suffer in the nineteenth century. Great Britain's rapid industrialization, followed later in the century by Germany, quickly outstripped French growth, whose essential raw materials like coal and iron ore were located in northern and eastern regions along the border with Germany. The vulnerability of these resources was underscored by demographic trends; compared to Germany, France's birth rate was anemic. Prussia's stunning military victory over the Austrian empire in 1866 led to the creation of the North German Confederation, whose population nearly equaled that of France, with an army one-third larger and coal production three times greater. A number of French observers, alarmed by the relative nature of national greatness, were unmoved by the appearance of this young giant on their eastern frontier. Even moderate and liberal opponents of the Second Empire began to argue in the 1860s on behalf of a preemptive war against Prussia, echoing historian and Orleanist minister Adolphe Thiers's assertion that the only way "to save France is to declare war on Prussia immediately." As Louis Napoleon's blunt-spoken wife, Empress Eugénie, told the Prussian ambassador: "We are in danger of finding you in Paris one day unannounced. I will go to sleep French and wake up Prussian."22

Eugénie's native Spain happened to set in motion the chain of events that led to the empress's waking up, if not Prussian, at least as an exile in England. Intent on completing German unification under the aegis of Prussia, Bismarck spied his chance south of the Pyrenees. He persuaded Prussian King Wilhelm to propose a member of his royal family as candidate to the vacant Spanish throne, knowing full well that it would alarm France. Though Wilhelm soon withdrew the candidacy at the behest of the other European powers, Napoleon and his closest advisors were not mollified. On the defensive back home, Napoleon III desperately needed a foreign policy success to rally the nation. As a result, the French foreign minister, the Duc de Gramont, demanded that Wilhelm forego any future role in the Spanish succession. Bismarck transformed the king's refusal into a diplomatic slap in the face. National honor demanded immediate satisfaction, and on July 19, 1870, France declared war on Prussia. A new chapter in the history of French republicanism was about to begin.

CHAPTER 2

L'Année Terrible
1870–1871

War broke out on July 19, 1870, and by October 3, Prussian forces had encircled Paris. The city's residents gathered around green posters plastered across the city. They announced the formation of 10 battalions of women, called the Amazons of the Seine, who would be trained and armed to defend Paris. Moreover, they would be garbed in dashing black and orange uniforms, complete with hats. Women were invited to sign up at 36 rue Turbigo, the office of Félix Belly, the entrepreneur behind the scheme. The one requirement was that the applicant bring along a member of the National Guard to vouch for her patriotic character. Women flocked to the office, but the National Guard quickly quashed the project.1

Félix Belly soon disappeared—it turned out he was charging each applicant an "enrollment fee"—but the image of Amazons rallying to the defense of Paris had a much longer life. In the wake of an armistice, the victorious Prussians pulled back, only to be replaced by French troops who in turn besieged a rebellious Paris. War against Prussia gave way to a civil war between the city of Paris, which declared itself the Commune and inheritor of France's revolutionary tradition, and the rest of France.

What had mostly been a fiction during the Prussian siege became briefly a reality during the short-lived Commune: Women achieved unprecedented social and political prominence. Their newfound freedom reached as far as military activity. Women were seen carrying arms and wearing uniforms in the streets, and newspapers followed the activities of Louise Michel, whose name became indelibly linked to the Commune: "Citizen Michel picked up the wounded under the royalist shells and, when necessary, returned fire." She later explained in her memoirs that while she "loved the smell of gunpowder, devotion to the revolutionary spirit of the Commune inspired her to fight.

This was undoubtedly the motivation of many other women; as one prominent participant, André Léa, declared: "Great causes excite the same sentiments in all human hearts." This "great cause," for Michel, Léa, and countless other women,
meant the freedom to enjoy the same rights that 1789 had promised men. At the same time, this "great cause" horrified most of the rest of France. Recalling the bloody events of 1787, Jules Claretie was appalled by the image of "squadrons of women, armed, uniformed... running through the streets." "We can only wonder," he lamented, "from what slime the human species is made and what animalistic instincts, hidden and ineradicable, still crouch in the dark soul of mankind." 23

Past and present, revolution and reaction, gender and class made for a perfect storm in 1871. Fear of social disorder and hope for a new political order collided in the streets and on the barricades of Paris. For its enemies, the Commune and its train of evils were epitomized by women; their sudden prominence—in the streets, political clubs, newspapers, and various institutions—was proof of a world turned upside down. For its defenders, the Commune heralded the fulfillment of the history first unleashed in 1789; for Léon, the "struggle [was] finally beginning between what is usual and what is right, between the ways of the old order and the spirit of the new era." Though the path was longer and more tortuous than Léon and Michel believed it would be, ironically the disasters of the French-Prussian War and the Paris Commune eventually led to the completion of the work of the French Revolution a century after its birth.

THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR

History offers few more striking examples of politically disastrous and morally egregious statements than Prime Minister Émile Ollivier's declamation in July 1870 that "the decision to go to war with Prussia "with a light heart." While this statement could serve as the epitaph of the Second Empire, it is unclear how widely it reflected public opinion. Either through prudence or patriotism, few politicians protested the regime's decision. One notable exception was Adolphe Thiers, former prime minister during the July Monarchy and in the opposition during the Second Empire. Thiers lambasted the childish justifications and lack of preparations that, ironically, would soon lead to his own ascent to power. 24 Etienne Arago, a republican deputy, was equally outraged: "The civilized world will condemn you when this comes to light. If indeed you make war on this basis it is because you want war at any price." More spectacular though equally ineffective was the protest by Lucien-Anatole Prévost-Paradol, French ambassador to the United States, who wrote Prévost-Paradol's La France nouvelle, published in 1868, foresaw the collision between France and Prussia, lamenting the "rivers of blood and tears [that] will flow when it takes place." These rivers, regardless of the war's outcome, would overwhelm France. While defeat would leave it fatally weakened, victory would leave it prey to an undying German desire for revenge. Victim of his own lucidity, Prévost-Paradol shot himself through the heart in his Washington home on July 20.

By then, a feverish bellicosity was sweeping much of Paris. The streets and the opera halls resounded with the singing of "La Marseillaise," which had until then been outlawed by the Second Empire. 25 Groups of young men marched along the boulevards "with arms linked together or waving their sticks over their heads and shouting "Marchons! Marchons!" from a line from the refrain of "La Marseillaise" at the top of their voices." Once in uniform, the men were "inirradically saluted with cheers, to which they responded with cries of "Vive la France!" and "To Berlin!" 26

Beyond Paris—and even there, the working class districts were more subdued than the central and western districts—the news of war failed to spark the same fervor. From his Norman redoubt, Gustave Flaubert wrote to George Sand that he was "nauseated" by the news, foretelling a "frightful butchery" because of the "stupidity of my countrymen." 27 And while the provincial cities and towns staged patriotic events, the countryside appeared far less enthralled. War inevitably announced hardship—a realistic attitude on the part of rural Frenchmen more preoccupied by the dim prospects for the upcoming harvest than by abstract values like the nation. 28 Anxiety over the crops was compounded by the sacrifices imposed by military conscription. If you pulled the short straw, the term of service was seven years—an eternity for peasants. Rural families most often lacked the...
resources of the urban bourgeoisie able to pay for the conscripted man's exemption from service by buying a replacement.

Consequently, it is not surprising that official reports noted widespread apathy, diffidence, and fear among the peasantry. Ignorance of current events, too, was common. Observers frequently underscored the surprise evoked among the peasantry by the official declaration of war. In a sense, Paris no less than Berlin was a faraway country inhabited by people of whom the peasants knew nothing. This helps explain the contrast novelist George Sand noted in her journal between the exhilaration in Paris and dull anxiety that had overcome her rural neighbors in the Berry region. In the end, although public opinion fluctuated, many Frenchmen and Frenchwomen either seemed resigned to the war or were driven by a kind of patriotic determination.

As French soldiers marched to war in the summer of 1870, the fixation on past glories blinded French leaders to the shortcomings of their military preparation for war. By 1870, the many inadequacies of the military had been transformed into a sort of national genius embodied in "le système D" for se débrouiller—which means figuring out how to make do using guile if necessary. In contrast, the Prussian military establishment had fully made use of the gains of its more advanced industrialization. For example, they brilliantly adapted the railway system, exploiting it for speed of troop concentration. This allowed the Prussian commanders to concentrate their forces at decisive points—ironically, a basic principle of Napoleonic strategy. Unlike their Prussian counterparts, the French military command not only failed to take control over France's rail system but also concocted a plan of staggering complexity that sent regiments, reserves, and supplies circling across the country in search of one another. As a result, by the third week of mobilization, only half of the French reserves, most often bereft of their equipment, had joined their regiments, while the other half, hostages of rail snarls and marooned far from their destination points, "spent their days sleeping, drinking, begging, and plundering army stores."

France was at an equally critical disadvantage in terms of the numbers and quality of its soldiers. With its reserve and guard contingents, the ranks of the Prussian army, overwhelmingly conscripts, exceeded 1 million. The French army, on the other hand, was half the size and depended largely on professional soldiers, the gagnards (or grumblers, a term of affection for Napoleon's troops), who had once been the nation's glory. But those days were past. In 1867, the blunt-spoken general Jules Trochu, who would assume control of the army during the last phase of the war, lambasted French soldiers, in a book titled The French Army, as too old, too drunk, and too cynical to defend the nation. France's embrace of a small, professional army during the Second Empire partly resulted from its conservative leaders' fear inspired by the example of the revolutionary citizen army of 1792 that cast its shadow across the entire continent. Moreover, the Second Empire found itself in a position similar to the governments of most modern liberal societies, unwilling to alienate its bourgeois supporters by the imposition of either a draft or universal military service. The depth of differences between civilians and military planners was plumbed in a heated exchange that erupted in response to the regime's ill-fated effort to reform military conscription in 1869. When opposition politician Jules Favre protested that the army was intent on turning France into one vast complex of barracks, the chief of the French Army, Marshal Niel, replied caustically, "As for you, take care that you don't turn it into a cemetery."

If armies rose and fell on the quality of armaments and materiel alone, then France was in good shape. While the French muzzle-loading brass cannons did little more in 1870 than offer target practice for the Krupp breech-loading cannons, the chassepot rifle outclassed its Prussian equivalent, and France had actually built and tested an early fire-rain machine gun, the mitraillette. France's fundamental problems were elsewhere. Training, tactics, and organization, not technology, were the crucial differences between Prussia and France. The chassepot was only as good as the men who wielded and commanded it. The machine gun's development was so swaddled in secrecy that its efficient use remained an utter mystery. The new weapons served as little more than symbols of institutional incompetence or paralysis of will when abandoned chassepot rifle littered the muddy banks of rutted roads along which streamed demoralized and retreating troops.

The French commanders also showed they had neither learned nor forgotten anything from earlier wars. The military command was a throwback to an earlier century, filled with men who most often owed their commissions to family or social influence. The density of intellectual mediocrity, strategic incompetence, and organizational ineptitude at the top, when added to the soldiers' general indifference to the Second Empire and Napoleon III, suggests that France had lost the war before it was begun. In contrast, Prussia's political, military, and industrial leaders had catapulted their country from a provincial backwater to continental power, one that carefully harvested the lessons of earlier but recent wars and no less methodically planned for the next one.

On July 28, 1870, under the intense gaze of the Empress Eugénie, Napoleon III had cast off from Paris to assume command of his disorganized forces. Haunted by spasms of pain from a huge bladder stone, Napoleon could barely master his horse, much less the quick moving events on the front. A series of rapid and bloody battles at the towns of Wissendorf, Froeschwiller, and Spicheren, where negligible strategic importance, nevertheless sapped the morale of French troops, undone by weeks of poor logistics and incompetent leadership.

As with the declaration of war, the public's response to the news of the initial Prussian victories varied dramatically. While the countryside, particularly those areas most distant from the battles, reacted with a combination of anxiety and confidence, Paris burst with disbelief, then anger. On August 7, crowds spilled into the boulevards, demanding the arming of the populace—an event, with its delirious echoes of 1792 and the violent birth of the First Republic, which hardly reassured an increasingly embattled imperial itself. The following day, the republican legislators, prodded by the crowds—several thousand protesters milled in front of the National Assembly calling for the overthrow of the Second Empire—demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Olivier, the cashiering of the general
staff, and the creation of a war committee. These demands reflected a dramatic shift for the Left: "the régime was now being attacked, not for being selfless, but for being incompetent."21

On August 9, 1870, Eugénie, having sent a terse message to her husband that insurrections were imminent in Paris, oversaw the overhaul of the government, now under the leadership of the Comte de Palikao. The new ministry attempted to galvanize the nation's defenses by reforming the army and mobilizing a National Guard that, until then, existed mostly on paper. The Palikao ministry also began the crucial task, given the increasing likelihood of a siege, of stockpiling essential supplies in the capital. Yet, while Paris prepared to continue the war, Napoleon III's forces, given the unhappy moniker "Army of the Rhine," lurched in retreat, prey to deepening confusion and uncertainty. On August 17, a listless emperor turned over supreme command to François Achille Bazaine, a general whose popularity was based on his humble origins, not his strategic brilliance, and whose middle name proved as hollow as the name of the army he now led.

 Barely installed as commander, Bazaine saw his army cut in two by Prussia's inexorable advance. The forces led by Marshal MacMahon, under the nominal command of Napoleon III, were paralyzing by conflicting orders. MacMahon's efforts to defend the Second Empire by retreating to Paris were countermanded by Eugénie, who insisted that any such move would have the opposite effect. Paris, she feared, would then fall not to the Prussians, but to irate and rebellious Parisians. As the emperor asked her husband, who had initially agreed with MacMahon's strategy, "Have you considered all the consequences which would follow from your return to Paris under the shadow of two reverses?"22 The conflicting political and military imperatives thus spurred a cascade of commands and countercommands that fatally delayed any effective strategy. MacMahon finally led his demoralized and exhausted troops to the eastern fortress city of Sedan, while Bazaine's forces were forced back on Metz.

 General Ducrot famously described the situation of MacMahon's army: "We're in a chamber pot and about to be shot on!" Indeed, MacMahon's forces quickly enveloped Sedan on September 1 and overwhelmed French efforts to defend their outlying positions. The battle quickly turned into a slaughter; fractious soldiers fell back upon the city, jostling against ambulances and bewildered citizens in the narrow, overcrowded streets of the medieval town. In his novel La Débâcle, Zola conveys the event's hellishness through his description of the ground outside the city's military hospital: at "the feet of the dead were the heaps of arms and legs, and in fact anything cut or hacked off on the operating tables, the sweepings of a butcher's shop when he had swept the refuse of flesh and blood into a corner."23

 By late afternoon, Napoleon, who failed even in his attempt to die earlier in the day by riding his horse across the battlefield, ordered that the white flag be raised above the city. After brief negotiations, the French surrendered on September 2, 1870. The French "Army of the Rhine" lost more than 17,000 men at the Battle of Sedan, and Prussia captured more than 100,000 French soldiers, who were parceled for a week in huge outdoor pen erected on a nearby plain without shelter or adequate food before their transfer to Prussia. The French officers, on the other hand, were able to return to France upon giving their word they would not again take up arms against Prussia. All the while Napoleon, with his imperial suite in tow, was allowed to pass through Belgium on his way to captivity, thus avoiding the humiliation of passing in front of the men he had so heroically failed. Bismarck's terse observation—"There is a dynasty on its way out"—was accurate but blind to his victory's far-reaching consequences for France, Europe, and the world.

THE FALL OF THE EMPIRE

On September 4, 1870, when news of Sedan's fall and Napoleon's captivity reached Paris, the city's residents filled the streets and then the government buildings in protest. Critic and writer Edmond de Goncourt, whose journal offers a wealth of observations during this period, noted, "Everywhere around me I hear people greet each other feverishly with the remark: 'This is it! ... From all this throng there comes a deep, dull murmur.'"24 The murmur soon reached a crescendo; Parisians swept across the Place de la Concorde and surged into the Palais Bourbon. There, the legislature was frantically debating the Second Empire's future—a discussion rendered moot by the implosion of protests into the chamber. Boisterous cries for the declaration of a Republic, amplified by the thousands more outside the building, could not be ignored. The legislature abandoned its final, halfhearted efforts to salvage what remained of the past, and a disguised empress Eugénie fled Paris the following day in the coach of a wealthy American dentist.

Keeping a semblance of sangfroid, the legislature's republican leaders, Léon Gambetta and Jules Favre, tried to master the surge of popular anger by changing its course. They led the crowd from the Palais Bourbon to the Hôtel de Ville, the official sitting line of the revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848. Elbowing aside members of the radical Left, already circulating lists of possible ministers, Favre and Gambetta formed a "Government of National Defense." The government was staffed almost entirely by representatives from Paris; the ministers were all committed republicans, the moderate Favre assumed the thankless task of foreign minister, and the radical Gambetta swept into the Ministry of the Interior. The Parisian deputies made one concession to their right-wing colleagues in the legislature, appointing as president the Orleanist, Catholic, and Iletoiser general, Louis Trochu. Having made its arrangements and named a president, the National Assembly left the rest of the Government of National Defense (GND) in Paris and installed itself safely in the southwestern city of Bordeaux. Eventually, to maintain links to the outside world, the GND in Paris sent a small delegation to establish a government office in the central city of Tours.

The events of September 4, 1870, were remarkable, left many issues unresolved. First, neither Bismarck, who insisted upon a dependable interlocutor with whom to strike a deal, nor the French legislators accepted the newly proclaimed government's legitimacy. Second, this revolution veered from the historical template. A hated regime's overthrow was not accomplished, as in 1830 and 1848, by the taking of arms or the invasion of a capital city by the military, but rather by the utter collapse of a state, followed by its peaceful replacement by a new form of governance that was not yet constitutional. Third, the GND in Paris, rather than the new government in Bordeaux, was the body that formulated the new rules of the political game; in this sense, the GND in Paris was effectively the government of the third republic—rather than the second.
or shedding of blood. Truth be told, there was no need for arms to be taken or blood to be shed. The events of September 4 were less a "birth than a certification of death." The Second Empire simply dissolved, leaving behind an institutional vacuum. The provisional government, confronted with an enormous task of national defense, threw itself into that vacuum, firmly believing, with their Parisian supporters, that it was Napoleon III, not France, that had been defeated and that the new Republic stood as insurance for the nation's ultimate victory.

Third, a number of southern cities, rooted in a long revolutionary tradition, also rallied to the new Republic, with self-proclaimed Committees of Public Safety hoisting red flags over their city halls. Thus, in Lyons, local republicans invaded city hall, released all political prisoners, and toppled the statues of Napoleon III and Eugenie. Similar events unfolded in Marseilles, Bordeaux, and Nimes. Prefects in several rural departments reported that peasants, still loyal to the defunct regime, worried over the urban revolutionaries' intentions for their property and livelihood. Rural support of the GND was provisional and pragmatic; despite the momentary unity, there remained deep ideological fault lines running through the nation.

After September 4, Paris became the war's focal point not just because of its traditional domination over France but also because of a series of decisions made by the GND. The cancellation of national elections, originally scheduled for October 1870, deprived the government of legitimacy in provincial eyes. More critically, having sent a small delegation to Tours, a temporary secondary seat of power, and the legislature to Bordeaux, the people actually running the GND hunkered down in Paris. This decision, though unsurprising, was not inevitable. Gambetta, for example, had argued for a stronger governmental presence in Tours so that France would not be taken hostage should Paris be captured. Gambetta's counsel was ignored, however, and the encirclement of Paris by the Prussians, completed in late September, had heavy strategic consequences. National resistance was now yoked irrevocably to Parisian resistance. Should the city fall, almost certainly France would, too. As a result, the rescue of Paris became the great goal for the nation's armies. Bismarck welcomed this strategy; the knowledge that the "relief of Paris, rather than attrition and defeat of the German armies, was the objective at which the Delegation aimed" greatly simplified his planning.

As Prussian forces approached Paris in mid-September, Jules Favre, without informing his fellow ministers, met with Bismarck. The inexperienced minister, who had earlier declared that France would not surrender "an inch of her soil or a stone of her fortresses," found that Bismarck expected France to do that and a good deal more. Under the illusion that Prussia considered the Second Empire, and not France, her enemy, and would show leniency in the negotiations, Favre was driven to tears by Bismarck's demands. Intoning that while regimes came and went in France, France's hostility to Germany would never abate, Bismarck informed the minister that Prussia intended to annex Alsace and part of Lorraine. Deprived of a common ground for negotiations, a deeply shaken Favre took his leave and sighed: "It is to be an endless struggle between two peoples who ought to stretch out their hands to each other."
Once encircled by the Prussian forces, Paris after September 1870 was cut off from France and the world. Along with crucial tactical consequences, the isolation also had great material and psychological ramifications. The authorities, anticipating a siege, had ingeniously improvised. The Bois de Boulogne, for example, became a vast holding pen for livestock (though the authorities overlooked the need for milk cows, creating a desperate situation for infants and children during the latter stages of the siege). A pond in a wealthy district of Paris, Auteuil, which had once been an artificial setting of public calm for the aristocracy, was "half dried up by the sheep which kneel there, drinking, in the weeds." Still, given the instable needs of a population far too great for the city's resources—the provisional government had based its calculations on a population of 1.5 million individuals, yet there were in fact more than 2 million inside the city walls—food, and no less critically, firewood and coal, grew increasingly scarce as the Prussian siege continued from autumn to winter.

The flocks of sheep shrank and soon disappeared from the parks, as did the trees, felled for firewood. By early fall there occurred one of the more curious transformations in this capital of gastronomy: the appearance of horsemeat in butcher’s windows and restaurant menus. At first it was scarcely accepted.

In October a waiter assured Goncourt that his dish was roast beef, but Goncourt knew better—the meat was watery, without fat, and stripped with white nerves; my painter’s eye discerned the blackish red color, so different from the rose red of beef." By November, waiters were proud to serve horsemeat, now itself a rare delicacy and replaced by even less likely candidates. Soon the donkey whose abdomen was cut out "in festoons and lace and garnished with leaves and roses" in a horse butcher’s window gave way to the former denizens of the Paris Zoo. One frigid evening, Goncourt spotted the most regal of young Follies, the elephant in the "Zoo" as well as camel kidneys, in a butcher’s window. Cats and rats, made strange bedfellows by the siege, eventually became staples.

By early December, as Goncourt grimly noted, "You talk only about what is eaten, can be eaten, or can be found to eat. Conversation does not go beyond that." Food scarcity eventually prompted the Academy of Science, which gave its imprimatur for properly cooked rat, to estimate the city’s rodent population. It was placed at 25 million, translating to 12 rats per Parisian. There was surely an element of self-dramatization, however, in accounts like Goncourt’s. Dishes made from exotic animals were done less of necessity than a kind of patriotic exhibitionism, while Goncourt himself reports that traditional foods were always available for the well-to-do. By ordering a well-prepared plate of kangaroo meat, diners displayed the ingenuity of a cultured people besieged by German barbarians. Poorer Parisians, needless to say, could hardly exhibit such bravado. Moreover, gender no less than social class determined the distribution of shortages. Men were, in general, better fed than women, if only because men could join the National Guard and thus be guaranteed three square meals a day, while women were burdened with the daily task of finding food and fuel for themselves and their families.

Like the city walls, the psychological ramparts of Paris’s male population were besieged. Women increasingly participated in various aspects of the siege, working as nurses or assisting military uniforms in textile workshops. Though these changes, mostly implicating working-class women, they were not alone. For example, Juliette Adams, the wife of the prefect of police, ran a hospital and enlisted other bourgeois women in her cause. These roles may well have politicized Parisian women, who increasingly considered themselves as participants in the defense of the city, rather than mere observers. In fact, their determination and energy contrasted sharply with an embattled and self-doubting military and political class that, failing to win a single battle, impatiently watched the city slowly starve and freeze to death.

No less crucially, Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century, the intellectual and artistic heart not just of France but of Europe and the world, was walled in and isolated. With the withering of outside news, rumors, fears, and hopes flourished. Dwelling on the city’s complete isolation, Goncourt wrote in late October: "Not an inhabitant who has had any news from his family for the last forty days! Never before have two million people been shut up in so absolute a prison." Better a prison, for a Parisian like Goncourt, than the provinces. For Goncourt, "To vegetate in this brutal and monotonous condition of war means for the Parisian to..."
suffer in Paris boredom like that of a provincial city." Setting aside the element of sanctions, this total isolation had a huge emotional impact upon Parisians. Nothing is crueler, Concourt lamented in December, "than to live in darkness, in night, in ignorance of the tragic fate which threatens, surrounds, and stifles you."34

Darkness quickly became a reality. Under Hausmann, the city had seeded its new boulevards and public places with nearly 24,000 gas lamps, transforming Paris into the "café" of Europe. During the siege, Parisian boulevards, falling back on oil lamps and candles, again dimmed to medieval times. But, as with food shortages, the eclipse of Parisian lighting was experienced differently by various social groups. While fashionable newspapers like Le Gaulois asked if Paris, this "lugubrious city without illuminated windows, open cafés, and gaiety," was still Paris, the poor and working-class quarters hardly posed the question. Largely untouched by urban renewal, the general lack of public infrastructure in these districts entailed continuity rather than rupture during the siege.35

The ingenuity of Paris's response to these deprivations was not limited to gastronomy. Most famously, there were balloon flights to pass over both the city walls and the Prussian forces. Prompted by the photographer Nadar, who had earlier used balloons for aerial shots of imperial Paris, the provisional government began to manufacture and launch balloons in late September as a means of maintaining not just communication but Paris's control over the rest of the nation. By February, 65 balloons had floated above and away from Paris, carrying on these obviously one-way trips more than 10,000 kilograms of messages. Writer Théophile Gautier reflected on the precarious nature of such contact with the outside world: "On a piece of thin paper more than one man... has dropped a tear. Shall we ever again see those to whom we write, now that the letter-box is a balloon and the postman the wind?"36

Léon Gambetta was one of more than 100 passengers who ascended the world via balloon, landing near Tours in early October. Charged with the task of mobilizing southern France to relieve Paris, Gambetta took over the Ministry of War and quickly pulled together a collection of veterans and conscripts dubbed the Army of the Loire. In light of the monumental logistical and institutional obstacles that Gambetta confronted, the Army of the Loire's very existence was as remarkable as the fact that it actually won one battle—chasing the Prussians from Orleans in early November. Although the Prussians retook the city a few weeks later, the significance of Gambetta's army lay not in its military fortunes but in its symbolic power. His use of mass conscription, harrowing back to the glory of the people defending their nation in 1792, helped establish the new Republic's legitimacy. As one German military analyst later commented, "Above all, the spectacle was intended to impress: The German barbarians were to be defeated not by armed force but by their amazement at free France's tremendous capacity for sacrifice."37

The French revolutionary myth of the people in arms also consumed Paris. Fired by memories of the 1793 draft, the city's National Guard grew to nearly 200,000 men, encompassing nearly every able-bodied Parisian male. In the words of one historian, the Guard became a "popular army—or at least an armed horde."38

The Departure of Léon Gambetta (1838-1882), in the balloon "Armand Barbès," October 7, 1870, Jules Didier and Jacques Guizard, Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris/Gréaudon/The Bridgeman Art Library. Once encircled by Prussian forces in 1870, Parisians resorted to hot-air balloons in order to maintain a precarious line of communication with the rest of France. These one-way flights carried not only tens of thousands of messages but also passengers, most notably the War Minister Léon Gambetta, who raised an army and sought unsuccessfully to lift the siege of Paris. The Departure of Léon Gambetta (1838-1882) in the Balloon "Armand Barbès," October 7, 1870 (oil on canvas), Didier, Jules (1831-93) & Guizard, Jacques (1811-75)/Musée de la Ville de Paris, Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France/Gréaudon/ The Bridgeman Art Library.

Men were assigned to battalions based on their neighborhoods, resulting in a military force with strongly contrasting political values: moderate in the western and bourgeois districts, radical in the eastern and working-class areas. The latter battalions in particular, with their calls for offensive sorted against the Prussians—a prescription of dire futility—represented a thorn in the side of the military and political leadership.

Caught between the Prussian forces from without and Parisian revolutionary forces within, the provisional Government of National Defense had no respite. The situation worsened in late October when France's Marshal Bazaine surrendered the remaining half of the Army of the Rhine, comprising more than 100,000 men, holed up in Metz since August. France's original military forces were either dead, wounded, or captured, leaving the Prussian high command free to turn its full attention to Paris. The situation inside the city was critical by the end of 1870. The city's material difficulties, compounded by Prussia's daily bombardment of the city through January and a restless populace demanding a replay of 1792, made for combustible politics.
As head of the government, Trochon's position had become untenable. Mistrusted by moderate republicans, not to mention the extreme Left, he had to swallow deeply and accept their presence in order to avert civil war. As for the war against Prussia, Trochon's prudent response to the immense tactical and strategic handicaps he faced was interpreted by his republican foes as cowardice or, worse yet, treason. Hounded by a belligerent Left, which exerted pressure through newspapers, journals, and republican clubs, Trochon ordered a series of military sorties in December and January. The National Guard's lack of training and cohesion, made worse by the severe cold, turned these attacks, difficult in the best of conditions, into suicidal gestures designed more to appease a militant Parisian population committed to war than with any real hope of breaking through the Prussian lines.

The bloody climax came in mid-January 1871 with the Battle of Buzenval. More than 4,000 Frenchmen lost their lives in a vain effort to over-run the Prussian artillery batteries. The survivors of the carnage fell back on Paris. The confusion on the battlefield was then duplicated within the city walls. In a dress rehearsal of sorts for the Commune, the same military forces that had been defeated by the Prussians just days before now repressed a Paris uprising fomented by the more extreme republican clubs. Once they dispersed the crowds, the reality of the army's hopeless predicament was clearer than before. Favre and the Government of National Defense finally concluded that Paris had to surrender.

FROM ONE SIEGE TO ANOTHER

More than three months after their earlier meeting at Ferrières, Bismarck and Favre again sat across from one another on January 23, 1871, meeting at the German headquarters established at the symbolic site of Versailles. But the nature of the war had also changed. On both sides of the Rhine, leaders of the professional armies that had faced one another in 1870 as tools of traditional diplomacy found themselves overwhelmed by great surges of nationalism. Bismarck and the French republican leaders had both unleashed mass and irrational sentiments that, impossible to control, they could only hope to ride. On January 18, the new German Empire had been declared, finalizing a long movement for unification, and the German public was unwilling to accept anything less than the annexation of territories in eastern France, Alsace, and part of Lorraine and a punishing war indemnity. The German military, harried by French francs-tireurs (partisans), shared this animosity to France. While the impact of French guerrillas on the Prussian war effort is debatable, French civilians clearly paid a terrible price. Prussian commanders held them responsible and destroyed entire towns and villages, acting on Bismarck's injunction that he wanted "no laziness in killing." The same tendency to blur civilian and military realms carried over, as well, in the Prussian bombardment of Paris.

The French urban population was also under the thrall of nationalism. News of the Government of National Defense's decision to seek an armistice, while greeted with relief across the French countryside, largely exempt from the war's destruction, was glumly received in Paris, a city that had sacrificed so much on behalf of France. As one guardians wrote, "Paris suffered so greatly, yet was willing to accept death. Now, we have been turned over to the enemy without being consulted by those who failed to defend us." Yet such feelings of shame and disgust, just as common among civilians, especially in the working-class districts, as among soldiers in Paris, could not trump reality. Under the Prussian threat to reconstitute the shelling and begin negotiations with the disgraced Bonaparte, the French government had no choice but to accept Bismarck's terms.

SIGNED BY FAVRE AND BISMARCK ON JANUARY 28, 1871, THE ARMISTICE AGREEMENT stipulated that France would, after a three-week period, hold national elections. Both sides expected that elections would create a fully representative national assembly with which Prussia could then conclude peace terms. In the ensuing electoral frenzy, the monarchists—both Legitimists and Orleanists—framed the vote in terms of war and peace. Even though a Bonaparte had led France into war, by January 1871 monarchists represented the peace party and portrayed republicans as hawks. "Those who want war to the bitter end will vote for the Jacobin list, which . . . wishes to have the last man killed and the last crown spent. Those who want an honourable peace will vote for the peace list." The identification of the republicans with the war was not entirely unjust. The Republic had, after all, insisted on pursuing the war after Napoleon III's capture, and certain republicans like Gambetta expressed in no uncertain terms their bitter opposition to the Armistice. However, the vast majority of Frenchmen, ensconced in their farms and villages, largely indifferent to Paris politics, wanted the war to end.

The results of the elections on February 8, 1871, were dramatic. Republicans scarcely won 150 seats, mostly hailing from Paris and the provincial cities. Supported overwhelmingly by the rural vote, the right-wing monarchist "peace party" swept most of the remaining 645 seats. But the greatest victor of the elections was Adolphe Thiers. A small man whose physical energy and intellectual vigor belied his 70 years, Thiers had made his reputation during the July Monarchy, having both served Louis Philippe as prime minister and undermined him as a political opponent. His renown, enhanced by the tragic clarity of his warnings against going to war against Prussia, thrust him to victory in 26 departments (French electoral rules allowed a single candidate's name to be placed on multiple ballots). No one was more convinced of the importance of his role than Thiers himself, declaring that his task was to "shield France from German vindictiveness, rebuild the power of the state, and give the country lasting political institutions."

Though the monarchists held an overwhelming majority, they accepted Thiers as president. His official title, Chief of the Executive Power of the Republican State, nevertheless reflected the monarchist majority's distaste for republicanism—an uneasiness perhaps felt by Thiers. While he himself had served the Orleanist king Louis Philippe, Thiers was a realist who foresaw the irresistible rise of popular democracy. Already during the short life of the Second Republic (1848-1852), Thiers had concluded that a Republic was the government that divided Frenchmen the least. Tellingly, Thiers appointed just one monarchist to his cabinet while filling
the rest of the ministries with moderate republicans, appointing Pave minister of foreign affairs and Picard minister of the interior. Yet even Thiers could not soften Bismarck's fundamental demands. In the end, France was forced to accept Prussia's annexation of Alsace and part of Lorraine (including the ill-starred Metz), as well as payment of a 5 billion franc war indemnity (with Prussian soldiers remaining on French soil until it was paid in full). The one concession Thiers squeezed from Bismarck was retaining the Alsatian city of Belfort, but in a humiliating quid pro quo, Prussian soldiers were allowed a victory march down the Champs-Élysées.

In retrospect, the treaty terms Bismarck insisted upon were not as draconian as many contemporaries thought. Apart from the territorial losses in the east—which amounted to more than 15,000 square kilometers of prime real estate rich in mineral resources and industry and 1,600,000 inhabitants—and sundry humiliations, France avoided any constraints on its national sovereignty, its military power, or its economic power once having paid the indemnity, which was itself an element of traditional treaty-writing. Yet Parisians, emerging from a traumatic siege, could not adopt such a dispassionate perspective. Rather than a sigh of relief, Paris would soon respond to the peace terms with the event known as the Paris Commune.

THE PARIS COMMUNE

On March 1, 1871, the newly elected National Assembly, still temporarily housed in Bordeaux, ratified the terms of the peace treaty. The February elections and resulting settlement with Germany only deepened the chasm between Paris and the rest of the nation. While the end of the war provoked a great sigh of relief in rural France, which could now go about its business, it compounded the shame and anger of Parisians, who had assumed not just the burden of the siege but also the heritage of the 1789 Revolution. For Parisian workers, the experience of the Prussian siege awakened long-repressed memories of the glory days of the sans culotte—as the working people of Paris had been called during the first Republic of 1792—and these memories began to shape their reactions to events.

Such memories, periodically revived in the revolution of 1830 and again during the June Days of 1848, represented the deep and tangled roots of the Paris Commune. However, by March 1871, the conflicting motivations behind the war and experiences during it provided the immediate catalysts. Experiences of the war that differed according to geography, gender, and generation were in turn sifted through different historical and ideological lenses. Emphasizing the historical continuity of events, Paris returned to its revolutionary and republican past, with political clubs and radical newspapers springing up, often named after their historical predecessors. Meanwhile, in the provinces, fearing those revolutionary tendencies in Paris as much, if not more, than Prussian demands, many ordinary people turned to conservative and traditional authorities as a counterweight. In the end, the monarchists and moderate republicans sitting in Bordeaux chose to ignore Gambetta's warnings against a humiliating peace: "Revolution will break out in Paris. . . . The unfortunates [in the assembly] fail to understand that what comes next will be worse than the war itself." Gambréta concluded that Paris "will be forced to create an independent government over which the National Assembly . . . will have no power. . . . Out of the still-glowing ashes of the war, a far more terrible civil conflict will be born." By March 1871, the dissonance between these two Francs had reached critical mass, as one monarchist observed, "Very bravely but not with impunity had the Parisians suffered . . . the privations and emotions of the siege. At first we provincials couldn't reason with them. It seemed as if we did not even speak the same language and that they were prey to a kind of sickness, what we called 'fortress fever.'" The National Assembly stoked the fires with several moves between March 10 and 11, suspending pay to National Guardsmen in Paris unless they could prove poverty and closing down all clubs, all public meetings, and five newspapers. Most provocatively, the Assembly, without warning, ended a measure taken during the Prussian siege, a temporary moratorium on rents, debt payments, and pawnshop sales that helped tide people over during the siege when commerce had largely ground to a halt. Not only did the Assembly lift the moratorium, it decreed that all overdue rents be paid in full immediately, sharpening animosity between Paris and the National Assembly. In its final blow, the National Assembly, fearing the National Guard's militancy and its continued control over cannons, enjoined the "passionate patriotism" of Paris and fears of a restoration of the monarchy by moving from Bordeaux not to Paris, but to the former royal headquarters, Versailles. Thiers, determined to reassure the Assembly, concerned that he would be too lenient with the Parisians, hoped to "finish" the agitators before the Assembly reconvened in Versailles on March 20. Temperatures in both Paris and Versailles (shorthand for France's national government) were rising.

On March 18, 1871, the fever spiked. Early that morning, Thiers ordered troops into the working-class neighborhood of Montmartre to remove several cannons that had been under local National Guard control. For once, Thiers had misjudged. Working-class residents resisted giving up the cannons. In a confrontation between the army and the rapidly mobilized residents, the troops refused General Leconte's orders to fire on the civilians. As the troops fraternized with the civilians, an angry crowd lynched both the commanding general, Leconte, and a second general who happened onto the scene. Thiers quickly ordered the removal of the regular troops from Paris; then with his cabinet he also fled Paris for the haven of Versailles. As in September 1870, in Paris, a new and makeshift government, the Central Committee of the National Guard, filled the vacuum left by a national government in flight. Faithful to historical precedent, the committee announced its birth from the windows of the Hôtel de Ville.

The National Guard committee members were republicans, not revolutionaries. From the perspective of Versailles, however, it was hardly reassuring to observe the radical posturing of a city that, in its view, had already humiliated the nation. The mutual and deadly incomprehension of both sides stunted observers like Zola: torn between "the discontents of City Hall and the blind bigots of the
Assembly, France lies bleeding… If one day history tells us how the insurrection pushed her over the edge, it will add that the regular and legitimate power did everything to make her plunge fatal.200

Elections for a new city council on March 26 confirmed the city’s militancy, as well as the declining power of moderate republicans (reflected in the high abstention rate among voters, particularly in the western, mostly middle-class districts), ‘two days later, on March 28, 1871, with one eye on the revolutionary past and the other on a utopian future, the Paris municipal council, freed of its more conserva
tive members, baptized itself the Paris Commune. The Commune’s name referred not to Marx’s ideas but to the municipal government of Paris, called the Commune, during the 1789 Revolution. The flash of millennial optimism exploded in other cities with similar political traditions; Marseilles, Narbonne, Toulouse, and Lyons also declared themselves communards. Yet the provincial Communards, unlike their Paris brethren, barely had the time to familiarize themselves with the levers of power before their fingers were fried off by Versailles, whose forces soon reimposed order. The “Republic of Paris” alone faced a country whose citizens by and large accepted the legitimacy of the elected government in Versailles and not that of a city whose ambitions they had long resented.

Radicals like writer Jules Vallès hailed the advent of the Commune, seeing in it the revival of the radicalism of the sans culottes of 1792. A participant in the events of March 18—the raising of the red flag over the Hôtel de Ville and the chanting of “La Marseillaise”—Vallès praised “a revolutionary and patriotic festi
val, peaceful and joyous, a day of intoxication and solemnity, of grandeur and merriment, worthy of those witnessed by the men of ’92.” On the other hand, Goncourt, who dismissed Vallès as a “bohemian of the beer hall” (a description the young and bohemian Vallès would probably not dispute), expressed the fears of the Parisian bourgeoisie: “The unbelievable rules…[T]he cohorts of Belleville (a working-class district) throng our conquered boulevards (the middle-class’s public space), going along in the midst of a somewhat mocking triumph which seems to embarrass them and makes them turn their eyes toward the toes of their shoes, worn mostly without socks.”

These antithetical perspectives nevertheless point to important elements of the Commune. Vallès’s depiction of the Commune highlights its initially festive character. Throwing off the oppressive weight of unjust political and economic regimes, the people of the Paris Commune threw themselves a party that expressed their will “to become masters of their lives and histories in the realms of politics and everyday life.” An undeniably, if at times overly dramatized, festive element to the Commune resulted from its spontaneous and collective assumption of a city’s freedom.

Goncourt’s scorn for the shabby, working class Parisians who suddenly appeared on middle-class, Hausmann-created boulevards points to another factor. The Parisians who unexpectedly found themselves in power seemed determined to reclaim the city from the authoritarian rule of earlier regimes. This assertion of local control found voice in the new government’s adoption of the term “commune,” the supreme expression of local self-government. The uprising of March 1871 repre
sented a mass movement in which the Communards thought of themselves as Parisians first, workers second. It is not a coincidence, perhaps, that the “largest urban revolution in modern history occurred on the heels of the first experiment with urban planning in an industrial city”—namely, Hausmann’s transformation of the city. By resupplying Paris, Haussmann also reshaped the collective consciousness of working-class Parisians.

Thiers, attempting to lead a country wracked by war and unrest, could not abide the Commune’s claims of local control. Invoking the recently ended civil war across the Atlantic, he declared that the capital must be brought to heel and that “any attempted secession…will be energetically repressed in France as it has been in America.” And as in the United States, this confrontation led ineluctably to civil war, not between North and South, but between France and Paris.

The Commune, a 66-man governing body for the city of Paris that combined executive and legislative functions, lasted scarcely two months, from its surprising birth on March 28 to its violent death on May 28. Paradoxically, its very brevity makes it difficult to summarize. Enveloped in a thicket of actions and aspirations, undertaken by amateurs under the unremitting pressure of the popular opinion from within and the Versailles army from without, the Commune’s actions and what they meant are still debated. Yet a number of elements are clear. First, the Commune was an experiment in radical popular government, harkening back to the sans culottes, similarly operating in time of civil war. Though never short of frequently inspiring, occasionally maddening rhetoric, the Commune lacked resources and time. More than three-quarters of the Commune’s budget, about 42 million francs, went to war-related needs (mostly salaries for the National Guard). The rest was spread among all other services (including, critically, the bureau of military supply).

While the Commune insisted on the importance of public education, its education department had a budget of just a few thousand francs.

Second, though hobbled by the imperatives of war, the Commune’s great social measure, as Karl Marx announced, “was its own working existence.” Inevitably, many of its economic measures were dictated by the Commune’s dire circumstances: the cancellation of overdue rents, suspension of the sale of objects hoarded at pawnshops, pensions paid to common-law wives of National Guardsmen killed in battle. In a measure that seemed quite radical at the time, the Commune created workers’ cooperatives to take over businesses whose owners had left Paris.

Even more radical, some of the workers’ cooperatives involved women. How-
ever, even these measures were spurred less by ideological conviction than by the imperatives of the moment and the desperate lot of most Parisians. The Commune needed uniforms, artillery shells, and other goods produced; out-of-work Parisians needed jobs. The Commune intended not to expropriate private property, only to get production going again; in theory, property owners who returned were to be compensated. In general, the Commune’s decrees, in their attempt at
THE FALL OF THE COMMUNE

The Commune achieved historical and mythical stature owing both to the millennial expectations it broadcast and to the waves of blood in which they were drowned. Its response to the looming shadow of the national government in Versailles was rhetorical, not tactical. The Commune invoked the memory of 1792–1793, of a people in arms. Imbued with the historical legend, the Commune's leaders believed that such a force would, by its very nature, overcome a counterrevolutionary force held together solely by fear or self-interest. One of the leading Communards, Charles Delescluze, declared, "When the People have rifles in their hands and paving stones under their feet, they have no fear of all the strategists of the monarchist school."

The hollowness of such appeals soon became clear. On April 3, 1871, the Commune launched an attempt to stream out of Paris and sweep over Versailles; the attack quickly turned into a frantic backwash against the city's walls thanks to the intervention of the officers and indiscipline of the troops. This fiasco was a sickening sign of things to come. The national government's Versailles army occupied the siege positions only recently vacated by the Prussians. The Commune's military commanders and political leaders, thrown back on the defensive, descended into confusion and internal strife.

Finally, on the night of May 21 the national army entered Paris through an unguarded section of the wall, inaugurating the final phase of the Commune—known ever since by its accurate description, la semaine sanglante, or Bloody Week. More than 120,000 strong, the national troops systematically and brutally took over the city. As the streets grew thick with the mass of invading troops, many Communards—despite the heroic legends of every street defended to the last man or woman—simply tossed away their guns, surrendered their barricades, and melted back into their neighborhoods. Nevertheless, Communards fiercely defended a number of districts, particularly in eastern Paris, which became the defenders' last redoubt. Heavy with revolutionary associations, the Place de la Bastille offered the most effective resistance.

The remaining knots of Communards were eventually pushed back to the dense and recalcitrant working-class neighborhoods of Ménilmontant and Belleville, as well as the cemetery of Père Lachaise, where the last defenders were shot or surrendered on May 28, 1871. That same day, Marshal MacMahon, having earlier surrendered Sedan to the Prussians, could now boast of having wrested Paris from his fellow French: "Paris has been delivered... [O]rder, work and security will reign once more."

This bare narrative of Bloody Week scarcely conveys the event's ferocity and violence. While the national army suffered approximately 3,500 killed or wounded, there were, according to conflicting sources, between 10,000 and 20,000 deaths among the Communards. The majority of these deaths resulted not from battle but from the army's systematic killing of those, including the wounded, suspected of having fought with the Commune. Many men were simply shot on sight, while
hundreds of others were rounded up, tried by hastily assembled military courts, and then taken off to barracks or parks where they were dispatched by firing squads. Hundreds of prisoners, for example, were trundled to Père Lachaise, lined against a wall, shot, and buried in mass graves, establishing the Mur des fédérés, or Wall of the Federaux, as one of the great sites of commemoration for the French Left. More than 40,000 men and women were arrested and marched to Versailles; the damal sight evoked pity in an otherwise unforgiving Goncourt, who thought, "They seem already half undressed for execution." Reentering Paris in the wake of Bloody Week, Emile Zola described the following sight: "the corpses heaped high under the bridges...that frightful mound of bleeding human flesh, thrown haphazardly on the tow paths, Heads and limbs mangled in horrible dislocation. From the pile emerged convulsed faces...What a hideous charnel house."

Both Commumards and soldiers of the national Versailles army were guilty of excess. On May 24, in the midst of Bloody Week, Commumards executed the Archbishop of Paris, Georges Darboy, and three other hostages at the prison of La Roquette. More killings, planned or spontaneous, followed and reached a crescendo when 50 hostages—a mixture of priests and policemen—were hauled to Belleville and massacred by a crowd of men and women. Although it does not lessen the horror, the comparative rarity of such events nevertheless makes for a striking contrast with Versailles's systematic and sustained killings of Commmunard fighters and civilians (a distinction necessarily blurred by the nature of the conflict.) Also, while Commumards often attempted to stop the use of summary executions, no such humanity was ever evinced by the officers fighting for Versailles, who saw their task as ridding "the country of all the scum that is spreading grief and ruin everywhere."

Nevertheless, through arson the Commumards unleashed their hatred of the regime on the city they sought to hold. Commumards set fires, in theory, as a defensive tactic to prevent advancing soldiers from penetrating a neighborhood. Not accidentally, the Commumards's fires destroyed structures closely associated with state power and gave rise to the legend of the pétroleuses, fearsome female incendiaries roaming the streets of Paris with cans of gasoline. Nearly one-third of the city was burned down; the ashes and smoke shrouded the city, according to Goncourt, resembling an eclipse. Several historic buildings, most notably the Tuileries, Hôtel de Ville, and Palais de Justice, were destroyed by fire; yet others, like Notre-Dame, were saved only through the intervention of Commumard officials. These buildings were closely linked to the detested rulers of the past and, it now seemed, the immediate future; the battle, lost militarily, would at least be continued symbolically.

**MAY 1871**

Even as the ruins of the Tuileries and Hôtel de Ville still smoldered, the tricolor flag was again flying above Paris, and bourgeois strollers were again walking along Haussmann's boulevards (whose paving stones, pried loose for barricades, had quickly been returned to their earlier function.) As he strolled along the streets, Goncourt reflected on the import of the Commum—on, more precisely, its violent suppression: "The solution has restored confidence to the army, which learned in the blood of the Commumards that it was still able to fight. Finally, the bloodletting was a bleeding white; such a purge, by killing off the combative part of the population, defers the next revolution by a whole generation." Historians of the Commum have, wittingly or not, largely echoed Goncourt's interpretation. The French army's action flowed, in part, from its recent experience. An institution steeped in the glory of its revolutionary and Napoleonic successes failed to win a single battle against Prussia. More humiliation was heaped upon the army's leadership when, in the wake of its defeats at Sedan and Metz, a hastily mobilized civilian army defended France with far greater resolution and daring than that shown by the French officer corps. When confronted by a radical and recalcitrant Paris, the army hid or perhaps purged its shame through the massacre of those who stood as witness to its shortcomings.
The army's shame dovetailed with Thiers's determination to rid the newborn Republic of threats from its most radical partisans. Once Paris was retaken, Thiers shed no tears over the carnage for which he bore ultimate responsibility: "The ground is strewn with their corpses; may this dreadful sight serve as a lesson."

The Commune's sudden rise and shattering fall marked the apotheosis of the French revolutionary tradition, in particular the popular radicalism of its urban working people, the sans culottes of 1789. From the taking of the Bastille through the revolutions of 1830 and 1848 to the Paris Commune, institutional and popular forms of violence pulse through the political history of France. Once the French state lost its monopoly on legitimate violence in 1789, there ensued a series of popular challenges to established regimes over the next century, which met them with ever greater ferocity. Not only were monarchies challenged by republicans, but in turn, each "Jacobin" Republic found itself challenged by more radical demands for true, direct popular sovereignty issuing from working men and women. The so-called founding massacres committed by the July Monarchy in 1832, the Second Republic in June 1848, the Second Empire in December 1851, and, finally, the nascent Third Republic in May 1871 proved the state's willingness to shed blood and the capacity and determination not just of monarchists on the Right but also of republicans on the Left to stamp out popular uprisings. As it turned out, aside from the considerably less deadly right-wing rioting in the 1930s and the interneceine bloodletting during World War II, France would never again see such explosions of popular violence. Ultimately, it was the brutally thorough nature of the Commune's death, rather than its short and ambiguous life, that prepared the ground for the Third Republic. Not only was popular radical republicanism sidelined by the state's resolute response, so too were the reactionary and monarchist movements jostling one another for another shot at mastery. The majority of Frenchmen preferred their order and stability served not by kings, but by conservative republicans.

CHAPTER 3

The Return of the Republic
1871–1885

In his painting of the July 14, 1878, celebrations in Paris, Impressionist master Claude Monet depicts the rue Saint-Denis awash in a sea of blue, white, and red flags. The festive scene celebrates, in a seemingly straightforward manner, the French nation's embrace of the Republic. The blur of French tricolores, the tricolored flag, binding the French Revolution to republican ideals does not seem to cast either literal or metaphorical shadows across the street.

Yet shadows appear upon closer inspection. Scrawled across the flag on the right is the phrase "Vive la République"—or, rather, the beginning of such a phrase: The letters trail off into illegibility. And barely noticeable is the banner strung across the street, announcing "Vive la France." Less ambivalent in his own rendering of the same holiday was Monet's colleague Édouard Manet. Here, as one critic has observed, the contrast of the flag flattering above both a bourgeois couple descending from a horse-drawn carriage and the crippled figure hobbling down the other side of the street—a veteran of 1848? 1870? or 1871?—poses hard questions about the fledgling Republic.

Both paintings reveal the problematic ties between France and the newly born Third Republic. How could it be otherwise when the same republican devotion that inspired the Communards also drove the forces of repression? In the decade following the great collision of 1870, opposing attitudes toward the Republic shaped France's politics, society, art, and diplomacy, with important consequences for its citizens and subjects—women and men; workers, peasants, and the bourgeoisie; Bretons, Corsicans, and Algerians, as well as Parisians. Even republicans differed on the social ends of the state and on the line between the politics of the possible and the ideal.

THE EARLY REPUBLIC

French republican ideology, as it developed in the 1870s and 1880s, emphasized the primacy of the nation, of man's (and, eventually, feminists insisted, of woman's)