

## Chapter 2

# The Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune, 1870–1

The fall of the Empire, the last great Parisian revolution – known as the Paris Commune – and the founding of the Third Republic were all consequences of a brief but dramatic war between France and a German coalition led by Prussia, a war known as the Franco-Prussian War.

### The Franco-Prussian War, 1870–1

Otto von Bismarck, Chancellor of Prussia under King Wilhelm I, forged a Prussian-led unification of Germany. After successful wars against Denmark (1864) and Austria (1866), each of which ended with new territory for Prussia, he needed one more war, a war with France, to draw the south German states into unification with Prussia. The immediate cause of the war was the decision of Leopold Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen to accept the Spanish crown. Because Leopold was a cousin of King Wilhelm, Napoleon III feared an alliance between Prussia and Spain which would encircle France. When France protested, the offer was withdrawn. But Napoleon wanted more. Believing that his army would win a war and restore his sagging prestige, he sent his ambassador to see King Wilhelm on holiday at the spa resort of Ems. He demanded a promise that no member of the Hohenzollern family would ever accept the Spanish throne. Wilhelm naturally refused and sent Bismarck a telegram recounting the incident. Bismarck doctored the telegram, making it appear that the King had humiliated the Ambassador, and published it (it became known as the Ems telegram). Immediately war fever arose in France, as Bismarck had intended.

The French declared war on 19 July 1870, without allies. Prussia enjoyed the support of all German-speaking states. Nor was France's army a match for Prussia's. Anyone who could pay for another to serve in his place escaped the draft, so most French soldiers were poor peasants. They served for seven dreary years. Their morale was understandably low. Prussia conscripted everyone for short terms, much like France's revolutionary armies 80 years before.

The French took 21 days to mobilise 300 000 soldiers, the Prussians eight days to mobilise 470 000. The French generals had not mastered the new railways and their troops advanced only 9 kilometres (5.6 miles) a day; the Prussians, using the railways effectively, advanced 22 kilometres (13.7 miles) a day. Because the French plans were outdated, the Emperor and his generals made last-minute changes which only confused things. Soldiers had often to cross the country to rejoin their regiments and the railways were overloaded. The Empress, believing in the power of the Napoleonic legend, persuaded Napoleon III to take command personally, but he had never commanded an army and, painfully ill with kidney stones, he hardly cut an exciting figure on horseback.

Soon the Prussians were threatening Strasbourg. On 10 August, the Legislative Body in panic created a 'Mobile' National Guard, incorporating all single men and childless widowers not already in the army. Many were those who had purchased replacements; thus it was a group of higher social status than the conscripts. On 11 August, all remaining men were placed in a reserve National Guard. The old National Guard had been formed of men of means: to join, a man had to purchase his own rifle and uniform. Now the 'lower orders' joined too. In Paris, there were 60 battalions of National Guard before the new law: these came to be known as the 'good' battalions; the 130 new battalions created in 1870 came to be known as the 'bad' battalions. After 10 September they were paid 30 sous (1 franc 50) a day, half the average wage of a worker.

The Prime Minister and the Empress feared revolt in Paris if the Emperor were to be seen to retreat. They argued that the 'Napoleonic' thing was to march forward. But as the French armies moved forward, the Prussians drove a wedge between them. By mid-August, they had trapped one French army of 140 000 men at Metz under General Bazaine. Then, on 2 September, at Sedan, they defeated the Emperor's army. He surrendered with an army of 84 000 men.

### The proclamation of the Third Republic, 4 September 1870

News of the surrender reached Paris on 3 September. Crowds in the streets demanded a Republic: had not the armies of the great Revolution held all

Europe at bay? On 4 September, a crowd led by National Guardsmen broke into the Legislative Body. A group of revolutionaries took over the chair to declare a Republic. Jules Favre, a conservative republican, wishing to disperse the crowd, told them that the proper place to proclaim the Republic was the Town Hall, as had been done in 1830 and 1848. Another republican, Jules Ferry, supported him and, arm in arm, they led the crowd across Paris to the Town Hall. Along the way, they met General Louis Trochu, recently appointed military governor of Paris. Trochu was popular at the time because he had published a book attacking the shortcomings of the imperial army. They persuaded him to accompany them.

At the Town Hall, a crowd was already acclaiming a group of well-known radicals. Favre and Ferry were joined by two other republicans, Jules Simon and Léon Gambetta. They asked General Trochu to be chief executive of a 'Government of National Defence'. His political sympathies were monarchist. Not trusting these republicans, he made them promise to safeguard 'God, family and property'.<sup>1</sup> The result was a provisional 'republican' government composed of conservative republicans and led by a monarchist; only Gambetta was a thoroughgoing or 'Radical' republican and his influence was limited.

Few members of the government were serious about continuing the war. That evening Trochu declared: 'we will defend ourselves, but it is a heroic folly'.<sup>2</sup> Jules Favre told the 1871 Parliamentary Inquest that their aim was not to defeat the Prussians but 'to repel the forces of anarchy and to prevent there being a shameful revolt in Paris'.<sup>3</sup> Jules Simon claimed in 1874 that 'from that day forward our constant concern was the possibility of revolt'.<sup>4</sup> Others, however, agreed with the Parisian crowd and wished to continue the war: Gambetta inside the government; outside, Charles Delescluze, an old revolutionary first imprisoned for a 'republican plot' in 1836 and a leader of the Revolution of 1848. The pressure of the crowd and of these leaders prevented the government from capitulating.

### The siege of Paris, September 1870–February 1871

The Prussians arrived at the gates of Paris on 18 September and laid siege. The government sent Gambetta to Tours – by balloon! – to raise a new army there. By late October he had built an army of 100 000, but on 27 October Marshal Bazaine surrendered his larger army without a fight. The government asked Bismarck for terms, but the Parisians refused to believe that the war was lost. When news leaked out on 31 October, crowds captured the Paris Town Hall, meaning to install a new government to prosecute the war vigorously. The government quickly regained control and arrested the leaders, but felt compelled to continue the war. As

a Prussian colonel noted, the French seemed to be fighting 'against their own wishes'.<sup>5</sup>

Paris was under siege, but it was a strange siege. The Prussians allowed people out and often in. Many well-to-do Parisians went to the country. With them went many officials, leaving a power vacuum in the city. The Prussian blockade effectively prevented regular shipments of food, leaving only small amounts carried by individual blockade runners. There was food, but at very high prices. The government refused to ration food, so market forces prevailed: those with money ate, those without did not. The literary critics Edmond and Jules Goncourt commented: 'It is astonishing that this population, confronted by the insolent display in the food shops, heedlessly reminding a population dying of hunger that the rich with their money could always, yes always obtain for themselves poultry, game and other table delicacies, did not break the shopwindows nor attack the shopkeepers.'<sup>6</sup>

Men had National Guard rations, women and children had nothing. In the coldest winter in living memory, women prostituted themselves or queued all night for what remained affordable: a contemporary painting showed them buying butchered rats.<sup>7</sup> These conditions encouraged unrest. People's clubs soon appeared, preparing the revolt that would break out in the spring. In the Latin Quarter alone, R. D. Wolfe found at least eight clubs.<sup>8</sup> Most Parisians, however, were reluctant to challenge the government while the war was on. Hence an uprising on 6 January 1871 failed, although its 'Red Poster' did contribute to the idea of a revolutionary Commune: 'Make way for the people, make way for the Commune'.<sup>9</sup> 'Commune' meant both a self-governing local district and its governing council, but it resonated with revolutionary potential: 'the Commune of '93' represented the most militant phase of Parisian crowd action during the great Revolution.

The government's response was a disastrous sortie on 19 January, which some have argued was an attempt to convince the Parisians that the war could not be won. Jules Favre made the cynical comment: 'opinion will be appeased only when 10 000 National Guardsmen are dead on the ground'. Another uprising, on 21 and 22 January, also failed. The government now felt that the Parisians would accept an end to the war and signed an armistice on 28 January.

Bismarck had already succeeded in getting the four southern German states to join his North German Confederation, thus creating the basis of the German Empire. The negotiations for this took place, ironically, at Versailles, and there, in the Hall of Mirrors, the German Empire was formally proclaimed, on 18 January 1871. Now the armistice was signed there.

The armistice was to permit elections for a new assembly from which could emerge a government with authority to end the war. The elections

signified general acceptance of universal male suffrage. The Empire had shown that it was not a threat to property. No one now opposed it. To seek to extend it to women, however, was unthinkable. Women's suffrage had been at least proposed and discussed in 1848. Now it was not mentioned.

Held on 8 February, the elections provided a provincial check to the Parisians' patriotic fervour, for in the countryside the traditional power of the notables and the widespread dislike of the war combined to return a monarchist majority. Even in Paris, the revolutionaries gained only 50 000 votes compared with the moderate republicans' 300 000. The result was 400 monarchists (Legitimists and Orleanists combined) in a National Assembly of 750 members against some 200 republicans and a handful of Bonapartists. A third of the members had genuine titles of nobility.

Above all, the elections were a victory for Adolphe Thiers, a veteran politician who had opposed the war and had refused to join the provisional government, knowing that it would have to take responsibility for a humiliating peace. Now he was a hero elected in 26 seats (multiple candidatures were common). The Assembly met at Bordeaux on 12 February and elected him with the ambiguous title 'Chief of the Executive Power of the French Republic'. They had to include the word 'republic', but they avoided giving Thiers the title 'president' so as to keep open the possibility of a monarchist restoration. Indeed, they included a proviso that he was acting in a provisional capacity, pending 'a decision on the institutions of France', which made clear that the Republic was not assured. This angered the people of Paris.

The Assembly concluded a treaty with Prussia on 26 February. It provided that France cede Alsace and part of Lorraine, pay Prussia an indemnity of 5 billion gold francs, and allow Prussian troops to parade through Paris. These provisions were harsh. Alsace and Lorraine were comparatively recent acquisitions, gained by the wars of Louis XIV – Alsace became a province in 1681, Lorraine only in 1766 – but since the Revolution they had become integral to developing nationalism. The 'lost provinces' kept revenge on the French agenda. The indemnity was considered staggering – it amounted to two and a half times the annual state budget – and, it was widely believed, would cripple the French economy. The Prussian victory parade was particularly painful for the people of Paris, who had sacrificed so much for victory.

### The struggle for Paris, 1–18 March 1871

On 1 March the Prussians marched through a dead city. Instead of guerilla war and sniping, they found shutters closed and buildings hung black in

mourning. During February, the army and the police had withdrawn from poorer neighbourhoods. Only a loose committee of National Guard representatives kept peace and prevented incidents during the Prussian victory march.

On 11 and 12 March, the Assembly adopted four bills which Parisians called the 'measures against Paris'. The first ended pay to National Guardsmen, who were left penniless since they had no way of earning money: the economy had ground to a halt. The second ended the moratorium on the sale of goods at pawnshops, where many had pawned all they owned to survive: the correspondent of *The Times* noticed pawnshops full of mattresses and of scissors, the tools of the trade for seamstresses. The third measure made overdue bills payable with interest. All bills had been suspended until the economy got moving. This measure devastated small shopkeepers, none of whom could pay their bills. The fourth measure adjourned the Assembly to meet not in Paris, where it feared crowd pressure, but in Versailles: the Parisians took what was called their 'decapitalisation' as a final humiliation.

Now, from the Assembly's point of view, the task was to restore order. The government worried that National Guardsmen had control of numerous heavy guns, including many cannon bought by popular subscription. Guardsmen had removed these weapons from main streets where the Prussians might take them and pulled them to safe spots. Many of these weapons were located on the hill-top site of Montmartre, where the Basilica of the Sacré-Cœur now stands. From there, as Thiers is said to have remarked, they could have destroyed the Paris Stock Exchange.

On 15 March, National Guardsmen from 215 of 254 battalions elected a 'Central Committee' to which they now reported instead of to their official commander. Leaders of the 'good' – or bourgeois – battalions informed their commanders that they would not act against any National Guardsmen defending 'their' cannon. Clubs were meeting continuously. Few dreamed of revolution, but many wished to efface the stigma of defeat and ensure a republican regime.

Thiers arrived in Paris the same day with clear aims: to disarm the National Guard, repress popular activity and restore state power. He was 73 years old with vast experience in politics. Trained as a lawyer, he had become a journalist and historian. His ten-volume *History of the French Revolution* (1823–7) was the first large-scale scholarly account. By making sense of the first revolution, it paved the way for the Revolution of 1830, in which he played a key role and which made Louis-Philippe King of the French, for whom he was Prime Minister in 1836 and again in 1840. In 1848 he urged Louis-Philippe to leave Paris, raise an army in the country, and return to smash the revolt. The King had demurred; Thiers now followed his own advice.

The first step was to regain control of the cannon. The young doctor and future prime minister Georges Clemenceau, now Mayor of the 18th arrondissement (which included Montmartre), was negotiating with the Guard to surrender their cannon. He urged the government 'not to rush matters'. But Thiers had his own ideas.

At 1 a.m. on the morning of 18 March 1871, posters went up all over Paris announcing that the government would confiscate the cannon. At 2:30 a.m., troops arrived on the Champs-Élysées. The majority went to Montmartre, where there were 171 cannon, others to Belleville, where there were 74 more, and the rest spread among 16 other locations where there were cannon. The operation depended upon secrecy and speed, but it was bungled, so badly that some have accused Thiers of deliberately provoking the insurrection. To get to Montmartre, the soldiers had to climb a steep and narrow street. A Guardsman named Turpin challenged them and was shot. Louise Michel, who would later be known as the 'Red Virgin' of the Commune, came to his aid, soon joined by Clemenceau. A crowd gathered. Other women joined Michel and, discovering the soldiers, raised the alarm. As the sun rose, drums began to beat throughout Paris. Soon Guardsmen were assembling around the cannon.

At Montmartre, the troops were standing by the cannon, awaiting horses to drag them away. The women began conversations and offered wine and bread to the soldiers, who had been up all night without eating. General Lecomte, the division commander, realised too late that he had lost control. He called on the troops to fire, but it had become psychologically impossible for them to shoot people they were talking with. They put their rifle butts up, signifying that they would not shoot. Guardsmen captured General Lecomte, to the cheers of his own troops. The revolt had begun.

The government now sought to call out the 'good' Guardsmen, but only 500 turned up and, as their commander put it, 'they were more disposed to do the opposite of what they were commanded'.<sup>10</sup> The people were taking over Paris but no one yet realised it. At nine, the government met in Council. They were still optimistic because only the victorious forces had sent messages back. In fact, General Lecomte and his officers were captive and the army was dissolving.

Over lunch, Thiers told the younger ministers the story of the Revolution of 1848 and of his plan to save Louis-Philippe. At 2:52, they learned that several strategic areas had been taken. They were discussing whether to evacuate when three battalions of National Guard marched past, bugles and drums at their head. The Guardsmen were only going to demonstrate at the Town Hall, but the ministers thought they were preparing to attack them. The Minister of War exclaimed, 'I think we're done for, we're going to be taken.'<sup>11</sup> Thiers pencilled an order to evacuate and leapt into a coach for Versailles.

Later in the afternoon, people spotted General Clément Thomas, commander of the forces of repression in June 1848, and a hostile crowd formed around him. When news of Turpin's death arrived, the crowd turned on Thomas. He and General Lecomte were shot. At 9:55 that evening, Jules Ferry, the Mayor of Paris, received a formal order from Versailles to abandon the Town Hall. At ten a group occupied the Prefecture, the seat of police, and at eleven another group occupied the Town Hall.

By midnight the Central Committee of the National Guard began meeting. They did not feel like revolutionaries. They debated at length the morality of their actions and finally decided to hold elections to 'the Commune of Paris', so that they could, as they put it in a poster placarded throughout Paris, 'hand over your town hall to new and rightful representatives'.<sup>12</sup> They neither closed the gates nor occupied the fortresses. Nor did they seek to recruit the soldiers, most of whom, not knowing what to do, straggled back to Versailles, where they were brought back under government control. But for the moment, the state had collapsed. Paris awoke, as Stewart Edwards puts it, 'to the springtime of its liberty'.<sup>13</sup>

#### Paris under the Central Committee of the National Guard, 18-28 March 1871

The Central Committee appointed men to take over the *Journal Officiel*, normally devoted to state proclamations. On 21 March 1871 it ran an editorial explaining the insurrection: 'Proletarians, whose names were unknown yesterday ..., brave men moved by a profound love of justice and human rights and by a boundless devotion to France and the Republic have resolved to deliver the country from the invader and defend our threatened freedom.' Here, as throughout the Commune, patriots were identified with the poor and workers - that was what was meant by 'proletarian' - and patriotism was conflated with a concern for social justice: 'the workers, who produce everything and receive nothing in return, who endure poverty in the midst of wealth which they have produced by the sweat of their brow, ... today it is the turn of the proletariat to be emancipated'.<sup>14</sup>

For ten days, the Central Committee of the National Guard provided the only authority in Paris. The Committee confided police powers to National Guard battalions in each neighbourhood because the police had disappeared. There was, observers noted, virtually no crime. Determining that they were still entitled to their 30 sous a day, the Committee set this as the salary for all office holders and collected it from the Bank of France without opposition. The Committee reversed the four 'measures against Paris', restored freedom of the press and amnestied political prisoners.

Elections to the Commune, as the Council was known, were held on 26 March and 229 000 votes were cast, substantially more than in the mayoral elections of the preceding November, but nearly 100 000 less than in the legislative elections of 8 February 1871. The difference was the result of the flight of well-to-do Parisians and the refusal of those who remained to participate in illegitimate elections.

The result was a victory for various forces of the left. One historian called the Commune a 'cross-roads of ideologies'.<sup>15</sup> Everyone was a republican, but what kind of republican? Some 28 of the 85 councillors elected were members of the International, which, however, remained divided between Proudhonians and those like Eugène Varlin who were confronting the problems of modern industrial society, often drawing inspiration from Karl Marx. Nine councillors were followers of the old revolutionary Auguste Blanqui. Four called themselves Jacobins, like Charles Delescluze, and many others thought of themselves in similar terms. 'Jacobin', however, indicated sympathy with the great Revolution more than a clear policy. Twenty more councillors were mayors and deputy mayors of various arrondissements, of whom 15 resigned rather than remain in an illegal body.<sup>16</sup>

Jacques Rougerie pointed out that 35 of the councillors and 75 per cent of those arrested afterwards were wage-earners. He argued that the Commune was 'an insurrection of the whole of working Paris'.<sup>17</sup> Contemporaries agreed. Elie Reclus, a writer who supported the Commune (and brother of a famous anarchist geographer), said: 'it was the social revolution which, on that memorable day, came out of the poll'.<sup>18</sup> The conservative Goncourt brothers commented: 'the newspapers only see in what is happening a question of decentralisation. What is happening is nothing but the conquest of France by the worker. ... The government is leaving the hands of those who have for those who have not.'<sup>19</sup>

The majority of those who participated in the uprising were workers, and their leaders saw the working class as their constituency, but was class the Communards' primary motivation? Roger Gould argues that, while class issues played a role, the Commune was different from previous Paris revolutions because it drew its strength from the collective urban identity shared by the people of Paris.<sup>20</sup> The language of the Commune identified with the city. We need to view it not only in class and political terms, but also in terms of liberation, of exhilaration, indeed of festival. Henri Lefebvre interprets the Commune as the reconquest of central Paris by the workers and the poor who had been driven out by Haussmann's reconstruction. Certainly, they rushed back into Paris with joy. The Commune was a time when the city belonged to them and freedom seemed possible, or at least a time when they enjoyed liberty in the Paris spring.<sup>21</sup>

The Commune was proclaimed amid great rejoicing. At the height of the festivities, the immense crowd sang the *Marseillaise*. The poet

Catulle Mendès, 'a republican but', in Stewart Edwards's words, 'no Communard',<sup>22</sup> witnessed the scene and was moved despite himself:

This thunderous singing shook all our souls and the great song ... found for a moment its old energy. Suddenly the cannon began to fire. The song came back, formidable; an immense flood of banners, bayonets and red hats came and went like a wave lapping the reviewing stand. The cannon thundered on, but could only be heard between the verses of the *Marseillaise*. And all the noise melted into a unison acclamation, the universal voice of the innumerable multitude.<sup>23</sup>

Then the Guardsmen marched off and the crowds dispersed. Even the Central Committee members left. The newly elected councillors were left alone. No one knew the password to enter the Town Hall and few were well known enough to convince the guards. When they finally entered, they found the Council Chambers locked. Opened by a locksmith, they were found to be dusty and without lamps after months of disuse. Late that evening, councillors held their first session. Their first act was to take the name 'Commune of Paris'.

#### 'The days of the Commune': 28 March-21 May 1871

The Commune lasted just 54 days, but it left a powerful legacy. Karl Marx considered it the precursor of the Revolution for which he hoped. 'Do you want to know', Marx's friend Friedrich Engels asked, what the dictatorship of the proletariat looked like? 'Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.'<sup>24</sup> Lenin counted the days to see if the Bolsheviks would stay in power as long as the Commune. Gay Gullickson writes that people's reactions to the Commune 'helped to create our political and cultural world. For over a century, the Commune has been a touchstone for political theorists and activists, for conservatives and reformers, and for our understanding of concepts ranging from class and revolution to femininity and masculinity.'<sup>25</sup>

The Commune unleashed extensive popular debate. Newspapers flowered: four major Communard newspapers each printed 50 000 copies daily and *Le Père duchesne*, reviving a title famous from the great Revolution, reached 80 000; in addition, a host of ephemeral papers appeared. Clubs sprang up in every neighbourhood. By April there were hundreds of small clubs and at least 40 major ones that attracted as many as a thousand people to meetings. People felt that the future lay open for them to shape. The agendas of the various clubs suggest this, with topics

like 'The Duties and Obligations of the Commune', 'The Means of Resolving Social Questions', 'Capital and Labour: Practical Means of Organisation'. This empowerment of ordinary people was what Karl Marx saw as the 'true secret' of the Commune: it was 'a working-class government, ... the political form ... under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour'.<sup>26</sup> That is what Engels meant when he called it 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'.

In this effervescence of popular culture, women played a significant role, a role magnified and vilified by hostile bourgeois observers for whom the idea of female activism in the public sphere clashed with the prevailing view of women as passive and limited to the private sphere. In clubs and other organisations, women debated the kind of society they wanted. Their main concerns were education, anticlericalism, and social justice.

The most famous women's organisation was the Union of Women for the Defence of Paris. Its founder and spokesperson was Elizabeth Dmitrieff, a Russian exile, a member of the International and a friend of Karl Marx (with whom she corresponded during the Commune). The Union became the 'women's section of the French International'. Dmitrieff articulated an active role for women. They had the same stake in the revolt as did men and should fight alongside them. Hundreds of women responded to her call. Dmitrieff's group also recognised the gender inequalities from which women suffered and called for equal wages for men and women, a century before it was achieved.

Women were also in the forefront in organising cooperatives: some 43 were created in the first few weeks of the Commune. Sophie Poirier, for example, formed a cooperative in Montmartre to make war materials and give employment to women. On trial for her involvement in the Commune, she testified that some 75 women worked in a shop they had confiscated while another 50 worked outside for want of space.

Men too formed cooperatives as well as unions, many of which joined the International. All shared a sense that a government of their own would by its neutrality guarantee a fair deal for workers, or, as the International's Manifesto of 23 March put it, 'the independence of the Commune will mean a freely discussed contract which will put an end to class conflict and bring about social equality'.<sup>27</sup> This was in line with the Commune's official 'Declaration to the French People': the Commune meant 'the end of the old governmental and clerical world, of militarism, of bureaucracy, of exploitation, of privileges, to which the proletariat owes its slavery and the country its misfortunes and disasters. ... The aim is to universalise power and property'.<sup>28</sup> This is the 'mutualist' or Proudhonian position as opposed to the socialist or 'Marxist' aim of using national politics to improve the lot of the worker.

The importance of the Commune's social measures was not their pre-conditions but the process by which they were decided. Léo Frankel, Chair

of the Commune's Commission on Labour and Exchange, spoke for most: 'we must not forget that the Revolution of 18 March was accomplished solely by the working class. If we do nothing to assist this class, we who believe in social equality, I can see no reason for the Commune's existence'.<sup>29</sup>

So the Commune responded favourably to appeals from workers. One put it simply: 'The Commune is placing orders with the bosses; this is not right. It should address itself to the workers first'.<sup>30</sup> When the Commune awarded contracts for military uniforms to entrepreneurs, Poirier's group protested that these capitalists offered lower prices only by imposing unbearable conditions on their workers. The Commune ought, they argued, to buy military uniforms at a standard rate which would ensure a survival wage for ten hours of work a day. The Commune took her point and cancelled the contracts to private enterprise. In ways like this the Commune sought to facilitate associations and cooperatives in which workers could earn a decent wage and retain some control of their work. This was the Commune's socialism.

While the Commune never developed a systematic approach to social reform, it entered the areas of education and religion with clear ideals: to extend education, make it entirely secular, and reduce the influence of the Church. One of the Commune's first acts was to decree the Separation of Church and State on 2 April, five days after it came to power! It may seem strange that the Communards spent time on such issues. They would have done better to prepare for the inevitable military confrontation with the Versailles government. But this is to ignore the element of liberation, of festival, at the heart of the Commune.

When the 'New Education Society' submitted a report to the Commune calling for it to guarantee free, non-clerical and secular education for both sexes, preferably in common, the Commune agreed and set up an Education Commission including two schoolteachers, the artist Gustave Courbet and the poet-songster J.-B. Clément, whose hit of the 1860s, '*Le Temps des cerises*' (Cherry-Blossom Time) came to be associated with the Commune as a period when the hopes of ordinary people flowered; it remains one of the most popular of French songs today. The Commission confirmed that before the war, one-third of Parisians under 14 did not attend school. They argued that only qualified lay teachers should teach in municipal schools.

The Commune was particularly concerned about the education of girls. This reflected the widespread sentiment that mothers were needed to educate their children to be republicans. The newspaper *Le Père duchesne* put the case forcefully, in its usual picturesque language: 'Fuck it! In a good Republic we have to take even more care of girls' education than of boys'! Because you know, patriots, that it's on a citizeness's knee ... that we put together our first ideas'.<sup>31</sup> The Commune set up a commission on

girls' education. It named the first woman school inspector, the novelist Marguerite Tinayre. And in its last weeks, the Commune set up two technical schools, one for girls.

The exhilaration that characterised the Commune can best be seen in its efforts to set up art for the people under Courbet's leadership. For a quarter of a century, he had represented militant realism in the visual arts. Now he sought to offer artists direct access to the people. On 15 April, he led in founding an Artists' Federation to set up free exhibitions and to eliminate symbols of the imperial regime. The first Napoleon had erected the Vendôme column which was decorated with bas-reliefs of his military exploits. During the Second Empire it had become the focus of popular hatred. Courbet's commission organised the demolition of the column on 16 May, five days before the Versailles troops entered Paris.

The Commune also brought music to the people, organising free concerts. The biggest was on 21 May, in the Tuileries Gardens: 1300 singers and instrumentalists performed for an audience of 6000. While the concert was in full swing, the Versailles troops entered the city. Paris was singing its requiem.

#### *La Semaine sanglante* (the Week of Blood): 21–28 May 1871

The troops' entry signalled the beginning of a week-long reconquest of Paris which came to be known as *la semaine sanglante*, and it was indeed a week of blood, the bloodiest fighting the streets of Paris had ever known. While the Commune was organising liberty, the Versailles government had been organising repression. The regular soldiers had been kept in ignorance of the Parisians' efforts. Through propaganda and training, they were prepared for the assault on Paris. Bombardment of the city began on 1 May and three weeks later the troops began their assault. The Communards built barricades and defended them to the death. The troops advanced, shooting all those who resisted or who appeared to be on the side of the Commune, workers and especially working-class women.

Thiers's shells set buildings alight and the Communards began to set fires to cover their retreats, so by the third day Paris was blazing. Supporters of the government gathered in the evenings on the terrace at Saint-Cloud to watch the city burn. Hostile observers assumed that working-class women had set the fires using inflammatory devices and the myth of the *pétroleuses* – women pouring petrol on fires – took on a tenacious life of its own. This myth resulted not from women's actions but from the ways in which women's participation in the Commune struck at the ideal of domesticity on which so much of bourgeois society was based. Women may have participated in setting fire to the Tuileries Palace,

which had been the focus of Napoleon III's court and the symbol of his reign, but all the other fires were set by men of both sides. To bourgeois observers, however, the fires could only be the work of the 'denatured', 'de-sexed' women of the Commune, who had ventured out of their proper sphere.

As the battle continued, atrocities became increasingly common. Those not killed in combat were taken to the Père Lachaise cemetery and shot in groups against a wall that became known as the 'mur des fédérés' (wall of federates; the Communards called themselves federates because their project was a federation of communities). The mur des fédérés remains a point of pilgrimage for revolutionaries around the world. During this one week, between 10 000 and 30 000 Parisians were killed: estimates vary wildly because no attempt was made to keep count of the killing and bodies were dumped indiscriminately in mass graves. The Jacobins' Reign of Terror in 1793 – still a symbol of totalitarianism – took 16 months to kill 2600 Parisians.

The hatred and fury aroused by the Communards' revolt against the accepted order knew no bounds, but it was particularly strong against women. In several areas, reported one witness, all suspected women were 'stripped, raped and massacred', and in at least one case a woman was disembowelled by a soldier. Many observers noted too, as Gay Gullickson has pointed out, that bourgeois women were particularly vehement in their anger against the fallen rebels. *The Times* reported that women followed the prisoners: they 'hoot and clap their hands and insult their victims'. Maxime Du Camp witnessed women who 'broke through the military ranks and beat the prisoners with umbrellas, crying: Kill the assassins! Burn the incendiaries!'<sup>32</sup> As with the *pétroleuses*, the possibility that women could behave in 'unfeminine' ways unleashed enormous anger against the prisoners. People returning to Paris were seen kicking corpses in the streets.

Between 43 522 and 47 000 more were arrested, 1051 of them women. Of these, 30 000 were released by 1874. Of the remainder, by Rougerie's count, 5207 served prison sentences and 4586 were deported to New Caledonia.<sup>33</sup> Courbet was imprisoned for a year and then condemned to pay for rebuilding the Vendôme Column. He fled to Switzerland, where he died penniless in 1877. Perhaps 9000 others fled to escape persecution.

The exiles led difficult lives in London, Brussels and other cities, but they had time to ponder what had happened and to discuss the events with others. Many in London made the acquaintance of the exiled German philosopher Karl Marx and not a few began to make use of his insights. The cabaret singer Eugène Pottier, with Clément the foremost singer of working-class life during the Second Empire, escaped and made his way to the United States. Hiding during the repression, he wrote a bitter poem about the crushing of the Commune. One verse read:

The machine crushes us again;  
Capital is triumphant;  
The machine gun restores order  
Cutting down women and children.  
Usury, wild with rage,  
Atop our incinerated corpses  
Welds to the workers' strike  
The strike of those assassinated.

During the next 16 years, Pottier revised the poem and in 1887, the year of his death, it was published. The following year, a member of a workers' choral society set it to music. At the dawn of the twentieth century, as the 'Internationale', it became the anthem for labour unions and socialist parties across the world:

Arise, ye condemned of the earth  
Arise, ye slaves of hunger!  
For Reason thunders from its crater,  
It's the explosion of the end!  
Let's wipe out the past  
Enslaved crowd, stand up! stand up!  
The earth will rise on new foundations  
We are nothing, let's be all!  
It's the final battle,  
Let's join together and soon,  
The International Union  
Will be the human race.

### Chapter 3

## The Triumph of the Republicans, 1871–85

The defeat of the Commune brought an end to Parisian revolutionary insurgency dating back to the great Revolution of 1789. It dashed hope of the 'democratic and social Republic'. It left in power a conservative government responsible to a National Assembly in which monarchists held a majority. Paradoxically, however, in less than ten years republicans gained power, established the first durable republican regime, and brought to an end the Revolution begun in 1789.

The social bases of republicanism firmed up during the 1870s. Workers and artisans' republicanism remained strong. With the threats of Bonapartism, of war and of Parisian radicalism removed, a developing bourgeois republican culture came into its own and country-dwellers' republican loyalties were no longer strained by the Napoleonic heritage.

The divisions among monarchists also helped republicans. Legitimists supported the Bourbon pretender, descendant of Louis XVI. Orleanists supported Louis-Philippe's son. Other monarchists had accepted the Emperor, whose recent reign seemed a period of prosperity and order: they now supported Louis, the Bonapartist pretender since the death of the former Emperor in London in 1873. The republicans used these divisions to persuade elites that, as Thiers put it in 1872, the Republic was the regime 'which divides us least'. Although Thiers was known as an Orleanist, he was moving toward the republicans. They now seemed to promise stability, whereas the monarchists' divisions threatened instability. Again, as Thiers put it in 1872, 'the Republic exists, it is the legal government of the country: to wish for anything else would be tantamount to revolution'. The genius of the republicans was to accept Thiers's argument: 'the Republic will be conservative or nothing'.<sup>1</sup>