

The fall of Louis Napoleon and the crisis of 1870–71 in France

Philippe Le Goff

This article unpicks the rise and fall of Napoleon's Second Empire and the subsequent fight for Paris, and power, in France.



I870–71 produced a major shift in the political landscape in France. In just nine months, an empire collapsed, a new republic emerged and a worker-led uprising was crushed. What were the causes and consequences of such upheaval?

Empire's end

Following his election as president of the French Second Republic in November 1848, Louis Napoleon Bonaparte staged a coup d'état in December 1851. He dissolved the National Assembly and seized supreme power. One year later, in December 1852, he crowned himself Emperor Napoleon III and established the Second Empire.

Authoritarian rule and political repression marked the early years of Napoleon III's rule. The new regime used local government and the press to control and manipulate public opinion. It outlawed dissent and intimidated any opposition — many republicans were forced into exile across Europe. Napoleon III believed he could secure popular support through economic growth and prosperity. The state encouraged industrialisation and modernisation through investment in national infrastructure, such as the railways. Other policies, including reform of the banking sector, likewise facilitated greater economic activity.

EXAM LINKS

OCR Y244/Y214 France 1814–1870

WJEC Unit 1(AS) 7 Revolution and new ideas in Europe 1780–1881

The attempt by government troops to seize the canons of the Parisian National Guard — citizens' militia that had led the defense of Paris during the siege — provided such a spark. The people of Paris rose up against this attempt to disarm them and, following fresh elections in the city, a commune was proclaimed on 18 March 1871.

discharged.

The terms of the armistice caused shock and outrage in Paris, particularly in working-class areas in the north and north-east of the city. There was a sense of national humiliation combined with a republican fear of monarchist restoration. The government feared social unrest and sought to re-establish its control over Paris. A clear political division between Paris and the new government had emerged. The stage seemed set for a confrontation.

The writer Victor Hugo once observed that Paris:

it suffices for a spark to fall, and the shot is loaded,

’

siege. A military army surrounded a town or city, cutting off essential supplies, with the aim of forcing those inside to surrender.

indecently. Money paid as compensation by a country defeated in war as a condition of peace.

French surrender



A painting by Narcisse
Chailloù depicting a rat
seller during the Siege
of Paris

In response to the defeat at Sedan and Napoleon III's arrest, the empire was abolished and a new republic proclaimed on 4 September 1870. A provisional government of National Defence, dominated by moderate republicans and led by General Louis-Philippe Trochu, was formed to direct the war effort. Meanwhile, Prussian troops continued their advance towards Paris and began a siege of the French capital on 19 September. Paris, Bismarck declared, would be starved into submission.

Conditions in Paris during the siege were terrible. As a particularly harsh winter set in and the Prussians bombarded the city, the inhabitants within faced a severe lack of food, fuel and other basic supplies. This material depriuation contributed to a famine. Left-wing radicals established a commune in the city, Left-wing radicals established a commune in the city, its inadequate and ineffectual military response to the Prussian invasion. They called for popular resistance to the siege, urging the people of Paris to defend France. There were also growing calls for the establishment of an autonomous and progressive commune of its own. The commune was established on 28 March 1871, a day before the fall of the Second Empire. It was a radical experiment of an autonomy and progressivism that had been established in Paris, a Commune. People hoped it would lead the French into war effort and succeeded in doing so.

Paris under siege

In July 1870, Napoleon III declared war on Bismarck's Prussia. Military victory, it was assumed, would curb Prussia's increasing strength and influence across Europe. Napoleon also assumed that the war would demonstrate the power and prestige of his regime to supporters and adversaries, both at home and abroad. A similar strategy had previously been effective following victory over Russia in the Crimean War of 1853-56 and over Austria in the battles of Solferino and Magenta in 1859. In 1870, France on 1 September 1870 and imprisoned by the Prussians. He was released the following year and spent his final years in exile in England until his death in 1873.

Utilising war

In the 1860s, Napoleon III made concessions to his political opponents and embarked certain reforms. Press restrictions were removed, while public meetings and strikes were legalised. By the late 1860s, however, it seemed that Napoleon III's political strategy — economic prosperity to encourage popular support, political concessions to appease liberals and moderate republicans — was no longer succeeding. Many people had not enjoyed the fruits of economic growth in the 1850s. The economy was now stagnating and political opposition was growing.

Paris in revolt

Over the course of the next seventy-two days in Paris — the Commune lasted from 18 March to 28 May 1871 — working people attempted to change the way they lived their lives. They experimented with forms of direct democracy and egalitarian social organisation. Work was organised on the basis of principles of association and cooperation. Education was free, universal, compulsory and secular. Church and state were separated. Women played a leading role in the Commune, both in the initial insurrection against the government on 18 March and during the subsequent military defence of the capital. The status, rights and demands of women achieved greater prominence, and figures like Louise Michel became celebrated for their political commitment and resolve.

The Commune's significance

Ever since the proclamation of the Paris Commune there has been a great deal of debate over its meaning and importance. Was it the first socialist government? A patriotic response to the government's capitulation to Prussia and 'betrayal' of its own people? A republican mobilisation against the perceived threat of a royalist restoration? A popular movement for municipal autonomy? A mix of all of the above?

The philosopher and economist Karl Marx famously argued that 'the great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence'. What was significant was not so much what the Commune did or sought to achieve, but rather the fact that ordinary men and women were actively participating in various forms of

Box I Political regimes in nineteenth-century France

First Republic: 1792–1804

First Empire: 1804–1814, 1815

Bourbon Restoration: 1815–1830

July Monarchy: 1830–1848

Second Republic: 1848–1852

Second Empire: 1852–1870

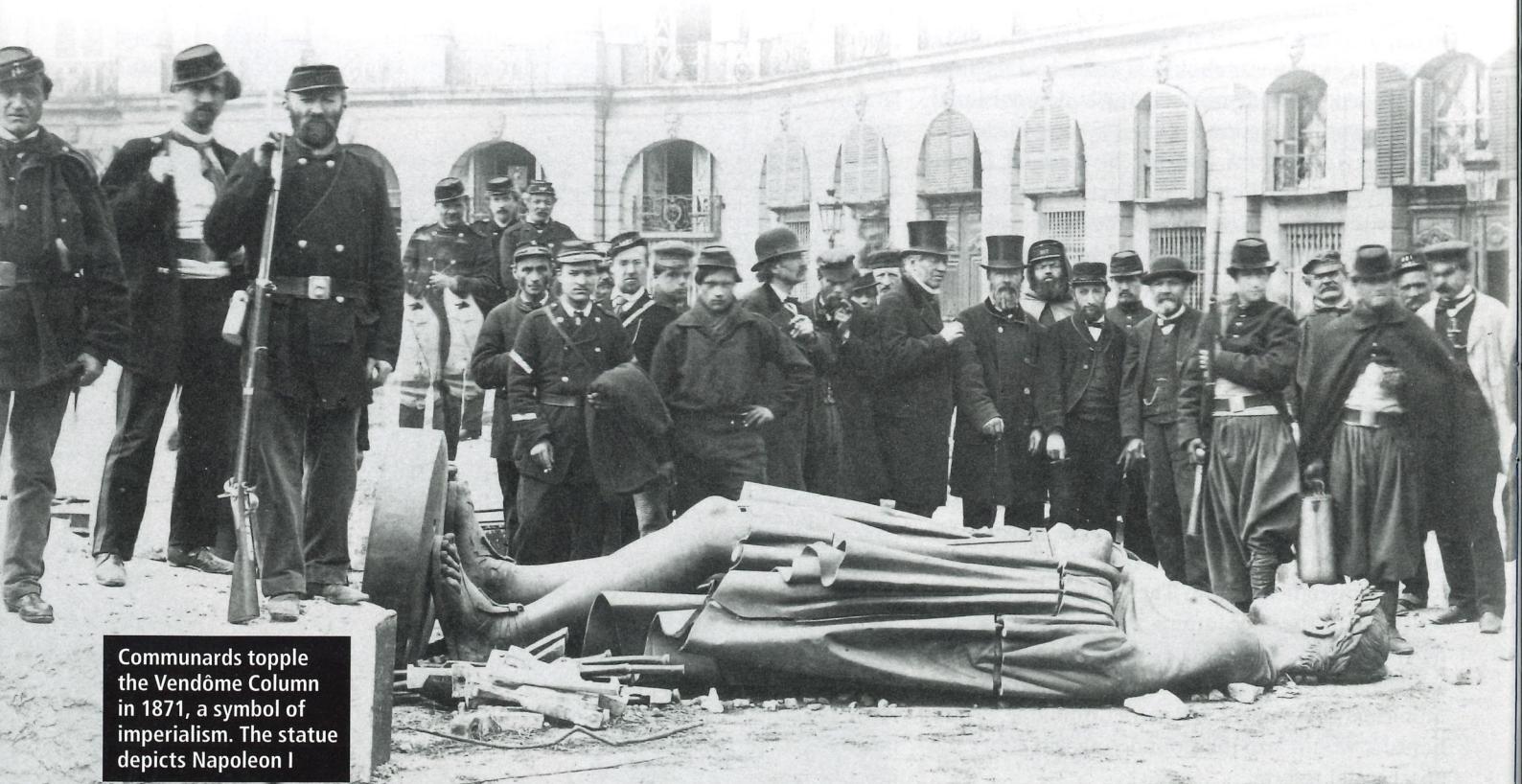
Third Republic: 1870–1940

social and political organisation, demonstrating their capacity to do so. In this sense the Commune was, Marx suggested, the first example of 'a government of the people, by the people'.

The 'bloody week'

No less significant and controversial is the manner in which the Commune was brought to an end. Following the establishment of the Commune, the army (and thousands of wealthy Parisians) had withdrawn to Versailles. A second siege of Paris began, only this time it was the French government besieging its own capital. The Franco-Prussian war had morphed into a French civil war. The Communards erected barricades across Paris to repel attacks. Skirmishes took place on the outskirts of the city between the National Guard and the army. Meanwhile, in Versailles, the government began assembling a military force capable of retaking the capital.

Communard Name given to supporters of the Paris Commune.



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May 1871 brought this political sequence to a close. And 1848 — the repression of the Paris Commune in revolution in France. From 1789 and 1792 to 1830 also signalled the dramatic conclusion to a century of revolution in France. The fall of Napoleon III's Second Empire, the period of the Third Republic endured until another German military invasion, in 1940, brought it down). But as well as France. The Third Republic would go on to outlast any 1870–71 marked both a beginning and an end in generation.

Population, defers the next revolution by a whole a purge, by killing off the conservative part of the writer Edmond de Goncourt put it at the time, such France since 1789, (see Box 1). As the conservative revolt altogether, and decisively break the cycle of revolt also wanted to stamp out the threat of popular sought not only to bring down this rival power, centuary in Europe. The government, it seemed, Marshal Patrice MacMahon. Extraordinary violence ensued. During the following days, an estimated 20,000 Communards were killed by the Versailles forces sent in his troops, led by On 21 May, Thiers sent in his troops, led by

EXAM-STYLE QUESTIONS

- What sort of regime was the Second Empire?
- Why did France surrender to Prussia in January 1871?
- What were the aims of the Paris Commune? How should we characterise it?
- Why was the repression of the Paris Commune so violent?

Available at <https://tinyurl.com/sodugnw>

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FURTHER READING

Available at <https://tinyurl.com/y4jafxjm>

In the Commune. Returned to France following a

French anarchist and prominent figure in the Paris

Commune. Deported to New Caledonia for her role

of the modern socialist movement. Best known for the

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