

STATE POWER, POPULAR RESISTANCE, AND COMPETING NATIONALIST  
NARRATIVES IN FRANCE, 1791-1871

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## **ABSTRACT**

Lindsay Ayling: State Power, Popular Resistance, and Competing Nationalist Narratives in  
France, 1791-1871

(Under the direction of Lloyd S. Kramer)

In this thesis, I analyze rhetoric surrounding three events in which violence erupted between the French authorities and the French “people”: the Champ de Mars massacre of 1791, the June Days revolt of 1848, and the Paris Commune of 1871. Studying newspapers, speeches, images, memoirs, and literature, I argue that in producing competing narratives surrounding these events, politicians and polemicists also shaped competing conceptions of the French nation. In order to justify a given position, they associated either “the people” or the military with French symbols, values, and ideals while presenting their opponents as the national enemy. With each subsequent civil struggle, they appropriated and altered previous narratives, thereby constructing evolving but still irreconcilable versions of the nation. I conclude that because nationalism fractures on ideological lines, it is impossible to realize a single, unified conception of a national essence.

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## Introduction

On September 8, 1871, Louis Rossel appeared before a Versailles tribunal to answer accusations of treason. As the Paris Commune's former Delegate for War, prosecutors alleged, Rossel had condemned "citizens who refused to march against the French Army" to death, labor, or imprisonment. He was further charged with "lead[ing] military operations against the legitimate government of France...[because] he did not hesitate for an instant, despite his military position and the rank he occupied in the army, to raise arms against France."<sup>1</sup> In short, a man who had previously judged treason cases against Parisians who failed to fight for the Commune later found himself charged with treason for taking up arms against Versailles.

Rossel countered that he was no traitor and had in fact acted out of "devotion to my *patrie*." The Commune was not an insurrection against France, but rather a patriotic movement that aimed to defend his nation against its most powerful enemy. It was born out of "vigorous opposition to the Prussians," he maintained, because "the first irregular act of the Parisian population was to seize the cannons in order to prevent them from falling into Prussian hands." When tribunal President Merlin accused him of betraying the French flag by fighting under the Communard red and against the tricolor, Rossel cited historical precedent. "In 1814, when Ney and Labédoyère raised the army against...a government more solidly established than the one I attacked, the whole army followed this movement; they tore up the white flag that was the flag of France in order to take up the tricolor."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Nathaniel Rossel, *Mémoires, procès et correspondance*, ed. Roger Stéphane (Montreuil : Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1960), 329.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 332-333.

Rossel was of course correct to point out that the tricolor had often been the flag of insurrection. But during the June Days of 1848, partisans of the Second Republic had taken great pains to associate the iconic flag with the government and against the working-class rebels. At various moments in French history, the tricolor represented republic, monarchy, and empire; it was the emblem of both revolution and of “order.”

The tricolor was one of many symbols, archetypes, and social groups that became fodder for a multi-generational battle over the meaning of the French identity. As a Communard, Rossel fought for the France of social revolution, a country in which insurrection was a patriotic act. His prosecutors represented the Republic of Order, a France which drew strength from its history of revolution but considered any uprising against the current government as an attack against the *patrie* and its revolutionary ideals. Because the Republic of Order and the France of social revolution each denied the legitimacy of the other—and because the Republic of Order prevailed, at least militarily, in 1871—Rossel was executed by firing squad.<sup>3</sup> In his trial and execution, we can observe one practical consequence of a recurring debate in eighteenth and nineteenth century France, a debate that centered on the following question: when the French “people” and the French armed forces go to war against each other, who is the nation?

This French debate raises questions about the broader nature of nationalism, which historians generally understand as an ideology that aims to build a united, “imagined community.”<sup>4</sup> Many have found it useful to analyze nationalism in terms of this intended goal. Indeed, it can be expedient—especially when tracing the emergence of nationalism—to describe this phenomenon as though a single, coherent nationalist ideology exists in any given nation at

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<sup>3</sup> John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 250.

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised edition (London and New York, Verso: 1991).

any particular point in time. Other scholars, however, have demonstrated that competing forms of national memory and identity can exist side-by-side. For example, Karen Hagemann's recent work reveals how different "master narratives" of the Napoleonic Wars reinforced opposing notions of Germans as conservative, religious, monarchical subjects and as a people fighting to restore its liberties.<sup>5</sup> This example attests to the fact that fractured nationalism is not limited to France alone.

When we examine the practical implications of nationalist politics, it becomes clear why national identity can never be entirely coherent. As David Bell has defined nationalism, it is "a political program which has as its goal not merely to praise, or defend, or strengthen a nation, but actively to construct one."<sup>6</sup> We must therefore consider how multiple governments and political movements, driven by competing values, enact their own versions of nationalist programs. Naturally, they define the nation's membership and ideals in different ways, thereby constructing different iterations of the same nation. Their proponents display these iterations most clearly in moments of crisis, when they claim legitimacy by defining their side as the "true" nation and their opponents as its enemies.

We might imagine that when one side of such debates emerges victorious, its version of nationalism destroys that of its opponents. Many scholars thus argue that European nationalism emerged from its leftist, Jacobin iteration in the eighteenth century but then gave way to a right-

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<sup>5</sup> Karen Hagemann, *Revisiting Prussia's Wars Against Napoleon: History, Culture, and Memory*, trans. Pamela Selwyn (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). See also Pierre Nora's work, which touches on a variety of contests for French memory, from the Franks vs. the Gauls to the Gaullists vs. the communists. Pierre Nora, ed, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, vol. 1, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, English Language ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> David A. Bell. *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680—1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 3.

wing, authoritarian ideology by the early twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Yet the debates that arose from civil struggles in eighteenth and nineteenth century France demonstrate that competing versions of nationalist ideology do not simply disappear when their supporters are defeated politically; alternative descriptions of the “true” nation endure long after their advocates have been displaced from political power. They remain embedded in collective memory partially because of a phenomenon Hayden White observed in his classic book, *Metahistory*. White challenged the distinction between a fiction writer who “invents” and a historian who “uncovers” a story, arguing that the process of arranging history—of choosing a beginning, middle, and end—means that histories will take on literary forms. “In order to figure ‘what really happened’ in the past,” White wrote, “the historian must first prefigure as a possible object of knowledge the whole set of events reported in the documents.”<sup>8</sup>

The polemicists and propagandists who promote various iterations of national identity engage in this same type of prefiguration. They then draw upon previously established tropes (such as national symbols or gender archetypes) and upon past polemical narratives in order to make their narratives recognizable. Nineteenth century radicals often drew parallels to the French Revolution of 1789-1799. Karl Marx famously likened the revolutionaries of 1848 to play actors who “knew nothing better than to parody...the revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1795.”<sup>9</sup> More than a century later, François Furet described each major political upheaval in nineteenth century France as a re-litigation of the French Revolution.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For one such example see Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 215-7.

<sup>8</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 6-7, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers Co., Inc., 1963), 15.

<sup>10</sup> Furet, François. “The French Revolution Revisited.” In *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*, ed. Gary Kates (New York and London: Routledge, 1998).



This study argues, however, that the polemicists of 1848 and 1871 did not simply rehash earlier arguments. Rather, they drew selectively from pre-existing narratives whenever such accounts suited their ideological needs, sometimes altering them to fit changing contemporary views of national identity. In the process, they extended opposing definitions of the nation across a larger historical timeline. Although I will refer to authors on the “left” and “right” side of contemporary political spectrums, it is important to note that even within political camps, narratives did not wholly align. These opposing narratives produced various competing and overlapping conceptions of the French nation, rather than a simple binary opposition.

The Champs de Mars Massacre of 1791, the June Days of 1848, and the Paris Commune of 1871 serve as illustrative examples for this comparative investigation. In addition to occupying prominent places in the French canon of resistance and oppression, these events share key historical similarities. In 1791 and 1848, a protesting public violently clashed with ostensibly patriotic military units. During the Bloody Week of 1871, the army of Versailles massacred the Communards of Paris and the National Guards who had joined their revolution two months earlier. Each conflict spurred emphatic debates in which partisans transformed “the people” and the soldiers they fought into either symbols of the nation or its archetypal enemies. In understanding how competing national narratives were articulated in 1791, we can observe how polemicists and politicians appropriated and altered them in 1848 and 1871. Together these controversies, and the rhetoric surrounding them, show how opposing political groups construct contrasting ideas of the nation, and they reveal the process by which nationalism fractures into competing ideological camps. The continued opposition between French nationalist narratives further demonstrates the impossibility of realizing a single, unified conception of a national essence.

## Tyrannical Peacekeepers and Patriotic Rabble

On July 17, 1791, Parisian activists gathered on the Champ de Mars to sign a petition denouncing the National Assembly's decision to absolve King Louis XVI for his attempt to flee the country almost a month before.<sup>11</sup> The crowd discovered two men lurking under the altar of the fatherland (*patrie*),<sup>12</sup> and although these men were probably hiding there in order to look up women's skirts, the crowd accused them of espionage and summarily executed them. In response to these killings (and an earlier incident in which someone had tried to shoot the Marquis de Lafayette, then Commander of the National Guard), Paris Mayor Jean-Sylvain Bailly<sup>13</sup> declared martial law. The National Guard marched on the Champ de Mars and eventually fired into the crowd, killing up to fifty people.<sup>14</sup>

This event has inspired a great deal of insightful scholarship. Timothy Tackett analyzed it as a product of the swift turn in popular French attitude against Louis XVI following his flight to Varennes,<sup>15</sup> whereas David Andress has noted how the subsequent political commentary tended to transform people into abstract concepts, thereby ignoring the plight of the individuals themselves.<sup>16</sup> Building upon both of these ideas, I will show how the petitioners and the National Guard became symbolic tools in dueling narratives—thereby shaping competing conceptions of

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<sup>11</sup> The National Assembly had nearly finalized the Constitution of 1791 when Louis XVI attempted to leave France, almost certainly to support a counter-revolutionary invasion, but he was caught in the town of Varennes and brought back to Paris. The Assembly, fearing France could not function without a King, absolved Louis so he could rule as a constitutional monarch in accordance with the new document. For further details see Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight*, (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2003).

<sup>12</sup> During Revolutionary festivals, French citizens often stood at these altars to swear oaths of loyalty to the nation.

<sup>13</sup> Bailly was eventually guillotined for his role in the Champ de Mars massacre.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed description of this event see David Andress, *Massacre at the Champ de Mars: Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution*, (Suffolk and Rochester: The Boydell Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Tackett, *When the King Took Flight*.

<sup>16</sup> Andress, *Massacre at the Champ de Mars*, 87.

the French nation. Later, I will show how these symbols recurred in the national debates of the nineteenth century.

On the radical left, polemicists depicted the petitioners as symbols of the true French nation while offering scathing rebukes of General Lafayette. Immediately following the massacre, Jean Paul Marat's popular newspaper *L'Ami du Peuple* (Friend of the People) carried the headline, "Atrocious massacre of peaceful citizens, women and children gathered on the Champ de Mars, their throats barbarously slit on the orders of the infernal Mottié<sup>17</sup> [Lafayette]."<sup>18</sup> While depicting the petitioners as ideal citizens of revolutionary France, Marat also presents Lafayette as their antithesis. "Burning with impatience to begin carrying out the counterrevolution," he wrote, "Mottié eagerly seized upon the occasion of the assembly of the friends of liberty who had come to the Champ de Mars."<sup>19</sup> Thus, Marat established a dichotomy between the petitioners who loved the revolutionary ideal of liberty and their "counter-revolutionary" oppressors.

Maximilien Robespierre feared (correctly) that a charismatic military leader would rise to power and co-opt the Revolution, and he therefore sustained the assault against Lafayette. A year after the massacre, Robespierre reminded the readers of his newspaper, *Le Défenseur de la Constitution* (Defender of the Constitution), that "the laws have not yet punished M. Lafayette's

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<sup>17</sup> Lafayette's full name was Marie Jean Paul Joseph Roch Yves Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette. His leftist opponents referred to him as "Mottié," a misspelling of the name he would have used had he not been an aristocrat. For more on the evolving public perceptions of Lafayette, see Lloyd Kramer, *Lafayette in Two Worlds: Public Cultures and Personal Identities in an Age of Revolutions* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>18</sup> Jean Paul Marat, *L'Ami du Peuple*, No. 523, 19 July 1791, in *Marat dit L'Ami du Peuple: Collection Complète du Journal*, vol. XI (Tokyo : Society for Reproduction of Rare Books, 1967), 177.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 177-8.

attacks against liberty.”<sup>20</sup> Removed the petitioners as a symbolic intermediary, Robespierre accused Lafayette of striking at liberty itself. The human martyrs of the Champ de Mars remained a powerful rhetorical tool, however, and they figured heavily in a denunciation by Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois which Robespierre reprinted following his brief introduction.

Employing the same dichotomy of Lafayette versus the values of the French Revolution, Collot d’Herbois told the Jacobin Club, “it was with a cold and calculated cruelty that Lafayette gave [the National Guard] the signal to bloody the altar of the fatherland, to kill their unarmed friends, their women and their children...Ferocious man! You have made red with blood that sacred ground where free men had sworn union, federation, fraternity!”<sup>21</sup> Here, Collot d’Herbois deliberately contrasted the “cruel” Lafayette with the united patriots of France, whom he associated with the ideals *patrie*, liberty, and fraternity. Robespierre himself seems to have made a conscious choice to portray Lafayette not only as a tyrant but also as antithetical to French values. A more explicit example is the passive-aggressive title of an open letter he published in 1792, “Response of French citizen Robespierre to Monsieur La Fayette, general of the army.”<sup>22</sup> By assigning himself the new patriotic honorific of *citoyen* and referring to Lafayette in the old aristocratic manner, as *Monsieur*, Robespierre defined himself as a member of the French nation and Lafayette a dangerous an outsider.

For their part, the National Guardsmen who served under Lafayette were minor characters in the radical leftist account. Louis-Marie Prudhomme’s newspaper, *Révolutions de Paris* described a brutal scene in which the National Guard hunted down petitioners attempting

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<sup>20</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Le Défenseur de la Constitution*, no. 9, 1792, in *Œuvres Complète de Maximilien Robespierre*, vol. IV, ed. Gustave Laurent (Paris : Société des Etudes Robespierristes, 1932), 262.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Marie Collot d’ Herbois, “Opinion de J. M. Collot—D’Herbois sur les coupables démarches du général Lafayette,” *Le Défenseur de la Constitution*, no. 9, 1792, in *Œuvres Complète de Maximilien Robespierre*, vol. IV, ed. Gustave Laurent (Paris : Société des Etudes Robespierristes, 1932), 274.

<sup>22</sup> Robespierre, *Défenseur*, no. 6, 1792, in *Œuvres* vol. IV, 186.

to escape and even “thr[ew] their sabres at the legs of those they could not overtake.” After recounting this carnage, the paper argued that “despicable methods must have been used to bring the National Guard to this point!”<sup>23</sup> Accounts such as these partially absolved the Guard by stripping it of agency. They suggested that nefarious elites must have turned the Guard against the people, who under normal circumstances would have been their allies.

A political cartoon captured this point of view, portraying the National Guard as leashed turkeys tethered to the tail of Lafayette’s horse. The Commander addresses his Guardsmen while gesturing to a small crowd milling peacefully about the altar of the fatherland; he tells them, “remember, it will take courage to kill those people over there” (Figure 1). Although the cartoonist was not entirely sympathetic to the Guardsmen, he implied they were naïve pawns of the mastermind Lafayette. In fact, the cartoon probably depicted the National Guard as a force of turkeys because the French word for a male turkey, *dindon*, can also refer to a person who is easily deceived.

A more specific conspiracy and wide-spread theory accused sinister counter-revolutionaries of planting their own men under the altar of the fatherland so the petitioners would kill them, thus providing a pretext for a royalist coup. In line with this theory, Robespierre suggested the conspiracy aimed “to inflame the zeal of the National Guard.”<sup>24</sup> Lafayette, of course, played a central role in the alleged plot. Marat claimed that the two men were disabled Guards, whom Lafayette had placed underneath the altar and supplied with gun power in order “to make them blow up the Champ de Mars while the friends of liberty were assembled there.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Les Révolutions de Paris*, No. 106, 16-23 July 1791, in *The Press in the French Revolution*, ed. J. Gilchrist and W. J. Murray (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1971), 162.

<sup>24</sup> Robespierre, *Défenseur*, no. 6, 1792, in *Œuvres* vol. IV, 165.

<sup>25</sup> Marat, *L’Ami du Peuple*, No. 524, 27 July 1791, in *Marat dit L’Ami du Peuple*, vol. XI, 190.

The people, in Marat's estimation, were entirely justified in killing these dangerous plants of the counter-revolutionary conspiracy.

But whether supporters of the petitioners leveled specific charges or simply made vague accusations, they all stuck to the same general narrative: because of external influence from Lafayette, the Guard temporarily made war against the French nation. Though their Commander had betrayed France, the Guardsmen themselves were not permanently alien to their country. Collot d'Herbois took this argument to its logical conclusion, telling the people of France that by ridding themselves of the Commander of the Guard, they could rejuvenate their divided nation. "Punish Lafayette," he wrote, "and the original links of our union will tighten again. A new federation will return us all to our first sentiments."<sup>26</sup> In other words, by eliminating the aristocratic enemy of revolutionary France, the Guard could reconcile itself with the people and thereby rejoin the nation.

The rhetoric surrounding the Champ de Mars massacre relates to an argument Lynn Hunt has made about the Revolution as a whole; even as the Revolution grew more radical and more peripheral, its rhetoric and symbolism continued to appeal to universal values.<sup>27</sup> In the polemics of 1791, leftist appeals to values such as liberty, equality, and fraternity—running parallel to accusations that their opponents attacked those values—led to narrower conceptions of who could be considered a true French citizen.

Rightist and centrist narratives of the Champ de Mars did not establish the same connections to national symbols and ideals; because the nation in the eighteenth century was linked to the concept of popular sovereignty, nationalist rhetoric first developed in opposition to

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<sup>26</sup> Collot d'Herbois, "Opinion," in *Défenseur*, no. 9, 1792, in *Œuvres de Robespierre*, vol. IV, 274.

<sup>27</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 217.

monarchy. It is nonetheless important to understand the key archetypes of counter-revolutionary and moderate narratives, especially that of the destructive and seditious crowd, which went on to become a perennial figure in the discourse of the nationalist right.

We can observe this image of the crowd in the Royalist paper *L'Ami du Roi* (Friend of the King), which was sympathetic to the National Guard and the Parisian municipal authorities. “The National Guard was menaced and insulted” on the Champ de Mars, the paper declared, at a site where “two murders had already been committed by villains.” Amid this dangerous situation, “Many National Guards were hit with stones” and “the troops could not hold back their indignation; they fired a salvo that entirely dissipated the seditious crowd.”<sup>28</sup> Although the National Guard did not come across as particularly heroic in this account, as the petitioners did in the leftist narrative, *L'Ami du Roi* portrayed them as taking a logical course of action in order to uphold the public safety.

By defending the National Guard, the paper portrayed the petitioners as the true villains, which in turn enabled it to critique the revolution in general. Noting the “striking similarity between these events and those that marked the first days of the revolution,” *L'Ami du Roi* criticized the crowds who had brought down the Bastille two years earlier. In both cases, it argued, “there were brigands who filled the capital with disorder; there were writings, incendiary motions, insurrections against authority were in full force, and victims immolated with a refined cruelty.” Raising the specter of “bloodied heads carried like trophies at the top of pikes,” the article went on to claim that the people of July 1791 were “more unpredictable...without a king.”<sup>29</sup> This narrative performed a similar operation to that of the left. Like its Jacobin

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<sup>28</sup> *L'Ami du Roi, des Français, de l'ordre et surtout de la vérité*, no. 200, 19 July 197, Gallica (ark:/12148/cb326916609), 798-9.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

opponents, *L'Ami Du Roi* established a dichotomy between “the people” and the National Guard to argue for a particular version of France. The royalist narrative critiqued the “disorder” of the French Revolution and suggested that monarchist France had produced a stable, superior society. The constitutional monarchist Antoine Barnave offered a different variant of the pro-Guard narrative. A member of the Feuillant Club, Barnave had joined Lafayette and a group of center-left politicians who split with the Jacobin Club over whether to reinstate Louis XVI’s powers after his attempted flight. Naturally, he was sympathetic to the National Guard’s cause. Barnave did not argue that the people were inherently anarchical without the king’s authority; instead, he blamed the Jacobins for stirring up disorder.<sup>30</sup> Claiming Parisians largely favored reinstating the king, Barnave suggested that the Jacobins—who were “violently agitated”—had mobilized workers who lived outside the city. The Jacobins “took in a multitude of workers, who they called the nation, and invited them to revolt,” leading directly to “the unfortunate affair of the Champ de Mars.”<sup>31</sup> With this accusation against the Jacobins, Barnave proved himself a conscious participant in the debate over national membership. He directly challenged the argument that the petitioners were “the nation” and instead insisted that they were trouble-makers who were not true Parisians. This type of rhetoric mirrored leftist polemics that had denied citizenship to Lafayette.

These rhetorical battles show how opposing ideologies constructed different meanings of French identity. Radicals like Marat associated citizenship with revolutionary activity and portrayed the French as a people locked in battle against a tyrannical class of aristocrats. Royalists, on the other hand, argued that France functioned only under a king’s rule and viewed

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<sup>30</sup> It was actually a petition from the Cordeliers Club that the activists signed the day of the Champ de Mars massacre. The Jacobin Club had considered endorsing it but ultimately decided not to.

<sup>31</sup> Antoine Barnave, *Œuvres de Barnave*, ed. Alphonse Béranger (Paris : J. Chapelle et Guiller, 1843), Gallica (ark:/12148/bpt6k41685w), 135-6.



the revolutionary masses as a fundamental threat to French society. As *L'Ami du Roi* demonstrated, narratives of the massacre drew upon previously-established archetypes. The royalist paper employed the trope of the “bloodthirsty mob” in order to connect the petitioners to a pre-existing image, thereby reinforcing broader conclusions about the lawless nature of “the people.” Later generations would employ this strategy repeatedly as they put forth competing narratives of civil struggles in their own times.

### **The Republic of Order and The Spirit of Revolution**

One such later struggle was the “June Days,” which ranks among the most controversial events in France’s perennial debate over revolutionary violence and national identity. Between June 23 and June 26, 1848, France’s newly-formed Second Republic put down a popular insurrection that was sparked when, after months of mounting tension, the National Assembly dissolved the National Workshops, an employment program for lower-class Parisians (formed after the February Revolution) and a hub of radical political activity. The Second Republic voted temporary dictatorial powers to General Louis-Eugène Cavaignac, who commanded the National and Mobile Guards as they smashed the insurgents’ barricades.<sup>32</sup>

Less than a week later, the pro-government newspaper *L'Illustration* ran a story praising a young Mobile Guardsman’s valor and, more importantly, his patriotic sentiment. According to the paper’s account, this sixteen-year-old soldier charged a barricade, seized the red flag planted atop it, and immediately collapsed. His fellow guardsmen “lifted him up, believing him dead or seriously injured, but he opened his eyes and told them it was nothing. ‘I felt so many emotions,’

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<sup>32</sup> For a detailed description of the June Days and its causes see Mark Traugott, *Armies of the Poor: Determinants of Working-Class Participation in the Parisian Insurrection of June 1848*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 3-34.

he added ‘upon seeing that I was the master of the flag that I found myself ill.’”<sup>33</sup> Like many battlefield narratives, this tale leaves much room for doubt. But whether a young man truly fainted upon capturing the red flag is less significant than the fact that *L'Illustration* deemed the story worthy of publication.

The young soldier was an ideal symbol for Second Republic nationalism, which borrowed from the left and right of 1791, portraying Mobile Guards as both agents of order and champions of revolutionary ideals. The imagery of the tricolor dominated many of their accounts because it associated the soldiers of the Second Republic with the French Revolution while also allowing government sympathizers to cast the insurgents, with their red flag, as alien enemies. The defenders of the nascent republic considered this symbolism important enough to award the Cross of Honor to several soldiers who had seized red flags from the barricades of Foubourg St. Antoine.<sup>34</sup>

It also allowed a young woman named Victorine Charlemagne to make herself into a Second Republic folk hero. She portrayed herself as a young *cantinière* who had courageously charged to the top of barricade and stolen a flag from her enemy’s hands.<sup>35</sup> Historians have cast serious doubt on her story, but she inspired several songs and illustrations in which she often resembled a conservatively dressed version of Marianne.<sup>36</sup> In one representative example (Figure 2), Victorine wields the tricolor flag’s pole as a weapon, clashing it against an insurgent’s rifle. She strikes a heroic, resolute pose while the insurgent—a wild-looking man with a contorted

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<sup>33</sup> *L'Illustration*, no. 279-280, 1-8 July 1848, 283.

<sup>34</sup> “Gardes Mobiles,” *L'Illustration*, no. 279-280, 1-8 July 1848, 283.

<sup>35</sup> *Cantinières* were female auxiliaries to French army units. They sold food, drink, and laundry services to the soldiers in addition to caring for the wounded and often fighting alongside the men. See Thomas Cardoza, *Intrepid Women: Cantinières and Vivandières of the French Army* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Cardoza notes that everything from her name to the wildly unrealistic details of her story arouse suspicion. *Ibid.*, 156-7.

face—is clearly frightened and appears to be on the verge of toppling backward. She does not need to look at her opponent in order to overcome him, as if the tricolor has imbued her with a mystical strength. Bullet holes riddle her flag, but it nonetheless flies triumphantly above the barricade, symbolizing a republic that had emerged victorious from a potentially fatal assault.

The official statements of the Second Republic mirrored this imagery, tying its soldiers and its defense of order to historically poignant nationalist rhetoric—in particular, the ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. When the tide of war turned against the barricades, General Cavaignac announced, “the cause of order and the true Republic triumphs.” He then described the unity and fraternity with which France fought the insurgents and concluded, “all of France beats with one heart and aspires to the same goal, the Republic and order.”<sup>37</sup> By implication, Cavaignac excluded those who did not aspire to “order” from his conception of “all of France.” Similarly, a proclamation of the National Assembly accused the insurrection of “striking at the heart” of “family, institution, liberty, *patrie* . . . under the blows of these new barbarians, the civilization of the nineteenth century was in danger of perishing.”<sup>38</sup> By associating “liberty” and “*patrie*” with “institutions” and “civilization,” the government of the Second Republic integrated its value of “defending order” into the already-established ideals of the French nation.

To emphasize the *fraternité* between its citizens, the Second Republic narrative also featured the provincial National Guard’s support for their cause. Alexis de Tocqueville, who then served as a deputy to the National Assembly, wrote of the volunteers who traveled from the countryside, “these men belonged without distinction to all the classes of society; among them there were many peasants, many bourgeois, many great landowners and nobles, all mixed

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<sup>37</sup> Louis-Eugène Cavaignac, “Proclamation de l’Assemblée Nationale aux peuple français,” in *L’Illustration*, no. 279-280, 8 July 1848, 286.

<sup>38</sup> Assemblée Nationale de France, “Proclamation de l’Assemblée Nationale aux peuple français,” in *L’Illustration*, 287.

together in the same ranks.” While painting this picture of national unity, Tocqueville carefully omitted from his list (ostensibly of “all classes of society”) any reference to the urban proletariat. Lest we wonder if the omission was accidental, Tocqueville continued, “the insurgents were receiving no fresh forces, and we, we had all of France for reserves.”<sup>39</sup> *L’Illustration* similarly praised “the enthusiasm that animated these defenders of order and liberty that the provinces had sent us,” and argued that these reinforcements had proved “the Republic was established upon an indestructible base [because] it is in seeing them that one can understand how the word fraternity that the Republic inscribed on her banner is far from devoid of meaning.”<sup>40</sup> Both the paper and Tocqueville connected the National Guard to the French revolutionary principles of liberty and fraternity. In doing so, they suggested by suppressing the June Days uprising, the French armed forces demonstrated their commitment to the French nation’s enduring values.

Because a soldier is only as brave as the enemy is frightening, it was not enough for the Second Republic to portray the Guard as the heroic embodiment of the nation; they also needed to present the rebels of the June Days as an existential threat to their version of French civilization. *L’Illustration* alluded to a bleak alternative—a France in which the revolt had succeeded. The paper described some imprisoned insurgents as “true soldiers of riot, necessary agents of all insurrections past and future... Victors, they would have begun again tomorrow against their own comrades. Vanquished, they resigned themselves with fatalism and carelessness.”<sup>41</sup> The workers had a natural inclination to revolt against authority, the paper suggested. Had they succeeded, they would have formed a new authority, which the “true

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<sup>39</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Souvenirs de Alexis de Tocqueville*, ed. Calmann Lévy (Paris : Le Compte de Tocqueville, 1893), Hathi Trust (<http://hdl.handle.net/libproxy.lib.unc.edu/2027/wu.89007049265>), 235.

<sup>40</sup> “Marche de la province sur Paris,” *L’Illustration*, no. 279-280, 1-8 July 1848, 279.

<sup>41</sup> *L’Illustration*, no. 279-280, 1-8 July 1848, 284.

soldiers of riot” would have subsequently attacked, thus perpetuating France’s spiral into utter disorder. Suppressing the uprising had therefore prevented the nation—and civilization in general—from continuing on that fatal road toward anarchy.

Tocqueville later wrote that upon the outbreak of street fighting, Paris reminded him “of some city of antiquity, in which the *bourgeois*<sup>42</sup> defend their walls as heroes, because they know that if the city falls, they themselves will be dragged into slavery.” The defense against the insurgents thus rescued civilization, but even further, it aided society’s future progress.

Tocqueville made this clear when he argued that the battle against the insurgents was necessary because, at least for the moment it had “delivered the nation from the oppression of the workers of Paris and put it back in possession of itself.”<sup>43</sup> In this view, Parisian workers were alien to the nation, and their influence on France was akin to foreign oppression. Tocqueville characterized “France” and the workers in a way that inverted the language that French republicans of 1792 had employed against the crown;<sup>44</sup> only in overthrowing the alien force of the urban working class could the French nation—as Tocqueville conceived of it—regain the freedom to exercise its sovereignty.

Victor Hugo’s description of “the people” contrasted starkly with Tocqueville’s, yet he too presented the suppression of the June Days as necessary to ensure the freedom of the French nation. As a republican deputy to the National Assembly, Hugo placed an intriguing twist upon the government’s dominant narrative by asserting that “the Faubourgs of Paris...are heroes even

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<sup>42</sup> I left the word “bourgeois” untranslated because it contains a revealing double-meaning. On the surface, Tocqueville meant “townspeople” or “citizens.” However, given his desire characterize the Parisian proletariat as alien to the nation, he likely intended this description of saviors of an archetypal ancient city to mirror the bourgeois class he praised in his own time.

<sup>43</sup> Tocqueville, *Souvenirs*, 234, 255-6.

<sup>44</sup> In debates surrounding the trial of King Louis XVI in 1792, Jacobins argued that a king could not be a true citizen of the nation.

when they err.” In *The History of a Crime*,<sup>45</sup> he defended the Second Republic’s response to the June Days, arguing that because of “a bad definition of socialism,” the workers “rose in June, 1848, against the Assembly elected by themselves, against universal suffrage, against their own vote.”<sup>46</sup> Hugo expanded upon these seemingly contradictory ideas—that the people were both heroic and wrong—in *Les Misérables*.<sup>47</sup>

Although the climactic action of *Les Misérables* takes place in 1832, Hugo opened “Jean Valjean Book 1” by describing with reverence the two great barricades of June 1848. He did not attempt to distance the insurgents from France’s revolutionary past, but he also made clear that they had acted in opposition to the French nation and values.

It sometimes happens that, even against principles, even against liberty, equality, and fraternity, even against universal suffrage, even against the government of all by all, from the depths of its anguish, of its discouragements, of its destitution, of its fevers, of its distresses, of its miasmas, of its ignorance, of its darkness, that that great embodiment of desperation, the rabble, protests, and that the populace gives battle to the people.<sup>48</sup>

Hugo portrayed the insurgent workers as enemies of the French nation only in the moment of insurrection; they attacked the Republic, the revolutionary values of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*—and even themselves. In representing the short-lived uprising as a tragic misunderstanding by heroic but ultimately self-defeating insurgents, he allowed “the people” to reclaim their place in a national, revolutionary narrative. Yet his account of the specific moment of June 1848 positioned the people against the Second Republic, which he connected to the key values of that

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<sup>45</sup> Hugo wrote *History of a Crime*, his autobiographical account of Louis-Napoleon’s coup in 1852, at the beginning of his exile (between Dec 14, 1851 and May 5, 1852), but it was not published until 1877. See publisher’s note to: Victor Hugo, *The History of a Crime*, vol. 5 of the *Valjean Edition of the Novels of Victor Hugo* (New York and London: The Co-operative Publication Society, 1900), 6.

<sup>46</sup>Hugo, *History of a Crime*, 121.

<sup>47</sup> Hugo wrote *Les Misérables* while in exile, after resisting Louis Napoleon’s coup d’état in 1851. It was originally published in 1862.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

revolutionary history. Despite Hugo's nuanced position toward the people, the broad strokes of his narrative lined up with those of Cavaignac's. The government's defenders may have offered slight variations on which groups were true members of the nation. Nonetheless, they all agreed that the uprising threatened French republican civilization, and therefore suppressing it was a national imperative.

Leftist supporters of the June Days accepted neither the Second Republic's characterization of the combatants nor its definition of the French nation. Rejecting the notion that the Second Republic had rescued civilization from the agents of disorder, Karl Marx wrote that the Party of Order defined "public safety" as "the safety of the bourgeoisie."<sup>49</sup> Delphine de Girardin presented her own ironic version of the Second Republic narrative and similarly argued that the June Days uprising was a battle over property. In other respects, however, their narratives—and with them, their conceptions of identity—diverged to a greater extent than their pro-government opponents.

Karl Marx's rhetoric intersected with the history of fractured French nationalism in two significant ways. First, although it differed in certain respects from the French nationalist left of 1848, Communard sympathizers would succeed in integrating it into the radical French narratives of 1871. Second, it established yet another imagined community that competed for legitimacy within France.<sup>50</sup> Marx's attacks on the Second Republic notion of "order" exemplify the later contribution. "*Order!* Shouts Cavaignac," he wrote, "the brutal echo of the French National Assembly and of the republican bourgeoisie. *Order!* Thundered his grape-shot, as it

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<sup>49</sup> Karl Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire*, 25, 30.

<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that the class-based nationalist rhetoric of the French revolution had a profound impact on Marx's theories. Having lived in Paris from 1843-1845, he was also familiar with the city and its politics in 1848.

ripped up the body of the proletariat.”<sup>51</sup> With this statement, Marx used both sides of the conflicts as stand-ins for an entire class. Just as the Second Republic represented its soldiers as “all of France,” Marx implied that the rebels were “the proletariat” as a whole and defined their enemies as simply “the bourgeoisie.” In employing this nationalist-style binary, Marx sought to construct an “imagined community” in Benedict Anderson’s conception of the phrase. Marx defined his community on the basis of class: an international society of proletarians who would one day overthrow the capitalist order. Like the members of an imagined national community, the workers who formed this international union would share a mental conception of their community despite having no physical interaction with the vast majority of their comrades.<sup>52</sup>

As he portrayed the June Days insurgents as proletarian martyrs, Marx also took care to portray the workers’ enemies as alien to their class. He referred to the National Guard as “the bourgeoisie in different grades” and argued that the Mobile Guard “belonged for the most part to the *lumpenproletariat*...a recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds, living on the crumbs of society.”<sup>53</sup> In reality, the Mobile Guard’s socioeconomic makeup reflected that of the insurgent workers,<sup>54</sup> so we can view Marx’s insistence that they were not truly proletarians as his own version of a long-running tactic that denied national membership or identity to those who acted against their interests. It is analogous to Marat and Robespierre declaring Lafayette a foreigner.

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<sup>51</sup> Marx originally published these words in the June 29, 1848 edition of his newspaper, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, and they were later reprinted in: Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-50*, trans. the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow (Bristol: Western Printing Services, Ltd., 1936), 59-60.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-2.

<sup>54</sup> Traugott, *Armies of the Poor*, 56-82.



The French socialist Louis Blanc, the deputy who had first put forth the idea of the National Workshops, presented a narrative that even more closely mirrors that of the radical left following the Champ de Mars massacre. Not only did he blame Cavaignac for acts of brutal repression and connect the insurgent workers with symbols of the nation, Blanc also refrained from presenting the Guard as entirely irreconcilable with the nation. He disagreed with Marx on the demographic makeup of the mobile guard, arguing that they were true proletarians, “but, through a lamentable combination of circumstances, they fell...into the hands of the enemies of the Republic, who contrived...to turn them into destroyers of their own class and their own cause.” While he revived the trope of the shadowy conspiracy, which polemicists like Marat had relied on so heavily in 1791, Blanc demonstrated even more sympathy for combatants of the Mobile Guard, lamenting the fact that “the blood of countrymen and fellow-citizens was flowing in disastrous rivalry.”<sup>55</sup>

Blanc thus included both the insurgents and Mobile Guardsman in his definition of French identity, but made some exclusions as well. In his lengthy discussion of the red flag, Blanc defended his proposal to declare it the official flag of the Second Republic. In doing so, he alluded to many of the debates surrounding the June Days. Blanc argued that “the people” adopted the red flag during the February Revolution because “they knew...that white meant kingly power, and that red had long been the national colour. In their eyes the prestige of the tricoloured flag had been irrevocably broken” by “seventeen years of corrupt policy” under Louis Philippe.<sup>56</sup> Using this line of thought, he aligned those who fought under the red flag (the “national color”) with true France, whereas those who fought under the tricolor represented a corrupted France, the legacy of recent years of a bad, monarchical government.

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<sup>55</sup>Louis Blanc, 1848: Historical Revelations (New York: Howard Fertig, 1971), 266, 439.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid, 72-3.

Reaching even further back in history, Blanc directly referenced the Champ de Mars massacre. He pointed out that the red flag was initially raised to warn the people that the government had declared martial law and argued that the Parisian authorities had not correctly observed this formality on July 17. If they had, “*the blood of the people* would not have been shed at all; as those gathered at the Champ de Mars were unarmed, actuated by no seditious feelings or warlike intentions, and quite disposed to withdraw, if warned in time.” Blanc thus assigned the petitioners a more peaceful character than Marat’s account of a patriotic crowd which had rightfully killed two “spies” discovered in their midst, a tweak to the narrative of 1791 that better served Blanc’s sympathetic description of the red flag and workers of 1848. In an implied comparison to the June Days, he claimed that in the aftermath of the February Revolution “not a drop of blood was shed, owing to the conduct of the sanguinary partisans of the red flag, then in complete possession of the street; the houses of the rich were guarded by the poor, and the men in rags stood as sentinels at the gates of their calumniators.”<sup>57</sup> By appropriating and slightly altering leftist narratives of the Champ de Mars massacre, Blanc assigned historical significance to the good people of the “uncorrupted” France who fought under the red flag, arguing that they had been peaceful throughout the generations. To the people’s opponents, on the other hand, he attributed a long history of hypocrisy and repression.

It should be noted that some narratives of the June Days did not put forward explicit interpretations of French nationalism. Many writers criticized the Second Republic without accepting that the insurgents of the June Days were the embodiment of either their country or the workers’ international. The author and playwright Delphine de Girardin was one example of a commentator who accepted certain characterizations from multiple narratives, but on the whole rejected them all. A political leftist who claimed adherence to no political party, Girardin became

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

a harsh critic of Cavaignac. The General, incidentally, had ordered the arrest of her husband Emile de Girardin, editor of the leftist publication *La Presse* (a paper to which Delphine herself was also a contributor).

Perhaps her personal experience explains why she directed the bulk of her criticism at the Second Republic and also challenged its claim that it had suppressed the June Days in order to rescue French civilization. In a series of letters and diaries, *Chroniques Parisiennes*, she wrote, “in this glorious France...blood flows in great waves...and it is not for the defense of a menaced nationality.” Instead, she argued, “blood flows in the valiant country of France because of the attack on, and the defense of, property.”<sup>58</sup> Here she agreed with Marx and Blanc that the bourgeoisie wished to put down the revolt in order to preserve a system that defended their material interests. Nonetheless, as we can infer from her double attack on those who fought for and against property, Girardin cast blame on the workers as well. She endowed this critique with a historical dimension and translated her views on the June Days into a statement about civil conflict throughout French history. Girardin opened this line of argument by identifying the two parties of 1848:

The party of those who want to keep,  
The party of those who want to take.  
The party of the egoists,  
The party of the envious.

Each of these parties, in Girardin’s estimation, employed specific words that guided their every action and revealed their culpability for violence of the June Days. The first party’s refrain was “shoot, shoot!” and second’s was “guillotine, guillotine!”<sup>59</sup> In characterizing the warring parties with these particular words, she created a certain parallel between their violent natures and called

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<sup>58</sup> Delphine de Girardin, *Chroniques Parisienne 1836-1848*, ed. Jean-Louis Vissière (Paris : Editions des Femmes, 1986), 469-70.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 468.

on her readers to reject them both. She also evoked painful historical memories of armed assaults on barricades and the Terror of 1793-1794. Her argument employed characterizations that multiple forms of French nationalism had put forward, yet it did so in a way that called on her audience to be skeptical of French nationalism in general.

Gustave Flaubert's famous novel *L'Education Sentimentale*, first published in 1869, encouraged a similar brand of skepticism. As the main character, Frédéric, learned of the June Days, he expressed sympathy for the insurgents while taking issue with the National Guard's brutality. The scene in which Frédéric learned how the Guardsman Dussardier was injured presents a telling example. "At the top of a barricade in the rue Lafayette, a young urchin wrapped in a tricolor flag cried out to the National Guard, 'are you going to fire on your brothers!'" In response, Dussardier kicks the boy and takes his flag.<sup>60</sup> Here, Flaubert identified the insurgent with the symbol of France while accusing the National Guard of committing violence against the boy, the tricolor, and the ideal of fraternity. Because he referenced the events of the first French Revolution throughout *L'Education Sentimentale*, Flaubert probably intended this scene's setting—the rue Lafayette—to evoke the Champ de Mars massacre. This allusion gave historical depth to his implication that republican France tended to violate its own ideals.

Yet Flaubert also condemned the violence of left wing radicals. Near the end of the novel, Frédéric runs into his old friend Deslauriers, who recounts the frustration he faced while working as a commissioner for the Second Republic. "As he preached fraternity to the conservatives and respect of law to the socialists," Flaubert wrote, "the former took shots at him and the later brought a rope to string him up."<sup>61</sup> Like Girardin, Flaubert rejected both French

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<sup>60</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *L'Education Sentimentale*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 2 (Paris: Société les Belles Lettres, 1958), 171.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 212.

traditions as inherently violent. To do so, he employed the leftist critique that portrayed the right as brutally repressive and then used the rightist critique of the left as the enemy of law and order. Both Flaubert and Girardin (like Blanc and Marx) connected the combatants of 1848 to long-running historical traditions. Although the two authors took issue with multiple conceptions of the nation, they both reproduced those conceptions for their readers, providing more literary material for polemicists to draw upon in future debates.

### **A People Massacred, A Civilization Destroyed**

Above the main entrance to the Hôtel de Ville, a plaque reads, “In this place on 4 September, 1870, the people of Paris proclaimed a republic.” It refers to a popular insurrection which ousted Napoleon III (who the Prussians had captured during the Battle of Sedan) and established a provisional Government of National Defense. The plaque neglects to mention that less than six months later, the people of Paris overthrew that republic and proclaimed a Commune.<sup>62</sup> The defeated authorities regrouped at Versailles, held elections throughout the provinces, and declared themselves the legitimate government of France. The Paris Commune called on cities everywhere to follow its example and throw off national authorities in order to establish progressive municipal republics; it cast itself not only as the legitimate government of Paris, but also as the forerunner of a new world order. In 1871, the Republic of Order and Social Republic were more than abstract concepts. For approximately ten weeks, they were distinct political entities, with separate governments and separate armies existing side-by-side.

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<sup>62</sup> In France, a Commune is a municipal government. Paris had had a Commune once before; it was an essential political organ for the radical left from 1792 to 1794. After the Thermidorian coup, its members were executed and Paris was forbidden from forming a Commune until the revolution of 1871.

Then, in the final week of May, the Versailles Government annihilated the Commune, killing up to 35,000 people in the process.<sup>63</sup> The left reacted with shock and outrage, accusing their opponents of calculated, wholesale slaughter. They evoked memories of June 1848, portraying the Bloody Week as an infinitely more terrible June, in order to emphasize the brutality of the Versailles government. Yet despite—or perhaps because of—the crippling nature of their defeat, Communard sympathizers also put forth a message of hope. In their view, the Commune embodied the revolutionary spirit of the French nation, and it actively advanced the revolution’s progress.

The leftist narrative of 1871 was more unified than that of 1848, possibly because the Commune’s official rhetoric had encouraged its members to identify both with the French nation and the international working-class struggle. In one representative example, the Commune’s Committee of Public Safety issued a proclamation calling upon the people of Paris to take up arms against the Versaillais invaders. It instructed those who “want to live free in a free and egalitarian France” to prevent the city from falling into “the pitiless hands of the reactionaries and clericals of Versailles” who “delivered France to the Prussians and whom we will make pay for their treasons.” Employing the same formula the Second Republic had used in 1848, the Committee pitted the historical French republican values of liberty and equality against the “traitors” of the Versailles government, whose ideals were antithetical to those of the free nation. But then the Committee went further, referring to France as the “mother of all popular revolutions, permanent home to the ideas of justice and solidarity that must be and will be the

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<sup>63</sup> According to Robert Tombs, approximately 20,000 people were killed during the street fighting and the mass executions that followed, most of them Communards. Robert Tombs, *The War Against Paris, 1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 7-8. John Merriman notes that estimates of the death toll “have reached as high as 35,000.” Defending much of the Communard narrative, he argues that the Versaillais killed up to 17,000 Communards by summary execution alone, while the Commune executed only 68 of their prisoners. John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 235.

laws of the world.”<sup>64</sup> Beyond presenting itself as the true France, the Commune thus claimed to be the forerunner of a new world order.

This idea did not die with the Commune. Karl Marx famously wrote that “working men’s Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class.”<sup>65</sup> He continued to add historical depth to his notion of the workers’ international, enshrining new heroes into the canon of his class-based imagined community. In this way, even the failed uprisings of the June Days and the Paris Commune expanded the narrative of communist history and raised expectations for its future. But Marx was not the only leftist who embraced a narrative of progress. Louise Michel, a leading Communard (a radical socialist who was never a member of the communist-led Union des Femmes) adopted a similar outlook. In her memoirs, which she dedicated to freedom fighters around the world, Michel predicted that her struggle would inspire a new generation. “As we kept armed vigil,” she wrote, recalling her days at the barricades, “we liked to speak of battles for liberty. So too at the present hour, awaiting a new spring, we will speak of the days of the Commune...from the slaughter of 71 to a rising dawn.”<sup>66</sup> While acknowledging the importance of previous revolutionary narratives to the combatants of 1871, Michel carved out a new space for her fellow Communards.

Leftists also expanded upon the other side of the progressive/reactionary dichotomy that the Commune’s official rhetoric had established; Versailles was the mortal enemy of the social republic, the latest link in a long chain of tyrants who used military force to suppress the

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Deleschluze et al, “Proclamation au peuple de Paris et à la garde nationale,” in *Journal Officiel de la Commune de Paris*, 22 mai 1871, (Coeuvres-et-Valsery : Ressouvenances, 1997), 631.

<sup>65</sup> Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France,” in *On the Paris Commune*, ed. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (Moscow: Progress Publishers Moscow, 1980), 90-1, 97.

<sup>66</sup> Louise Michel, *La Commune*, ed. Paul-Victor Stock in 1898 (Paris : Stock, 1970), 12.

democratic spirit. Versailles chief Adolphe Thiers “wanted only one thing,” said the exiled Communard André Léo in September 1871, “the extermination of the democrats and the crushing defeat of Paris... After this new, much more terrible June, there was a new suppression of the word Republic, a new restauration.”<sup>67</sup> In demonizing Thiers, she connected both the June Days and the massacre of the Commune to the post-1815 restoration, thereby denying the republican credentials that the government of 1848 had so rigorously attempted to carve into cultural memory.

Decades later, the brutalities of 1848 and 1871 remained linked in cultural memory, as evidenced by Maximilien Luce’s painting, *A Street in Paris in May 1871* (Figure 3). Completed between 1903 and 1905, this work depicts four male Communards lying dead in the street. An unarmed woman’s body rests next to the deceased men, clearly distinguished by her white and purple clothing, in contrast to the blue uniforms of the *Fédérés*. She attests to their innocence, as does the soft color palette, while the poses of the dead suggest a sense of tragic calm. Luce’s work bears a great resemblance to Ernest Meissonier’s *The Barricade, rue de la Morellerie* (Figure 4) which portrays the aftermath of a street battle in the June Days of 1848. Meissonier, too, represents dead bodies behind a pile of cobblestones. Both paintings approach the street from roughly the same angle, and both display intact façades with boarded windows in the background. Meissonier’s buildings are a dreary brown mixed with some orange and blue, and his bodies are contorted into more unnatural shapes, suggesting violent deaths. Luce recalls this brutality while also eliciting sympathy for the defeated Communards. By choosing to base *A Street In Paris* on the earlier *Barricade*, he projects his portrayal of innocence onto the dead of 1848 while also linking the savagery of the repression in 1871 to the repressive violence of the

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<sup>67</sup> André Léo, “La Guerre Sociale : discours prononcé au Congrès de la Paix,” in *Les Révolutions du XIXe Siècle, 1852-1872, Vol 7 : La Commune de Paris 1871* (Paris : Edhis Editions D’Histoire Sociale, 1988), 13. Note that this quote is on page 13 of the speech cited; the volume itself has no pagination.



June Days. The Parisian workers of different generations were thus represented as the same characters in an ongoing historical narrative of uprising and oppression.

Once again, the left denied both agency and national membership to the individual soldiers who fought against the workers. The National Guards who had joined the March revolution became known as *Fédérés*, a word that Communard supporters used interchangeably with “the people.” They were no longer “the bourgeoisie in different grades” or the *lumpenproletariat*, as Marx had portrayed the National and Mobile Guard following the June Days of 1848. Marx himself wrote that the initial revolution of March 1871 was only successful because Paris “had got rid of the army, and replaced it by a National Guard, the bulk of which consisted of working men.”<sup>68</sup> Before its final destruction, the Commune extended the Versailles troops an opportunity to similarly become members of its imagined community. In a May 24 proclamation to the soldiers of Versailles, it wrote, “do not abandon the cause of the Workers! Do as your brothers did on March 18! Unite with the People, of which you are part! Let the aristocrats, the privileged, the hangmen of humanity defend themselves.”<sup>69</sup> After the Versailles proceeded to massacre the Communards, however, sympathizers of the defeated movement no longer considered the Versailles soldiers as part of “the people.”

Recalling the mass executions at Père-Lachaise cemetery, Frederick Engels described the Wall of the *Fédérés* as “a mute but eloquent testimony to the frenzy of which the ruling class is capable as soon as the working class decides to stand up for its rights.”<sup>70</sup> The soldiers who carried out these executions, Engels implied, were part of the “ruling class,” or at the very least

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<sup>68</sup> Marx, *Civil War in France*, 53.

<sup>69</sup> La Commune de Paris, “Le peuple de Paris aux soldats de Versailles,” in *Journal Officiel de la Commune de Paris* (Coeuvres-et-Valsery: Ressouvenances, 1997) 24 Mai, 1871, 648.

<sup>70</sup> Engels, “Introduction,” *Civil War in France*, 13.

part of its machinery. Marx later distinguished the Versailles soldiers from the proletariat, claiming that their ranks consisted at first of “a handful of *Chouans* fighting under a white flag, every one of them wearing on his breast the heart of Jesus in white cloth, and shouting ‘Vive le roi!’” This allusion to the Vendée region’s revolt against the First Republic portrayed the Versaillais as an unevolved people still living in a pre-industrial world—a marked contrast with Marx’s representation of the urban proletariat.

In leftist imagery of the bloody week, the Versaillais appear as peripheral, emotionally detached figures that lack individual autonomy. Ernest Pichio’s ironically titled painting, *The Triumph of Order*, portrays mass executions against the Wall of the Fédérés (Figure 5). He foregrounds the Communards, whose arched backs and dramatic gestures represent them as tragic, romantic figures. Most of the soldiers carrying out the execution are indistinct; they blur together with their cannons. The two soldiers that appear more clearly stand in the shadows, their faces obscured. They maintain their straight posture as one casually shoots a Fédéré. In contrast to the suffering Communards, Pichio’s Versaillais betray no hint of emotion. Similarly, the firing squad in Edouard Manet’s famous lithograph *The Barricade* (Figure 6) is composed of faceless soldiers, all roughly the same height and standing with similar postures. Toward the left side of the picture, they seem to blend together, appearing less as individual people than as an emanation of government force.

While Communard sympathizers decried the massacre of a people, the Versailles Government used well-established narrative traditions to accuse its opponents of destroying a civilization. Building upon the Second Republic’s theme of “order,” the right of 1871 represented the burning of Paris as a metaphor for the murder of the city, the nation, or French civilization as a whole. Even before the Commune was fully suppressed, the destruction of Paris became an essential

rhetorical touchstone for the Versailles government. On May 24, provisional chief executive Adolphe Thiers condemned the burnings as “odious acts, abominable, without precedent in history...it was nothing but the hopeless act of villains who pretended for a moment to dominate France. It was in retreat that they set the fire.”<sup>71</sup> His allies echoed this message, creating sensationalistic images that decried the destruction of Parisian landmarks while also representing the Commune as the enemy of the French nation.

A little more than a month after the end of the Bloody Week, the novelist and journalist Louis Énault produced an illustrated anti-Communard history entitled *Paris Brûlé Par La Commune*. Mirroring Thiers, he wrote, “the city that one has so often called the flame of the world burned like a torch; – no doubt to die as she had lived.”<sup>72</sup> In the cover art (Figure 7), a woman is tied to a stake, and flames leap around her while the city burns. Her shield contains the *fleurs de Lys* and ship that make up the Parisian coat of arms, which dates back to the late medieval era. She is an allegory for Paris, while the instrument of her execution—a stake topped with a liberty cap—represents the Commune.

In addition to constructing feminine metaphors of victimhood, the right of 1871 also depicted Communard women as the embodiment of a vicious underclass. Drawing for the conservative periodical *Le Monde Illustré*, Frédéric Lix helped popularize the trope of the *pétroleuse*; according to a widespread conservative myth, Communard women had hidden stockpiles of gasoline around Paris, which they used to programmatically burn the city when it

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<sup>71</sup> Adolphe Thiers, “Discours au sujet d’un Incident Relatif aux Événements de Paris,” *Discours parlementaires de M. Thiers*, part 4 of 13, ed. C. Lévy (Paris: Antione Calmon, 1879), Gallica ([ark:/12148/bpt6k23696m](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k23696m)), 274.

<sup>72</sup> Louis Énault, *Paris Brûlé par la Commune : Ouvrage Illustré de douze Gravures*, ed. Henri Plon, illustrated by L. Breton (Paris: Henri Plon, 21 June 1871), Gallica ([ark:/12148/bpt6k6454706p](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6454706p)), 4.

became evident that the Commune would fall.<sup>73</sup> In “The Arsonists” (Figure 8), Lix depicted three such women, all stereotypically ugly and wearing cruel expressions, pouring petrol onto a building. The accompanying article claims that “Paris, like Rome and Alexandria, had been devoted to the arsonists...Civil war and conflagration! Such was the program of the Paris Commune.”<sup>74</sup> Beyond blaming the Commune for the murder of Paris, *Le Monde Illustré* assigned it sole culpability for the civil war. Bertall, a prolific engraver and caricaturist, presented similar themes in his book of lithographs, *Les Communeux, 1871: Types, caractères, costumes*. In his plate *la Barricade* (Figure 9), a woman raises the flag of the Commune with one arm and holding a flaming torch at her side with the other. Like Lix’s *pétroleuses*, the woman is unattractive. She has a lined face, a disproportionately large mouth, and wild hair that matches the form of the smoke clouds rising behind her. Both her torch and the homes behind the barricade burn a shade of red that matches the color of the Commune’s flag. Thus, she becomes a metaphor for the Commune’s destructive nature.

Although individual women rarely figured into nationalist narratives of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, they often played large symbolic roles. As we have seen, the Second Republic transformed *cantinières* into allegories of the nation while the left of 1791 referenced female victims to attest to the petitioners’ innocence. The archetype of the wild woman who had abandoned her feminine nature also had a long history in counter-revolutionary discourse. She appeared with particular intensity following the Women’s March to Versailles, the revolutionary *journée* that forced the royal family to relocate to Paris in October 1789. In one contemporary

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<sup>73</sup> Because the Communards used fire as a street fighting tactic, women were involved in setting fires to the extent that they participated in the battles. Although women mobilized to defend the barricades, there is no evidence that the *pétroleuses* existed as an organized force or that they intended to destroy the entire city, as their opponents alleged. See Edith Thomas, *The Women Incendiaries*, trans. James and Starr Atkinson (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1966), 163-188.

<sup>74</sup> V.F. Maisonneuve, “Les Incendiaires,” *Le Monde Illustré*, 3 June 1871, 342.

lithograph (Figure 10), the only conventionally attractive woman in the crowd is a hostage. She wears aristocratic clothing, and in contrast to the others, she has a slim waistline and large hips. The marchers drag her along as she looks back mournfully. One of the figures pulling the cannon appears to be a man; he wears a dress but has a masculine face and the shading around his cheeks suggests a beard. His presence suggests that the women around him have all become male through their actions, even if they wear the outer veneer of female bodies. The trope of the masculine radical woman was widespread throughout Europe, as evidenced by Edmund Burke's portrayal of the Women's March to Versailles. Burke condemned "the furies of hell in the abused shape of the vilest of women" who had ensured that the world would never again "behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex...that subordination of the heart which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom."<sup>75</sup>

If female revolutionaries had killed the feminine ideal in 1789, the women of the Commune managed to murder it again in 1871. The same trope of "unnaturally" masculine women is evident in Bertall's<sup>76</sup> rendering of the *Pétroleuses* (Figure 11). This lithograph portrays two women, one in her senior years and the other middle-aged, carrying cans of petrol and walking away from a burning house. Behind them stands a boy who had presumably lived there.<sup>77</sup> Here, we see two generations of women abandoning their "feminine duty" to care for the next. While Bertall accused the women of the Commune of failing as mothers, the writer

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<sup>75</sup> Written as an open letter to the revolutionaries of France, this text demonstrates that polemical debates—even those over the nature of national identity—are not isolated to national borders. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Thomas H. D. Mahoney (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1955), 82, 86.

<sup>76</sup> Bertall released his third edition of *Les Communeux* in 1880, which demonstrates that anti-Communards, like their opponents, also carried their narrative into the time of the Third Republic.

<sup>77</sup> Bertall, "Pétroleuses," lithograph, in Bertall, *Les Communeux*, plate 20.

Augustine Alphonsine Malvina Blanchecotte wove a metaphor of Paris as an unfaithful wife.<sup>78</sup> In a preface to her journals written during the Commune, which she originally published in 1872, she bemoaned that “Paris is ceasing to peacefully be the legitimate spouse of France, [she] will become...the other! The fascinating, provocative, alluring, irresistible mistress...Adventurers from around the world will come to take up residence.”<sup>79</sup>

For Blanchecotte, this metaphor of a wife’s betrayal mirrored the Commune’s betrayal of France. She wrote glowingly of the patriotic sentiment within Paris during the Franco-Prussian War, but then argued that what began as a “patriotic fever during the siege” transformed into social unrest and “insanity” under the Commune. Blanchecotte was more explicit than many of her rightist contemporaries in drawing the connection between Communard violence and the destruction of France’s revolutionary values. In a journal entry on May 23, she sarcastically invoked the motto commonly inscribed on 19<sup>th</sup> century tricolors. “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity or death! In effect, there is neither liberty, nor equality, nor fraternity in a state of riot [sous l’*émeute*]; there is only death, nothing but death!” The Commune had realized this motto, she implied, only because they chose death over liberty, equality, and fraternity.<sup>80</sup>

Blanchecotte’s appeal to the ideals of republican France is striking for its relative absence in the rightist rhetoric of 1871. Aside from brief references to the tricolor flag (which had also been the symbol of Napoleonic France) flying above Paris once more, Adolphe Thiers avoided the republican imagery upon which Cavaignac had relied. Because the Third Republic would not be officially established until 1875, Thiers and his supporters may have felt that in the immediate

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<sup>78</sup> Blanchecotte was a protégé of George Sand who adopted a more conservative worldview than her predecessor, rejecting both feminism and the working class movement.

<sup>79</sup> Augustine Alphonsine Malvina Blanchecotte, *Tablettes d’une femme pendant la Commune*, ed. du Lérot (Tusson : du Lérot, 1996), 6.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6, 191.

aftermath of the Commune's destruction, the rhetoric of order and "French civilization" in general would resonate more effectively. Thiers himself—having served the July Monarch, Second Republic, and Second Empire—had no ideological commitment to a specific form of government. Perhaps that is why he lacked an appreciation for the rhetorical subtleties of French republican discourse. Whereas Cavaignac had openly challenged the image of soldiers as oppressors, Thiers's May 24 speech characterized the army as "a generous and noble means of repression." Earlier, he had missed an opportunity to portray his opponents as foreigners when he praised the Versaillais for completing the "painful" task of "combatting Frenchmen on French soil." The Bonapartist deputy Adrien Joseph Prax-Paris quickly interjected, shouting that the Communard forces "are not [composed] of Frenchmen!"<sup>81</sup>

The Versailles Government never managed to portray the soldiers who repressed the Commune as embodiments of the French nation. They were, however, able to draw upon Second Republic tropes in order to characterize the Communards as assassins of French civilization. Later, they embarked upon a cultural campaign to pre-date the Third Republic to 1870. The plaque above the Hôtel de Ville, affixed above the entrance in 1920, glorifies the revolution of September 4, 1870 in order to suggest a continuity between the Government of National Defense, the Versailles Government, and the Third Republic. Inscriptions under the *Arc de Triomphe* and in the *Place de la République* similarly celebrate 1870 as the birth of the Third Republic; these monuments send an implicit message—the Government of National Defense was never legitimately overthrown and Versailles was, throughout the episode of the Paris Commune, the true government of France.

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<sup>81</sup> Thiers, "Événements de Paris," 283, 278.

## Conclusion

The struggle for the memory of 1871 is just one example of the fractured nature of French nationalism. Polemical portrayals of “the people” and the armed forces following three divisive revolutionary events demonstrate that French national identity did not evolve as one coherent entity but rather branched out in various, contradictory directions. Following the Champ de Mars Massacre, the June Days, and the fall of the Paris Commune, competing ideological camps employed national symbolism to suit their own perspectives and in so doing, they put forward different versions of the nation. In 1848, many Second Republic supporters combined the ideals of the First Republic with the royalist emphasis on order and portrayed those who disrupted that order as outsiders, just as Barnave had represented the petitioners of 1791. Their opponents, meanwhile, took issue with the notion that the Second Republic represented all of France. Marx and Girardin (mirroring Marat’s earlier arguments about Lafayette) accused Cavaignac of cutting down the people for the benefit of an elite class, and Louis Blanc aligned the government of 1848 with the “corrupted” France of Louis Phillipe and the repressors of the Champ de Mars.

Divisions over revolt, suppression, and membership in the nation calcified during the Paris Commune. The Versailles government uncoupled the concept of order from the rightest conception of republican ideals and instead attached it to an older form of French “civilization.” By vilifying the Communards as destroyers of this civilization’s symbols, architecture, and gender roles, supporters of the Versailles government presented the Commune as the enemy of France. For the Communards, by contrast, the French people were the historical leaders of social revolution. On this basis, leftist nationalists and the leaders of the International were able to



agree on a broad narrative that both integrated the Commune into the canon of great French revolutions and cast its martyrs as the forerunner of a new proletarian-led world. As contemporaries of the commune invoked memories, symbols, and archetypes of 1848 and 1791 in order to characterize the Communards and the Versaillais, the Commune's memory became fodder for future national debates. Despite the Third Republic's initial attempts to censor this bloody historical episode, leftists continued to put forth their narratives of the Commune and to gather at the Wall of the Fédérés in honor of the lost heroes of the social republic. As evidenced by papers produced for the Commune's centennial in 1971, rightists still invoked the narrative of a civilization destroyed; they revived the archetype of the rabid Communard in order to criticize the student protests of May 1968. In one of these papers Henri Peyre wrote, "there was little method behind their fury, little clarity of purpose behind their idealism. August Comte had uttered the precept, which proved valid in 1871 as it did in Paris in May 1968, that 'one only truly destroys what one knows how to replace.'"<sup>82</sup>

The continuing polemical nature of these debates suggests that divisive moments are not simply litigated from differing ideological or political perspectives. Rather, polemicists approach controversial events as adherents to competing versions of the nation itself. They draw upon previous narratives, whose authors had put forth their own definitions of the nation, but they alter those definitions as it suits their circumstances. Because nationalism requires an active attempt to construct an imagined community and because influential political movements always disagree about the nature of that community, it cannot be a stable or coherent ideology. As the civil struggles of eighteenth and nineteenth century France demonstrate, the meaning of the nation is

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<sup>82</sup> Henri Peyre, "The Commune—A Century After," in John Hicks and Robert Tucker, eds. *Revolution & Reaction: The Paris Commune of 1871* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 3.

contested alongside the meaning of events, and the nation's values, membership, and history are subject to continuous debate.

## APPENDIX: Images



Figure 1. Unknown Artist, *Songez qu'il faudra du courage pour tué ces gens la*, 1791. Etching, 13 x 17 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de la France, Paris.



Figure 2. G. Donjean, *Courage*, 1848. Lithograph, 26 x 19.2 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.



Figure 3. Maximilien Luce, *A Street in Paris in May 1871: The Commune*, 1903-05. Oil on canvass, 150 x 225.5cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

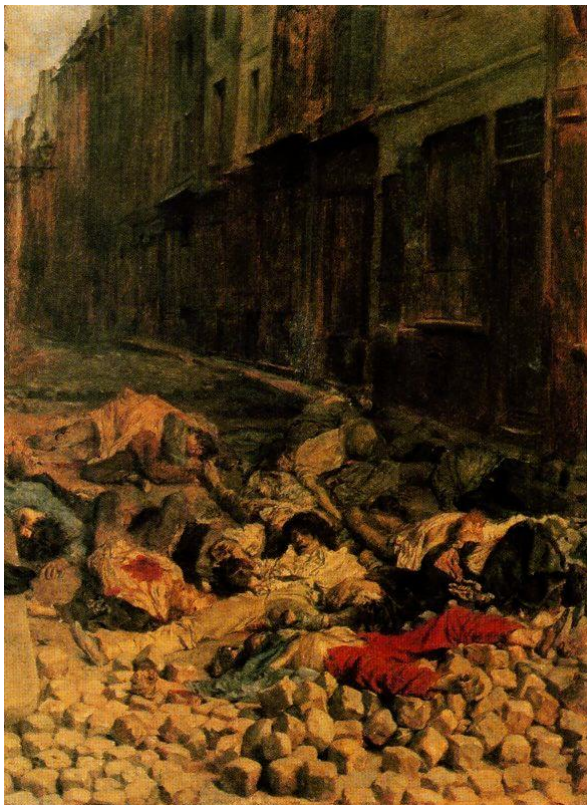


Figure 4. Ernest Meissonier, *The Barricade, rue de la Mortellerie*, 1848. Oil on canvass, 29 x 22 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.





Figure 5. Ernest Pichio, *The Triumph of Order*, 1875. Engraving after painting. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris.



Figure 6. Edouard Manet, *The Barricade*, 1871. Lithograph. Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Figure 7. Louis Breton, *Paris Brûlé par la Commune*, cover art. 21 June, 1871. Bibliothèque nationale de la France, Paris.



Figure 8. Frédéric Lix, *Les Incendiaires : les pétroleuses et leur complices*, 1871. *Le Monde Illustré*, no. 738, 341.

Bibliothèque nationale de la France, Paris.



Figure 9. Bertall, “la Barricade,” 1871. Lithograph. *Les Communeux*, 1871: *Types, caractères, costumes*, plate 37. Bibliothèque nationale de la France, Paris.





Figure 10. Unknown Artist, *À Versailles, à Versailles du 5 Octobre 1789*, 1789. Engraving, 18 x 28 cm. Bibliothèque nationale de la France, Paris.



Figure 11. Bertall, *Pétroleuses*, 1871. Lithograph. *Les Communeux, 1871: Types, caractères, costumes*, plate 20. Bibliothèque nationale de la France, Paris.

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