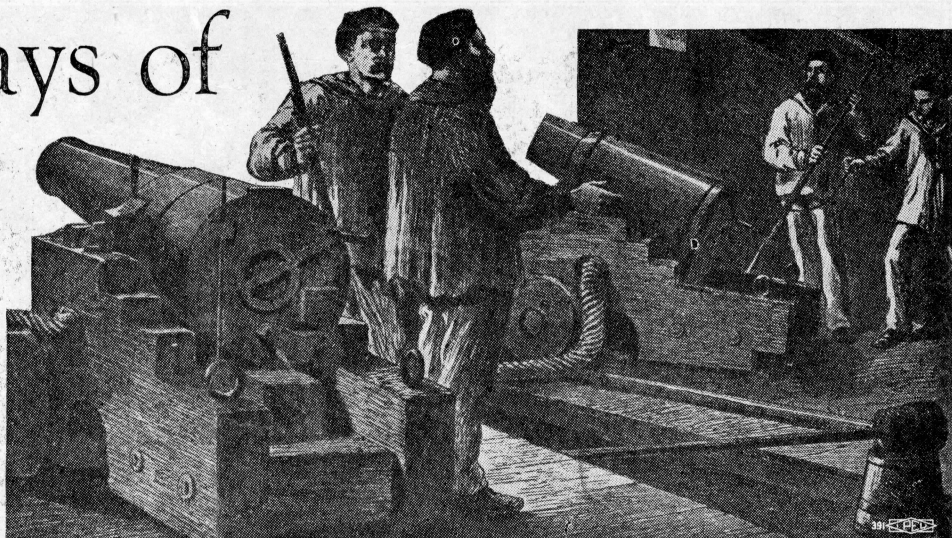


# The Last Days of the Commune

By Max Shachtman

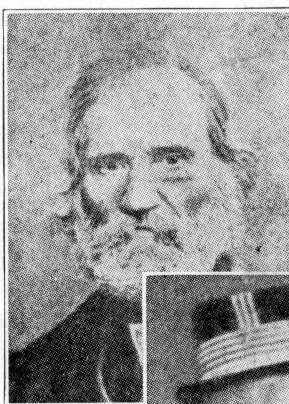
"We are honest gentlemen; it is by ordinary laws that justice will be done. We will have recourse to nothing but the law."—Thiers to the National Assembly, May 22, 1871.



Gunners during the fight between the Communards and Versailles.

**W**ITH its last breath, facing extinction, the Communards fought like the most courageous of heroes. Delescluze, abdicating his authority as commander, called for revolutionary war by the people, war with naked arms, war on the barricades. There was no longer even a pretense at a strategic retreat, an organized defensive. It was every man for himself and only the natural tendencies of crowds united little groups of men to struggle in their various sections. Debouching everywhere the Versailles gained ground, foot by foot, every hour. On the 22, La Murette was taken, then the Trocadero; a bloc of Federal artillery was taken in the capture of the Military School.

The Communards now made a desperate attempt to rally against the enemy. At the first sign of the end



Louis  
Blanqui



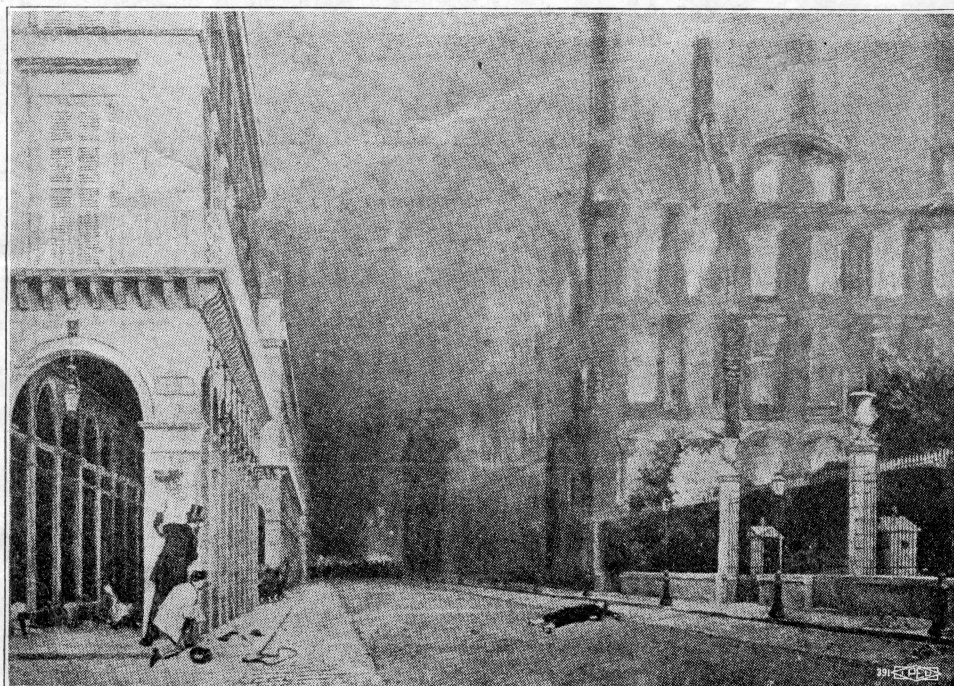
Gustav  
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the cowards, with Felix Pyat at their head, removed their red sashes and fled. Dombrowski, Delescluze, Varlin, Rigault, Ferre and a few others made an attempt to organize the defense but it was hopeless. For a few days, the tigerish heroism of the defenders, outnumbered as they were, even checked the enemy. Scenes of unknown self-sacrifice and noble courage were hourly occurrences. The Communards died with the Marseillaise on their lips and the shout "*Pour la solidarite humaine!*" Dombrowski, realizing the end and saddened by the suspicions cast upon him, exposed himself to the fire of the enemy and was riddled by balls in the rue Myrrha.

One after another: Montmartre, the historic battleground of the revolution was taken by 30,000 men because the Commune had failed to send reinforcements and munitions; the cemetery of Montparnasse was occupied and the Federals were being flanked on every side, driven to a corner. Raoul Rigault was found lifeless in a street. Ferre, the Blanquist chief of police, saw to the shooting of the spy Veysett, and gave the order for the killing of the hostages—after the Communards, maddened by the savage slaughters of Thiers, demanded reprisals.

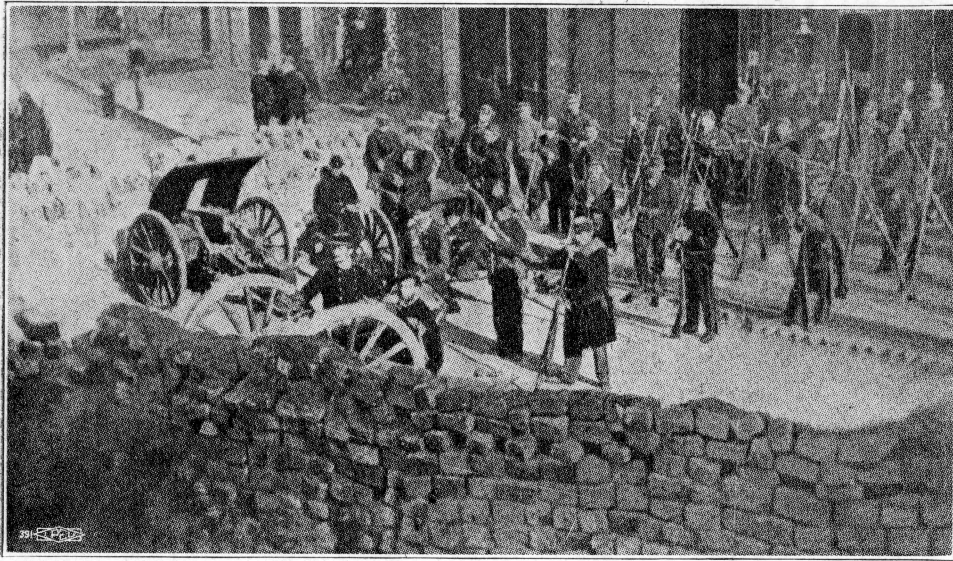
The Commune now suffered its death pangs. The leonine struggles on the barricades were of little avail. The Versailles pressed forward. On Sunday, May 28, the last barricade was taken. At noon, the last cannon of the Communards was fired. The next day a small squadron seized the outlying fort of Vincennes, shot the Communist officers against the wall, pulled the red flag from the mast and ran up the tricolor of the republic of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity . . . . .

But the monstrous scoundrel Thiers had not finished. It was necessary to thoroely purge Paris of subversive no-



Desolation and death: a street in Paris during the "Bloody Week".





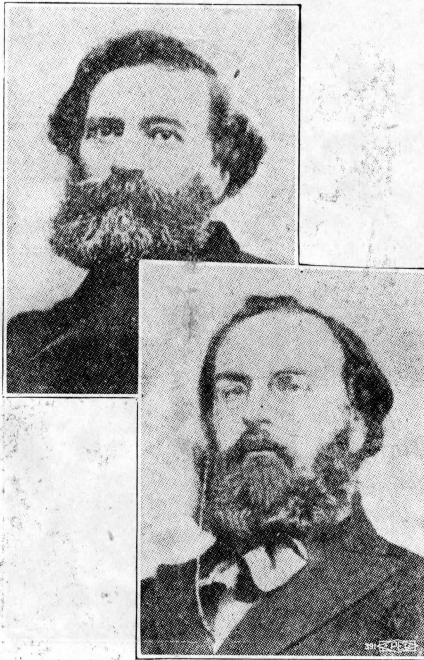
*A street barricade during the Paris Commune.*

tions, to drown its revolutionary spirit in a bath of its own blood; a massacre was an essential prerequisite for the achievement of year-long tranquillity. So there followed the bloody week of May, the most frightful slaughter, the most cold-blooded murder of men since the days of the Byzantine Empire. To the scoundrelly patriots of Thiers' mold, the Communards were far more detestable than the Prussians; indeed, it was only with the aid of the Prussians that they managed to conquer Paris. The party of "order" was in power.

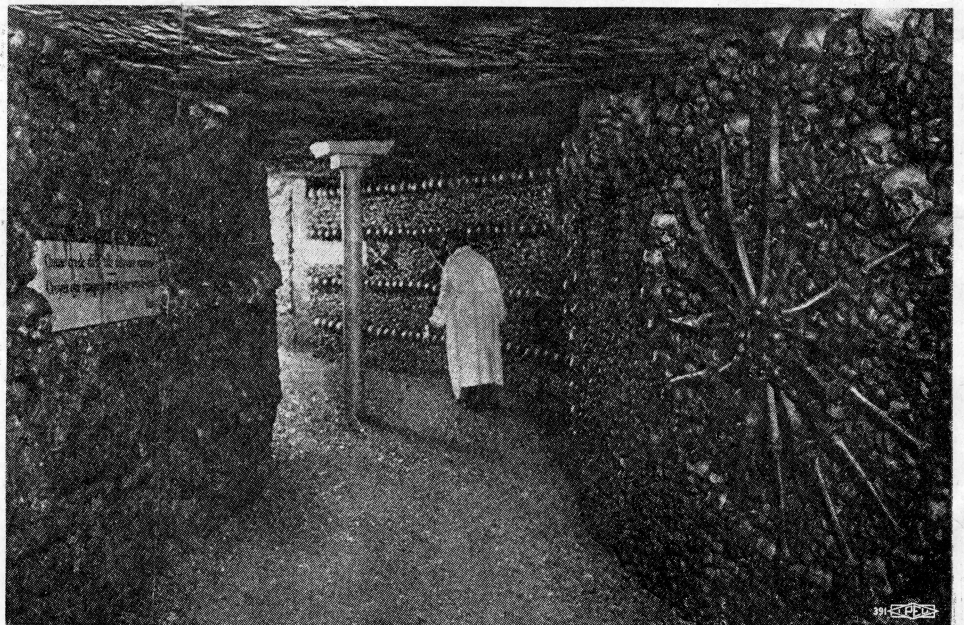
"Pitiless murder!" With this order were the Communards exterminated. Those found with black marks on their fingers, indications of having used gun powder, or those who still wore a bit of National Guard uniform were shot in their tracks. Three hundred Federal refugees were shot in the Madeleine. At the square of the Pantheon hundreds of Federals were massacred. Huge heaps of corpses were piled against every wall in the city. The wounded and the medical corps equally were killed by the bloodthirsty troops, despite the concord of the International Convention at Geneva.

Members of the Commune were avidly hunted like dogs, and even Free Masons were murdered on sight. Varlin, one of the most capable figures in the Commune was cruelly assassinated. The Versailles press would announce the execution of Cluseret, Valles, Ferre, Longuet, Gambon, Lefrancais: and all of them were living! Unfortunates who could not prove their identity were killed in their places.

Moderates, republicans, men who had never participated in the Commune but whose staunch republican ideas made them suspect were done to death. Milliere, the deputy to the National Assembly, was forced to his knees in the Pantheon and shot; the doctor Tony Moilin suffered the same



*Felix Pyat—Raoul Rigault*



*In the catacombs: Skulls and bones of Communards killed by the black Reaction*

fate. The presence of foreigners in official posts in the Commune gave rise to a hunt against all strangers: Poles, Hungarians, Italians, Hollanders and Germans were shot almost on sight. Neither women nor children were spared: "They are probably Communards anyway."

Anonymous denunciations were sufficient in most cases for the seizure and death of a Parisian, and thousands died in this manner. The fable of the *petroleuses*, women oil throwers who were alleged to have set fire to buildings, brought about the death of scores. Thousands were tried before drum-head court martials which devoted only a second to each individual. Those who were sent to Versailles for retrial had to pass thru a gate guarded by the Marquis de Gallifet. This horrible butcher stood there and selected haphazardly hundreds of men and women out of the purest whim, and murdered them against the wall.

"To find a parallel for the conduct of Thiers and his bloodhounds we must go back to the times of Sulla and the two triumvirates of Rome," wrote Marx. Where rifles failed to slaughter the hundreds of victims who were driven to death like droves of cattle, the *mitrailleuses* were substituted. Huge graves, yards wide and deep, were dug for the murdered Parisians and they were flung in like so much dirt. The hastiness with which they were buried brought horrible nightmares to those who passed by or lived near these mass graves. At night a still living arm would be thrust out of the ground, or a leg which still wore the uniform of the National Guard. In the butchery many of the wounded had been buried alive! Unearthly groans and heavings issuing from the ground, made Parisian life a ghastly night-

mare. Bodies rotted in the bleak rooms of the proletariat, awaiting a hasty internment.

Every family in Paris gave at least one sacrifice to the cause of the Commune. The insatiable sadism of the bourgeois hyenas spattered every wall of Paris with the stain of noble proletarian blood. The rivers of Paris ran red with blood, a constant broad stream staining its course for days during the *Semaine Sanglant*. A new amusement afforded the degenerates of Paris: *La peche au federe*, which consisted in betting on the amount of Federals' corpses that would float under a bridge in a given time.

Not all died the death of heroes. Some bought their worthless hides with

their own shame. At the trials Urbain, who proposed the decree on hostages, grovelled before the court and denounced the "crimes of the Commune." Jourde, the delegate for Finances, servilely apologized for the relations of the Commune with the Bank of France. Rastoul announced that his protest against the Commune's murders and crimes exceeded that of the Versaillese. Courbet, the painter of delicate pastorals, declared that he had voted for the demolition of the Vendome column only on aesthetic grounds (!) and repudiated the work of the Commune. The shameless drunkard Lullier, the first Communard general, boasted that he was in the pay of Versailles. But the best of the Communards, as tho with

deliberate thrusts, as these fawning cravens, shouted on the gallows "*Vive la Commune!*"

Estimates vary as to the number that were murdered by the Versaillese after the fall of the Commune. Beyond a doubt, however, there were between twenty and thirty thousand slaughtered. Hundreds were exiled to bleak islands on the African coast. In all the Commune suffered at the hands of the reactionaries a loss of some 100,000 of the flower of the Parisian proletariat. The Commune paid with seas of blood for its historic and audacious attempt to establish the revolutionary rule of the proletariat.