

Louise Michel



Louise Michel (29 May 1830 – 9 January 1905) was a teacher and important figure in the Paris Commune. Following her penal transportation to New Caledonia she embraced anarchism. When returning to France she emerged as an important French anarchist and went on speaking tours across Europe.

During the siege, Michel became part of the National Guard. When the Paris Commune was declared she was elected head of the Montmartre Women's Vigilance Committee. Michel thus occupied a leading role in the revolutionary government of the Paris Commune. In April 1871 she threw herself into the armed struggle against the French government.

Women played a key role in the Paris Commune. They not only chaired committees, but also built barricades and participated in the armed violence. Michel ideologically justified a militant revolution, proclaiming: "I descended the Butte, my rifle under my coat, shouting: Treason! . . . Our deaths would free Paris". Michel would be among the few militants who survived the Paris Commune and reflected: "It is true, perhaps, that women like rebellions. We are no better than men in respect to power, but power has not yet corrupted us." In her memoirs Michel confessed that the realities of the revolutionary government strengthened her resolve to end the discrimination against women. On the attitude of her male comrades, she wrote "How many times, during the Commune, did I go, with a national guardsman or a soldier, to some place where they hardly expected to have to contend with a woman?". She challenged her comrades to "play a part in the struggle for women's rights, after men and women have won the rights of all humanity?"

In December 1871, Michel was brought before the 6th council of war, charged with offences including trying to overthrow the government, encouraging citizens to arm themselves, and herself using weapons and wearing a military uniform. Defiantly, she dared the judges to sentence her to death, saying "It seems that every heart that beats for freedom has no other right than a bit of lead, so I claim mine!". Michel was sentenced to penal transportation. It is estimated that 20,000 defenders of the Paris Commune had been summarily executed. Michel was among the 10,000 supporters of the Commune that were sentenced to deportation