

"what was the
significance of the
paris commune of
1871"



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On March 18th, 1871, the revolutionary workers of Paris established the Commune. It was the first attempt at proletarian dictatorship; according to Kropotkin (1896) " the people of Paris rose against a despised and detested Government, and proclaimed the city independent, free, belonging to itself." The late 1860s were a period of social and political ferment in Paris as well as the rest of urban France. 1 In part because of an 1864 law legalizing strikes and an 1868 law liberalizing controls on the press and public meetings, but also because growing discontent with the regime of Emperor Louis Napoleon, strikes became more frequent throughout France's industrial regions and calls for social and political reforms became more vociferous. The Paris Commune only lasted 72 days, but it had a great many victims. More than 100, 000 men and women were killed or exiled to the colonies when the bourgeoisie triumphed. The Commune is the great tradition of the French working class. The mute walls of Père Lachaise² remind the French workers of the heroism of their proletarian fathers who fought for freedom from wage slavery. Twenty years before the advent of the Commune, following the defeat of the workers uprising in June 1848, the military coup of 2nd December 1851 brought Emperor Napoleon III to power. Initially, the new Bonapartist regime seemed unshakable. The workers were defeated, their organizations outlawed. By the late 1860's, however, the exhaustion of the economic upswing, combined with the revival of the labour movement, had seriously weakened the regime. It was clear that only a new - and rapidly successful - war would allow it to survive for any length of time. In August 1870, the armies of Napoleon III marched against Bismarck. The war ended, he claimed, would bring territorial gains, weaken France's rivals, and put an end to the crisis in finance and industry. It often happens that war leads to

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revolution. This is not accidental. A war wrenches the working people out of their daily routine. The actions of the state, of generals, of politicians, of the press, come under the scrutiny of the mass of the population to an infinitely higher degree than is normally the case in times of peace. This is particularly the case in the event of defeat. Paris was primed for the Commune by four circles of cause and effect. First, the French had already witnessed many periods of revolutionary activity before the commune. The French Revolution in 1789 was followed by uprisings in 1830 and 1848. Historian Alain Faure suggests that the Commune can be seen in chrysalis form during the 1860s (Schafer p. 26). Indeed, the energy and fervor of the first uprising was undoubtedly channeled in the events of 1848 and 1870. Secondly, Napoleon III's struggle through the last years of his empire created a transition into the Commune. The first hint of the Emperor's downfall appeared in his faltering foreign policies. By the end of his 2nd decade in power: "Almost every one of his foreign adventures had ended in disaster and his Empire, faced by a powerful and aggressive Prussia, was without a single European ally" (Aronson p. 42). A series of embarrassing defeats of France's armies, led to the proclamation of a Republic in Paris on September 4th, 1870. Adding insult to injury, changes occurred on the mainland in a most simultaneous manner. In 1867, the Credit Mobilier Bank collapsed which signaled economic disaster for the regime (Schafer p21). Although France's economy had grown and industrialized since the declaration of the Second Empire in Bonaparte's "Eighteenth Brumaire" of 1851, the growing prosperity had chiefly benefitted propertied classes and finance capitalists at the expense of the working population, which included proletarianized industrial workers as well as artisans³ (Edwards 1971). Unlike the revolutions of 1789 and 1848, <https://assignbuster.com/what-was-the-significance-of-the-paris-commune-of-1871/>

the events of 1871 were not preceded by a nationwide agricultural crisis. The combination of an economic recession and a misguided war with Prussia over the succession of a Holenzollern prince to the Spanish throne were sufficient to sweep away the empire without a shot being fired. Thirdly it is important to note that while public opinion and meetings were repressed during the majority of the Second Empire, the Liberalization of the late 1860's opened the floodgates of public frustration. Napoleon III sought to gradually liberalize France by permitting cultural discussions but steering the working class away from political solutions (Schafer p. 20). The presence of numerous meetings in 1869 hints at the imminent creation of the Commune. The proclamation of the Commune on March 26th initiated a two-month experiment in democratic socialism. The Commune established worker's cooperative enterprises throughout the city, instituted universal free education, declared the separation of church and state, and passed resolutions on specific economic issues such as abolition of night work for bakers. But as Marx (1940), noted " The greatest social measure of the Commune was its own working existence, its special measures could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people" (p. 65). And finally, the organization of people had direct ties to Haussman's urbanization. Groups of Parisians who met freely during Liberalization became as the Communards. The Communards was a group inspired to revolt against the policies of Haussman. During the 1850s, the people living in the slums of central Paris were forced to migrate to the 18th, 19th and 20th arrondissements⁴, on the outskirts of Paris. As Haussmannization pierced through their neighbourhoods, they moved northwards en masse. It was in these northern suburbs that the Communards would congregate

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during the late 1860s. These displaced Parisians found themselves in new living areas that lacked basic amenities like public water fountains and hospitals (Edwards p. 8). Their frustrations and struggles continued throughout the 1860s and were exasperated by the large-scale starvation during the Siege of Paris 1870.