
H-France Review Vol. 16 (April 2016), No. 44

John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune*. Basic, 2014. 360 pp. \$20.39 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13: 978-0465020171

Review by Carolyn Eichner, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Through the 134 years since its brutal demise, the 1871 Paris Commune has remained steadfast in the historical imaginary. A shining, hopeful, yet tragic moment for the left, and a triumphantly quashed, nightmarish specter for the right, the Commune stands as a touchstone for movements and ideologies. Ranging from likening American Indians to savage Communards; to Teddy Roosevelt's 1896 campaign threat that if elected, his opponent would govern with the vicious lawlessness of the Paris Commune; to the Communard flag's accompanying Yuri Gagarin on the 1961 first human space flight; to the 1968 Prague Spring song "The Paris Commune is in Prague"; to the international Occupy movement's many Commune references, the insurgency has retained its popular potency for both its champions and its disparagers. The seventy-two day revolutionary civil war continues to draw scholars of philosophy, political theory, comparative literature, art history, and history, offering explanations of its causes, context, meaning, and contemporary uses. Into this mix, John Merriman's *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune*, stakes a distinct position. The evocative narrative begins with the exciting rise, and focuses especially on the brutal fall of the event, addressing both class and gender, and convincingly demonstrating the cold-blooded intentionality of the French state and military in slaughtering over 20,000 Parisians on the city streets.

The potent and present nature of the Commune—both the event and its tangled legacy of contested memories—has generated a divided, politicized historiography. At the core rest questions of intention and guilt. Merely describing the Commune's two central elements—what it was and how it ended—reveals an author's position. Presenting the event as an upheaval, an inversion of political, social, religious, and gender hierarchies, asserts a different politics from representing it as a breakdown in social order and an exercise in mob rule. Correspondingly, portraying the Commune's suppression as a murderous bloodbath clearly diverges from describing it as the restoration of order in the city. There is little neutral ground. As in many revolutionary historiographies, the conflicts persist. But the Commune generates particular identifications and passions, in terms of both the event and its rich afterlife. The ideals and idealism of the actors, the unlikeliness of its (even temporary) success, and the ferocity of its subdual, combined with its subsequent associations and uses, attract scholars for myriad reasons.

It makes sense that Merriman has contributed to this debate. A highly respected and prolific scholar of urban life and social conflict in nineteenth-century France, Merriman brings extensive knowledge, a profound understanding, and deep passion to this work. The book's title, *Massacre*, unambiguously locates the text. Meticulously researched and robustly argued, Merriman confronts and dismantles arguments that normalize the suppression of the Commune, that question the Versailles government's lethal intent and complicity in the carnage, and that attempt to sharply minimize the number of dead. *Massacre*, therefore, refutes British historian Robert Tombs's recent assertions that the repression was not a "wholesale massacre," that it was not a deliberate effort of state violence, and that only 7,400 Parisians died. The book clarifies and delineates four major points of political contention: the role of class

antagonisms on both sides; the Catholic Church's central role in the hostilities; the significance of women, feminism, and gender in the event; and the one-sided and extreme nature of the slaughter.

Massacre opens with a Prologue, setting up the physical, intellectual, economic, and political contexts of the story. In the face of a mushrooming population, accelerating urban decay, and the legacy of street fighting and revolutionary barricades, Napoleon III appointed Baron Georges Haussmann, prefect of the *département* of the Seine, to reconceptualize and rebuild Paris as an imperial city. This extraordinarily expensive 1853 project destroyed tens of thousands of urban apartments, pushing poor Parisians out of the city's center. Haussmann constructed wide, sweeping boulevards both for their elegantly imposing aesthetics and for logistical purposes. In case of social unrest, the expansive boulevards would allow rapid troop movement through the city, while also thwarting working class efforts to tear up the paving stones and construct barricades—which, Merriman points out, they had done eight times in the previous twenty-six years. Midcentury Paris became a city of sharply divided socio-economic space, heightening elite fears and working-class frustrations.

Paris's social landscape plays a vital role in Merriman's account. Allegiance to the Commune closely paralleled elite vs. popular social divisions. The tightly interwoven intellectual, economic, and political context split along corresponding lines. Wealthy Parisians primarily aligned with the Catholic Church and the forces of order, either conservative republican or monarchist, while the urban poor and middle-class radicals opposed both church and the existing state. Shifting from empire to a nominally republican Government of National Defense, then to a reactionary republic, France's government sought social order and the maintenance of the status quo.

Working-class Parisians reacted against these efforts. Suffering through Prussia's 1870 Siege of Paris, they patriotically supported and fought for France in its war against Prussia. When France surrendered in January of 1871, Paris's poor considered it a betrayal of the nation. The subsequent election of a monarchist National Assembly, followed by the imposition of a string of socially and economically repressive laws, pushed the population. Politicized in the popular public meetings of the late, liberal empire, rank and file Parisians reacted to the multiple attacks on their rights and livelihoods. On March 18, conflict arose between soldiers and citizens over control of the cannons on the buttes of Montmartre. The troops fraternized with the local people and turned on their leaders. Parisian workers—in concert with radicalized republican and socialist intellectuals—seized the revolutionary moment.

Yet, Merriman contends, “The conservative National Assembly revolted against Paris, and not the other way around” (p. 34). In an important distinction, and a supporting pillar of his argument, Merriman clarifies the Commune's efforts to negotiate an end to insurgency in its earliest days. They did not seek an armed conflict. Multiple groups attempted to proffer compromises: demands ranged from those of the Central Committee of the National Guard, calling for the elimination of the prefecture of police, to those of more moderate factions calling for municipal autonomy. Paris was the only French city barred from having a mayor, an office, Merriman explains, abolished in the revolutionary backlashes of 1794 and 1848; even the city's twenty *arrondissement* mayors had been appointed by the emperor. Working for a peaceful settlement, the Communards postponed revolutionary municipal elections. But Adolphe Thiers, the monarchist head of the Government of National Defense, refused to negotiate. He rebuffed all efforts, even turning away delegations of republican deputies, including Georges Clemenceau (then the mayor of the eighteenth *arrondissement*). Thiers insisted that the Commune had no legitimacy, and thus no position from which to negotiate. Surrender remained its only option.

In the meantime, Thiers rebuilt the Versailles army. He called for provincial volunteers to fight the urban revolt, counting on their hostility toward Paris. The National Assembly met secretly on March 22 to plan their response to the uprising. Led by Thiers and the “very conservative republican” Jules Grévy, they determined to make no concessions. The assembly agreed to allow time to reconstitute the army, while giving “what they considered an illegal insurgent authority time to set itself up in order to make legitimate

a bloody repression” (p. 34). Here Merriman underscores the ways in which Thiers also seized the revolutionary moment, refusing to negotiate, and deliberately escalating the conflict. Countering an oft-accepted narrative, Merriman shifts escalatory blame away from the Communards and squarely onto Thiers and the National Assembly.

Municipal elections were finally held on March 26, with male-only suffrage. Women did not seek the vote, most considering electoral politics ephemeral, believing they stood on the precipice of the new world. The governing body officially declared the Paris Commune on March 28 at the Hôtel-de-Ville. Although the Central Committee of the National Guard had stated it would step down following elections, releasing its transitional power, it instead reconstituted and persisted as a parallel authority. This, and the later creation of a Committee of Public Safety, intensified internal divisions and dissention.

Fighting began two days following the Commune’s proclamation. Unevenly matched in terms of equipment, organization, experience, and leadership, the Commune immediately suffered multiple military defeats. Its National Guard faced an aggressive and superior fighting force intent on its destruction. Simultaneously, the Communards bore the daunting responsibility of unexpectedly governing Paris, newly under siege. Yet, a sense of triumph and freedom filled the city.

Massacre effectively evokes the liberatory air of Paris under the Commune, weaving narratives of Commune lives with reports of teeming civic life. Merriman deftly employs the eyewitness perspectives of both Communards and their opponents, of the French and the foreign (British, American), of men and women, and of unknown and renowned participants and observers. The brief individual histories, some only a paragraph or two, others forming threads that reappear throughout the text, evoke daily life in the city. These provide windows into the quotidian and deeply divergent realities of people living through an extraordinary event. From the heady beginning of the Commune, through the conflict and brutal repression, the experiences of the anarchist ethnographer and Protestant minister Elie Réclus; the eighteen-year-old republican Sutter-Laumann; John Leighton, a British anti-Commune; Elisabeth Dmitrieff, the Russian-born leader of the city-wide *Union des femmes*; Marie Holland, the anti-Commune wife of a Protestant pastor; and many more, deepen the book’s humanity.

Merriman rightly places the Catholic Church at the crux of the conflict. Split mostly along class lines, elite pro-clericalism clashed with working class anti-clericalism. Long associated with wealth, reaction, and the repressive state, the Church was a clear target for the Communards. On Palm Sunday, the Commune government mandated the separation of Church and state; they secularized hospitals and prisons, and outlawed all religious teaching in lay schools. Working women and men expressed virulent, often rhetorically violent anti-clericalism in political clubs, which met in nearly half of the city’s churches. Yet some Communards remained loyal to the Church, for religious and for sentimental reasons. And some Churches continued to function, essentially sharing space with radical political clubs. As Merriman points out, on-the-ground, human encounters, such as seeing that nuns truly lived in poverty, or encountering a priest who gave them First Communion, occasionally tempered hostilities toward the larger institution.

Anti-clericalism also spurred the Commune to take hostage Georges Darboy, the Archbishop of Paris, as well as several other clergymen. Merriman explains that they took hostages to avenge Versailles troops’ capture and summary execution of two Commune commanders, Gustave Flourens and Emile Duval, and to forestall the killing of additional Commune prisoners. The Communards’ deep-rooted and pervasive hostility to the Church, and the Archbishop’s prestige and visibility, made the clerics an obvious choice for detention. Merriman justifiably terms this a turning point. Expecting Versailles to abide by the Geneva Convention of 1864 regarding battlefield arrests, Commune leaders were stunned when Thiers refused to recognize National Guardsmen as legitimate belligerents. Instead he deemed them “insurgents, indeed bandits and criminals” (p. 83), due no international protections. This opened the door to battlefield, and ultimately urban, slaughter.

It also resulted in the Commune's executing the Archbishop and twenty-three priests in the revolution's final days. After Darboy's arrest, Commune leaders attempted to negotiate a prisoner exchange with Versailles, seeking to trade the Archbishop for the veteran revolutionary Auguste Blanqui. Again, Thiers refused to engage. Merriman portrays the Archbishop Darboy fairly sympathetically, and his detailed description of the slaying demonstrates the brutality of the Commune's action. The execution of the Archbishop, and ultimately twenty-four others, became a major rallying point for retributive action—both in the Commune's final, bloody days, and in its aftermath.

Merriman traces the logistics, interactions, and internal conflicts among the Commune's male leadership, and interweaves women's organizational and defense work. Communard feminists prioritized the economic over the political during the uprising, but organizations like Elisabeth Dmitrieff's *Union des femmes* focused not only on reorganizing women's labor into producer-owned cooperatives, but also on defending the revolution. Unlike much Commune scholarship, Merriman does more than nod toward the role of women and gender. While not his central focus, he makes clear women's significant presence and engagement in the insurgency. Addressing both Communard and anti-Communard women's participation and roles, he focuses particularly on the high profile and influential feminists Louise Michel and Elisabeth Dmitrieff. Beyond analyzing women's activism, importantly, he also critiques the gendered nature of the Versailles troops' violence during the Commune's suppression. Soldiers raped and sexually humiliated women, in deliberate acts of retribution for women's upending gender (and class) hierarchies.

Merriman builds a riveting narrative of the Commune's fall. Following the battle arrondissement by arrondissement, the book vividly describes the viciousness of Versailles's clampdown. This is what Merriman has been building toward: a highly detailed, well-supported, passionate proof of Thiers's, the Government of National Defense's, and the French army's intentional, systematic, and blatant massacre of thousands of working class and left intellectual Parisians. Directed not just against the Commune and its supporters, the violent suppression was aimed at all working-class and left Parisians. Merriman compellingly shows the murderous class-based ideology of the French national leadership.

To effectuate the subdual, Versailles set up military courts across the city. During the Commune's final days, which have become known as "Bloody Week," these courts meted out virtually instantaneous "justice." Resting on a governmental decree passed during the Prussian siege, the courts-martial held the power to judge and condemn to death both soldiers and citizens. By establishing courts-martial in the city, Merriman contends, Thiers "fully expected that his troops would be executing Communards in Paris" (pp. 206-7), rather than arresting and transporting prisoners out of the city. Propaganda likening Communards to colonial "barbarians," demonizing and dehumanizing them as disease-ridden and animalistic, incited the provincial Versailles troops. Merriman powerfully demonstrates that, strongly intending to deter future uprisings, Thiers and the Versailles government systematically planned and carried out the carnage.

The closing chapter, "Remembering," briefly addresses the Commune's aftermath and legacy. Paris quickly became a "ruin tourism" destination, while Communard trials continued, and a strand of international condemnation of Versailles's ruthless repression emerged. The Church worked to reassert its political, religious, and physical authority, constructing the monumental basilica Sacré-Coeur in working-class Montmartre. A looming presence intended as a reminder of defeat, the church became a despised symbol of despotism to left Parisians. Merriman points out that plebian Paris felt even further estranged from the Church in the revolution's wake.

Massacre concludes by linking the Commune to the twentieth century. Again engaging debates regarding the uprising's historical place, Merriman argues, "If the Paris Commune of 1871 may be seen as the last of the nineteenth-century revolutions, the murderous, systematic, state repression that followed helped unleash the demons of the twentieth century" (p. 256). Asserting this as the unfortunately dominant legacy, he sees the Commune's repression as "State violence...organized and systematic" (p. 256). Yet he

ends the book romantically and wistfully, quoting first Jean-Baptiste Clément's "Le temps de cerises," with its promise to "keep this time, in my heart, An open wound," and closing with Thomas Wolfe's plaintive "Oh lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again" (pp. 257-58). It is this romantic view of the Commune that underpins Merriman's political engagement—the lost moment of liberatory potential. Intertwining the brutal and the human throughout the book, Merriman fashions a conclusive, impassioned, piece of scholarship while never allowing his work to lose its accessibility.

Carolyn Eichner
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
eichner@uwm.edu

Copyright © 2015 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172