

# The Paris Commune - from the archive, 1871

Thursday 27 June 2019, by [NELSSON Richard](#), [The Guardian](#) (Date first published: 26 June 2019).

**On 28 May 1871, French soldiers crushed the Paris Commune, a socialist government that had ruled the city for two months. See how the Guardian and Observer reported the insurrection**



The Paris Commune - barricade in the rue de Charonne, 1871  
UIG via Getty Images

The [Paris Commune](#) was a radical, popular led government that ruled Paris from 18 March to 28 May, 1871. It occurred in the wake of France's defeat in the [Franco-German war](#) and the collapse of [Napoleon III's Second Empire](#) (1852-70). Parisians united to overthrow the existing French regime which had failed to protect them from the Prussian siege. The elected council of the Commune passed socialist policies and oversaw city functions but was eventually overthrown when the French army retook the city. About 20,000 insurrectionists were killed, 38,000 arrested and more than 7,000 deported.

## **[Editorial: the capitulation of Paris](#)**

3 March 1871

Victor Hugo, in the *Misérables*, describes the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, 1815, as “the most mournful day in the history of France;” but he himself probably will now be the first to transfer the title to this sad pre-eminence to the 1<sup>st</sup> of March, 1871. On Wednesday last [France](#) was doubly humiliated; Prussian troops entered Paris for the third time this century and on the same day the French National Assembly, compelled to meet far away in a provincial city, ratified a treaty of peace which proclaims in every line the utterly prostrate and helpless state of the nation.

## **The state of Paris**

From an occasional correspondent

3 April 1871

Paris is again a besieged city. The Government has interrupted the mails, and none of the trains are running. There is a report that the army is concentrating at Courbevoie and Puteaux to march upon [Paris](#) to-morrow. The Commune is strengthening all its positions. The Place Vendôme bristles with bayonets; every foot of ground is covered with armed men. The Grand Hotel has been occupied by the National Guards, and all the windows looking on the Rue de la Paix and the adjacent streets were barricaded with sand bags, loopholes being left for Musketeers. 300,000 francs have been requisitioned from the railways.

The Bank of [France](#) has taken a large printing office for the purpose of printing 10-franc notes for the Commune. The notes will be issued under duress and protest. The Bank is still open and transacts business as usual.

There are no obstructions yet on the bridges. All the public buildings near the old Hotel Dieu, and the Hotel itself, have been turned into fortresses by the Commune. [Adolphe] Assi and the other members of the Commune ride about in state, preceded by outriders and followed by a motley staff.

The spies of the Government at Versailles report that the Commune has 156,000 men under arms. The secret societies here reckon they have 120,000 men. Both these figures are exaggerated. The paper strength of all their battalions is 120,000 men, but not half their battalions number more than 80 men who will serve.

It is now said at Versailles, that [Marshal MacMahon](#) will command the army. General Chanzy did not give his parole to take no part in the operations against the insurgents. When the decree remitting house rent was published it was received in several model lodging-houses amid prolonged shouts of "Vive la Republique démocratique et sociale."

The dissensions in the Commune are great, but the Head Committee of six remain of one mind and control everything. The number of regular soldiers of all arms now in Paris is amazing. They swarm in every street. It is positively known that 33 men have been put to death by the Central Committee or their myrmidons since the 18<sup>th</sup> of March. This number does not include those killed in the Rue de la Paix. They were executed on the most frivolous pretexts. Three of them were shot by National Guards at Belleville because the latter did not admire the way they were dressed. As I close my dispatch, I hear the Government will begin to throw its troops across the river at midnight to-night.

### **[Paris in flames as communards vanquished](#)**

From our own correspondent

25 May 1871

A terrible fire is raging in the chief centre of Paris. The Versailles batteries are firing furiously against the quarters which still hold out. By the aid of the telescope the horrible fact is disclosed of numerous dead and wounded being left lying about the streets without any succour whatever.

### **[Massacres in Paris as army takes control](#)**

1 June 1871

Civil government is temporarily suspended in Paris. the city is divided into four districts, under Generals Ladmirault, Cissey, Douay, and Vinoy. "All powers of the civil authorities for the maintenance of order are transferred to the military." Summary executions continue, and military deserters, incendiaries, and members of the Commune are shot without mercy.



The rue de Rivoli after the fights and the fires of the Paris Commune, 1871

*Niday Picture Library/Alamy*

### **[Paris after the conflagration](#)**

From our special correspondent

The Observer, 4 June 1871

I doubt whether anyone out of Paris can quite realise the horror of the situation during the latter days of last week. For at least four days and nights every inmate of each one of the countless apartments in the city was in perpetual dread of death by fire. The inflammable shells of the insurgents were being sown broadcast over the town from the batteries of Montmartre and Belleville, and all about the city there were agents or emissaries of the Commune crouching about and trying to set fire to any house into whose apertures they could pour petroleum. I am quite willing to admit that there has been immense exaggeration about the number and the activity of these agents. In times of panic like the present there is no story too monstrous to be credited for the moment. Only yesterday I was speaking to a shopkeeper whom I have known for years, and was congratulating him on it all being over. "Ah. Monsieur," he answered, "who can say it is over yet? I cannot shut my eyes without seeing the flames. I cannot sleep at night without dreaming the house is on fire." And if, as I believe, this saying represents the feeling to-day of vast numbers of Parisians, one can realise what their agony must have been when the air was filled with smoke, and when on every side you could see nothing but flames.

There is no counsellor so cruel as fear, and I cannot doubt that the reprisals committed by the French troops have been often brutally, savagely cruel.

### [A woman's diary during the Paris Commune](#)

From a correspondent

26 July 1872

The Commune has had its military and its political historians, both friendly and unfriendly, the optimist account of these being as unworthy of credit as the pessimist account. A book which might adopt for its own the epigraph which precedes Montaigne's essays, '*C'est icy un livre de bonne foi, lecteur,*' was still a desideratum till Madame Blanchecotte published her [Tablettes d'une Femme pendant la Commune](#). This lady is the authoress of two works on moral philosophy, crowned by the French Academy, and served in the ambulances during the Prussian siege. During that terrible period she had become accustomed to the smell of powder, and insensible of the horrid din of artillery. This rude apprenticeship, therefore, had fitted her to be a calm, though reflective, and feeling, spectator of the terrible civil war which broke out on the 18<sup>th</sup> March, 1871.

**Tuesday, April 15** The people are greedy of strong emotions; they take pleasure in seeing the burials of slain insurgents pass; they are delighted if any ferocious exhibition of unrecognised dead gives them the spectacle of open coffins. I have heard pretty shop girls, with sweet eyes, complaisantly communicate these cemetery impressions. Young mothers take their children there; the little ones are glad; they have seen corpses, and they tell it with pride to the others."

**April 29** As I was going home in the 'bus this afternoon, I could not help looking continually at the face of a growing lad, so *naïf*, so good-humoured, so young, and so communicative beneath his military equipment of sword and gun, that I asked, "Why, my child, how old are you?" "Seventeen, madame. I am a volunteer; for do you see, I belong to the people. My grandfather was killed in the insurrection of June, 1848; my father died of grief; and my mother said to me, 'Avenge them.' It's not to say we shall win; we never do win. We are sheep, and we shall always be shorn."

**Wednesday, May 24** The night has been dreadful, with reciprocal fury. Shells, shrapnel, cannonade, musketry, all kept on bursting in a frightful concert. The sky itself is red, the flashes of the massacre have set it on fire; the action is quite near, at the Luxembourg; we can see the fire and smoke of the combat; they are firing from every part, from the roofs, the windows, the cellars.

3 am: Ambulance carts are passing red with blood; under blankets that are too short; dead bodies are jostled; they are picking them up by cartfuls at a time. Our barricade has at last become 'serious,' it is a model. They have made loopholes; a mitrailleuse is already in position, and an enormous cannon is waiting to take its place. A young artilleryman bestrides it with fixed gaze and folded arms. He scarcely replies to those who speak to him. More and more powder passes by unceasingly to increase the frightful reserve of the Pantheon. It is the aged insurgents who have guarded the barricades during the night. They are shivering in the morning air.

*This is an edited extract. [Read the article in full.](#)*



The Guardian, 26 July 1872

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## Richard Nelsson

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## P.S.

The Guardian

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