbinder, trade-unionist, member of the International, Proudhonist) and **François Jourde** (accountant), as commissioners for finances; Varlin also served as lead person on labor relations and later became a war commissioner;
- **Édouard-Marie Vaillant** (engineer and lawyer, member of the International, Proudhonist), as commissioner for the interior, including education;
- **Leó Frankel** (Hungarian goldsmith, organizer of migrant workers, member of the International), as commissioner for labor and exchange;
- **Félix Pyat** (journalist, playwright, independent socialist politician), as member of the

- Committee on Public Safety;
- **Théophile Ferré** (probably a law clerk), as member of the Committee on Public Safety;
- **Adolphe Alphonse Assi** (worker, member of the International, Proudhonist-leaning) to administer the government machinery at the Hôtel de Ville;
- **Edouard Moreau de Beauvière** (literary writer), to supervise the *Journal officiel* (the revolutionary newspaper of the Commune) and the printing press;
- **Louise Michel, Elizabeth Dmitrieff**, and many other women of working-class and petty-bourgeois backgrounds, while they did not hold any official positions in the Commune and its armed forces, nonetheless served as leaders of its various local and women's organizations and as practical military commanders and street fighters in the final weeks.

2. How did civil war unfold between the Paris Commune and the Versailles government?

Despite the signs of growing counter-revolution, the CC (even before the new Commune's election) had been complacent and careless in dealing with the Versailles effort to retake the forts and to tighten its encirclement around Paris.

The CC tasked Gen. Charles Lullier (the National Guard overall commander, who turned out to be most incompetent) with securing the city fortifications before Versailles took them first. But Lullier was very slow in completing the task. Surprisingly, he did not occupy the strategic fortress of Mont Valerien—the key to Paris and to Versailles. On March 20, the fortress was occupied by Versailles troops.

The CC tolerated Lullier's other questionable actions. After the Commune was proclaimed, he was replaced by Émile Eudes, Paul Antoine Brunel, and Émile-Victor Duval as military troika, with Bergeret as National Guard commander. Duval and Eudes pushed for an immediate march on Versailles, to force Thiers to either surrender or flee. But this was rejected—again showing how indecision and softness prevailed among Commune leaders in dealing with Versailles. Thiers thereby gained breathing space to quickly consolidate his military position.

Even among the general population of Paris, there was misplaced optimism that any further conflict with the Versailles troops could be defused peaceably, by fraternization between the two sides, in a hoped-for repeat of the March 18 uprising.

While Thiers carefully marshalled his forces, the Commune leaders groped in the dark towards the correct course of military action. On April 2, finally, they faced a serious military challenge. Versailles troops attacked a Guards detachment and murdered their captives. Paris immediately took up the cry: "To Versailles! March on the Versailles!"

On the early morning of April 3, a 28,000-strong National Guard force marched towards Versailles along four separate routes. The 15,000 troops of Jules Bergeret and Gustave Flourens had to pass on the north and east flanks beneath the cannon of Mont Valerien (the key fort which Lullier did not occupy). The Federals assumed that the troops inside the fort would not fire on them, and that fraternization would again save the day. But the fort rained gunfire on the Federals, who had to fight in a disorganized way through other enemy strong points before they could fall back to Paris. (Flourens was captured and killed during the retreat.)

The botched march to Versailles and the hasty retreat stunned the Parisians. It reinforced the military

conservatism among the Commune leaders. From then on, Paris fell back to the defensive and no longer dared to resume the offensive against Versailles.

3. What were the main political trends within the Paris Commune?

Lenin explained the trends within the Paris Commune in terms of class alignments:

At first this movement was extremely indefinite and confused. It was joined by patriots who hoped that the Commune would renew the war with the Germans and bring it to a successful conclusion. It enjoyed the support of the small shopkeepers who were threatened with ruin unless there was a postponement of payments on debts and rent (the government refused to grant this postponement, but they obtained it from the Commune). Finally, it enjoyed, at first, the sympathy of bourgeois republicans who feared that the reactionary National Assembly ... would restore the monarchy. But it was of course the workers ... , among whom active socialist propaganda had been carried on during the last years of the Second Empire and many of whom even belonged to the International, who played the principal part in this movement.

On a daily basis, the Commune had to resolve the many questions of policy and attend to the thousands of details in governing a city of 2 million amid a most uneasy situation. Here it faced internal difficulties, as Engels described: “The Commune was consumed in unfruitful strife between the two parties which split it, the Blanquists (the majority) and the Proudhonists (the minority)...”

Blanquists. This was a group led by Louis Auguste Blanqui, which advocated a type of socialist revolution to be carried out not by the masses but by a small and tight conspiratorial group, which would seize power in behalf of the people and wield dictatorial rule to build socialism for the people. Their great majority were socialist only by proletarian instinct—with a few exceptions like Vaillant who was familiar with the socialist theories of Marx and Engels. (Blanqui himself was among the leaders of the Oct. 31, 1870 uprising, but was captured by Versailles forces and remained a political prisoner throughout the Commune until he was released in 1879.)

The Blanquists did not see the need either for a broad mass movement or the leading role of the working class, as it could not distinguish between the proletariat and the revolutionary bourgeoisie. It was more interested in the practical measures for overthrowing capitalism rather than pursue rigorous theories and principles for building socialism.

Blanquists, estimated at 1,000-strong even before the Commune, were organized into highly compartmentalized cells of about 10 persons each. Many were armed and ready to perform practical tasks once the uprising began. Their audacity, discipline, and leadership skills made up for their small number. They were predominant in the National Guard CC; they initiated and led the (failed) October 31, 1870 uprising during the siege of Paris, and were the majority in the Commune itself.

Proudhonists and other Internationalists. The minority in the Commune (but a most influential one) were followers of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, a former utopian-socialist who is considered to be the founder of anarchism. Many of them were also members of the International, where there was a strong anarchist bloc led by Mikhail Bakunin. In principle, the Proudhonists modeled their economic program on the interests of the small peasant and craftsman. They belittled the role of organized workers in large-scale mass production and industry, and granted its importance only in exceptional cases such as railways.

In practice, however, when the Commune presented them with the most urgent measures for its survival, the Proudhonists (especially the left-wing militants) set aside Proudhon's anarchist theories. Rather, as Engels said: "It does the Commune the greatest honor that in all its economic measures the 'driving spirit' was not any set of 'principles', but simple, practical needs." Most of these measures reflected, not the spirit of Proudhonism, but more closely "the spirit of German scientific socialism."

The only social measure that fully hewed to Proudhon's principles was the decision not to confiscate the Bank of France—a big blunder that greatly contributed to the Commune's downfall.

Women's powerful role. One distinctive characteristic of the Commune is that it unleashed a gigantic women's movement. The struggle for women's rights, equality and liberation in France had suffered setbacks during the 60 years of Bonapartist regimes and restored monarchies. Super-macho values predominated even among the Commune's mostly male leaders and National Guard fighters, especially among the Proudhonists.

There were a few exceptions, such as Eugène Varlin, Benoît Malon, Édouard Vaillant and Leó Frankel, who promoted women's equality in their areas of responsibility. As the Commune pressed ahead, many more women activists stood up to assert their equality and leading roles. They won the support and respect of more and more Commune leaders.

Elisabeth Dmitrieff, Paule Mink, Louise Michel, Nathalie Lemel, André Léo, Eliska Vincent, and Noémi Reclus were just a few of the many leading women of the Commune. They had already been trade-unionist fighters, socialist organizers and feminist campaigners leading workers' strikes and girls' education programs in the 1860s. During the Franco-Prussian War and the siege of Paris, many women activists joined the "vigilance committees," ran cooperatives and mutual-aid groups, and led the militant crowds that marched alongside their National Guard units throughout those turbulent months.

On their initiative when the Commune emerged, the Union des Femmes (Women's Union) was organized among the city's working-class women, with its first meeting on April 11. The Women's Union, a member of the International, proved to be among the most active and militant Communards—in maintaining the organized mass base among the Red Clubs, in pushing for socio-economic measures that protected women and workers' rights, in treating the sick and wounded, and in fighting and dying alongside men in the frontlines and barricades.

Strong internationalist current. The Commune likewise emphasized a strong internationalist-socialist current, especially with the direct participation of many members of the International. It mobilized veterans of 1848, political refugees and immigrant workers and their families who came from other parts of Europe. Commune leaders like Leo Frankel of Austria-Hungary, the veteran Polish revolutionary Dombrowski, Elisabeth Dmitrieff and many other Communards from other nationalities raised high the banner of the world proletariat and fought in the barricades alongside their French comrades-in-arms. The Commune's internationalist spirit was upheld right at the outset, when the foreigners elected to it were confirmed, because "the flag of the Commune is the flag of the World Republic."

4. What were the most prominent achievements of the Commune?

In spite of many unfavorable conditions and its very short timespan, the Paris Commune was able to promulgate measures that underscored its historic proletarian-socialist revolutionary significance and aims. Its most fundamental achievement is that, for the first time in world history, the working class

was able to set up its own state and learn in practice how to wield proletarian power.

Even though the Commune's leadership and most organized sections carried different political platforms, it was able to unite the entire working class in accomplishing the democratic tasks which, as Lenin noted, "the bourgeoisie could only proclaim" but not complete. It proved to the world that the working-class masses—who throughout the Commune consciously defined and proudly called themselves as "the proletariat," the social class most oppressed by capitalism—could organize themselves into a proletarian state, democratize the entire political system as never before, and build the foundations of socialism on the ruins of capitalism.

In many respects, the Commune was both a working-class weapon and school for class struggle and socialism. It was a product of a spontaneous rebellion, true. But along the way, it was shaped and driven forward by groups and individuals already with much experience and some theoretical understanding of the proletarian and socialist movements of the previous decades. Beneath the Commune's seemingly spontaneous reactions to events as they unfolded, a kernel of conscious and organized proletarian-socialist revolutionary movement began to sprout and take root.

Lenin explained it this way:

The Commune sprang up spontaneously. No one consciously prepared it in an organized way. ... But in modern society, the proletariat, economically enslaved by capital, cannot dominate politically unless it breaks the chains which fetter it to capital. That is why the movement of the Commune was bound to take on a socialist tinge, i.e., to strive to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie, the rule of capital, and to destroy the very foundations of the contemporary social order.

Abolition of the standing army and bureaucracy. As one of its first official acts, on March 30, 1871, the Commune abolished conscription and the standing army. Standing armies had served as the blunt weapon of previous ruling classes in history, including the French bourgeois state which now wanted to crush Paris. In its place, the Commune declared the National Guard to be the sole armed force, in which all able-bodied citizens were to be enlisted. The Commune likewise disbanded the the bourgeois battalions of the National Guard.

In a parallel move, the Commune also abolished the bureaucracy. In its place was instituted the broadest possible democracy. It cut off all lines of authority emanating from the bourgeois government sitting at Versailles, declaring as null and void all "orders and communications coming from the Versailles government or from its adherents". It stipulated that judges shall be elected by the people. Consciously or not, its leaders had redefined and transformed the state and organs of state, which had served the ruling classes through the past centuries.

In contrast to the feudal and bourgeois states, and to emphasize its fully democratic and proletarian character, the Commune defined its own very simple rules (as Engels restated in 1891):

In the first place, [the Commune] filled all posts—administrative, judicial and educational—by election on the basis of universal suffrage of all concerned, subject to the right of recall at any time by the same electors. And, in the second place, all officials, high or low, were paid only the wages received by other workers. The highest salary paid by the Commune to anyone was 6,000 francs [annually].

These rules were applied to all officials regardless of rank. Binding mandates were given to delegates to representative bodies—mandates that they must not violate lest they are subjected to recall. This system encouraged the rise of committed leaders immersed among the masses, working conscientiously as government functionaries while receiving ordinary worker's wages.

Separation of church from state. On April 2, the Commune decreed the separation of the church from the state in the most straightforward manner: it abolished all state payments for religious purposes, transformed all church property into national property, and abrogated all prerogatives of the clergy. In this regard, the Commune also introduced free tuition and made popular education purely secular.

Social and economic reforms. The Commune had its hands full in rebuilding the new ship of state and keeping it afloat in the stormy sea of civil war. Thus, its attempts at social and economic reforms accomplished very little, and were limited only to the most urgent remedial measures. Nonetheless, these minor acts reflected the Commune's character as a popular workers' government.

In its most significant socialist measure, the Commune decreed on April 16 that all factories and workshops abandoned by the employers were to be registered and handed over to associations of workers so they could resume production. Compensation would be paid on the basis of decision by arbitration committees. Furthermore, night-work in bakeries was forbidden. The system of fines (basically a form of legalized robbery of the workers) was abolished.

All rent payments for dwellings from October 1870 until April 1871 were remitted, with the amounts already paid to be booked as future rent payments. All sales of articles pledged in the municipal loan office were stopped. Marx commented: "The decrees about rent and commercial bills were two master strokes: without them 3/4 of the trades people [who were allied with the proletariat] would have become bankrupt."

Organizing the masses, full practice of democracy. Organizing the masses was among the less-documented and most taken-for-granted achievements of the Commune. Mass organizations flourished in Paris, first during the Prussian siege, and then throughout the duration of Commune. The National Guard itself was an armed mass organization of all able-bodied male citizens, united under one Federation and its Central Committee. In the working-class districts, Vigilance Committees exercised power on behalf of the arrondissement mayors. The Commune also encouraged trade unions, cooperatives, Red Clubs, and women's associations.

On the basis of the broad masses being organized as active participants in the Paris Commune, they created a new government and continually infused new blood into it. They fully exercised not just universal suffrage but produced new leaders from their own ranks. As Jose Ma. Sison explained: "The Paris Commune had the attributes of a true democracy while being at the same time a class dictatorship over the exploiting classes."

Women's rights. While it remained hobbled by the exclusively male suffrage and purely male National Guard duty practiced at that time, the Commune did promote women to leading positions and enable women's empowerment in their daily lives. It encouraged the active support of women in the Commune's social, economic, political, and military tasks.

With the Commune's active support, women's organizations and committees set up welfare programs, orphanages, clinics, soup kitchens, and relentless campaigns for gender equality in the workplace and social benefits. The Commune gave particular attention to the education of girls, setting up a

commission on girls' education and supporting the initiatives of the Union des Femmes along these lines. In its last weeks, the Commune set up two technical schools, one for girls.

Finance matters. The CC of the Federals and the Commune proved much more timid in using the finances of the old order. They dared not open the coffers of the old ministry of finance. Rather, at first they meekly asked for money from the financier Rothschild—who gave 500,000 francs (happily, since he was let off so easily).

Charles Victor Beslay (a conservative-republican and Proudhonist entrepreneur) was a member of the Commune and its finance commission, and acted as its delegate at the Bank of France. But he avoided interference in the Bank's internal affairs and the question of nationalization. Two battalions of Federals had to physically enforce the Commune's demands for money before the Bank's governor handed over 2 million francs. Due to the Commune's over-legalistic concerns, however, it did not seize the Bank itself.

Failed efforts to take nationwide power. From the start, the Commune leaders were fully united and explicit in their common goal to establish a truly democratic and socialist republic for the whole of France. They believed that the Commune would soon rule not just over Paris, but would spread to other provinces. They envisioned a nationwide system of people's communes, with a national delegation seated in Paris, which would be the basis for a new democratic and socialist republic. Many Communards hoped further that victory in France would spark other similar (i.e., worker-led socialist) revolutions throughout Europe.

Hence the Commune leaders sent emissaries and manifestos to other French departments to rally around Paris. Marx and the other leaders of the International exerted their all to rally all the national sections and workers' movements in support of the Commune and uprisings in other cities. But time was fast running short. Before it could extend its power elsewhere, the Commune had to confront the seat of counter-revolution in Versailles.

5. How did the Commune fall in the face of counter-revolution?

The incompetent Cluseret. For nearly a whole month after the April 3 fiasco, Gen. Gustave-Paul Cluseret was given overall command of the Parisian forces. Despite his extensive military experience with Garibaldi in Italy, with Union troops in the American Civil War, and as Fenian insurrectionist in Ireland, he proved to be as incompetent as Lullier. Under his command, the National Guard organization and provisions were completely neglected, and the Federals' CC began to interfere in the conduct of the military operations.

On April 6-7 the Versailles troops captured a Seine River crossing on the western front, even as their April 11 attack on the southern front failed. On April 30, the fort of Issy, a heavily-defended strategic point for the defense of Paris, was evacuated by most of its garrison. The Parisians, demanding severe disciplinary action for such neglect of defenses, had Cluseret arrested and thrown into prison.

Efforts to bolster Parisian defense under Rossel. Next, the Commune gave the overall command to a young officer, Col. Louis Rossel—the only senior French army officer to join the Commune (as a “friend of the people” but not as a revolutionary). Quickly, Rossel reorganized Parisian defense. He streamlined the National Guard into mobile combat groups supported by sections of artillery, while ensuring munitions and provisions. (Note: Of the 1,740 artillery pieces in Commune hands, not more than 320 were ever used—reflecting the Commune's tactical failure to maximize its weaponry.) He also

had a second line of fortifications built within Paris—although these remained unused until the last days of desperate street fighting.

Now the city was being continually bombarded by Versailles artillery. In order to bolster Versailles' assault on Paris, the Prussians released the French armies taken prisoner at Sedan and Metz. On May 3-4, Versailles forces took the Moulin Saquet redoubt on the southern front. On May 9, Fort Issy fell—reduced to shambles after Versailles forces battered it with 70 artillery pieces.

Paris defenses crumble under Delescluze. In the face of the Fort Issy debacle, Rossel resigned his overall command and fled. He was replaced by Louis Charles Delescluze (an austere and noble Jacobin veteran), who was fully committed to the Commune's principles and defense, but found it difficult to command the untrained troops and strengthen discipline in the ranks. Nonetheless, he was greatly helped by the Polish internationalists Dombrowski (Jarosław Dąbrowski)—a former officer of the Russian army and Narodnik revolutionary.

But the defense of Paris was no longer a question of honest or capable generals. The National Guard had become so disorganized that only the heroism and bravery of its worker-fighters kept the Commune alive.

On May 13-14, Versailles troops took Fort Vanves on the southern front despite the Communards' heroic defense. On the western front, the attackers captured numerous villages and buildings until they reached the city wall and its main defenses. On May 19, a continuous barrage from 300 artillery pieces battered the defenses. The city walls began to crumble. On May 21, a massive Versailles army, outnumbering the Communards by at least 5 to 1, succeeded in forcing their way into the city.

The Prussians, who held the northern and eastern forts, were forbidden by the armistice to move towards the city. So they simply allowed the Versailles troops to pass through their side and attack the city on a wide circular front, catching the defenders by surprise. There was weak resistance in the western half, the wealthier side of Paris. It grew more tenacious as the troops approached the working-class districts in the eastern half.

Barricades and the Commune's fall. As the Communards fell back to the inner city, Delescluze resigned his command and called instead for revolutionary war by the masses through barricades and street fighting. At least 15,000 Parisians, many of them women and children, responded to the call and entrenched themselves on the barricades. There was no longer a Paris-wide defense plan, only local initiative and sheer resistance by groups fighting in every neighborhood. Nonetheless, Dombrowski, Delescluze, Varlin, Rigault, Ferre and a few others still tried to coordinate the defense.

Everywhere, the heroic masses of Communards fought fiercely, with boundless courage and self-sacrifice. Many barricade fighters sang the "Marseillaise" and shouted "Pour la solidarite humaine!" as they fell. The Polish internationalist, Dombrowski, realizing the end was near, exposed himself to enemy gunfire on the barricades; he died of his wounds two days later.

The Commune was now on its death throes. But Thiers the monster thirsted for more killings, in his wish that a bigger bloodbath would drown the revolutionary spirit of Paris and teach it a life-long lesson. In the mind of his ilk, the Communards were more repulsive than the Prussian occupiers, and had to be exterminated en masse. Thus the Versailles went in for the kill. The Bloody Week (May 21-28) was well underway.

Federals defending historic Montmartre, place of the first uprising, could no longer be bolstered by reinforcements and munitions. On May 22, Montmartre finally fell to 30,000 assaulting army troops. On May 25, in the barricades of the Chateau-d'Eau, Delescluze walked unflinchingly, wearing his Commune ceremonial sash, and faced the Versailles with only a cane. He was killed in a hail of bullets.

On May 27-28, after eight days' shelling and fighting across most working-class districts, often with fierce hand-to-hand combat, the last organized barricades of the Commune finally fell on the heights of Belleville and Menilmontant districts—most famously including the last 147 defenders killed at the Père Lachaise cemetery. On May 29, a Versailles brigade accepted the surrender of the fort of Vincennes, shot the Communard officers against the wall, and pulled down the red flag from the mast.

Communard women fought heroically. Author Judy Cox wrote:

Women were involved in all the military engagements during Bloody Week and many were listed among the wounded and the dead. One name on the list was that of Blanche Lefebvre, a laundress at the Sainte-Marie des Batignolles washhouse. She was a member of the Club of the Social Revolution, which had been set up on 3 May in the local church. Lefebvre was also a member of the Central Committee of the Union of Women. She was one of 120 women who held the barricade at the Place Blanche for several hours until they ran out of ammunition and were overrun. Those taken at the barricade were shot on the spot. Lefebvre was one of them. She was aged just 24. (“Genderquake: socialist women and the Paris Commune,” Jan. 5, 2021)

Orgy of mass killing and state terror. All through that Bloody Week, Versailles troops mindlessly shot down not just Communards engaged in combat but defenseless men, women and children who crossed their paths.

Parisians of all ages found with the slightest indication of having fought as Communards were shot on sight. In city streets and squares, the moment fighting stopped, all civilians nearby were gathered and gunned down in groups—including the wounded, medical corps, women and children. Corpses were piled into huge heaps. Where breech-loading rifles could no longer kill the huddled victims fast enough, *mitrailleuses* (Belgian-made machine guns similar to the Gatling gun) were used for quicker butchery.

Leaders of the Commune and other known revolutionaries were hunted down like animals. Varlin, leader of the French section of the International, member of the National Guards CC and the Commune, was captured and taken to Montmartre, where he was tortured, blinded, and finally shot. In the case of some Commune leaders who eluded capture, unlucky people who resembled them were killed on the spot. Even some moderate republicans who were non-combatants, foreigners who looked like Internationalists, and those unfairly denounced by secret spies, were summarily executed.

When the butchers finally tired of their mass executions, they shifted to other forms of terror. They conducted mass arrests and shot on the spot those identified as Federals. The rest were herded into camps to face summary courts-martial, usually requiring just a few minutes to try each individual. Those lucky enough to be sent to Versailles for retrial had to pass through a gate where butcher officers like the Marquis de Gallifet stood guard. He randomly picked hundreds of men and women on pure whim, separated them from the mass of other prisoners, and had them shot against the wall.

The Versailles forces' assault against female Communards was exceptionally brutal. Bourgeois counter-

revolutionary propaganda ranted that women of the Commune “unsexed themselves,” and called them “evil, amazons, furies, jackals,” *pétroleuses* (arsonists) and “hideous viragoes.” Whipped up to a frenzy by such propaganda, government troops “systematically humiliated, stripped, raped and murdered” female fighters of the Commune. (Cox, 2021)

As the last barricades fell, the orgy of mass killing proceeded in the Père Lachaise cemetery. The Wall of the Communards (*mur des fédérés*) at a corner of the cemetery remains until today a sacred spot of pilgrimage for revolutionaries around the world. In Engels’ words, the Communards’ Wall is “a mute but eloquent testimony to the frenzy of which the ruling class is capable as soon as the working class dares to stand up for its rights.”

The dead and dying victims, including those wounded but still alive, were flung into large hastily dug pits and buried en masse. On the following nights, some movement and groans were observed from the mass graves. In working-class neighborhoods, bodies rotted inside houses while awaiting burial. Most working-class families in Paris suffered at least one dead. Countless corpses floated on the Seine’s red-tinged waters.

In total, some 20,000 to 30,000 Parisians—including countless women and children—were killed by Thiers’ soldier-butchers during the Commune’s fall. Some 45,000 were arrested (including some 1,000 women)—many of whom were also executed. As of January 1, 1875, military courts had sentenced 13,700 persons, including 80 women and 60 children, to prison or exile to the remote islands of New Caledonia; 3,000 of these died in prison. In all, the working class lost about 100,000 of its best sons and daughters, whom Lenin called “the flower of the Parisian proletariat.”

Part III. Legacy and lessons of the Paris Commune

1. What was the attitude of Marx and the International to the Commune?

As mentioned earlier, members of the International—including its entire French section and other non-French emigres such as Poles and Germans—actively participated in the efforts to organize the independent arming of the masses during the siege of Paris and in the subsequent work of the Commune itself. Marx and Engels followed the 1870-71 events as closely as they could. They fully used the postal and telegraphic services between London and Paris, and fed their war reports and analyses to various newspapers.

Marx famously said at first that he did not favor the overthrow of the Government of National Defense and the setting up of the Commune at that time. Right after Napoleon’s Empire collapsed and the new republic was proclaimed, he said:

... the French section [intends] ... to do foolish things in the name of the International. They want to overthrow the Provisional Government and establish a Commune de Paris. ... Any attempt at upsetting the new government in the present crisis, when the enemy is almost knocking at the doors of Paris, would be a desperate folly. ... Let [the French workers] calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of Republican liberty for the work of their own class organization. It will gift them with fresh Herculean powers for the regeneration of France, and our common task—the emancipation of labor. (Marx letter to Engels, Sept. 6, 1870)

But once the March 18 uprising triggered the Commune, Marx publicly and unreservedly aligned

himself with it, supporting it from start to end, and rallying the rest of the International in that regard. He expressed profound marvel at the heroism of the Paris workers: “What elasticity, what historical initiative, what a capacity for sacrifice in these Parisians!” He regarded the Commune “as a historic experience of enormous importance, as a certain advance of the world proletarian revolution, as a practical step that was more important than hundreds of programmes and arguments.”

When Frankel and Varlin (members of the International and two of the most influential leaders of the Commune) asked Marx for advice and aid, he wrote back on May 13, 1871: “... For your cause I have written some hundreds of letters to all the corners and ends of the world, wherever we have connections.” Largely through the influence and connections of the International, the Commune aroused tremendous sympathies from the working classes of Europe and America.

In many German cities, the workers held huge mass meetings to express solidarity. In the Reichstag, Bebel spoke with passion:

... Be assured that the entire European proletariat, and all that have a feeling for freedom and independence in their heart, have their eyes fixed on Paris. And if Paris is for the present crushed, I remind you that the struggle in Paris is only a small affair of outposts, that the main conflict in Europe is still before us, and that ere many decades pass away the battlecry of the Parisian proletariat, war to the palace, peace to the cottage, death to want and idleness, will be the battlecry of the entire European proletariat.

Marx was particularly close to Varlin (despite his being a Proudhonist) and Frankel (who aligned with Marx on many debates), corresponding with them on Commune matters. Marx’s strong influence among Commune leaders was also reflected in his sympathetic dealings with Blanqui and his followers. Two of Blanqui’s most influential supporters, Charles Longuet (who was a leading member of the Paris Commune) and Paul Lafargue (who went to unoccupied Bordeaux to raise French public support for besieged Paris), were members of the International. Both were married to Marx’s daughters.

Marx’s reportage and running commentary on the events of 1870-71 became the basis of the series of his writings in the form of “Addresses of the General Council of the International,” which were later published as *The Civil War in France*. A major work on the Commune, it showed his “remarkable gift for grasping clearly the character, the import and the necessary consequences of great historical events, at a time when these events are still in progress before our eyes or have only just taken place.” (Engels)

Marx and Engels were in fact thrilled that the Blanquist and Proudhonist leaders of the Commune, through their own revolutionary practice, disproved the petty-bourgeois socialist and anarchist theories that guided them at first. Instead of being content with a state of anarchy, as advocated by Proudhonism, they established the Commune as the state machinery of the proletariat. Instead of relying on conspirational plots and dictatorial measures of the few, as advocated by Blanquism, they relied on the revolutionary enthusiasm and initiative of the toiling masses in exercising proletarian power.

At the same time, Marx and Engels seriously weighed some of the Commune’s most obvious failings, and relayed their opinions and suggestions to their contacts in the French sections of the International, many of whom were leaders and fighters of the Commune.

As embattled Paris entered its Bloody Week, Marx told the International’s General Council that the end was near, yet he boldly declared: “[If] the Commune is beaten, the struggle will only be deferred. The

principles of the Commune are eternal and cannot be crushed; they will assert themselves again and again until the working classes are emancipated.” (The Record of Marx’s Speech on the Paris Commune, May 23, 1871. *MECW* Vol. 22, p. 595)

2. What were the Commune’s failings that caused its downfall?

Immediate causes of the defeat. Lenin, in his speech “In Memory of the Commune” (1911, for its 40th anniversary), summarized the attitudes of the various class actors that shaped the Commune and led to its fall. He did not mince his words: “Only the workers remained loyal to the Commune to the end.”

Lenin explained:

The bourgeois republicans and the petty bourgeoisie soon broke away from it: the former were frightened off by the revolutionary-socialist, proletarian character of the movement; the latter broke away when they saw that it was doomed to inevitable defeat. Only the French proletarians supported their government fearlessly and untiringly, they alone fought and died ... for the cause of the emancipation of the working class, for a better future for all toilers.

He continued:

Deserted by its former allies and left without support, the Commune was doomed to defeat. The entire bourgeoisie of France, all the landlords, stockbrokers, factory owners, all the robbers, great and small, all the exploiters joined forces against it. This bourgeois coalition, supported by Bismarck (who released a hundred thousand French prisoners of war to help crush revolutionary Paris), succeeded in rousing the ignorant peasants and the petty bourgeoisie of the provinces against the proletariat of Paris, and forming a ring of steel around half of Paris (the other half was besieged by the German army).

The French workers also attempted to seize power in a few large cities (Marseilles, Lyons, St. Étienne, Dijon, etc.) and to provide help to Paris, but the attempts were short-lived. Paris was thus “left to its own resources and doomed to certain destruction.”

Commune lacked basic conditions for victory. In hindsight 40 years later, in the same article, Lenin discussed certain conditions that the Commune lacked in 1871, but which it absolutely needed to attain victory as a “social revolution” (with socialist aims while also completing the uncompleted tasks of the democratic revolution).

The first condition lacking, Lenin said, was highly developed productive forces. “French capitalism was still poorly developed, and France was at that time mainly a petty-bourgeois country (artisans, peasants, shopkeepers, etc.).”

The second condition lacking was “a proletariat adequately prepared” to lead the revolution. “[There] was no workers’ party; the working class had not gone through a long school of struggle and was unprepared, and for the most part did not even clearly visualise its tasks and the methods of fulfilling them. There was no serious political organization of the proletariat, nor were there strong trade unions and co-operative societies ...”

For Lenin, there was yet a third condition—something very practical but crucial for the Commune’s survival: time. The Commune needed time—

... an opportunity to take stock of the situation and to embark upon the fulfilment of its programme. It had scarcely had time to start work, when the government entrenched in Versailles and supported by the entire bourgeoisie began hostilities against Paris. The Commune had to concentrate primarily on self-defense. Right up to the very end, May 21-28, it had no time to think seriously of anything else.

Major mistakes and shortcomings. Those were the objective conditions. But there were also subjective mistakes that the Commune could have avoided. Many of them were minor or understandable, but at least two huge blunders greatly hastened its defeat.

First mistake: the Paris proletariat was over-magnanimous to its enemies. In the trenchant words of Marx, writing blow-by-blow commentaries while the Commune was still unfolding:

If they are defeated only their “good nature” will be to blame. They should have marched at once on Versailles ... The right moment was missed because of conscientious scruples. They did not want to *start the civil war*, as if ... Thiers had not already started the civil war with his attempt to disarm Paris. (Marx letter to Kugelmann, April 12, 1871)

In other words, while the Commune had the backing of a fully armed population in Paris, it only sought to exert moral influence on its enemies instead of destroying them. Its sense of patriotic duty in fighting the Prussian occupiers blurred its view of the unfolding civil war with the French ruling clique entrenched in Versailles. Thus it flinched from a resolute offensive, giving Versailles enough time to pursue and achieve its own aim of crushing Paris.

Although the Commune was armed, it used those arms only to defend itself once the Versailles offensive began. The Commune also underestimated the role of military initiative and tactical leadership in civil war, neglecting to fully utilize its available armed forces and to organize even its own proper defense.

Engels emphasized this lesson, with both strategic and tactical implications, about a people arming itself and using those arms to the fullest against the enemy. In his 1874 article “On Authority”, directed against the anarchists (who decried the Commune’s exercise of state authority backed by arms, and wished to have abolished the state at one stroke), he said: “Would the Paris Commune have lasted a single day if it had not made use of this authority of the armed people against the bourgeois? Should we not, on the contrary, reproach it for not having used it freely enough?” (*MECW*, Vol. 23, p. 425)

Second mistake: the Paris proletariat stopped half-way from imposing a socialist program according to its class interests. Still influenced by Proudhonist (anarchist) notions of “just exchange”, it limited itself mostly to populist or half-baked measures instead of “expropriating the expropriators”. Along this line, the Commune committed the unforgivable blunder of refusing to seize the Bank of France.

Both mistakes were reinforced ideologically, among many leaders, by the still-prevalent bourgeois traditions of the French revolution of 1793 and the legalities of French bourgeois institutions. The other shortcomings of the Commune—of which there were countless and varied ones—would find their root causes in these objective limitations and subjective mistakes.

Marx and Engels, for example, did not hide their frustration about the Commune’s indecision and vagueness in its program and aims; its having tolerated the phrase-mongers, incompetent generals, and

anarchic organization; and its wasting too much time on meetings where “long-winded talkers and demagogues” discussed petty issues while Versailles was already starting to tighten its stranglehold.

Commenting on hindsight judgments about the Commune’s many excesses (e.g. arbitrarily taking and killing hostages and destroying monarchist properties and symbols), Engels had this to say:

A lot of follies are unavoidably committed in every revolution, as they are indeed at all other times, and when at last people calm down sufficiently to be able to review events critically, they inevitably draw the following conclusion: we have done many things that it would have been better to leave undone, and have failed to do many things that it would have been better to do, and that is why things took a bad turn. (Engels, *Refugee Literature* series, 1874-75)

3. How did the Commune inspire the growth of the proletarian-socialist movement?

Immediately after the Commune’s collapse, the general socio-political situation became more repressive against the workers’ movement. This was especially true in the various European states, which recalled the 1848 Revolution and saw themselves being threatened once more by another social upheaval.

At the same time, successive generations of the working class learned to take inspiration and draw lessons from the Commune. They honored its martyrs, cherished its veterans who were in prison and exile, and studied its lessons. They scoffed at the worst reactionary red-scare propaganda and persecution campaigns thrown at them by the big bourgeoisie. As Engels remarked in 1895: “It was believed that the militant proletariat had been finally buried with the Paris Commune. But, completely to the contrary, it dates its most powerful resurgence from the Commune and the Franco-Prussian War.”

Within France, the bourgeoisie assumed that revolutionary socialism was dead after 1871. But five years later, a new generation of socialist workers emerged to pick up the red flag anew. By the 1880s, a new workers’ party waged a successful nationwide campaign to compel the release and return of many Communards still in prison or exile.

In other European countries, the embers of the Commune served to awaken and inspire the working class into advancing their movements and building their socialist parties. The events of 1870-71 “transferred the centre of gravity of the European workers’ movement in the meantime from France to Germany, ... [where] Social-Democracy experienced a still more rapid and enduring growth.” (Engels, 1895) Indeed, German chancellor Bismarck had tried to destroy the German Social-Democratic movement with repressive anti-socialist laws in 1878. But the repression merely made the party stronger, such that it could hold a most successful Erfurt Congress in 1891.

In a handful of countries such as Spain and Italy, Britain and some American cities (and as secret factions within the First International), anarchist groups rode on the continuing political ferment. They attempted to redirect the working class away from social revolution and into dark treacherous paths where they joined up with other reformist and sectarian groups.

On the other hand, many leaders of the Commune who escaped death, prison and brutal repression found themselves as refugees in England. They were warmly welcomed by Marx and Engels, and absorbed into the increasingly Marxist leadership of the International.

In a broad sense, the Paris Commune’s aftermath defined the paths taken by the proletarian-socialist

movement in the subsequent 20-30 years. The Commune gifted the proletariat with priceless lessons. It also showed that some conditions were still lacking for the advance to victory. Such conditions include mass proletarian parties armed with scientific-socialist theory and able to lead the workers' struggle in the specific conditions of their own countries.

This post-Paris Commune era, said Lenin, was thus a "period ... of the formation, growth and maturing of mass socialist parties with a proletarian class composition." The task at hand was for the working class to rally its forces, form proletarian parties in individual countries, and prepare for new revolutionary storms. Marx and Engels, and their work in the First International (which disbanded in 1876), helped prepare the basis for building such parties.

Based on the Paris Commune experience, Marx and Engels further developed their theories on state and revolution, the working-class struggles under capitalism, the political conditions and class alliances required for it to win power, and the features of the proletarian state and party. They defended its lessons against the anarchists (who viewed it too narrowly, as an example of the destruction of the state per se) and the reformists (who praised its social reforms but glossed over its revolutionary essence).

Lenin and the Russian Bolshevik party treasured the lessons of the Commune and the memory of its martyrs. On March 18, 1908, Lenin spoke at a Geneva meeting in commemoration of three anniversaries: the 25th anniversary of Marx's death, the 60th anniversary of the March 1848 revolution, and the anniversary of the Paris Commune. On April 15 (28), 1911, Lenin wrote the stirring "In Memory of the Commune" to commemorate its 40th anniversary. Finally, the lessons of the Commune as applied to the Russian revolution underlie much of Lenin's major work, *The State and Revolution* (especially in Ch. III).

The Internationale, the proletarian-revolutionary anthem. The Commune inspired so much awe among the masses of workers and radical intellectuals of that time, that they produced volumes of literature and many artistic works dedicated to its heroic martyrs, stories, and lessons. In the past 150 years, massive outpourings of deep proletarian sentiments, especially in solemn cultural form, marked the many anniversary commemorations of the Paris Commune, through meetings and demonstrations, and by placing wreaths on the graves of the Communards.

Of these artistic expressions, the most outstanding and timeless is the Internationale—a poem written in June 1871 by French socialist revolutionary, poet and singer, and painter of fabric and wallpaper designs, Eugène Pottier, after he escaped the Paris bloodbath. It was originally intended to be sung to the tune of "La Marseillaise" (the most-sung anthem in the barricades). During the next 16 years, Pottier revised the poem. It was finally published in 1887, the year he died.

A year later, Belgian socialist and composer Pierre de Geyter wrote a new melody, partly inspired by another barricade favorite ("Chant du Départ"). The rousing proletarian anthem quickly gained popularity among workers of other countries fighting on their own picketlines, protest marches, barricades and combat fronts, for class and human emancipation. The Internationale has become one of the most-translated, most-performed, most-popular, and most-beloved song of revolutionaries throughout the world.

4. What are the Paris Commune's most fundamental lessons for today's world?

The most fundamental lessons of the Paris Commune for today's world remain anchored on the historic but still unfulfilled mission of the proletariat to end wage slavery and emancipate itself together with

the whole of humanity, to wage organized resistance against all kinds of oppression and exploitation, and eventually to overthrow capitalism and build socialism. Here we focus on three fundamental lessons that ring as resonant as ever.

Proletarian party as practical center of leadership, guided by revolutionary theory. Throughout the many decades after the fall of the Commune, Marxists have gone deeper to understand the roots of its subjective weaknesses and mistakes. It is now clear that the main internal cause underlying the Commune's failure was the absence of a proletarian party guided by revolutionary theory, while its many groups of proletarian leaders and activists held on to various theories that often conflicted with each other and with concrete conditions.

The theories of Marx and Engels, while already enjoying a formidable influence within the International, were as yet only loosely understood among the Commune's leaders—including those who were themselves members of the International. It was Blanquism and Proudhonism that dominated among the leaders. This did not help to resolve the constant bickerings, vacillations, and over-extended debates within the leadership.

Thus, the Commune had no solidly unified party capable of providing correct leadership—if only to overthrow the Versailles regime, extend proletarian power beyond Paris, adopt consistent class-based policies, and conclude an honorable peace treaty with Prussia. (In comparison, the correct leadership of the Bolshevik party, with Lenin at the helm, proved crucial in winning the 1917 October Revolution and in consolidating the Soviet state under similar conditions of war, economic ruin, and tangled politics.)

It was thus reasonable that during the International's London Conference (held in September 1871 in lieu of a regular congress due to post-Commune repression throughout Europe), the most important decision was “to found, in each country, an independent proletarian party whose aim would be the conquest of political power by the working class.”

As Lenin later explained, after the First International decided to disband in 1876: “[It] had played its historical part, and now made way for a period of a far greater development of the labour movement in all countries in the world, a period in which the movement grew in scope, and mass socialist working-class parties in individual national states were formed.”

Indeed, the revolutionary mass upsurges and emergence of proletarian-socialist states in the 20th century—all inspired by the Paris Commune—were led by such working-class parties guided by Marxism-Leninism.

Relying on the masses, learning warfare through warfare. Among the lessons of the Paris Commune, one fundamental lesson—a materialist lesson that runs through the thousands of years of class struggle—is for revolutionaries to rely on the masses and to learn from their actual practice of waging revolution.

As Lenin said: “The *historical initiative* of the masses is what Marx prized above everything else.” In one of his memorable quotes, Lenin explained the fundamental reason behind Marx's apparent 180-degree turn from his position on the Paris workers' uprising (“a desperate folly”) the moment they proved their absolute willingness to “storm the heavens”:

In September, 1870, Marx called the insurrection desperate folly. But when the masses rose [in

March 1871] Marx wanted to march with them, to learn with them in the process of the struggle and not to give them bureaucratic admonitions. He realised that it would be quackery or hopeless pedantry to attempt to calculate the chances in advance with complete accuracy. Above everything else he put the fact that the working class heroically, self-sacrificingly and taking the initiative itself, makes world history.

As for the charge that the Commune was an costly gamble on a losing bet, Marx said: “World history would, indeed, be very easy to make, if the struggle were taken up only on condition of infallibly favourable chances.” (Marx letter to Kugelmann, April 17, 1871) Even after the Paris Commune fell, Marx saw in it a most valuable historical moment “when the desperate struggle of the masses even for a hopeless cause is necessary for the sake of the further education of these masses and their training for the next struggle.”

While the leadership of the Paris Commune came from many streams of revolutionary and socialist thought, it was the proletarian masses of Paris in their millions, brimming with enthusiasm and initiative, that really drove the leaders to unite and resolve their differences, decide and act quickly on the urgent tasks of the Commune.

The masses, who were organized on a wide scale, were the Commune’s real masters. They discussed important questions of policy within their organizations. Everyday, some 20,000 activists joined club meetings to propose or criticize this or that course of action. The masses likewise sent articles and letters to the various revolutionary newspapers and journals that circulated throughout the Commune.

The more democratic Commune leaders encouraged this groundswell of mass participation and local initiatives in running state affairs. Many of the major decrees of the Commune, especially those on political and socio-economic reforms, were based on proposals by the masses. The masses also monitored the work of the Commune and its leaders, and criticized them either directly (during meetings) or through letters and articles.

Writing about the lessons of the Commune some two decades later (Introduction to *The Class Struggles in France*, 1895), Engels said: “Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organisation, the masses themselves must also be in on it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are fighting for, body and soul.”

In the same Introduction, Engels stressed another point barely touched in earlier years: the need to mobilize the other strata of working people, especially the great mass of peasants, and to use all possible means to win them over. He said: “...Even in France, the Socialists are realising more and more that no lasting victory is possible for them unless they first win over the great mass of the people, i.e. the peasants in this instance.” Lenin, drawing from this lesson and applying it to Russian conditions and the requirements of the Russian revolution, likewise gave utmost importance to mobilizing the peasantry in their vast numbers.

The Paris Commune showed the correct relationship between the leadership and the masses. As Sison explained:

The creators of history are indeed the masses. Leaders can make a summing-up and synthesize new tasks only on the basis of the revolutionary mass movement. True leadership cannot be established and cannot act correctly without relying on the masses and without learning from them. “From the masses to the masses” is the correct slogan that must be followed by the

revolutionary party of the proletariat and by its cadres. (“The Paris Commune Inspires Our Party,” 1971)

Political power and proletarian dictatorship. The solid core of the Paris Commune’s message, serving to anchor its many important lessons, is on the question of political power. Marx and Engels tirelessly explained the Commune’s world-historic significance to the working class, as the first attempt to break the bourgeois state machine and to replace it by a state of a new type, a proletarian dictatorship—the main instrument for building socialism.

Throughout the 19th century and beyond, capitalist countries displayed a crazy “musical-chairs” kind of political situation in which various forms of bourgeois state power merely rotated within the ruling classes. One ruling clique simply transferred power to the next ruling clique, while the same military-bureaucratic machine at the core of the bourgeois state remained intact.

This pattern was most starkly exhibited in France during that period, but is inherent in all bourgeois states. However the political shuffle went, the proletariat remained under bourgeois rule and exploitation. Every major change of ruling clique further expanded and perfected the state machine, while the workers and other working people were more ruthlessly squeezed. The French proletariat, with its nearly a century of painful lessons since the bourgeois 1789 revolution, gradually realized that “the political instrument of their enslavement cannot serve as the political instrument of their emancipation.”

In 1871, the fully armed masses of Paris faced two imminent threats: the external Prussian threat, which was straightforward enough, and the internal threat from a double-faced “Republican” regime. But they were already exercising power within Paris and scoffed at any thought of surrender. Hence, by force of historical circumstances, they had no choice but to turn the predatory Franco-Prussian war into a revolutionary civil war. (This lesson was much appreciated by Lenin and the Bolsheviks in leading the Russian revolution through a similarly complex situation.)

The proletarian masses realized that their revolution this time was “not against this or that legitimate, constitutional, republican or imperialist form of state power.” Rather, it was:

... a revolution against the *state* itself, of this supernaturalist abortion of society, a resumption by the people for the people of its own social life. It was not a revolution to transfer it from one fraction of the ruling classes to the other, but a revolution to break down this horrid machinery of class domination itself. (Marx, *The Civil War in France*, 1st and 2nd drafts)

Marx and Engels gave such an exceptional importance to this historical lesson of the Commune, that when a new German edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was issued in 1872, they wrote in its preface what they saw as the only substantial correction to their original 1848 work: the Commune had especially proved that “the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.”

The Paris Commune, Marx said, was an attempt to smash the military-bureaucratic machine, and not simply to transfer it to different hands. He repeatedly stressed that the bourgeois state had to be smashed and replaced with the proletarian state. And the first premise in accomplishing this task, Marx said, “was a proletarian army. The working classes would have to conquer the right to emancipate themselves on the battlefield.”

By 1895, the various workers' parties had recovered, having gained substantial mass following and victories in the parliamentary struggle. But parliamentary reformism and bourgeois pacifism lurked in the wings. With Marx already gone, and with the Commune's lessons in danger of fading away after two decades, Engels made sure to reiterate this fundamental assertion and remove any ambiguity:

Of late, the German philistine [reformist Social-Democrat] has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. (Introduction to *The Civil War in France*)

Towards a proletarian-socialist resurgence. A century and a half later, Marxist-Leninists of the world have shown more brilliant examples of the dictatorship of the proletariat—the products of armed revolutions led by the proletariat and its party: the great socialist states of the Soviet Union in the time of Lenin and Stalin (1917-1956), the People's Republic of China in the time of Mao (1949-1976), and other socialist states elsewhere.

Because of the failures that produced revisionist regimes in the Soviet Union and China, leading them back to the capitalist road, the international big bourgeoisie has been crowing that the proletarian-socialist revolution is a dead-end. At best, they say, the working class should find an alternative way out of capitalism and of exercising its power without smashing the bourgeois state machinery.

But, despite the defeat of the Paris Commune, the Soviet Union and socialist China, despite the absence of a fighting organization such as the First International in the 1860s-1870s, the world proletariat of the early 21st century is in fact stronger in terms of sheer size, distribution, technical skills, and intellectual level.

As the most advanced social force in history, today's proletariat has retained its capacity to organize itself for class struggle, and to rediscover its revolutionary moorings and historic mission. More proletarian revolutionary parties, with red flag in hand, are rising anew to lead the mass upsurges and the long march to socialism in the years and decades ahead.

Today, 150 years after the Paris Commune—as past generations also did 50, 100 years ago—the world's proletariat and oppressed peoples will again honor the men and women, young and old, of various nationalities, that fought for the Paris Commune. Its story has not faded. Its lessons ring true now more than ever. Its chants and songs continue to fire up the workers and other toilers wherever and whenever they are suffering, wherever and whenever they are struggling to keep afloat the red flag, wherever and whenever they are in the thick of the people's fight for rights and liberation.

Marx summed it up thus: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.” The cause of the Paris Commune is the cause of the complete social emancipation of all proletarians and other toiling masses of the world. #

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