MASSACRE

THE LIFE and DEATH of the PARIS COMMUNE

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PARIS WAS FREE. Ordinary people from quartiers populaires strolled through western Paris's fancy neighborhoods, which many of them had never seen before unless they had worked as domestics or day laborers. Other working families, expelled from central neighborhoods by Haussmann's grand projects, reappropriated streets they had once known very well. But with Adolphe Thiers readying his troops in Versailles, how long could it last?

On Easter Sunday, the Luxembourg Gardens seemed as crowded to Ernest Vizetelly "as in the calmest days of peace." And so were the principal boulevards of Paris, at least until cafés shut, as ordered, at 11 p.m. In many ways, during the first half of April, life in Paris seemed to go on very much as before. The Louvre and Bibliothèque Nationale reopened. The Bourse carried on, despite the fact that most of the big investors had left Paris. The Café de Madrid, Vizetelly observed, was "swarming with delegates and staff officers."

Concerts held in the Tuileries Gardens celebrated the Commune. Louis Barron noted the social mix at the gatherings, which brought together elderly proletarians and "the white and fat figures of well-nourished bourgeois, along with the little, laughing faces of young women." He was amused to see people from all social classes greeting each other enthusiastically with the words "Abî Citoyenne... Abî Citoyen!" More surprisingly, the Tuileries Palace, where Napoleon III and his family had lived so recently, had been opened to the public, with the entry fee of fifty centimes going toward the care of those wounded fighting the Versailles. Women flocked to the apartments of the empress, imagining the luxurious life Eugénie led there. Those hostile to the Commune were
likely to miss the continued laughter of young children as they watched the Guignol puppets at the lower end of the Champs-Élysées.6

The Commune was something of a "permanent feast" of ordinary people who celebrated their freedom by appropriating the streets and squares of Paris. Revolutionary songs echoed, well entrenched in the collective memory. Le peuple (the people) of Paris sang "La Marseillaise," "Le Chant du Départ," and "La Carmagnole." Édouard Morin remembered that "everyone wanted to see the spectacle of the day" as Parisians rushed to watch the cannons being hauled off to battle, forgetting perhaps that a bloody clash with Thiers's troops was all but inevitable. The Commune placed enormous importance on political symbolism, and the destruction of several symbols of "reaction" and "injustice" took place in a festival-like atmosphere that made it possible for some to ignore the increasingly grim situation.3

In one such display of symbolic destruction, national guardsmen from the Eleventh Arrondissement burned a guillotine at the place Voltaire on April 7, just below the prison of La Roquette, where executions took place every year. Several thousand people were there. John Leighton watched: "When nothing remained but a heap of glowing ashes, the crowd shouted with joy; and for my own part, I fully approved of what had just been done as well as of the approbation of the spectators."4

The almost frenetic proliferation of newspapers, brochures, pamphlets, political posters, manifestos, wall posters, and caricatures that flooded Paris reflected popular excitement about and engagement with the Commune. Ninety newspapers appeared during its existence, including the Jacobin Le Vengeur and the Proudhonist La Commune. La Sociale was largely the work of André Léa, aided by Maxime Vaillant. Other newspapers published only a few editions: Jules Vallès's Le Cri du Peuple turned out 50,000 to 60,000 copies per issue, sometimes more. Boys wearing red caps peddled Le Bonnet Rouge on the boulevards.3

Père Duchêne, which published as many as 60,000 copies a day, was one of the more popular newspapers, though its tone, insults, and sheer vulgarity offended even many loyal to the Commune.4 Like its namesake during the French Revolution, Père Duchêne borrowed the biting argot of working-class Parisians. It also adopted the revolutionary calendar that began in 1792, so 1871 was the year 79. On 3 Germinal, Père Duchêne denounced "the reactionary good-for-nothings (jean-fousets) who spread disorder in Paris." Yet, despite the violence of the newspaper's denunciation of wealthy men of property, Vaillant, another anti-imperial militant who had written his first piece for the newspaper in 1869, called for class collaboration. His articles reflected the sentiments of most Parisians, who read newspapers and wall posters while discussing politics and the current situation, but did so in good order and, for the most part, good humor.

We must view the publication of so many newspapers during the Commune against the censorship of others. Just as General Joseph Vinoy had shut down a spate of newspapers less than a week before the Commune's proclamation, the Central Committee in late March banned Le Figaro and Le Gaulois, both closely tied to Thiers. At least twenty-seven newspapers were shut down after March 18. On May 5, it was the turn of France, Le Temps, and Le Petit Journal; later ten more disappeared.7

There were signs too of a new efflorescence of art during the Commune. Claiming authority given him following the proclamation of the republic on September 4, the great painter Gustave Courbet had announced on March 18, coincidentally, the convocation of an assembly of artists. Courbet demanded artistic freedom from constraints and tastes imposed by the state. He exclaimed, "Paris is a true paradise. . . . [A]ll social groups have established themselves as federations and are masters of their own fate."9

Courbet stood in the Sixth Arrondissement as a candidate for the elections to the Commune the next day but came in sixth, failing one position short. When by-elections took place on April 16 to replace members of the Commune who had not accepted the Commune's mandate, had been elected in more than one arrondissement, or had resigned, Courbet was elected, becoming mayor of the arrondissement a week later.9

Courbet celebrated his newfound artistic freedom as he ate and drank. Barron paid a visit to the "master of Ornans" in his apartment on the rue Serpente in the Sixth Arrondissement. He found the painter seated before a pungent platter of cabbage and sausages, which he consumed with glass after glass of red wine. They went down to the boulevard Saint-Germain. The café terraces were full of students and loving couples, while the usual flâneurs strolled by, breathing in the sweet smells from the flowers of the nearby Luxembourg Gardens. Yet, in the far distance, one could just hear the sound of gunfire. Courbet seemed briefly preoccupied and hoped that the Parisians would not let themselves be taken, noting, "It's true that the French in the provinces are celebrating the carnage inflicted on the French of Paris."10
Courbet moved quickly to organize and codify freedom for and promotion of the arts in Paris. The artist announced a fifteen-point proposal on April 7. In his fiery speech he insisted that Paris had saved France from dishonor. He called upon artists, whom Paris had "nursed as would a mother," to help repair France's "moral state and rebuild the arts, which are its fortune." In the amphitheater of the Medical School, four hundred artists elected a committee of forty-seven members drawn from painting, sculpture, architecture, lithography, and the industrial arts, with thirty-two of them to be replaced after one year. Besides Courbet, who was elected president of the new Federation of Artists, Jean-François Millet, Camille Corot, Édouard Manet, and Eugène Pottier (author of "The Internationale") were members. The establishment of the federation and the large number of artists who participated in its assembly reflected the dramatic increase in the number of artists in Paris: from 350 in 1789 to 2,159 by 1838 and to 3,300 in 1863. Parisian artists, like members of other professions, had feared for their livelihood under Louis Napoleon. In the arts, too, the Commune offered hope."

The federation took on responsibility for the conservation of monuments, museums, galleries, and relevant libraries and put forward the idea that the Commune should pay for the training of exceptionally promising young artists. It would soon abolish the Academy of Beaux-Arts, long considered an appendage of "official" taste. A week later, the federation produced a blueprint for the future administration of the arts in Paris. Its committee would soon cashier the directors and associate directors of the Louvre and the Musée Luxembourg, believed sympathetic to Versailles. The federation became increasingly concerned with protecting the artistic treasures of the Louvre from damage by Versaillais shells; indeed, it had already sent some paintings to distant Brest for safety. Courbet ordered that windows in the Louvre be secured and placed guards around the museum."

The Commune appointed Courbet to the Commission on Education on April 21, in part because the commission was nominally responsible for overseeing the federation. Courbet described his work: "To follow the wave that is the Paris Commune, I do not have to reflect, but only to act naturally.""

On April 29, the Commune named Protestant Pastor Élie Reclus director of the Bibliothèque Nationale; like Courbet with the Louvre, he sought to ensure that Versaillais shelling did no harm to its rich collections. When he arrived at the great library on May 1, he had to summon a locksmith to open the office of the previous director, who had bolted for Versailles. Twelve days later Reclus notified all employees that he would fire anyone who did not sign a paper pledging allegiance to the Commune."

While the fine arts seemed poised to flourish under the Commune, Paris's theaters staggered on as best they could, given the severity of the situation facing the city. The Commune abolished monopolies and subsidies to the theaters of Paris, seeking to encourage the creation of cooperative associations instead. The Comédie Française had shut down on the evening of March 18, the day the people of Montmartre succeeded in keeping the National Guard cannons from troops, but reopened ten days later with the help of a loan. In the immediate confusion, some other theaters also closed for a time. A reduced troupe of actors in Parisian theaters—some had left the city—put on fifty-one performances during the Commune, closing only on April 3 for whatever reason (causing a brief panic in the neighborhood because it seemed that something dire had occurred), and during the Easter holidays later that week. However, fewer tickets sold, generating barely enough income to cover the lights and heating. The most relevant production may have been staged at Gaité in late April. It portrayed in unflattering terms men who managed to avoid serving in the National Guard."

With May came faltering morale and fewer theatrical performances. On May 1, the Comédie Française filled only thirty-eight seats. No one likes to play to a largely empty theater, and the director adopted the strategy of giving away tickets so that on some nights five hundred people attended. At least eleven other theaters staged performances during the Commune, including the Folies-Bergères. When Carlotta Mendès purchased a ticket to a performance, the theater was almost empty. The actors went through their lines quickly, accompanying them with slow gestures. They seemed bored and in turn bored those who had bothered to come. Café on nearby boulevards shut down for lack of a post-theater crowd."

Musicians in Paris played on, thanks to the support of the Commune, which named a commission to oversee their interests. When the director of the Opéra stalled on organizing performances, the Commune named a new director of the Conservatoire de Musique, composer Daniel Salvador, the son of Spanish refugees. The Commune encouraged music that was "heroic in order to exalt the living, funereal to mourn the dead." Charles Garnier's Opera stood unfinished—it
would open in 1875—and became a food storage facility. The old Opera continued with barely half its musicians. On May 13, Salvador summoned professors at the Conservatoire to a meeting at Alcazar in the rue du faubourg Poissonnière, but only five turned up. One asked Salvador if he understood that he was risking his neck by casting his lot with the Commune. Salvador replied that he knew that very well but had to act according to his principles.7

Revolutionary music and symbols could not gloss over great differences in the political inclinations of the men leading the Commune. Former 1848ers were prominent among them. Such Jacobins—including Félix Pyat, Charles Delescluze, and Charles Beslay, the senior at seventy-five years of age—tended to be older than the others. A Breton from Dinan, Beslay had begun a factory producing machines in Paris during the July Monarchy. He supported workers’ rights, unlike Thiers, whom he had joined in opposing the Bourbon regime in its last years. Pyat, the son of a lawyer from Vierzon, had studied law but devoted himself to politics and writing political pamphlets and plays. The blowhard Pyat was anything but a man of courage, having hidden on a coal barge during the demonstrations that followed the funeral of Victor Noir. Pyat had a “rasping laugh” and the “bilious eyes of a man whose childhood had been unhappy.”8

Devoted republicans, Jacobins seemed to romanticize a return to previous revolutions—hence their choice of the color red and the Phrygian cap, associated with the sans culottes of the French Revolution, as symbols. Raoul Rigault referred to them disparagingly as “the old beards of [18]48.” Jacobins tended to assess the situation facing Paris in terms of the politics of previous revolutions, particularly that of 1789, when foreign invasion and civil war threatened revolutionary gains. Both Jacobins and Blanquists continued to respect centralized revolutionary authority; however, unlike the Blanquists—above all, Rigault, who had become excessively focused on seizing and exercising power—Delescluze and other Jacobins remained committed to retaining essential freedoms despite the threatening military situation. As we have seen, Rigault also made constant reference to the French Revolution and was obsessed with militants of the extreme Left during those heady days. Jacobin and Blanquist militants were prominent in the governing body of the Commune and in the Central Committee of the National Guard; indeed, following the elections of April 16 about fifteen members belonged to both groups.9 Therefore, when the members of the Commune’s elected governing body began to meet, the political divisions surfaced immediately andcontentiously. Unlike the Jacobins, the Blanquists did not want the sessions of the Commune’s Council publicized, fearing that within an hour or so Thiers and his entourage would know everything discussed, particularly military strategy, which the followers of Blanqui, professional revolutionaries, considered their specialty. Moreover, Rigault proposed that Blanqui be named honorary president, but Delescluze, among others, protested vigorously. He could not stand Rigault’s authoritarian posture and denounced the proposition as “monarchical.”10

In an effort to reconcile political tensions and make clear that the judicial abuses of the Second Empire would be left in the past, the Commune asked Eugène Proton, the son of Burgundian peasants, a lawyer, and once a delegate to the congress of the International in Geneva and now Communard delegate for justice, to move civil and criminal proceedings along more rapidly and to undertake measures to guarantee “the freedom of all citizens.” But Proton’s efforts had little effect on the deep divide between Blanquists and Jacobins, in no small part thanks to Rigault’s obsession with perceived threats to the revolution. Gustave Le- français and some other delegates advocated abolishing the prefecture of police in order to put an end to seemingly arbitrary arrests undertaken by Rigault. The Blanquist fought against this measure tooth and nail, insisting that Thiers might well have a thousand spies in Paris.

However, Rigault’s fears were not unfounded. Conspiracies against the Commune were afoot from the beginning. Within a couple of weeks, anti-Communard organizers began to distribute armbands (brasards)—conservative rallying marks that were at first white, the color of the Bourbons, and later tricolor—in conservative neighborhoods. Those who had them awaited the day when they could come into the open and crush the Commune.11 On one occasion the militant Internationalist Jean Allemane, a printer by trade, got through the lines to Versailles in a failed attempt to infiltrate Thiers’s government. Upon his return, he related his short trip to Paris in the company, by chance, of two loose-tongued Versaillais secret agents. When one of them observed that entering revolutionary Paris was as easy as slicing butter with a knife, Allemane quickly realized his mistake and had them arrested upon their arrival. Thiers and his entourage also tried to bribe well-placed Communards, apparently with some success.12

In an effort to counteract this threat, Rigault, named civil delegate for general security on March 29, appointed committed young
gave rise to rumors in Versailles of "orgies" at the prefecture of police. The long weekday finished—not without a break for food, drink, and frivolity—Rigault and the others went out to dine and drink some more. His critics howled at the restaurant bills he allegedly ran up with Da Costa. One breakfast on May 10 costing 75 francs allegedly included two great Burgundies and Château-Riboulot aux trefles; five days later, 62.85 francs paid for cigars and bottles of Pommard, Veuve Clicquot, and Nuits-Saint-Georges.25

Communard general Gustave Cluseret described Rigault's obsession with the police: "He could not knock down a bok—and he drank many—without talking about the police." US citizen Lili Morton, enthusiastic about the Commune, soured slightly when she met Rigault. Needing a pass to leave Paris, she went to see him carrying a letter of introduction, but the head of the police received her rudely and interrogated her "diabolically." The American got her passport but left repulsed by the "wicked expression... [in Rigault's] cutting eyes."26

Rigault, for all his faults, was devoted to the cause and aided Communards whenever he could. Cattelain remembered his boss as an "ardent revolutionary, sometimes brutal, but always subject to sentiments of humanity" and emphasized "the extreme instability of his character." He could be vicious but also compassionate. Every day people showed up asking to see him. Women came to beg for help: their families did not have proper lodging and were hungry. Some even turned up asking for help even though their men were fighting on the side of Versailles.

The Commune provided spouses of national guardsmen seventy-five centimes per day, but that was not enough. Rigault gave some of them rooms in the Lobau barracks. Having been aided by Auguste Renoir when he was on the run from imperial police several years earlier, Rigault also made it possible for the Impressionist to get out of Paris to paint in the countryside.27

Maverick journalist Henri Rochefort, though no fan, admitted that Rigault was "made of the stuff from which veritable revolutionaries are cut out." He sacrificed all for the cause of revolution. Rigault was fearless—no danger caused "his face to pale." He was the kind of man who could tell someone, "I'm very fond of you, but circumstances unfortunately compel me to have you shot. I am, therefore, going to do so!"28

Rigault set up eighty neighborhood police offices and had at his disposal a brigade of two hundred agents tasked with sniffing out Versailles spies. In the morning, at least when he was awake, Rigault convinced a sort of council that went over reports that had come in during
the past twenty-four hours. Political policing remained, predictably, Rigault’s central focus. About 3,500 people were arrested during the Commune, among them 270 prostitutes. The prisons of Paris were full. Rigault had ordered the arrest of over four hundred people between March 18 and 28, even though many, including Georges Clemenceau, were quickly released.

As the weeks passed, the arrests of those accused of working for Versailles increased and included a member of the International Workers’ Association who had been an imperial police spy. Rigault’s political opponents within the Commune objected to his dictatorial methods. Tensions mounted between Rigault and the Central Committee. Rigault responded memorably to a critic, “We are not dispensing justice, we are making revolution.”

On April 13 Rigault drew more fire when he ordered the arrest of Gustave Chaudey, former deputy mayor, follower of the anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, former critic of Père-Lachaise, and a friend. Chaudey was also a friend of Courbet, who had painted a portrait of him in 1870 and protested his arrest. Chaudey had ordered Breton guardsmen to fire from the Hôtel-de-Ville on demonstrators on January 22, killing several people, including Rigault’s friend Théophile Sapa. Élie Reclus, who described Chaudey as haughty and something of a mediocrity, suggested that the journalist had been incarcerated by the Commune, to which he had rallied, because he had forcefully opposed all “who do not appear to be acting in good faith.”

Who were the Communards? British journalist Frederic Harrison assessed the Communards in Paris, writing, “The ‘insurgents’ . . . are simply the people of Paris, mainly and at first working men, but now largely recruited from the trading and professional classes. The ‘Commune’ has been organized with extraordinary skill, the public services are efficiently carried on, and order has been for the most part preserved.” In his view, the Commune, while being “one of the least cruel, has been perhaps the ablest revolutionary government of modern times.”

The average Communard was the average Parisian: young, between twenty-one and forty years of age, with the largest number men aged thirty-six to forty. Three-fourths had been born outside Paris and arrived in the waves of immigration, above all from northeastern France but also from the northwest, along with seasonal migrants from the Creuse in the center; 45 percent were married, and 6 percent were widowers, although many workers lived in unions libres, which the Commune legitimized. Only 2 percent had secondary education. In a time of increased literacy, only about 11 percent were illiterate, although many ordinary Parisians enjoyed only basic reading and writing skills.

Most Communards hailed from the world of Parisian work and included artisans and craftsmen who produced articles de Paris and jewelry. Their numbers included skilled and semiskilled workers—many working with wood, or in shoemaking, printing, or the small-scale production of metals—as well as construction workers, day laborers, and domestic servants. Shopkeepers, clerks, and men in the liberal professions were also well represented. They were among “the people” who had suffered during the siege and felt threatened by monarchist machinations. Of female Communards, 70 percent came from the world of women’s work, particularly textiles and the clothing trades. Some courageously provided food and drink to Communard fighters or served as doctors’ assistants tending to the wounded. Louise Michel saw no problem with incorporating prostitutes into the corps of women nursing injured fighters: “Who has more right than these women, the most pitiful of the old order’s victims, to give their lives for the new?” The Commune accorded pensions to widows and children, whether “legitimate” or not, of men killed fighting for the Commune.

However average or ordinary most Communards were, many observers—foreign and local alike—saw the Commune as a pitched conflict between classes. During his relatively short time at the US Legation, for instance, Wickman Hoffman took note of “the class hatred which exists in France.” For the American, it was “something we have no idea of, and I trust that we never shall. It is bitter, relentless, and cruel; and is, in no doubt, a sad legacy of the bloody Revolution of 1789, and of the centuries of oppression which preceded it.”

Hippolyte Taine, a conservative historian, was sure that the Commune was a proletarian revolution. On April 5 he wrote that most fundamentally the “present insurrection” was socialist: “The boss and the bourgeoisie exploit us, therefore we must suppress them. Superiority and special status do not exist. Me, a worker, I have abilities, and if I want, I can become the head of a business, a magistrate, a general. By good fortune, we have rifles, let’s use them to establish a republic in which workers like us become cabinet ministers and presidents.”

Edmond Goncourt and his brother Jules had assessed, shortly before the latter’s death a year earlier, that “the gap between wages and
the cost of living would kill the Empire." A workman had indeed reason to ask, "What good does it do me for there to be monuments, opera, café-concerts where I have never set foot because I don't have the money? And he rejoices that henceforth there will be no more rich people in Paris, so convinced is he that the gathering of rich people into one places raises prices."

The economic and political divisions in Paris's quartiers did seem to bear out the Commune's origins in class conflict. The more plebian neighborhoods of Paris led the way in support of the Commune. The social geography of Paris reflected a divide between the more prosperous western half of the city and the People's Paris of the eastern districts, as well as between the center and the proletarian periphery. Baron Georges Haussmann's massive urban projects during the Second Empire had only intensified the divide, but with the uprising on March 18, the periphery had arguably conquered the beaux quartiers. This is not to say that there were none who opposed the Commune in poorer arrondissements like the Eleventh, Twelfth, Eighteenth, Nineteenth, and Twentieth or that there were no devoted Communards in the relatively more privileged Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Arrondissements. It does indicate that social geography counted for much.

The Second Arrondissement embodied the social and political divide that existed even within relatively prosperous districts. The western parts of the arrondissement were more bourgeois, more anti-Communard, and highly suspicious of proletarian Belleville and its national guardsmen and the Vengeurs de Flories, a military unit named in honor of the martyred Communard, who came down to parade in the conservative quartiers below. In the early weeks of the Commune, many residents advocated conciliation and a negotiated settlement and voted for moderate representatives in the election of March 26. The more plebian eastern neighborhoods of the Second Arrondissement sent delegates to the Commune; the middle-class residents to the west did not. Around 12,000 people required living assistance in the arrondissement and were more likely to be guardsmen whose families depended on the 1.50 franc daily payment. A mechanic put it this way: "I have seven children, and my wife was ill. I had no other means of feeding my family."

Given the needs of its plebian supporters, the organization of work remained a significant goal for Communal militants. The "Declaration of the French people" of April 19 called for the creation of institutions that would provide ordinary people with credit, facilitating "access to property" and "freedom of labor." Ideas and even concrete projects for the "organization of work" were in the air, amid confidence that the defense of the National Guard cannons on March 18 had inaugurated a new era, full of possibilities that would make Paris and the world a better place."

Thus the "social question"—the condition of the poor and how to help them—remained important to many ordinary Parisians. The idea that revolution could bring about reforms that would reduce or even eliminate the considerable differences in conditions of life, opportunities, and expectations remained entrenched in the collective memory of Parisian workers. As Eugène Varlin stated, "We want to overthrow exploitation of workers by the right to work [le droit au travail] and the association of workers in incorporation." Workers hoped that newly established cooperatives would reflect the organization of the Commune itself: decentralized and locally governed. The anarchist Proudhon's influence was apparent in many workers' organizations in many trades. The Proudhonists and Blanquists imagined that France, like Paris, would evolve into a federation of communes, becoming a free country just as Paris had for the moment become a free city (ville libre). Such echoes could be heard at the meeting of women in Trinity Church on May 12, when a speaker thundered, "The day of justice approaches with giant strides...[T]he workshops in which you are packed will belong to you; the tools that are put into your hands will be yours; the gain resulting from your efforts, from your troubles, and from the loss of your health will be shared among you. Proletarians, you will be reborn."

This was a time of big dreams.

The regulations established by a workshop set up in the Louvre to repair and convert weapons reflected how some workers envisioned manufacturing operating in the future. Foremen and chargehands (who supervised the hammers) were to be elected, just as the National Guard units elected officers. The regulations also laid out the responsibilities of the administrative council, to consist of the manager, the foreman, a chargehand, and one worker "elected from each workbench," which would set salaries and wages and ensure that the workday did not exceed ten hours.

On April 17, the Commune ordered a survey of workshops abandoned by employers who had fled Paris so that workers' cooperatives could ultimately take them over, which indeed happened in a few instances. A small cooperative iron foundry started up in Grenelle. Members moved into one workshop after four days and another after two weeks. The cooperative, employing about 350 workers, produced shells
crucial to the city’s defense against Thiers. Workers elected “managing directors”—not a very socialist term—led by thirty-nine-year-old Pierre Marc, who had inherited a foundry from his father. The cooperative paid rent to the previous owner of the shop, and its workers earned less than their counterparts employed by the Commune’s L’ouvre shell factory. Producers’ cooperatives were thus organized along traditional class lines, and workers were expected to show up with their livret, a record book of employment, which they had been required to have with them since 1803, despite wide resentment of this obligation.  

In addition to reorganizing Paris’s workers, the Commune also endeavored to improve their working conditions. The abolition of night baking by a decree issued on April 20 was one such concrete social measure in the interest of labor taken by the Commune. The debate centered on advantages for bakers and the fact that workers’ virtual nighttime enslavement benefited “the aristocracy of the belly.” Some master bakers resisted, fearing the loss of clients, and the application of the measure was postponed until May 3, with another decree the next day threatening to seize bread produced before 5 A.M and distribute it to the poor. Many Parisians still demanded warm croissants first thing in the morning, however, making it difficult for the Commune to enforce the measure. Other Communard decrees established a maximum salary for municipal employees (6,000 francs a year), prohibited employers from taking assessed fines from workers’ wages (an increasingly common practice during the Second Empire), and established labor exchanges in each arrondissement.  

Given the circumstances and ideological divisions among Communist leaders, it is not surprising that no full-fledged attempt to transform the economy took place, despite the role of socialists who ultimately wanted workers to control the tools of their trades. Yet most Communards accepted the idea of private property. Moreover, for Blanquists, a complete social revolution would have to wait until political power was secured.  

Even though the structure of the economy remained relatively unchanged, the status of women improved by leaps and bounds. Indeed, the solidarity and militancy of Parisian women, who had suffered such hardship during the Prussian siege, jumps out as one of the most remarkable aspects of the Paris Commune. Women, taking pride in their role as citoyennes, pressured the Commune to attend to their rights and demands and pushed for an energetic defense of the capital. Citoyenne

Destrée proclaimed in a club, “The social revolution will not be operative until women are equal to men. Until then, you have only the appearance of revolution.”  

Such militants considered the condition of women a reflection of the “bourgeois authoritarianism” of the defunct empire and of the enemies gathering their forces at Versailles. Here, too, the Commune seemed to offer exciting possibilities for change. Élisabeth Dmitrieff, who had helped organize cooperatives in Geneva and then arrived in Paris in late March as a representative of the International, stated, “The work of women was the most exploited of all in the social order of the past. . . . [T]he immediate reorganization is urgent.”  

The economic disadvantage faced by ordinary female workers inflated women’s demands. Many communardes remained more interested in improving their lives than in achieving political equality, a demand strikingly absent from women’s discourse. As Louise Michel explained, “[A woman] bends under mortification; in her home her burdens crush her. Man wants to keep her that way, to be sure that she will never encroach upon his function or his titles. Gentlemen, we do not want either your functions or your titles.” Many women were doubly exploited—by their family situations and by their employers. One woman denounced bosses as “the social wound that must be taken care of” because they took advantage of workers, whom they considered “a machine for work,” while they lived it up. Dmitrieff called for the elimination of all competition and for equal salaries for male and female workers, as well as a reduction in work hours. She also demanded the creation of workshops for unemployed women and asked that funds go to aid nascent working-class associations.  

Dmitrieff, born Elisaveta Koucheleva in the northwestern Russian province of Pskov in 1850, was the illegitimate daughter of an aristocrat and a German nurse twenty years his junior. Élisabeth entered into a mariage blanc (a marriage of convenience) to get out of Russia, after having been active in a student group in Saint Petersburg. She carried funds from her sizable dowry into exile in Geneva in 1868. Dmitrieff went to London, where she met Karl Marx and his family. Immediately following the proclamation of the Commune, Marx sent her to Paris, and she sent reports on the situation back to him.  

Dmitrieff cut quite a figure. She wore a black riding costume, a felt hat with feathers, and a red silk shawl trimmed in gold. A police description put her at about five feet, three inches tall, with chestnut
hair and gray-blue eyes. Léo Frankel was probably but one of the Communards who fell in love with her. Dmitrieff combined a precocious feminism with a socialism influenced by Marx and a firm expectation that revolution would some day come to Russia.

Like Dmitrieff, some women during the Commune wore clothing that reflected their determination to effect change. Some garments were colorful, indeed flamboyant, with the color red omnipresent—for example, in sashes. Other women wore men's clothing and carried rifles. Lodońska Caweska, a thirty-year-old Polish woman, rode at the head of soldiers, adorned in "Turkish pants, high-buttoned shoes with a red cockade, and a blue belt from which hung two pistols."

On April 8, Dmitrieff sought to rally citoyennes in defense of Paris in the tradition of the women who had marched to Versailles in October 1789. Three days later, mothers, wives, and sisters, including Dmitrieff and Nathalie Le Mel, published an "Appeal to the Women Citizens of Paris": "We must prepare to defend and avenge our brothers."

That evening, the Union des Femmes was constituted, led by a council of five women, with Dmitrieff as general secretary. The union called on women to form branches in each arrondissement. Saluting the Commune as representing "the regeneration of society," the organization asked women to build barricades and to "fight to the end" for the Commune. It set up committees in most arrondissements as recruiting centers for volunteers for nursing and canteen work and barricade construction.

The Union des Femmes also took the fight for equal rights to Paris's factories. The manufacture of National Guard uniforms, the vast majority of which women produced, was one Parisian industry that kept going full steam. The Commune had first signed contracts with traditional manufacturers for the production of uniforms, but a report determined that under this arrangement female workers were earning less than under the Government of National Defense. The Union des Femmes demanded the award of all future contracts to workers' producers' cooperatives and that the Tailors' Union and delegates from the Commission of Labor and Exchange negotiate piece rates.

The Commune gave women in the Union des Femmes, which included perhaps as many as 2,000 women, unprecedented public responsibilities, but the response was not all positive. Some Communard leaders and other men reacted with uncertainty and even outright hostility. An official of the Tenth Arrondissement told the female administrator of a welfare hostel that members of the union committee "were to be kept away from all administrative agencies." Yet, without question, women made essential contributions to the Commune, encouraging the military defense of Paris, and caring for wounded Communard fighters.

Although the Commune concerned itself mainly with the well-being of its citizens, the new government also faced the daunting task of demonstrating its stability and legitimacy to foreigners residing in or visiting the city. About 5,000 US citizens who had been living in Paris before the Commune found themselves surrounded by Versailles troops. US Ambassador Elihu B. Washburne feared that it would be a long time "before these terrible troubles in Paris are ended." Including tourists passing through, the number of US citizens in Paris during the Commune may have reached 13,000. They read the newspaper American Register. Most resided on the Right Bank on the Champs-Élysées or in the Sixteenth Arrondissement. Many spoke no French but benefited from a strong dollar. They had the reputation for being "without polish," even boorish, and "arrogantly aloof."

Most Americans seem to have sided against the Commune. W. Pembroke Fehridge disparaged it as "the most criminal [act] the world has ever seen...a revolution of blood and violence" led by "ruthless desperados...the refuse of France...bandits...atheists and free-thinkers...madmen, drunk with wine and blood." Yet two Americans residing in Paris could find no fault with the way the city operated. Marie Putnam described the "apparent orderliness of the Commune." Frank M. Pixley of California remembered, "I was present in the city of Paris during the entire period that the Commune held sway...And yet during the five weeks—weeks of menace from without and suffering within—I saw and heard of no single act of pillage and murder."

Indeed the Commune's leaders trumpeted a "revolutionary morality," knowing that their constituents and foreign observers alike would scrutinize them closely. They held themselves to a high standard of honesty and accountability, intended to contrast starkly with the rampant corruption of Napoleon III's Second Empire. Communard leaders went out of their way to demonstrate that they ran a tight ship and could account for all expenditures. Inspired by the goals of equality and decentralization, the Commune rejected high salaries for officials, while affirming the principle of electing functionaries. The idea was that public servants would listen to citizens, who in turn would be actively involved in their government; a poster in the Second Arrondissement
called for "the permanent intervention of citizens in communal affairs through the free expression of their ideas and free defense of their interests." Administrators of the Commune were considered responsible to ordinary people, as their representatives and delegates. The ability of the Commune to provide public services in the wake of the prolonged Prussian siege and the government's overthrow was also essential to demonstrate its legitimacy. The sudden departure of so many officials and employees complicated the situation. Yet the Commune's municipality managed well enough, providing water, light, and postal service, cleaning streets regularly, disposing of garbage properly, and collecting taxes. An American woman had received her tax bill and went to see an official, relating that in view of events, her family was having trouble coming up with the money owed. The Communard replied that this would be no problem, much to the American's relief. She was forced to admit that "Communards were not as bad as all that." The cemetery service continued to function as always—and would have increasingly more to do.

Some observers insisted that crime seemed less of a problem in Paris during the Commune than before or after. On March 23 a poster warned that thieves arrested in flagrant delit would be shot, but none were. Relatively few thefts seem to have been reported, and probably only a couple of murders occurred in a city that, despite the departure of so many, remained a teeming place. Charles Beslay attributed this to the spontaneous emergence of a "revolutionary morality." Yet some evidence suggests that thefts may have actually increased. We just do not know. The prefecture of police forbade begging, which Rigault admitted on April 17 had "taken on a considerable extension": the police banned gambling, and a decree warned cheats and hucksters to stay away from markets. The Commune outlawed prostitution, making some arrests and pushing the industry into corners, although venereal disease proliferated, as it had during the Prussian siege. A decree in May reimposed on prostitutes the old draconian regulations, including the resented obligatory medical inspections. Despite Rigault's ban on the serving of drinks to anyone "in a state of drunkenness" (ironic, considering the source), alcoholism continued its ravages in the City of Light, which could well have been called the City of Drink.

The Commune also wanted to ensure that food was available and affordable. To that end, it established a Commission on Subsistence on March 29. The annual Ham Fair took place April 4–6; pigs and charcuterie went on sale as they had since medieval times. The price of food rose, but the situation did not come close to the extreme shortages that had compounded the disastrous effects of the freezing weather during the Prussian siege. Once German military authorities allowed the Commune to open the gates leading to their zone of occupation, more provisions entered the city. Some arrondissement mairies purchased and then sold meat at about cost. Yet Henri Dabor, who lived in the Latin Quarter, complained that his cook could not find what she wanted at the market and that a modest little rabbit, which before would have gone for two francs (almost a day's wage for a worker in ordinary times), now cost five. Courbet drank a little glass of Gentiane liqueur "to forget having to eat black bread and horsemeat." However, for ordinary people who did not have cooks, prices put some commodities increasingly out of range. In early May an employee of the prefecture of police reported that Parisians were complaining about rising food costs. Denunciations of hoarders became common, and officials ordered some stores searched.

Arrondissement mairies became hubs of activity during the Commune; in addition to selling food at or near cost, they handled matters of local governance that brought in a steady stream of citizens. Paul Martine, a former normalien (student at the prestigious École normale) and lycée teacher, related the creative chaos of the mairie at Batignolles in the Seventeenth Arrondissement: "First came our tumultuous deliberations in the large hall where the municipal council met, then the public crowding the door with demands of all kinds. Then came those carrying news, the dissatisfied, foreigners, and people who wanted to declare births, deaths, or ask to be married. And this while the cannons rumbled, day and night, all around the ramparts. We were there almost permanently." Martine often slept on one of the mattresses placed in the corner, as the "hall of the municipal council was transformed into a dormitory."

Depending on supplies, the mairies of each arrondissement provided national guardsmen and indigents with coal, wood, and bread. Beginning early in the morning, "an uninterrupted procession of poor women, without work and bread, and whose husbands had been killed in the fighting" arrived asking for vouchers to exchange for food whenever stocks permitted. The mairie undertook soupes populaires (soup kitchens) when sufficient provisions were available. Couples arrived asking to be married: Benoît Malon sometimes performed the brief ceremonies. Malon, who had eight national guardsmen arrested for theft on April 25, also oversaw burials of Communards killed in fighting.
outside the ramparts or by Versailles cannon fire, sad events followed by angry calls for vengeance and the death of Thiers and the "bombers of Paris." Sutter-Laumann's father had begun working in the mairie of the Eighteenth Arrondissement at the beginning of the Prussian siege. His son now found work there. Sutter-Laumann and his father received 1,50 francs per day for National Guard service. This was barely enough to live on, so the salary of five francs per day for each of them from their work in the mairie helped out. The younger Sutter-Laumann dispensed vouchers for bread and meat to poor residents of the district from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. Though not difficult, the work was "odiously monotonous and fatiguing," because of 40,000 people inscribed on the registers in that poor district alone, perhaps 10,000 showed up. The help the mairie could provide was quite small; many women demanded more, "half imploring, half threatening."

Sutter-Laumann made it a point to attend battalion meetings and club gatherings. The clubs epitomized popular sovereignty at work. The Club of Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs insisted that the Commune respond directly to all its proposals, even if doing so took two hours per day. The belief that Commune officials should attend such public meetings was widespread. Some clubs admitted participants at no charge; others levied small fees ranging from five to fifteen and occasionally twenty-five centimes per person. Those in attendance rose to speak and debate, frequently amid noise and, depending on the subject, heckling. The defense of Paris became an increasingly frequent theme. At a club meeting in Saint-Ambroise in the Eleventh Arrondissement, Citizen Jubelin recalled "the dreadful threat looming over our intelligent people, the convict settlements of Lambessa and Cayenne that await us if we should fail." He added that he would die in the defense of his rights. On May 9 at a meeting of the same club, Citizen Roussard rose to denounce "the young dandies and others who are too cowardly to join the ranks of the National Guard" and demanded their immediate incorporation into the Commune's fighting force. Several days later Citizen Lesueur related that his National Guard battalion had fallen apart because a few men had deserted, after which "everyone" had fled. He blamed the men who "wore the stripes" and should be leading but were "staying to the rear."

Of 733 people identified as participating in political clubs (clubistes), 113 were female (15 percent), and 198 held some position within the Commune (27 percent). The average member was somewhat older than the average Communard and most likely hailed from the most working-class neighborhoods. Organizers saw the clubs as a means of popular education and a way to maintain vigilance against the Versailles fifth column within the walls of Paris. On April 16 Sutter-Laumann asked for two days off from his work in the mairie so that he could join his battalion, which was heading out to reinforce troops in Asnières. The city lay directly in the line of fire of Versailles cannons appropriately placed at a chateau in Bécon across the Seine. Sutter-Laumann was fortunate to return with his life. Near Gennevilliers, the Versailles advanced, approaching so near that he could easily distinguish the uniforms of gendarmes from those of line troops. The national guardsmen retreated under enemy fire, leaving fallen comrades behind. Those reaching the Seine earlier had destroyed the bridge, fearing the Versailles would use it to cross the river. Sutter-Laumann swam across and returned to Paris. The Commune faced staunch critics from the start, as well as the nearly impossible challenge of governing a divided city, still reeling from months of siege, even as it prepared for a Versailles attack. But while ordinary citizens like Sutter-Laumann and his father were willing to wait for the new government to work out its kinks—and even take part in its ministries—the Versailles threat would test their patience. And for all its efforts, the Commune would quickly lose (if indeed it had ever had) the confidence of many foreign visitors and most of the bourgeoisie remaining in the city.

Englishman Ernest Vizetelly was one foreigner who noticed that the mood in Paris was shifting. It had become somber, or "more dismal" as Vizetelly put it. Most workshops had shut down, except those turning out uniforms or other items for the National Guard, and "there were no spring fashions and no bargain days." The wine shops, however, seemed always to be open. One evening Edmond de Goncourt went out to dine and asked about the plat du jour (dish of the day). "There isn't one, nobody's left in Paris," a waiter replied, referring to his usual clients. Another large restaurant had no diners, and "the waiters spoke only in low tones," while well-heeled clients were dining well in Versailles. On April 17 Goncourt also caught wind of the bourgeoisie's disgruntlement. He wondered, "Are things going badly for the Commune? I am astonished today to find that the population has come back to life." He noted occasional shouts against the Commune, including those of a man in a grey overcoat "who goes on up the boulevard defying the
angry rowdies and turning around to shout aloud his disdain for the Communards.” Five days later he observed, “The whole length of the Rue de Rivoli there is a procession of the baggage of the last bourgeois making their way to the Lyon railroad station.” He went to the zoo and there thought he had found “the sadness of Paris. The animals are silent.”

The Commune’s defeat at the hands of the Versaillais in skirmish after skirmish did little to restore faith in the new order. In central Paris, Goncourt watched as four hearses adorned with red flags went by, one carrying “a man, half of whose face and nearly all of whose neck have been carried away by a shell, with the white and blue of one of his eyes running down his cheek. His right hand, still black with powder, is upraised and clenched as if it clasped a gun.” The bodies of those killed by Versaillais shells were taken to the Hôtel-de-Ville to await identification by family and friends. Unidentified corpses were photographed in the hope that someone would come looking for a missing person. It was all so grisly. A national guardman penned a letter to a newspaper reflecting his disgust at returning exhausted from fighting at Issy and Vanves to find the cafés on the boulevard Saint-Michel full of revelers cawing “with drôleries [female jokers],” carrying on as usual while other Parisians risked their lives for the Commune.

Within the ramparts of the besieged French capital, many upper-class Parisians who had been unable to get out or believed the Commune would collapse more quickly than it had awaited their liberation. These included members of the Vignon family, who worried most about their property. They had money, jewelry, and other valuables in another apartment in the Tenth Arrondissement, now under the supervision of domestic servants. They also owned a house in the village of Clamart just south of Paris, but all was well there. Henri, Paul Vignon’s brother, was safely lodged in Versailles, and from there Henri assured his mother in Falaise in Normandy that “all the honest and sensible people are deserting Paris.” In Versailles, Henri got up late, purchased the Versailles newspaper Le Gaulois to read the government’s slant on the news—for example, that many foreigners were involved in the Commune—at lunch, hung around the château, dined again, and went to a café. Henri reassured his mother that he was receiving an indemnity from Versailles of ten francs a day. In any case, he assured her, the family remained well-off, and money was not a problem.

The Sixth Arrondissement seemed as calm as Falaise. Paul could write his mother while sitting in a quiet café. Édouard, Paul and Henri’s father, was more than sixty years old, so he did not have to worry about being conscripted into the National Guard of Paris. Paul had managed to avoid service in his unit, which for the moment did not have any officers. He noted that there was no problem getting about in Paris, even on streets where barricades were going up.

Ten days into the Commune, Édouard Vignon became alarmed about the situation in Paris, which he described by letter to his wife as the absolute power “of the most perverse that society can offer.” He did not think that the honnêtes gens (men of property) would let themselves be pillaged and massacred. Édouard lamented that all talk of reconstituting a National Guard “of order” remained only that. For his part, Édouard’s son found measures taken by the Commune to be increasingly “absurd,” notably the law on rents and the abolition of conscription and thus of a professional army.

Paul could also imagine reaction by the honnêtes gens against these “bandits.” His reflections reveal the emerging biological discourse differentiating the “healthy” part of the population and those so corrupted that they had to disappear. Paul distinguished people of property from those without. The family property was a constant theme in the correspondence of the Vignon family. Édouard received a worrying order from a justice of the peace to take items of value from their apartment in the Tenth Arrondissement, which had been “sealed” until lawyers could adjudicate ownership after the recent death of a relative. The residence was near enough to Montmartre that it might suffer “an indiscrete visit from ill-intentioned men.” Édouard moved the nicest furniture to a room well inside the apartment and took things of value to the apartment in the Sixth Arrondissement, where he believed there was nothing to fear because of the social composition of the quartier. He carried family deeds and titles to be locked away. To the Vignon family, the Commune put at risk “all of society, the future of France, and especially private fortunes,” including Thiers. Édouard mused about moving his family and fortune to the mountains of Switzerland; he was not the last French person of means to consider such a decision.

For the moment, Paul could not complain. He was pleased to have heard that “the members of the Council of the Commune have begun to eat each other, a good sign.” Paul reassured his mother on April 1, “We continue to enjoy the most perfect tranquility. I walk about all day, looking for ways of occupying my time.” Paul went to a café every day to see his friends, read in the garden of the Cluny Museum or in the Luxembourg Gardens, and played whist. He strolled the boulevards
alone or with his father. Paul observed clergy walking through his neighborhood without the slightest problem. His National Guard unit, commanded by "Citizen Cook Lacord," operated under the principle of inertia, stronger than resistance.

In the meantime, the Vignon's two domestics took care of one of their apartments, going to daily Mass and asking God "to bestow the most precious blessings on our excellent masters and on their dear family." The servants noted wistfully that "Monsieur's newspaper" was no longer to be found, only Le Cri du Peuple and Père Duchêne, of which the Vignons did not approve. Their concierge was under pressure from the Commune to make empty apartments available to Parisians whose homes had been blown apart by Versailles shells. Each day the domestics told the concierge that they were expecting friends of the Vignon family to arrive at any time. The servants had worries of their own, with a brother-in-law and brother in the Army of Versailles. "Monsieur is really so good," they wrote, "to think of our dear soldiers."97

Paul avoided walking on or near streets close to his apartment, afraid of seeing men with whom he had served during the siege who might ask why he was not in uniform. One day, he went to the Palace of Justice to pick up some papers and ran into a lawyer of vague acquaintance, who knew that Paul had served in the National Guard during the Prussian siege and encouraged him to join up again. The lawyer could make sure that he would retain his former rank of captain, adding that Paul would see "that the Commune is an honest and legitimate government." Paul refused, telling him very coldly that he knew what he had to do and was not about to join the Commune. Miffed, the lawyer turned around quickly and walked away.98 Despite run-ins like this, Paul decided not to try to leave Paris for the time being, thinking that fleeing could well be more dangerous than remaining in the city.99

At the very end of March, the railway line to Versailles along the Right Bank of the Seine had been cut, but the train on the other side of the river continued to operate. Paul's brother Henri had no difficulty getting from Versailles into Paris on March 30 to spend the evening with his father and brother. Likewise, Paul got to Versailles without problem to visit his brother. However, many Parisians were not so fortunate in exchanging news and even visits with their families. The Versailles seized letters sent from Paris via Saint-Denis "by the thousands"; some got through, but many—indeed most—did not. Édouard worried that his and Paul's letters might no longer get out of Paris, as during the Prussian siege. At the same time, he rejoiced that increased surveillance by the Versailles and Germans might prevent Communal propaganda directed at the provinces from getting out. Thiers's government, unsurprisingly, was at the same time bombarding the provinces and other countries with fanciful accounts of happenings in Paris.100

The failure of the Commune's forces to defeat the Versailles at Courbevoie on April 1 pleased the Vignon family. National guardsmen retreated down the avenue de Neuilly and into Paris, followed by Versailles shells. Henri left his father and brother and headed back to Versailles via Sceaux. Nearing the valley of the Bièvre, he heard sounds of combat uncomfortably near. Henri came upon peasants who advised against his chosen route, warning that he would soon find himself in the middle of the fighting. Finally reaching Versailles, he watched as Communal prisoners arrived under escort. About 20,000 people waited to have a look at them; they greeted the troops and gendarmes with enthusiastic shouts and insulted and even struck the national guardsmen. The presence of guards prevented the Versailles crowds from going so far as to massacre the captured soldiers. The soldiers made clear, however, that they wanted nothing more than to storm Paris and "take care of these revolutionaries." Henri wrote his mother that the Communards had suffered losses of between 1,000 and 1,500 men and that the Army of Versailles had only 25 wounded. The Versailles troops' decision to "give no quarter" pleased the Vignons. Captured Communards who had "deserted" from the regular army were immediately shot, which Henri considered an "energetic and good example."101

The victory at Courbevoie renewed Édouard Vignon's confidence in the French army. Once it had reached full strength, Édouard was sure it would show the Parisians a thing or two. The bourgeois was not disappointed that attempts at conciliation or some sort of negotiated settlement had failed. Yet he assured his wife that she should not fear for Paul and Henri—they would not be forced to march. Édouard believed that when the Versailles launched an assault on Paris, "the brave national guardsmen of order" would rise up and complete the rout of the "bandits." Then they would only need "to reestablish order with severity." He had heard that the National Guard fighting at Châtillon and Clamart had encountered not gendarmes but rather regular French troops, easily identified by their red pants. National guardsmen had reason to be discouraged.

Henri excitedly related to his mother news of a successful Versailles attack on the barricades at the pont de Neuilly on April 6; one
had included an overturned omnibus, another a toppled railroad car. The Army of Versailles crossed the Seine and occupied the first houses of Neuilly. Communards defending prisoners had been killed. As Henri explained, "The mot d'ordre (watchword) is to take no prisoner, to shoot everyone who falls into their hands." He assured his mother that "foreigners" were playing a major part in the Commune and repeated reports that the British government had assured the Versailles government that 5,200 pickpockets were on their way across the English Channel to Paris to add to the chaos in the capital.77

Henri amused himself by once or twice going with the Versaillais troops on expeditions near the walls of Paris. He found such excursions a little dangerous but "truly admirable." He could judge for himself the effectiveness of the artillery duels between the two sides. As the Communards returned fire from Point-du-Jour, he and his friends decided it would be prudent to return to Versailles. But Henri was convinced that his exile would soon end. After all, Thiers had announced that the Versaillais would soon be in Paris.79

IN EARLY APRIL, it remained fairly easy to get in and out of Paris. Céline de Mazade remained there for the first six weeks of the Commune to oversee the operation of her husband’s textile manufacturing company, which had factories in the Oise north of Paris and a warehouse in the capital. Her husband, Alexandre, stayed away from the capital to avoid conscription into the National Guard. Husband and wife supported Versailles and complained that the Commune was hurting business. Good labor had become difficult to find. Yet, at least in the beginning, Céline de Mazade managed to leave Paris regularly and to ship silk out of the capital to the company warehouses, sometimes with the help of bribes. She was not the only one to rely on that method to move in and out of the city.74 As Thiers’s propaganda continued to flood in, accompanied by wounded soldiers returning from battle, wealthy and foreign-born Parisians—even those who had held out—began to see the appeal of escape.

The US Legation was jammed with French citizens asking for passports. By late April, Ambassador Elihu B. Washburne had provided more than 1,500 laissez-passer (diplomatic passes) to Alsatians, who could now claim to be German subjects. He became increasingly pessimistic about the entire situation, reporting on April 20, "Fortune, business, public and private credit, industry, labor, financial enterprise, are all buried in one common grave. It is everywhere devastation, desolation, ruin. The physiognomy of the city becomes more and more sad... and Paris, without its brilliantly-lighted cafés, is Paris no longer."75

But for those who could not claim foreign citizenship in order to escape the city and avoid service in the National Guard, bribery was the best, if not the only, option. The ongoing fight with Versailles troops meant that the National Guard was in dire need of men to fight, so they did everything in their power to round up those shirking their duty. National guardsmen demanded information from concierges, who lived in the buildings they tended, and searched apartments, looking for men trying to avoid service. Those between twenty and forty who were discovered hiding and resisted were hauled off and told that they would be put up front during the next skirmish. The Commune cut off their daily wage in the hope that spouses might pressure them to serve. Yet some men still managed to leave by bribing guards to look the other way. John Leighton noted that one could go to the Gare du Nord and claim to be seventy-eight years old, and a guard might well reply in playful jest, "Only that? I thought you looked older." Leighton heard that some residents of Belleville and Montmartre were earning "a nice little income" helping people get out, such as by aiding them in climbing over the walls.76 Wickham Hoffman, secretary of the US Legation, also managed to go back and forth to Versailles, where he had found lodgings, thanks to his embassy. In Paris, Versailles shells hit his Paris apartment building eight times. Hoffman travelled to and from his office in the capital with passes easily obtained from both sides. But as he had to go through German-held Saint-Denis in order to get back into Paris by train, the trip grew from twelve to thirty miles, taking three-hours each way. Friends asked him to bring their horses and carriages to Versailles on his trips. He noted, "If the Communist officers at the gates were close observers, they must have thought that I was the owner of one of the largest and best-appointed stables in Paris." His principal complaint during the Commune was that his landlady had run out of his favorite champagne.77

PAUL VIGNON, like 200,000 other upper-class Parisians who had already fled, realized in mid-April that the time had come to leave Paris. In his apartment building on the rue de Seine, the concierge took Paul aside and told him that a junior officer in the National Guard had come by with a notebook containing a list of names, asking about men under age forty living there. When the concierge hesitated, the officer said
he was aware that the man had knowingly provided false information in the past, adding that the Commune wanted to make an example of people who did this in order to reduce the number of draft dodgers (réfractaires). The concierge took a real chance, saying that two brothers of the age to serve, les citoyens Vignon, who had been in the 8th battalion during the war, normally residing there but had left for the provinces. The National Guard officer departed, saying he would find out whether this was in fact the case. Paul Vignon profusely thanked the concierge but knew he could delay no longer.

The challenge now was to get out. Increased Commune security had made it more difficult to leave Paris. The gates were closely guarded, and only civilians with passes stamped by the Commune could leave. Paul had heard that some young men had managed to escape hidden beneath laundry in the wagons of washerwomen or even, somehow, ensconced in giant slabs of meat, thanks to sympathetic butchers. But guards had heard about that trick and were stabbing meat being transported with their bayonets. Several young department store clerks got away by jumping a guard at the customs barrier post and quickly fleeing. A few other hardy souls had thrown ropes from the top of the ramparts and climbed down at night.

The Vignon family's devoted servant had heard that a young Swiss man had loaned his papers to a Parisian, and she said she could get hold of them. Paul and his father accepted the proposition. Soon Paul was in possession of a Swiss birth certificate in the name of Schmitt, who was approximately his age, along with a passport stamped at the Swiss embassy.

Early the next morning Paul Vignon, his father, and the domestic—who would return to Paris with the papers once they had arrived in Saint-Denis—went to the Gare du Nord armed with Paul's new identity. Guards would not stop Paul's father, because of his age, or the domestic servant, as women could pretty much come and go as they pleased. Paul went up to the window to buy three second-class tickets so they could (for once) "travel democratically" in order not to attract unusual attention. Communards did not travel first-class. They registered their two crates of belongings without problem and walked into the waiting room.

The travelers showed their papers to a guard at the door, who stepped back to let them pass. But a young National Guard lieutenant suddenly appeared and asked politely to see their documents. He announced that Paul's papers were not in order because they lacked the stamp of the prefecture of police. Paul replied that this was not necessary because they bore the stamp of a representative of Switzerland—"my country," he lied—and no such requirement had been in place when his brother had left. The lieutenant told him that because so many men avoiding military service were trying to leave Paris, a new regulation had been decreed. Paul reminded him that as a foreigner, he should be allowed to go, but the young lieutenant would not relent. Paul told his interrogator that he would find the head of surveillance for the railway station, who would presumably take care of the matter.

When he arrived at the station's police office, Paul discovered that the suspicious national guardsman had taken a back stairway and was already there. The surveillance officer assured Paul that he did not doubt his Swiss nationality for a minute, but he had received explicit instructions that he could not ignore. There was nothing to be done. If Paul made a scene, they might well have a look at his luggage and see that as a good Parisian bourgeois, he had had is initials "PV" embroidered on his clothes and inscribed on his cane. He could not go to the prefecture of police because for four years he had been attached to the appellate court and often had dealings with officials there. Someone might recognize him. He and his father would have to find another way.

By good fortune, they did. A railroad employee had brushed by Paul a bit close as he paced back and forth in the station. When Paul reacted by looking directly at him, the man asked if they were being prevented from leaving for Saint-Denis. Paul started to tell his story when the man cut him off: they should follow him and give him a small bribe in cash. If Paul gave the guard on duty twenty francs—a considerable sum—he could be arrested for bribery if ensured. So he took out two francs, handed them over, and went quickly through the door to the quay while the railroad official looked the other way.

Paul, his father, and their servant entered the closest second-class train compartment they found. Paul's heart was pounding. Their traveling companions would be six femmes du peuple, not the sort Paul and his father had traveled with before. One of the women suddenly warned him to be careful—before the train left, Commune guards would pass through the cars. She noted that he looked too young to be leaving Paris. Paul recounted his now quite tired story about being Swiss and how the Communards authorities could not prevent him from leaving, and so on. "Believe me!" the worthy woman replied, telling him to slide under the bench of the compartment so that the women could
conceal him with their clothes. He did so, and an instant later a guard looked in. The train pulled out, and twenty minutes later his new acquaintance said that he could come out from under the bench; she had seen a German soldier on the quay of the train station in Saint-Denis.

Now no longer within the Commune’s jurisdiction, Paul and his party got off the train, giving each of the working-class women a warm handshake. The Vignons’ domestic servant returned to Paris with the Swiss papers. Paul and his father immediately went to eat a “copious” lunch upon leaving the station. They then left for Falaise. Not long thereafter, Paul Vignon was in Versailles. It seemed to him that he should show “some zeal” about working again. He found Versailles full of deputies and senators, as well as a bevy of job seekers, men like him who had abandoned Paris. Still, Paul managed to find a post in Thiers’s government.⁹⁶

**THE PARIS COMMUNE** brought most Parisians, such as Sutter-Laumann, hardship but also hope. For others with more comfortable existences, like the Vignon family, the Commune was to be endured until the Army of Versailles could put an end to the pretensions of ordinary Parisians. With the capital surrounded militarily, civil war imprinted on daily life, as shells fell on western Paris and casualties mounted amid growing, gnawing fear.

Gradually some Parisians who had been willing to give the Commune a chance because they were republicans or favored the program for municipal autonomy began to turn against it. The quarrels among Communal leaders, for instance, disgusted lower-middle-class Parisians. In an attempt to combat dwindling support, Communal propaganda, in the Journal Officiel and on wall posters, transformed fidélistes into great victors over depleted Versaillais forces taking many casualties. In the propagandists’ telling, battalions and entire regiments of Versailles line troops were abandoning Thiers and joining the Commune.⁹⁷ There was no truth to these reports, and Parisians, even those devoted to the Commune, could not have ignored the mounting casualties resulting from the skirmishes.

Yet growing opposition to arbitrary arrests, hostage taking, and the occasional requisition of supplies did not turn all hesitant public opinion toward Thiers. In fact, Thiers continued to do everything possible to earn the hatred of Parisians. The Versaillais leader had agreed to the devastating armistice, and his cannons were inflicting great damage on Paris—more than that caused by the Prussian siege—and killing innocent citizens. His commitment to the republic was at best equivocal. Charles Beslay wrote a letter to Thiers, whom he had once known fairly well, calling on him to resign. The Communal moderate saluted this third revolution of the century in Paris, “the greatest and the most just,” and accused Thiers of opposing in obvious bad faith the social transformation that had been occurring over the past half century in Europe. If Versailles was now stronger, Beslay and many others firmly believed, Paris at least had right on her side.⁹⁸

In a grand demonstration of Parisians’ hatred of Thiers, newspapers called for the demolition of the house of the “bomber” who was launching destructive shells into Paris while denying doing so. On the morning of April 15, Communal leaders with national guardsmen turned up at the door of Thiers’s house on the place Saint-Georges. The concierge almost fainted when she saw “grim-looking visitors” but quickly turned over the keys. A quick search revealed objets d’art, paintings, and books that Thiers had assiduously collected over the years. They found Italian Renaissance bronzes, porcelains from centuries past, ivory carvings, engraved rock crystals, and Chinese and Japanese jade carvings. Courbet proposed that the objets d’art belonging to Thiers should be enumerated. When Thiers learned in Versailles that his beloved house was to be demolished, he became quite pale, fell into an armchair, and burst into tears. Thiers, one could easily conclude, loved objects, not people.⁹⁹

Destroying Thiers’s home did little to assuage the fears of Communards like Elisabeth Dmitrieff, who worried about the fate of the Commune in which she had invested so much effort. Would there be time to establish unions for female workers as she hoped? Sick with bronchitis and a fever, with no one to replace her, Dmitrieff knew time was of the essence. On April 24 she wrote the General Council of the International, “I work hard; we are mobilizing all the women of Paris. I organize public meetings; we have set up defense committees in all arrondissements, right in the town halls, and a Central Committee as well.” She had worked tirelessly for the cause, but would it be enough? Increasingly, it seemed the future of the Commune relied not on Communards like herself but on powerful forces beyond Paris—and beyond her control. Razing Thiers’s house would have no impact on efforts to defend the city against the Versaillais hordes. Thiers no longer had his mansion, but he had a powerful army moving ever closer to the ramparts of the capital.