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THE LESSONS OF THE PARIS COMMUNE

By ALEXANDER TRACHTENBERG

On March 18, 1871, the revolutionary workers of Paris established the Commune. It was the first attempt at a proletarian dictatorship. Again and again the story has been told: how Napoleon III (the Little) attempted to bolster up the decaying régime of the Second Empire by declaring war on Prussia in July, 1871; how he met his debacle at Sedan and exposed Paris to the Prussian troops; how a bourgeois republic was proclaimed in September and a so-called Government of National Defense organized; how this Government betrayed the besieged city and how the Parisian masses rose and armed themselves for its defense; how they proclaimed the Commune on March 18, when the Government attempted to disarm their National Guard, and how they took the government of the city into their own hands; how the traitorous Thiers Government withdrew to Versailles and there plotted with the Prussians the overthrow of the Commune; and how the Parisian workers held the Commune for seventy-two days, defending it to the last drop of blood when the Versailles troops had entered the city and slaughtered tens of thousands of the men and women who dared to seize the government of the capital and run it for the benefit of the exploited and disinherited.

Wherever workers will gather to hear once more the story of this heroic struggle—a story that has long since become a treasure of proletarian lore—they will honor the memory of the martyrs of 1871. But they will also remember those martyrs of the class struggle of today who have either been slaughtered or still smart in the dungeons of capitalist and colonial countries, for daring to rise against their oppressors—as the Parisian workers did sixty odd years ago.

The Battle-Front is Far Flung

The Paris Commune lasted only 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. Today the revolutionary battle-front is spread over a greater territory. It encircles almost the entire globe. Fierce class struggles are being fought in all capitalist and colonial countries; and tens of thousands of workers and peasants are killed or imprisoned. The total number of victims of fascism, the white terror and police brutality during the past years runs into many hundreds of thousands. Workers everywhere are rising to the defense of these victims of capitalist class justice, and the anniversary of the Commune calls especial attention to this important class duty of the workers. In the United States the workers are rallying to the banner of the International Labor Defense, which leads their struggle against every means of capitalist persecution. It fights for the right to strike and picket and against persecutions arising from all workers' struggles; it fights lynchings and social and political discrimination against Negroes; it fights against the deportation of foreign-born workers and for the victims of every type of capitalist oppression and persecution.

The struggle for power, limited to a single city in 1871, has since become worldwide. One-sixth of the world already has been wrested from capitalist rule, and a Workers' Commune has been in power for more years than that of Paris lasted in weeks. In the Soviet Union the workers not only have defeated the bourgeoisie and beaten off the foreign invaders who came to its aid, but have so firmly established themselves that they already have begun to build the Socialist society of which the Paris Commune was a "glorious harbinger."

War Threatens the Soviet Union

But in the rest of the world—in the advanced capitalist countries and the backward colonies—the irrepressible conflict is day by day assuming greater proportions and a deeper meaning. The continued existence of workers' rule in what was once the Russian Empire and the great strides toward building Socialism there—a constant inspiration and guide post to the workers and peasants suffering under imperialist rule—drives the capitalist governments to plot the overthrow of the Soviet Union by organizing counter-revolution among the bourgeois remnants in the country, or war against it. The rivalries between imperialist powers will no more stop this drive for war in which the existence of a workers' government is at stake, than the rivalry between the French and

Prussian bourgeoisie of 1871 could divide them when their community of interest demanded the defeat of the Paris Commune. The trials of the Industrial and Menshevik Parties have completely proved the conspiracies of the capitalist governments and the Second International against the Soviet Union through counter-revolutionary propaganda and acts of sabotage by their agents within the country. Continuous war provocations during recent years in the Far East, the erection of a vassal buffer state in Manchuria by Japan with the connivance of other imperialist powers, notwithstanding their conflicting interests in looting China, follows the policy of counter-revolutionary encirclement and war preparations against the Soviet Union and the annihilation of the Soviets established by the Chinese workers and peasants.

In commemorating the Paris Commune of 1871 the workers everywhere will bear in mind this constant war danger that hangs over the Soviet Commune of today; and they will organize for its defense. The Paris Commune suffered in part because it was isolated from other industrial centers and from the village districts, and because the international labor movement was then still too weak to be of material assistance to it. That is not true today. The Soviet Union has become an integral part of the revolutionary labor movement in all capitalist countries, and of the national liberation movements in the colonies. The working masses will leap to its defense and fight for it because they recognize that it is a part of their own struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

Workers Study Lessons of Commune

But the workers will not only draw inspiration from the heroic deeds of the Communards, who were "ready to storm the heavens" (Marx). They will review the story of the Commune in the light of its achievements as well as of the errors and shortcomings for which the Parisian workers paid so dearly.

The absence of a disciplined, well-knit revolutionary leadership both prior to and after the establishment of the Commune spelled disaster at the outset. There was no unified and theoretically sound working class political party to put itself at the head of this elemental rising of the masses. Several groups competed for leadership—the Prudhonists, the Blanquists and the Internationalists were the most representative of them. And this doomed the Commune to continued confusion and indecision, to a lack

of planning and of a long range program. Piecemeal, day-to-day treatment of a rapidly developing revolutionary situation with utter neglect of tactics seemed to have been the practice of the leaders.

Even the limited authority of the first days of the uprising was relinquished. As Marx noted in the celebrated letter to his friend Kugelman, written on April 12, 1871, "the Central Committee [of the National Guard] relinquished its powers too soon to pass them on to the Commune."

Marx, the centralist, realized that a successful revolutionary struggle against Thiers' government could have been carried out by the Paris workers only under the leadership of a centralized revolutionary authority with military resources at its command. This authority was the Central Committee of the National Guard, but by renouncing its powers and turning its authority over to the loosely organized Commune, it dissipated the revolutionary energy of its armed forces.

Yet, even while he analyzed the weaknesses of the Commune Marx showed an unbounded enthusiasm for the revolutionary fervor of the Communards. In the letter to Kugelman from which we already have quoted, and which was written three weeks after the proclaiming of the Commune, he grew almost rhapsodic. "What dexterity," he wrote, "what historical initiative, what ability for self-sacrifice these Parisians display. After six months of starvation and destruction, caused more by internal treachery than by the foreign enemy, they rise under Prussian bayonets as though there were no war between France and Germany, as if the enemy were not at the gates of Paris. History records no such example of heroism."

He immediately followed this up, however, with a criticism of an error which was one of the costliest of the Commune: "If they are to be defeated it will be because of their 'magnanimity.' They should immediately have marched on Versailles, as soon as Viny and the reactionary portion of the National Guard escaped from Paris. The opportune moment was missed on account of 'conscientiousness.' They did not want to start a civil war—as if the monstrosity Thiers had not already begun it with his attempt to disarm Paris."

Marx, the revolutionary strategist, knew that *when the enemy of revolutionary Paris was on the run, it was the job of the National Guard to pursue Thiers' defeated army and annihilate*

it, rather than to allow it time to reorganize its forces and return to fight the Paris workers.

The "magnanimity" of the leaders of the Commune which Marx criticized led them to allow the ministers of the Thiers government and its reactionary supporters to depart to Versailles in peace, there to reorganize their forces and conspire against the Commune: it kept them from taking hostages from among the prominent bourgeois leaders who remained in the city and who took the opportunity to act as spies and form centers of counter-revolutionary activity. Had the Commune disarmed those troops which were under the influence of the reactionary government and held them in the city, they could have won over a great part of them, and neutralized others. Instead they were permitted to leave freely for Versailles, and to remain there under the continued tutelage of the reactionary militarists.

After the capture of power comes the immediate task of holding it and using it to spread and deepen the revolutionary struggle. When the Russian workers seized power in October, 1917, they did not rest there. Having learned from the mistakes of the Commune, the Russian Bolsheviks led the workers to a further offensive, not to end until every vestige of the old order had been uprooted and destroyed in the entire country and the working class firmly entrenched.

The Commune Fights for Power

The Commune was a struggle for power on the part of the working class. It was not merely a change of administration that the Paris workers saw in the development of the struggle. The clearest among the leaders, the followers of the International, knew that the conflict was assuming the proportions of a social revolution, although they, as well as the others, failed to work out the tactics necessary for the direction of the struggle. In another letter to Kugelmann (April 17) Marx gave his interpretation in the following words: "The struggle of the capitalist class and its State machine has, thanks to the Paris Commune, entered a new phase. However it may end, a new landmark of international significance has been achieved."

This was precisely Lenin's attitude regarding the December uprising in Moscow in 1905. The revolutionists of Moscow, who had the support of the masses, had either to accept the provocation of the Tsar's troops or go down in moral defeat before the

Moscow workers. Though defeated, the revolutionists came out of that unequal struggle glorified by the entire working class of Russia.

While the panicky Mensheviks were muttering the Plekhanov formula, "They should not have resorted to arms," Lenin saw in the heroic struggle of the Moscow workers the revolutionary will to conquer of the Russian working class.

Commenting on Marx's observation that the Paris workers had to take up the fight, Lenin wrote: "Marx could appreciate that there were moments in history when a struggle of the masses, even in a hopeless cause, was necessary for the sake of the future education of these masses and their training for the next struggle."

It was this hopeful view of the Paris uprising applied to the revolutionary struggle of 1905 that led Lenin to maintain in 1907 in his introduction to the Kugelmann letters: "The working class of Russia has already demonstrated once and will prove again that it is able to 'storm the heavens.'" And in 1917 it did.

The decrees of the Commune separating the church from the State, confiscating church property, taking over the deserted factories, abolishing the payment of fines levied upon workers, prohibiting night work in bakeshops, etc., were all acts of great social import. These were the acts of a workers' government legislating in the interest of the working class. But the Commune did not take over all the factories. It did not take over the Bank of France. Instead, it went there to borrow (sic!) money for its revolutionary needs.

Although the Commune seized the powers of the State, it tried to operate within the framework of the old State apparatus. Marx warned against this when, in his April 12 letter, he wrote of "the destruction of the bureaucratic political machine" as a prerequisite for a proletarian revolution. In his classic study of the Commune, *The Civil War in France*, an address read to the General Council of the First International two days after the fall of the Commune, he devoted a good deal of attention to the subject, and formulated this theoretical conclusion: "*The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery and wield it for its own purpose.*"

In 1891, the 20th anniversary of the Commune, Engels wrote an introduction to a new German edition of *The Civil War in France*. In criticizing the Commune for not taking over the Bank of France and using it for its own advantage, Engels points out

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that the Commune tried to utilize the old government apparatus. He comes back to what Marx took up in his "Address" by asserting that "the Commune should have recognized that the workers, having assumed power, cannot rule with the old State power, the machinery used before for its own exploitation." Engels concludes: "In truth, the State is nothing but an apparatus for the oppression of one class by another, in a democratic republic not less than in a monarchy."

The Commune—the First Proletarian Revolution

Many are the lessons which the Commune has bequeathed to the international working class. Marx, Engels, and Lenin, have studied the Commune closely, and the Russian workers showed that they mastered the lessons of the first proletarian revolution.

The Commune is the great tradition of the French working class. The mute walls of Père Lachaise remind the French workers of the heroism of their proletarian fathers who fought for freedom from wage slavery. The Commune is also the heritage of the entire proletariat. It was the first revolution in which workers not only fought but which they also controlled and directed towards proletarian aims.

Writing on the 40th anniversary of the Commune, Lenin said: "In modern society the proletariat, enslaved by capital economically, cannot rule politically before breaking the chains which bind it to capital. This is why the Commune had to develop along socialist lines, that is, to attempt to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie, the rule of capital, the destruction of the very foundations of the present social order."

The Commune was the first attempt at proletarian dictatorship. It was not victorious but it was the prototype of the successful dictatorship inaugurated by the Russian workers forty-six years afterwards. Engels closes his introduction to *The Civil War in France*, quoted above, with the following passage: "The German philistine (read 'Socialist'—A. T.) has recently been possessed of a wholesome fear for the phrase: dictatorship of the proletariat. Well then, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship is like? Look at the Paris Commune! This was the dictatorship of the proletariat!"

The Soviet, introduced in 1905 as a new form of representative working-class organization and firmly established in 1917 as a proletarian form of government, is of a higher type than the

Paris Commune, and, according to Lenin, "the *only* form capable of insuring the least painful transition to Socialism." Lenin maintains, nevertheless, that this new state apparatus can be traced directly to the Commune. He speaks of the Soviet government "standing on the shoulders of the Paris Commune," that it is a "continuation of the Paris Commune," and that the Communist Party should state in its program that it strives "for Soviet power, for the Soviet type of government, for a government of the type of the Paris Commune."

The Great Soviet Commune was established by the Russian workers in 1917 under more favorable objective conditions, with a strongly welded revolutionary proletarian party to lead them, which the Parisian workers did not possess. Soviet Communes have also been established in China in the midst of the imperialist-ridden Far East—all direct lineal descendants of the short-lived proletarian dictatorship of 1871.

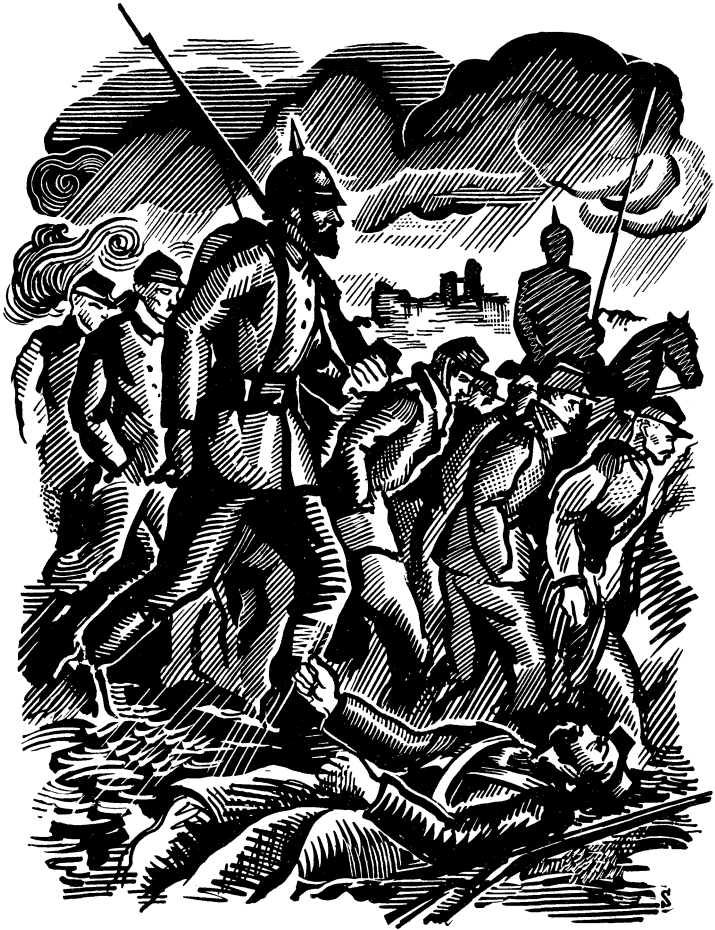
The Paris Commune is an epoch-making achievement of the revolutionary working class. Marx's tribute at the close of his historic "Address" testifies to the fealty of the world's proletariat to the memory of the valiant Communards and to the cause in behalf of which they fought: "Workingmen's Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of the new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class. Its exterminators history has already nailed to that pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them."

And forty years afterward, in 1911, Lenin concluded an article on the anniversary of the Commune with the following trenchant words: "The cause of the Commune is the cause of the social revolution, the cause of the complete political and economic emancipation of the workers. It is the cause of the proletariat of the whole world. And in this sense it is immortal."

In the following pages the reader will find the story of the Paris Commune told in pictures. This is a medium in which little working class literature has previously been done. It is graphic, dramatic and simple and should give to the reader the story of the Commune. The short text printed beneath the drawings will fill in such gaps as they leave and aid in understanding them.



In the summer of 1870, the French bourgeoisie drew their country into a war with Prussia. The government and leaders of the army were corrupt. There was a series of defeats. Finally, in September, 80,000 untrained and ill-equipped men were thrown against the great



Prussian war machine. The French were surrounded and defeated. Napoleon III and nearly half his army were captured, as were the Paris defences; and the Prussians swept on to the capital.



But the city's masses had organized a National Guard. They already felt the shortage of food: long lines of the hungry stood about the bakeries waiting for bread. But they procured a number of cannon for their defence and placed them on the Paris ramparts.



In this move the wealthy saw a danger to themselves, no less than to the Prussians. The masses were aroused to a revolutionary fervor: their guns could be swung toward the bourgeoisie within the walls as easily as against the foe without.



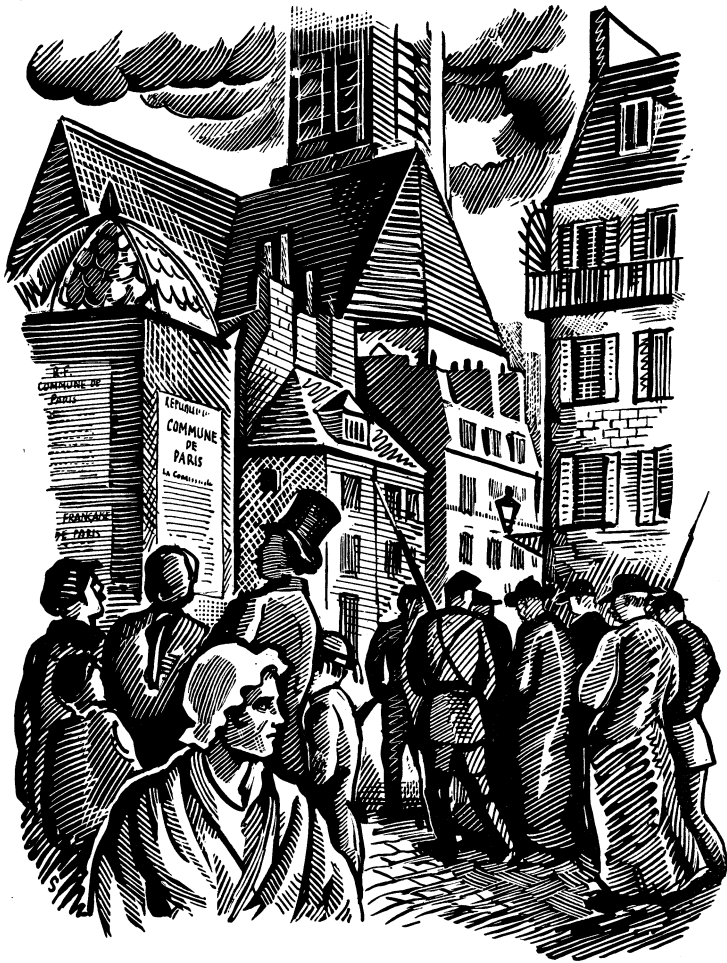
An attempt was made to capture the cannon. The alarm was given: the whole city of workers, women as well as men, turned out to their defence. And the Government troops rather fraternized than attacked the defenders.



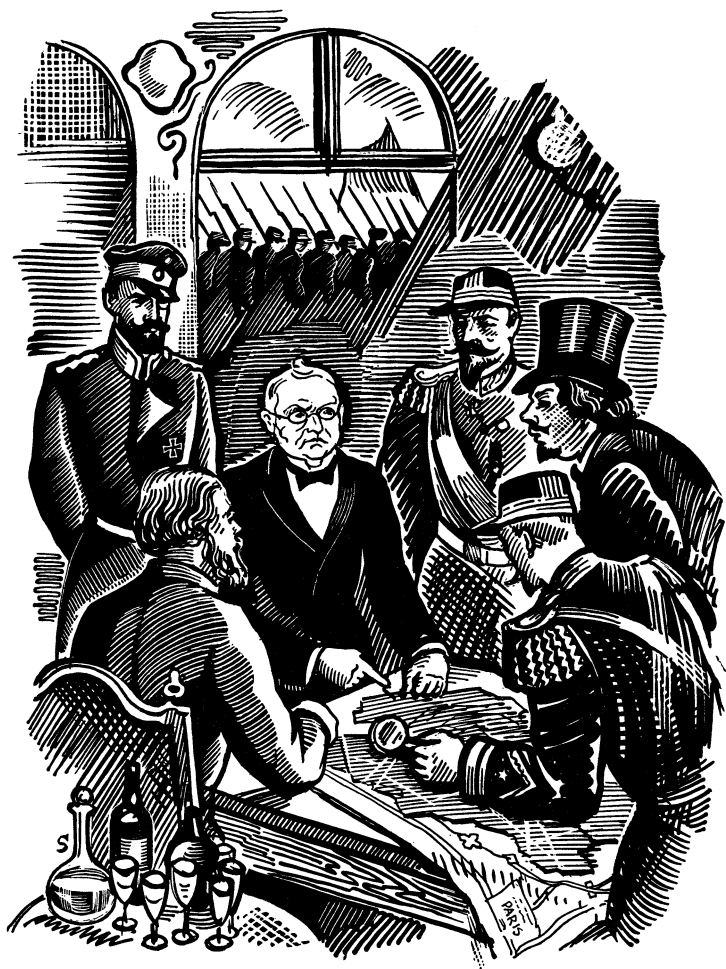
On March 18 the Commune was proclaimed. The Government withdrew with its troops to Versailles. The Communards allowed the departure, though the troops could have been won over; and the city's rich who swarmed out of Paris should have been held as hostages.



The city, organized into *arrondissements*, or districts, was now headed by groups of Communards—men and women, workers and intellectuals—who were, says Lenin, creating “a new type of state—the Workers’ State.”



And in the streets the crowds stood to read the proclamations of this new State: separation of the church; no more night work in bakeries; no back rent for the poor; the arrest of priests; the re-opening of abandoned factories; the abolition of fines against workers.



In the meantime, in Versailles, Thiers and his reactionary government, aided by Prussian officers, were planning an attack on the Paris Commune. Thousands of captured French soldiers were to be returned and armed for the onslaught—for which, however, the Communards were also preparing.

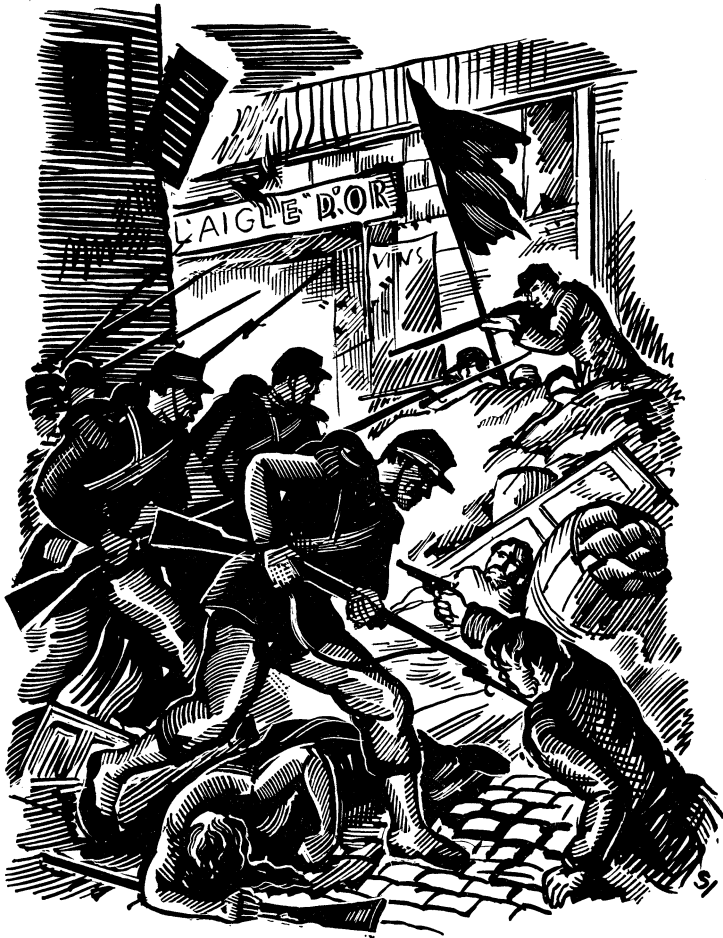


Barricades were erected in the streets. Men and women labored to construct and man them. But the whole city could not be held. The bourgeois who remained in Paris communicated its vulnerable places to Versailles; and from May 22 to May 28, a bloody week, the troops poured through undefended gates. The Communards, fight-



ing valiantly, were driven to a last stand in one small section of Paris. Every pavement was a battlefield; every house a fort. The Communards, worn and exhausted, were falling back before an advance that spared neither woman nor child.

Still fighting among the flaming ruins of the city, they were cap-



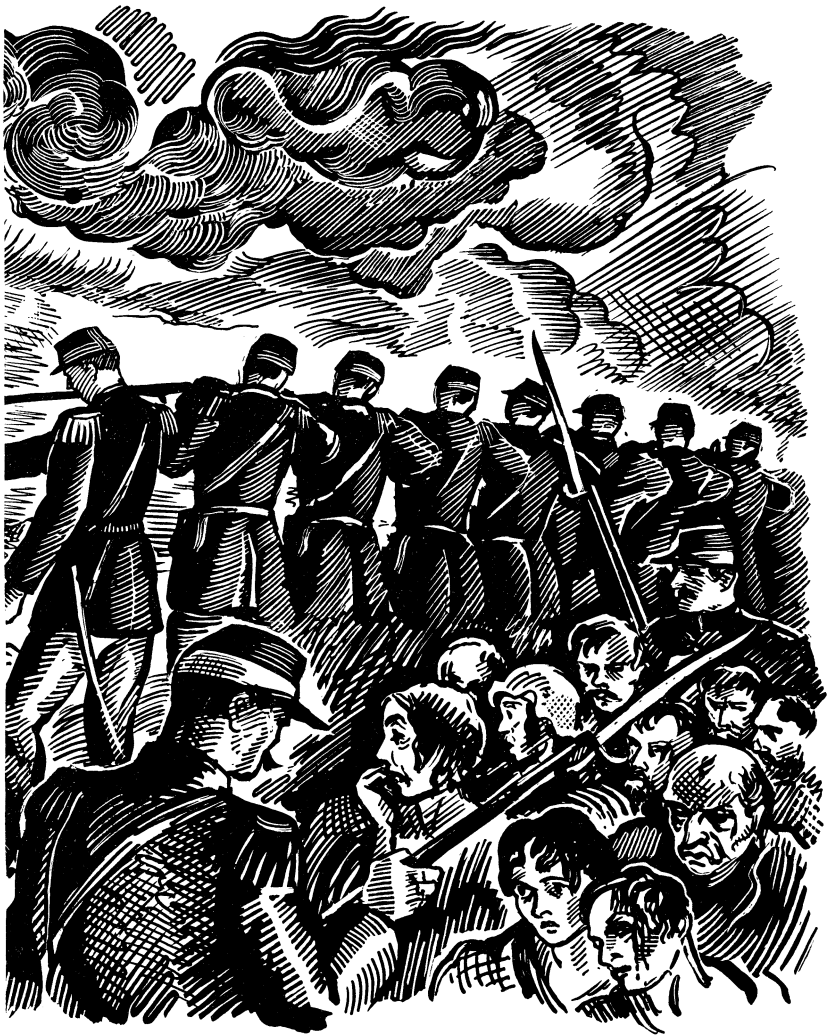
tured. Thousands were killed where they stood; other thousands—children, the old and sick—were herded to open places to be shot. Each detachment of the maddened Versailles troops was an executioner's gang, summarily killing every suspected sympathizer. The Commune was being drowned in its own blood.



And the wealthy, many of whom had now returned, stood on the curbs to watch the ghastly parade and congratulate themselves on their victory.

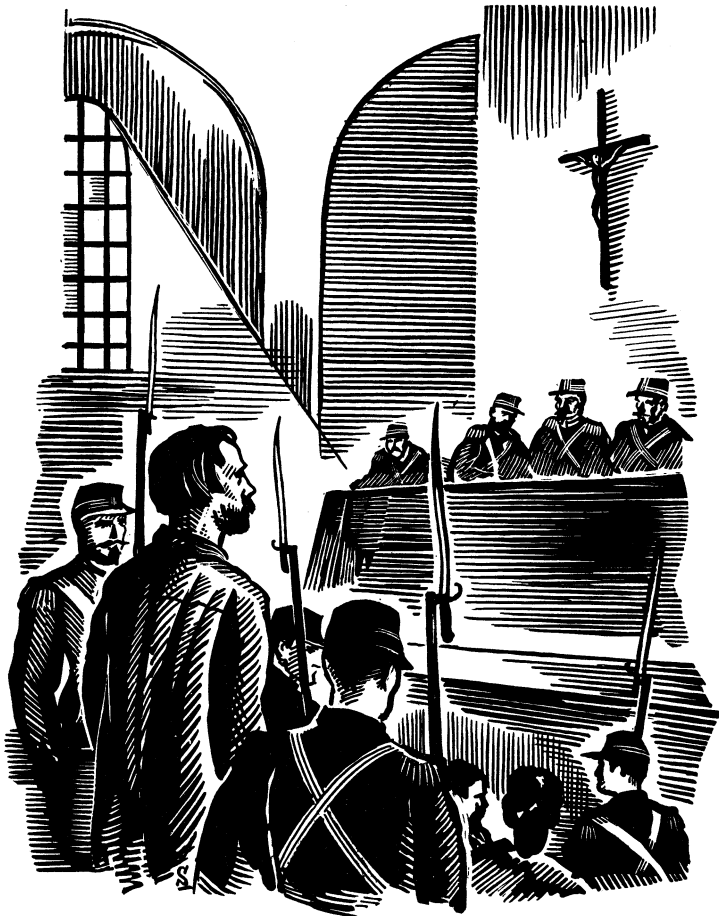


The White Terror knew no bounds. At Père Lachaise Cemetery, at a dozen other points, thousands of Communards were herded together and shot. General Gallifet, the Butcher of the Communards, stood by and watched while the troops fired into the defiant crowds



massed against the walls. Huge mounds were formed of corpses and those not yet dead.

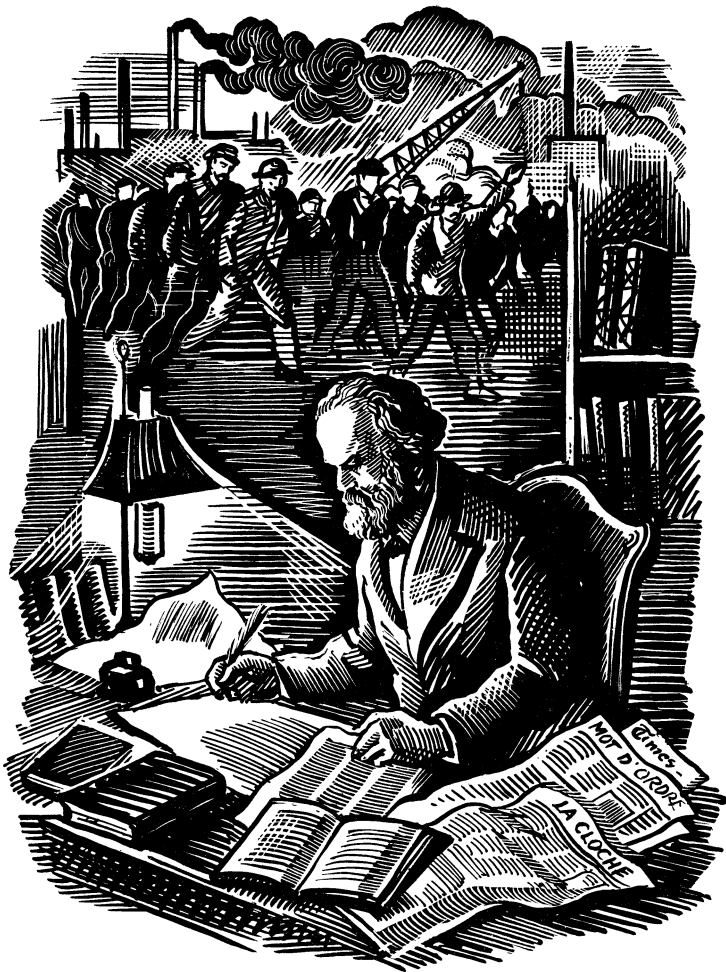
A part of "The Wall of the Communards" still stands; and the sculptured faces that peer from it are at once a challenge to capitalist rule and a monument to the martyrs of the Commune.



In that one week 40,000 workers were slaughtered. Then those Communards who had so far escaped were herded together and given mock trials. With monotonous regularity they were found guilty and executed or shipped to the tropical colonies.



There they were forced to slave at the most difficult labor. They had helped found the first government of workers; and in revenge the victorious bourgeoisie sent them to die of fever, overwork and inattention, under the tender ministrations of the French foreign troops.

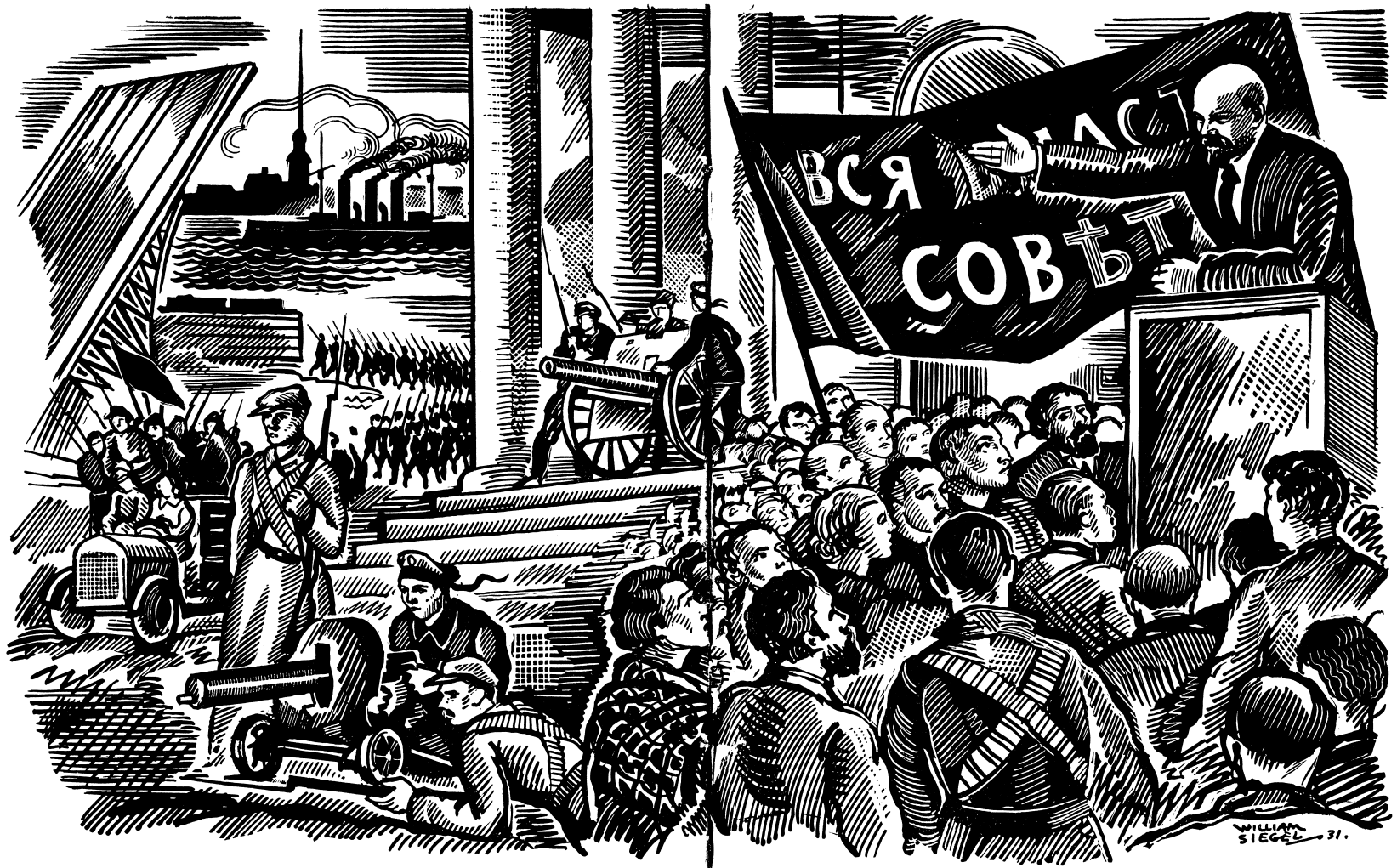


With the greatest care and understanding Karl Marx had followed the fortunes of the Commune. Immediately after its fall, he spoke to the workers of the world on the lessons of its rise and fall.

"Workingmen's Paris," he said, "with its Commune, will forever be celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society."



March 18, anniversary of the Paris Commune, is one of the milestones of the advancing workingclass. Since 1871, it has been a day of celebration and re-dedication of the workers in every country.



The Commune lives again!

In October, 1917, forty-six years after the Paris Commune, the workers of Russia under the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, with Lenin at its head, established the first workers' state rooted in permanence. These Russian Communards directed from Smolny by Lenin—troops of workers from the factories, the Aurora steaming up

the Neva, and the soldiers and sailors who joined the Proletarian Revolution—defeated the bourgeois government under the slogan: "All Power to the Soviets."

"The Paris Commune," said Lenin, "was the first step." The Socialist Society now being built in the Soviet Union is the beginning of the workers' march to a World Proletarian Commune.

PUBLISHERS' NOTE



THIS pamphlet is one of a series sponsored by the John Reed Club, an organization of revolutionary writers and artists, and is published by International Pamphlets, 799 Broadway, New York, from whom additional copies may be obtained at five cents each. Special rates on quantity orders.

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