

## What Babette Fled

The Rise and Fall of the Paris Commune

By Jerry James

*It seems to Paris that they're shooting everyone... When the echoes of the last shots have ceased, it will take a great deal of gentleness to heal the million people suffering nightmares, those who have emerged, shivering from the fire and massacre.*

— Emile Zola, June 1, 1871



*Destruction in the Rue de Rivoli, May 1871*

In Isak Dinesen's *Babette's Feast*, Babette Hersant fetches up on the doorstep of the Puritan sisters Martine and Philippa in Berlevaag, Norway, in June 1871. Babette has fled Paris in the wake of the destruction of the Paris Commune, that ill-fated, proto-socialist experiment. Her husband and son have been executed. She herself has only narrowly escaped the same fate, having been condemned as a *pétroleuse*, a female arsonist.

Isak Dinesen (Karen Blixen's pen name) knew a great deal about this event. Her father, Danish adventurer Wilhelm Dinesen, was in Paris during the 72 days of the Commune, March 18-May 28, 1871. It ended with Bloody Week, the largest civilian massacre of the 19th century. Between 17 and 35,000 men, women and children were killed. Afterwards, Dinesen wrote in his book, *Paris sous la Commune*, "I wonder, shall I never take part in anything this great again?"

Americans, on the other hand, generally know little or nothing about these days of carnage. And yet, more than twice as many people died there than at the Battle of Gettysburg (7,863).

What was the Paris Commune? How did it come about? What did it do? Why was it necessary to extirpate it so violently? And why was its memory suppressed?

## Bloody Century



*Working Class Parisians, Not Happy*

The Paris Commune marked the end of a particularly unsettled century, even by French standards. Beginning with the Revolution of 1789, the country had gone through 2 monarchies, 2 republics and 2 empires, interspersed with revolts and uprisings on a regular basis.

Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, nephew of the original, had been elected head of state to replace the deposed King Louis Phillippe (1848). But as his term of office neared its end, he staged a coup and declared himself the Emperor, Napoleon III (1852). Most wealthy and bourgeois Parisians cheered.

The working people shrugged and went on as they always had, regardless of the government. Men might make 4 francs/day, perhaps by emptying Paris' 70,000 cesspools. Women might make half that, but they could always supplement their incomes by working the "5<sup>th</sup> Quarter," the time set aside for amateur prostitution, as perhaps 30,000 did. If you still needed money, you could hock your valuables at the *mont-de-piété*, the government-owned pawnshop.

The Roman Catholic Church was seen as pro-monarchy and a friend of the rich. Attendance among the poor had been slipping for decades. In 1871, some would take their revenge. Churches would burn, and priests would die.

## The Franco-Prussian War



*Napoleon III*

Napoleon III unwittingly provided the conditions under which the Commune would rise. Judging the German states to be in chaos following the Austro-Prussian War, the Emperor declared war on Prussia on July 19, 1870. He was very, very wrong.

The Prussians, as organized as the French were disorganized, defeated them in battle after battle, capturing Napoleon himself on September 2. Two days later, a group of National Assembly deputies gathered at the Paris City Hall and announced the Third Republic, under a Government of National Defense, with Adolphe Thiers as president.

Two weeks later, they fled to Bordeaux, as the Prussians besieged Paris, a walled city that could not easily be taken. The siege lasted 4 months (September 19, 1870–January 28, 1871). It is said that Parisians ate first the animals in the zoo, then house pets, then rats. Alcohol consumption tripled. But Paris did not surrender. The Government of National Defense did.

The Parisians felt betrayed. And it was a new Paris. Poor refugees had streamed into the capital. The rich had fled to their country houses. Elections for a new government in February 1871 produced a monarchist majority, under Thiers. But the Parisians had a secret weapon—the National Guard.

## The Inciting Incident



*Montmartre Artillery Park, March 18, 1871*

The National Guard had been founded in 1789. By 1870, it was largely made up of the working men of Paris—on paper, 390,000 strong. Because there were only 50,000 French army soldiers in Paris, the Guard felt it alone had held off the Germans. Now, it elected a radical Central Committee, which immediately faced its first challenge—the French army was coming to Montmartre to seize the Guard’s cannons.

The army found itself first outnumbered, then outfraternized. Troops refused to fire on their fellow citizens, as women rushed to embrace them. During the army’s retreat, the Guard captured two generals—and killed them. A bad omen, but an accurate one.

The Central Committee marched on City Hall. Elections were held March 26. The Paris Commune was officially established.

## The Commune

Thiers ordered the French government moved to Versailles—a bad look, because it was the ancestral seat of the monarchy. He also withdrew the army and police. Thiers did not immediately order his troops to crush the rebellion, because most of them were being held as POWs. Also, the Prussians still occupied much of France. This gave the Commune time to establish itself, as the red flag flew over the City Hall

in Paris, the city that had long been the center of French radicalism.

“Commune,” in French usage, simply means local or city government. The elections produced a council of 60 members, 33 of whom were workers. The new government had no president, no commander in chief. This would prove impractical. “Everyone debates. No one obeys,” said one councilor.

Although Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had written *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, not many councilors were Marxists. Most fell somewhere between left-liberal bourgeois and utopian socialists. Only a few were anarchists.

Thiers had reason to fear the Commune more than the Prussians; they might seize the nation’s gold reserves and destroy the value of the franc. Quietly, the Thiers government approved loans from the Bank of France to finance the Commune.



The Council issued decrees abolishing the death penalty; remitting all rents; requiring free return of items from the government pawnshops; establishing a 10-hour workday; and forbidding child labor. It separated church from state with anti-clerical force.

Although women could not vote, the socialist activists Louise Michel and Elisabeth Dmitrieff founded the Women’s Union for the Defense of Paris, which demanded wage equality, education for girls and the right of divorce.



The Commune was an early socialist attempt to establish a civic republic. But as RTH History says, “It quickly sank into a catastrophic mixture of extremism, egotistical and overwhelmed leadership, lack of an economic plan [and] poor administration...”

On April 3, the National Guard set out to march on Versailles. They were thoroughly beaten. Any guardsman captured with a rifle in his hands was shot. As the French army began to encircle Paris, the Guard, having learned its lesson, began to slip away. By May, 20% of them had gone AWOL.

### Bloody Week



*Communards Face the Mitrailleuse  
Père Lachaise Cemetery*

On May 21, the French army entered Paris—through a gate left unguarded (of course). The army had been humiliated by the Prussians. Here was a chance to feel like men again, fighting against the barbarians of the Commune, who deserved only death—and whom they outnumbered 5-to-1. The army would spend Bloody Week retaking the city. Those captured would be shot.

The Commune had taken hostages, including the Archbishop of Paris. He was executed, along with 106 others. As the Guard retreated, they burned buildings, the Tuileries Palace, the City Hall. None of

these fires were set by a *pétroleuse*. The female arsonist was invented by the winners.

Late on May 27, 147 Communards were condemned in a hasty trial, lined up in groups against a wall at Père Lachaise Cemetery and shot with a *mitrailleuse*, the French Gatling Gun. The army didn't even bother to take down their names.

The next day, it was all over.

### The Wall in Père Lachaise



During Bloody Week, between 17 and 35,000 were massacred. Deportees to French penal colonies totaled 7,000. Others escaped. An 1880 general amnesty tried to draw a firm line under the episode.

But in its failure and bloody repression, the Paris Commune became the stuff of legend. Marx called it the greatest moment in history; Engels, the first dictatorship of the proletariat. Vladimir Lenin saw what had happened—and planned accordingly.

Paris now turned its back on the Commune and entered its most glorious age, those 45 years before WWI known as *La Belle Époque*. But the bullet-pocked wall in Père Lachaise remained, mutely chastening the *Gâté Parisienne*. It still stands today.

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