

No.12

THE PARIS COMMUNE

A STORY IN PICTURES

by

William Siegel

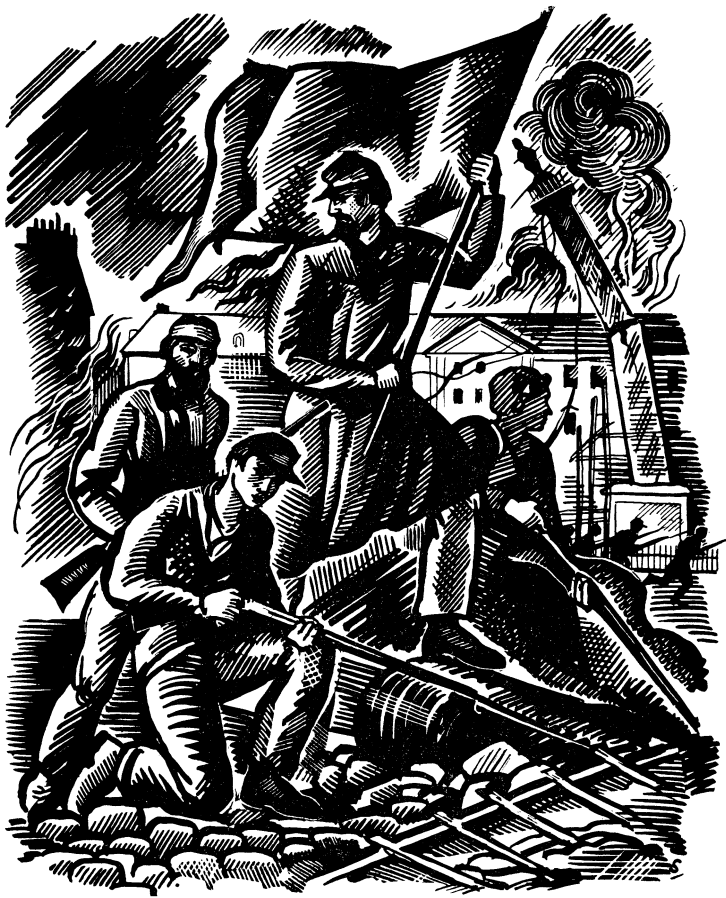
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Vive la Commune!

INTRODUCTION

By ALEXANDER TRACHTENBERG

March 18, 1931, marks the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of the Paris Commune—the first attempt at a proletarian dictatorship. Again and again the story has been told: how Napoleon III (the Little) attempted to bolster up the decaying régime of the Second Empire by declaring war on Prussia in July, 1871; how he met his debacle at Sedan and exposed Paris to the Prussian troops; how a bourgeois republic was proclaimed in September and a so-called Government of National Defense organized; how this Government betrayed the besieged city and how the Parisian masses rose, arming themselves for its defense; how they proclaimed the Commune on March 18, when the Government attempted to disarm their National Guard, and how they took the government of the city into their own hands; how the traitorous Thiers Government withdrew to Versailles and there plotted with the Prussians the overthrow of the Commune; and how the Parisian workers held the Commune for seventy-two days, defending it to the last drop of blood when the Versailles troops had entered the city and slaughtered tens of thousands of the men and women who had dared seize the government of the capital and run it for the benefit of the exploited and disinherited.

Wherever workers will gather to hear once more the story of this heroic struggle—a story that has long since become a treasure of proletarian lore—they will honor the memory of the martyrs of 1871. But they will also remember those martyrs of the class struggle of today who have either been slaughtered or still smart in the dungeons of capitalist and colonial countries, for daring to rise against their oppressors—as the Parisian workers did sixty years ago.

The Battle-Front is Far Flung

The Paris Commune lasted only 72 days, but it had a great many victims. More than 100,000 men and women were killed

or exiled to the colonies when the bourgeoisie triumphed. Today the revolutionary battle-front is spread over a greater territory. It encircles almost the entire globe. Fierce class struggles are being fought in all capitalist and colonial countries; and tens of thousands of workers and peasants are killed or imprisoned. The total number of victims of fascism, the white terror and police brutality during the past years runs into many hundreds of thousands. Workers everywhere are rising to the defense of these victims of capitalist class justice, and the anniversary of the Commune calls especial attention to this important class duty of the workers. In the United States the workers are rallying to the banner of the International Labor Defense, which leads their struggle against every means of capitalist persecution. It fights for the right to strike and picket and against persecutions arising from all workers' struggles; it fights lynchings and social and political discrimination against Negroes; it fights against the deportation of foreign-born workers and for the victims of every type of capitalist oppression and persecution.

The struggle for power, limited to a single city in 1871, has since become worldwide. One-sixth of the world already has been wrested from capitalist rule, and a Workers' Commune has been in power for more years than that of Paris lasted in weeks. In the Soviet Union the workers not only have defeated the bourgeoisie and beaten off the foreign invaders who came to its aid, but have so firmly established themselves that they already have begun to build the Socialist society of which the Paris Commune was a "glorious harbinger."

War Threatens the Soviet Union

But in the rest of the world—in the advanced capitalist countries and the backward colonies—the irrepressible conflict is day by day assuming greater proportions and a deeper meaning. The continued existence of workers' rule in what was once the Russian Empire and the great strides toward building Socialism there—a constant inspiration and guide post to the workers and peasants suffering under imperialist rule—drives the capitalist governments to plot the overthrow of the Soviet Union by organizing counter-revolution among the bourgeois remnants in the country, or war against it. The rivalries between imperialist powers will no more stop this drive for war in which the existence of a workers' government is at stake, than the rivalry between the French and

Prussian bourgeoisie of 1871 could divide them when their community of interest demanded the defeat of the Paris Commune. The trials of the Industrial and Menshevik Parties in Moscow have completely proved the conspiracies of the capitalist governments against the Soviet Union, and their use of Russian *émigrés* and Socialists of the Second International in the attempt to defeat the Five-Year Plan of industrialization through counter-revolutionary propaganda and acts of sabotage by their agents within the country.

In commemorating the Paris Commune of 1871 the workers everywhere will bear in mind this constant war danger that threatens the Soviet Commune of today; and they will organize for its defense. The Paris Commune suffered in part because it was isolated from other industrial centers and from the village districts, and because the international labor movement was then still too weak to be of material assistance to it. That is not true today. The Soviet Union has become an integral part of the revolutionary labor movement in all capitalist countries, and of the national liberation movements in the colonies. The working masses will leap to its defense and fight for it because they recognize that it is a part of their own struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

Workers Study Lessons of Commune

But the workers will not only draw inspiration from the heroic deeds of the Communards, who were "ready to storm the heavens" (Marx). They will not only recall their martyrdom to build defense organizations and arouse the entire working class to struggle for the liberation of all class-war prisoners in capitalist countries, but they will also review the story of the Commune in the light of its achievements as well as of the errors and shortcomings for which the Parisian workers paid so dearly.

The absence of a disciplined, well-knit revolutionary leadership both prior to and after the establishment of the Commune spelled disaster at the outset. There was no unified and theoretically sound working class political party to put itself at the head of this elemental rising of the masses. Several groups competed for leadership—the Prudhonists, the Blanquists and the Internationalists were the most representative of them. And this doomed the Commune to continued confusion and indecision, to a lack of planning and of a long range program. Piecemeal, day-to-day

treatment of a rapidly developing revolutionary situation with utter neglect of tactics seemed to have been the practice of the leaders.

Even the limited authority of the first days of the uprising was relinquished. As Marx noted in the celebrated letter to his friend Kugelmann, written on April 12, 1871, "the Central Committee [of the National Guard] relinquished its powers too soon to pass them on to the Commune."

Marx, the centralist, realized that a successful revolutionary struggle against Thiers' government could have been carried out by the Paris workers only under the leadership of a centralized revolutionary authority with military resources at its command. This authority was the Central Committee of the National Guard, but by renouncing its powers and turning its authority over to the loosely organized Commune, it dissipated the revolutionary energy of its armed forces.

Yet, even while he analyzed the weaknesses of the Commune Marx showed an unbounded enthusiasm for the revolutionary fervor of the Communards. In the letter to Kugelmann from which we already have quoted, and which was written three weeks after the proclaiming of the Commune, he grew almost rhapsodic. "What dexterity," he wrote, "what historical initiative, what ability for self-sacrifice these Parisians display. After six months of starvation and destruction, caused more by internal treachery than by the foreign enemy, they rise under Prussian bayonets as though there were no war between France and Germany, as if the enemy were not at the gates of Paris. History records no such example of heroism."

He immediately followed up this, however, with a criticism of an error which was one of the costliest of the Commune: "If they are to be defeated it will be because of their 'magnanimity.' They should immediately have marched on Versailles, as soon as Viny and the reactionary portion of the National Guard escaped from Paris. The opportune moment was missed on account of 'conscientiousness.' They did not want to start a civil war—as if the monstrosity Thiers had not already begun it with his attempt to disarm Paris."

Marx, the revolutionary strategist, knew that *when the enemy of revolutionary Paris was on the run, it was the job of the National Guard to pursue Thiers' defeated army and annihilate*

it, rather than to allow it time to reorganize its forces and return to fight the Paris workers.

The "magnanimity" of the leaders of the Commune which Marx criticized led them to allow the ministers of the Thiers government and its reactionary supporters to depart to Versailles in peace, there to reorganize their forces and conspire against the Commune: it kept them from taking hostages from among the prominent bourgeois leaders who remained in the city and who took the opportunity to act as spies and form centers of counter-revolutionary activity. Had the Commune disarmed those troops which were under the influence of the reactionary government and held them in the city, they could have won over a great part of them, and neutralized others. Instead they were permitted to depart in peace to Versailles, and to remain there under the continued tutelage of the reactionary militarists.

After the capture of power comes the immediate task of holding it and using it to spread and deepen the revolutionary struggle. When the Russian workers seized power in October, 1917, they did not rest there. Having learned from the mistakes of the Commune, the Russian Bolsheviks led the workers to a further offensive, not to end until every vestige of the old order has been uprooted and destroyed in the entire country and the working class firmly entrenched.

The Commune Fights for Power

The Commune was a struggle for power on the part of the working class. It was not merely a change of administration that the Paris workers saw in the development of the struggle. The clearest among the leaders, the followers of the International, knew that the conflict was assuming the proportions of a social revolution, although they, as well as the others, failed to work out the tactics necessary for the direction of the struggle. In another letter to Kugelmann (April 17) Marx gave this interpretation in the following words: "The struggle of the capitalist class and its State machine has, thanks to the Paris Commune, entered a new phase. However it may end, a new landmark of international significance has been achieved."

This was precisely Lenin's attitude regarding the December uprising in Moscow in 1905. The revolutionists of Moscow, who had the support of the masses, had either to accept the provocation of the Tsar's troops or go down in moral defeat before the

Moscow workers. Though defeated, the revolutionists came out of that unequal struggle glorified by the entire working class of Russia.

While the panicky Mensheviks were muttering the Plekhanov formula, "They should not have resorted to arms," Lenin saw in the heroic struggle of the Moscow workers the revolutionary will to conquer of the Russian working class.

Commenting on Marx's observation that the Paris workers had to take up the fight, Lenin wrote: "Marx could appreciate that there were moments in history when a struggle of the masses, even in a hopeless cause, was necessary for the sake of the future education of these masses and their training for the next struggle."

It was this hopeful view of the Paris uprising applied to the revolutionary struggle of 1905 that led Lenin to maintain in 1907 in his introduction to the Kugelmann letters: "The working class of Russia has already demonstrated once and will prove again that it is able to 'storm the heavens.'" And in 1917 it did.

The decrees of the Commune separating the church from the State, confiscating church property, taking over the deserted factories, abolishing the payment of fines levied upon workers, prohibiting night work in bakeshops, etc., were all acts of great social import. These were the acts of a workers' government legislating in the interest of the working class. But the Commune did not take over all the factories. It did not take over the Bank of France. Instead, it went there to borrow (sic!) money for its revolutionary needs.

*Although the Commune seized the powers of the State, it tried to operate within the framework of the old State apparatus. Marx warned against this when, in his April 12 letter, he wrote of "the destruction of the bureaucratic political machine" as a prerequisite for a proletarian revolution. In his classic study of the Commune, *The Civil War in France*, an address read to the General Council of the First International two days after the fall of the Commune, he devoted a good deal of attention to the subject, and formulated this theoretical conclusion: "The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery and wield it for its own purpose."*

In 1891, the 20th anniversary of the Commune, Engels wrote an introduction to a new German edition of *The Civil War in France*. In criticizing the Commune for not taking over the Bank of France and using it for its own advantage, Engels points out

that the Commune tried to utilize the old government apparatus. He comes back to what Marx took up in his "Address" by asserting that "the Commune should have recognized that the workers, having assumed power, cannot rule with the old State power, the machinery used before for its own exploitation." Engels concludes: "In truth, the State is nothing but an apparatus for the oppression of one class by another, in a democratic republic not less than in a monarchy."

The Commune—the First Proletarian Revolution

Many are the lessons which the Commune has bequeathed to the international working class. Marx, Engels, and Lenin, have studied the Commune closely, and the Russian workers showed that they mastered the lessons of the first proletarian revolution.

The Commune is the great tradition of the French working class. The mute walls of Père la Chaise remind the French workers of the heroism of their proletarian fathers who fought for freedom from wage slavery. The Commune is also the heritage of the entire proletariat. It was the first revolution with the workers not only fighting in it but also controlling and directing it towards proletarian aims.

Writing on the 40th anniversary of the Commune, Lenin said: "In modern society the proletariat, enslaved by capital economically, cannot rule politically before breaking the chains which bind it to capital. This is why the Commune had to develop along socialist lines, that is, to attempt to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie, the rule of capital, the destruction of the very foundations of the present social order."

The Commune was the first attempt at proletarian dictatorship. It was not victorious but it was the prototype of the successful dictatorship inaugurated by the Russian workers forty-six years afterwards. Engels closes his introduction to *The Civil War in France*, quoted above, with the following passage: "The German philistine (read 'Socialist'—A. T.) has recently been possessed of a wholesome fear for the phrase: dictatorship of the proletariat. Well then, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship is like? Look at the Paris Commune! This was the dictatorship of the proletariat!"

The Paris Commune is an epoch-making achievement of the revolutionary working class. Marx's tribute at the close of his historic "Address" testifies to the fealty of the world's proletariat

to the memory of the valiant Communards and to the cause in behalf of which they fought: "Workingmen's Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of the new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class. Its exterminators history has already nailed to that pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them."

In the following pages the reader will find the story of the Paris Commune told in pictures. This is a medium in which little working class literature has previously been done. It is graphic, dramatic and simple and should give to the reader the story of the Commune. The short text printed beneath the drawings will fill in such gaps as they leave and aid in understanding them.

PUBLISHERS' NOTE



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