

The Revolutionary Age

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The Paris Commune, 1871—1919

THE agonizing but inspiring struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors is as old as human history. It is as brutal and tragic, as human and magnificent, as life itself. It is a struggle in which and through which man's finest instincts have been expressed, have tried to break the shackles imposed upon life by oppression and inequality.

All through history there are the scars of this great struggle. They are proletarian scars, transfigured by the beauty of aspiration. In one form or another the struggle flared up, and was beaten down. Always beaten down—the cross and the prison, the rack, the fire and the gallows being the answer of the oppressors to the rebels. Always beaten down—but arising to inspire new struggles, again to arouse the masses to action, to teach the new rebels the more effective methods of struggle. The early Christian Communists, crushed by the unity of feudal church and state, were the ideologic inspiration of the Communist movements of the middle ages. The great Spartacus, implacable but human, a slave who towered infinitely above his masters, lives again in our day in the revolutionary movement of Germany—the Spartacans. Despised but unconquerable, overwhelmed but irresistible, the rebel-slaves struggle, and each new struggle inspires the future and is born again.

The Paris Commune was crushed, completely. But it did not die. It is alive in our day, active and implacable. The Commune! The Communists! They are the terror of the bourgeois reaction. The Commune controls in Russia—that terrible mystery to the oppressors, that flaming star of hope to the oppressed. The Communists are shaking the Government of the People's Butchery in Germany, and the world of Capitalism unites against the Communists. The Commune! The Communists! Everywhere they are the inspiration of the proletarian revolution; everywhere they are the rallying cry of the most resolute elements of the Socialist proletariat.

The Paris Commune was crushed. It was the revolt of the proletarian masses against class mastery; it was the attempt to use the collapse of Bonapartism for action and the conquest of power by the proletariat. It challenged equally Thiers and Bismarck—bourgeois France and Junker Prussia. The Commune was life striving to realize life, its majesty and inviolability; to complete the struggle of the ages, to end class rule. And Thiers and Bismarck, bourgeois France and Junker Prussia, united against this menace. The former enemies became allies against the revolutionary proletariat and communism. Are not the bourgeois enemies of yesterday an indivisible unity today against the Commune in Russia, against the developing Commune in Germany?

It was a tragic struggle. The Communards met the cannon with their bodies and starvation with a jest. Thunderbolts of iron were answered with the thunderbolts of proletarian courage and the revolutionary ideal. Isolated, starved, overwhelmed, the struggle went on against Thiers and Bismarck physically, against the world spiritually. There were no men, there were no women, there were no children—just rebels. When the walls were conquered, the Communards held the streets; conquered off the streets, they made each house a fortress and every person an army. Driven back, always back, they held the corners and the alleys and the cellars, until overwhelmed by sheer physical exhaustion and the numerical superiority of the enemy. And they were all made prisoners. Prisoners? No, they were made victims. They were tortured. Men, women and children were shot in droves, mercilessly and systematically.

MARX ON THE COMMUNE

The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.... The Commune was formed of the various municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally workmen, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary, body, executive and legislative at the same time. Instead of continuing to be the agent of the central Government, the police was at once stripped of its political attributes and turned into the responsible and at all times revocable agent of the Commune. So were the officials of all other branches of the administration. From the members of the Commune downwards, the public service had to be done at *workmen's wages*. The vested interests and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of State disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves. Public functions ceased to be the private property of the tools of the central Government. Not only municipal administration, but the whole initiative hitherto exercised by the State was laid into the hands of the Commune.... The Paris Commune was, of course, to serve as a model to all the great industrial centers of France. The communal regime once established in Paris and the secondary centres, the old centralized Government would in the provinces, too, have to give way to the self-government of the producers. In a rough sketch of national organization which the Commune had no time to develop, it is clearly stated that the Commune was to be the political form of even the smallest country hamlet, and that in the rural districts the standing army was to be replaced by a national militia, with an extremely short term of service. The rural communes of delegates in the central town, and these district assemblies were again to send deputies to the National Delegation in Paris, each delegate to be at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents. The few important functions which still would remain for a central government were not to be suppressed, as has intentionally been misstated, but were to be discharged by communal, and therefore strictly responsible, agents. The unity of the nation was not to be broken; but, on the contrary, to be organized by the Communal Constitution, and to become a reality by the destruction of the State power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity independent of, and superior to, the nation itself, from which it was but a parasitic excrescence.... The Communal Constitution brought the rural producers under the intellectual lead of the central towns of their districts and there secured to them, in the workmen, the natural trustees of their interests.... It was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor.—Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*.

amid the indifference or applause of the world. The masters knew no mercy; they who accused the Communards, falsely and vilely, of savagery acted as savages even would not act. It was the vengeance of the master class—the vengeance of the master class at all times against its slaves who rebel. Today, the bourgeois still froth about the savagery of the Commune; but they say nothing about the thousands of men, women and children who were massacred at Pere la Chaise, who were often hurried alive, who were transported to French Guiana. Today, the bourgeois froth about savagery in Russia; but they are quiet about the bloody actions of the bourgeois White Guards in Finland, about the savagery of the masters in Germany. "Shoot on sight"—that is the order of the bourgeois—"Socialist" government in Germany, approved by the world of Capitalism. Capitalism trembles at the menace of Bolshevism; but what a vengeance will be their's should Bolshevism collapse! But it won't....

The Paris Commune was the most mature expression of the proletarian revolution up to that time. The tendency of the French Revolution, among the masses, was to go beyond the bourgeois parliamentary state, with its division between legislative and executive, and to organize a completely new state, the federated communes, uniting all functions of government in the masses. That was the immature tendency of the sections and communes of the French Revolution, which the Paris Commune established in practice.

The contribution of the Commune to revolutionary theory and tactics consisted in developing a *new type of state*, by means of which the proletariat could accomplish its emancipation. The Commune annihilated

the machinery of the old state—its army, its police and its bureaucracy, independent of and imposed upon the masses, the instruments of repression used by the state to coerce the working class; and the Commune, moreover, abolished legislative and executive functions as *separate functions*, these being united democratically in the Commune. The Paris Commune demonstrated in actual practice that the first task of the militant proletariat is the conquest of power by the revolutionary proletariat—the annihilation of the old bourgeois state and the construction of a new proletarian state. On this head, N. Lenin wrote in April 1917: "As to the revolutionary organization and its task, the conquest of the power of the state and militarism: From the experience of the Paris Commune, Marx shows that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made machinery of the state and wield it for its purposes.' The proletariat must break down this machinery. And this has been either concealed or denied by the opportunists. But it is the most valuable lesson of the Paris Commune and of the Revolution in Russia of 1905. The difference between us and the Anarchists is, that we admit the state is a necessity in the development of our Revolution. The difference with the opportunists and the disciples of Karl Kautsky is, that we claim we do not need the bourgeois state machinery as completed in the 'democratic' bourgeois republic, but the direct power of armed and organized workers. Such is the state we need. Such was the character of the Commune of 1871 and of the Soviets of Workmen and Soldiers of 1905 and 1917. On this basis we build." The new proletarian state of the Paris Commune functioned as a revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, precisely as in Soviet Russia in 1917-1919.

The Commune was the final magnificent act of the first revolutionary period of the proletarian movement, while it simultaneously, through its practice of proletarian dictatorship and the new state, projected the phase of the final revolution of the proletariat. But the International Socialist movement that developed after the crushing of the Commune was pacific, moderate, reformistic and nationalistic. It repudiated the lessons of the Commune, became a wholly parliamentary movement, imagining that Socialism could be introduced by means of parliamentary activity on the basis of the bourgeois state, that this state could be used as the instrument for the emancipation of the working class.

The rough shock of the accomplished proletarian revolution in Russia and of the developing proletarian revolution in Germany is awakening Socialism from its parliamentary dreams, from its acceptance of the bourgeois state. *The practice of the proletarian revolution in Russia and in Germany is the practice of the Paris Commune amplified and organized in accord with the newer forces of today.* The amplification consists largely in making industry—the organized producers—the basis of the new state. The Commune is again in action, in its final form, implacable and unconquerable. The Commune! Proletarian Dictatorship! The Revolution!

The Paris Commune was isolated. The international proletariat was not awake, did not respond to the call of the Commune. But the Commune in Russia has sent the flaming call to proletarian revolution throughout the world. And there is answer to the call! The Russian Commune has its natural ally in the awakening international proletariat. The final struggle is on! But—Socialism must reconstruct itself in harmony with the experience of the Commune—1871-1919.