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*H-France Review* Vol. 6 (May 2006), No. 55

**David A. Shafer**, *The Paris Commune: French Politics, Culture, and Society at the Crossroads of the Revolutionary Tradition and Revolutionary Socialism*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. xii + 226 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 US (cl). ISBN: 0-333-72302-3. \$28.95 US (pb). ISBN: 0-333-72303-1.

Review by Steven C. Hause, Washington University in St. Louis.

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The revolutions of 1989 and the subsequent collapse of Marxist scholarship and the working-class orientation it encouraged have muffled many debates of pre-1989 scholarship. One of the interesting exceptions is academic fascination with the Paris Commune of 1871. The Commune has continued to receive considerable attention, especially among British historians. Post-1989 contributions by James Smith Allen, Ronald Aminzade, David Barry, Albert Boime, Roger Gould, Gay Gullickson, John Milner, Bertrand Taithe, and Robert Tombs testify to the vitality of the subject.

David A. Shafer, an assistant professor of history at California State University, Long Beach, has added a noteworthy contribution to this subject with the publication of his *The Paris Commune: French Politics, Culture, and Society at the Crossroads of the Revolutionary Tradition and Revolutionary Socialism*. It is not a direct adaptation of Shafer's 1994 doctoral dissertation on revolutionary insurgency (at the University of London, where he worked under the direction of Pamela Pilbeam), but a refocusing and restyling for broader readership. The result is a good model of how to reorient and adapt a dissertation and publish it.

Shafer has produced a work of synthesis and survey, well suited for both general readership and classroom use. It has a good "brief bibliography" and strong foot-noting, showing its scholarly pedigree, but skips both the alphabet soup of archival notation and the dissertation tradition of dense, comprehensive notes—again, well-planned for the intended readership.

Shafer considers the week of bloodshed and fires during the suppression of the Commune to have been Paris' "most anguished moment"—a considerable statement when the competition includes the reign of terror and the Nazi occupation. He stresses the heroism and idealism of the Commune, and—not surprising considering the book's roots in his dissertation—the place of the Commune in the revolutionary tradition. Academic specialists will appreciate his up-to-date digest of the large literature on the Commune, such as the role of women in the Commune, and his place in the eternal left-versus-right interpretation.

One ideological touchstone to locate Shafer's place in scholarly literature might be accounts of the body count for the Versailles suppression of the Commune. The leading scholar of the Commune, Robert Tombs, has recently stated a restrained, conservative conclusion on this subject: "The fragmentary evidence so far uncovered suggests that around 10,000 people were killed in combat or by summary execution." Tombs notes the existence of "much higher figures, usually based on Lissagaray's estimate of 17,000-20,000."<sup>[1]</sup> Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, of course, fought on the barricades of the bloody week, and his history of the Commune has long been favored as one of the best sympathetic accounts.<sup>[2]</sup> David Shafer shifts the authority for this number. He notes that Marshal MacMahon, one of the generals responsible for the bloody week, "gave an estimate of 17,000." Shafer then relies upon a modern leftist historian, Jacques Rougerie, who "believes the number to be at least twice as high."<sup>[3]</sup> Thus, Shafer supports an estimate three times the size proposed by Tombs—a striking indication of how

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far apart historical interpretation can get. Shafer also underscores his perspective in concluding his body-count discussion by adding, “By contrast, Versailles losses—those killed in battle, as hostages, and disappearance—amounted to less than 1200!” (p. 98).

One of the most interesting aspects of this debate comes in recent attempts to understand it. Shafer accepts Bertrand Taithe’s suggestion of “brutalization theory” (which “holds that violence is self-perpetuating and accustoms a society” to further indifference to suffering[4], but “suggests a more expansive approach to the functioning of brutalization” (p. 94) by drawing out the imperial background of the generals who crushed the Commune. Noting the roles of several generals, including MacMahon and Galliffet, in wars in Algeria and Mexico, he states that “French military atrocities against the indigenous peoples of both countries have been well-documented,” then proposes the view that the French military dehumanized the Parisian working class just as they colonial peoples (p. 95).

Most histories of the Commune spend most of their time considering aspects of this still-controversial subject, rather than reconstructing the events of its short life between March 19 and May 27, 1871. Shafer follows this pattern and devotes one chapter of six to the actual events. Given the expertise of his dissertation, it is not surprising that he devotes an introduction and two chapters to the background. The brief introduction introduces readers to the revolutionary antecedents to the Commune, from 1789 to 1848, then the Second Empire. Shafer’s view is straightforward: “Revolutionary republicanism in the nineteenth century functioned on two different levels: as an incessant quest to realize the egalitarian promise of the French Revolution and as a response to changes in the French political, economic, social, and cultural landscapes that were unimaginable at the time of the Revolution” (p. 27).

Shafer uses a chapter on the Second Empire to explain other roots of the Commune through a presentation of Haussmannization, Proudhon, the First International, Blanquism, and neo-Jacobinism. In this he shares the conclusion of David Jordan on Haussmannization, “The emotional energy of the Commune was already in place” (p. 12).[5] A second chapter on the origins of the Commune looks at the period between the fall of the empire on September 4, 1870, and the rupture of March 1871. This section provides a good explanation of the complicated governing of Paris under the Government of National Defense, the German siege of Paris, and finally the monarchical National Assembly of Versailles. Shafer nicely marks the transition with two crowd scenes: he opens the chapter with 30,000 peaceful citizens marching on the emperor’s residence at the Palais Royal and ends it with the smaller crowd in Montmartre executing Generals Lecomte and Clément-Thomas. His interpretation of the descent into revolution and civil war places emphasis upon the role of Adolphe Thiers at the head of the National Assembly. Here he effectively uses Thiers’s own words (as reported by Rougerie[6]) of reflection upon the advice that he had given to Louis Philippe in February 1848 (to withdraw safely from Paris, then to return with overwhelming force): “I [Thiers] was not successful on 24 February, but on this day [18 March], I triumphed over all objections” (p. 61).

Shafer devotes the second half of his history to three topical chapters. The first addresses the long-standing debate about the Commune: Was it a socialist revolution? Here Shafer begins by acknowledging “the absence of a precisely identifiable philosophy to guide and unite its [the Commune’s] members” (p. 110). He provides a good treatment of Marx’s elevation of the Commune in revolutionary orthodoxy, beginning with Marx’s report to the General Council of the (First) International and shows how this led to the Commune being understood (by both sides of the debate) “through a prism tinted by proletarian class consciousness” (p. 111). This leads to a good survey of the scholarly literature on the Commune which gives a valuable, concise presentation for graduate students seeking an overview of the historiography (but would presumably be somewhat less interesting to non-academic, general readers). Shafer notes that Rougerie (“the doyen of historians of the Commune”) does not accept the Marxist-Leninist reading that the Commune was the first revolution of the proletariat, but neither does he reject “the socialist motivations at the heart of the Commune” (p. 114). This provides

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the context for Shafer's own view that scholarly arguments "have occluded a clear view of the remarkable degree of unity on the Commune around revolutionary republican socialism articulated in the final years of the Second Empire" (p. 110).

A second important topical chapter treats "Women and the Commune". This section is further removed from Shafer's research on the revolutionary tradition, and it relies chiefly on the well-known basics: Edith Thomas, Claire Moses, and Gay Gullickson. It is moderately disappointing that the *Communardes* receive separate-but-equal treatment rather than integration into a single history of the Commune, but this chapter too provides a good, brief introduction for student discussions or exam preparations. Shafer's approach here focuses heavily on three prominent Communardes (Louise Michel, André Léo, and Elisabeth Dimitrieff), but he provides a strong section on the links between women's aspirations and contributions and the debates and actions of the Commune. He explains the limited accuracy of the widely repeated image of women's arsonists: "in the first place... this was no general conflagration." Secondly, the fires at a few prominent buildings were exaggerated by the government: "In the wake of the most indiscriminate bloodfest in French history, the fires served as a public relations coup for the Versailles government, desperately needing to divert attention away from the 20,000 to 30,000 corpses scattered across the capital and its neighboring suburbs" (p. 158). Obviously, the government this partly to justify itself and partly for reasons of class and gender. Why focus on women? Shafer's conclusion here draws heavily on Gay Gullickson's analysis of gender constructs.[7] Female defenders of the Commune threatened the bourgeois vision of order as much as workers did, and they had "challenged the foundations of social stability" (p. 160).

Shafer's third topical chapter looks at art and the Commune, at the use of visual media to shape political perception. The central figure here, of course, is Gustave Courbet, who founded the democratically-elected *Fédération des Artistes* under the Commune. Courbet acted primarily from a Proudhonian, anti-statist impulse, and was thus capable of defying the government of the Commune too, by leading Communard preservationists to rescue the artistic and historical collections from Thiers' home when the Commune ordered it destroyed. As Shafer nicely shows, Courbet nonetheless paid dearly for his role in Commune—all of his works were seized by the state, and the MacMahon government of 1873 charged him personally the total cost (over 300,000 francs) of reconstructing the Vendôme Column. In addition to this case study, Shafer shows how visual media, especially caricatures, were effectively used to shape public perceptions of the Commune.

This section links nicely with the chapter on women, because none of the anti-Commune caricatures exceeded the hostility poured on the *pétroleuses* who had threatened French civilization in so many ways. The cover of the paperback edition of *The Paris Commune* provides a provocative example—an elegantly detailed image of central Paris, viewed from the air as conflagration appears to be sweeping the city away. A less subtle illustration, reproduced from the collection at Northwestern University, manages to pack in every negative image the artist could imagine: a hard-faced and utterly unfeminine *pétroleuse*, wearing blood-stained garments (with the names of prominent people who fell to the crowd in 1848) and a Phrygian cap, holding a burning torch aloft, and sitting astride a tangled mass of serpents, severed heads, government decorations, and the corpse of a military hero. In the background a monument to "Égalité" has skulls atop it, a crowd of adoring workers worshipfully approach this anti-Marianne, and in the distance stands a guillotine with a banner proclaiming "1793."

David A. Shafer is to be congratulated for a first-rate scholarly synthesis and his own provocative views on an important subject which surely must continue to be taught and studied in the post-1989 world. He has produced a book which is valuable for class-room use and helpful for graduate students preparing for exams. It is probably not the first choice for general readers seeking a more popularized account

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(Rupert Christiansen's *Paris Babylon* will probably continue to carry that market), but it is written in a nicely accessible style so non-academic readers can read it with few concerns.

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## NOTES

[1] Robert Tombs, *The Paris Commune, 1871* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), pp. 179-80.

[2] See Bernard Noël's summation in his *Dictionnaire de la Commune* (Paris: Fernand Hazan, 1971), pp. 237-38.

[3] Jacques Rougerie, *Paris insurgé: La Commune de 1871* (Paris: Découvertes Gallimard, 1995), p. 257.

[4] Bertrand Taithe, *Citizenship and Wars: France in Turmoil* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 138-39.

[5] David Jordan, *Transforming Paris: the Life and Times of Baron Haussmann* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 290.

[6] Rougerie, *Paris insurgé*, p. 102.

[7] Gay L. Gullickson, *The Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 208-9.

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ISSN 1553-9172