

## **From Paris to Rojava - 150 Years Paris Commune**

Today, on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021, we celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Paris Commune. In celebration of this cornerstone in modern revolutionary history, we want to recall the main events of the Paris Commune, acknowledge its influence on revolutionary theory and practice until today, and finally connect the Rojava revolution with the legacy of the Paris Commune.

### **The emergence of the Commune**

The Paris Commune came into being in the context of the Franco-Prussian war which led to the collapse of the Second French Empire under the rule of Napoleon III, which was replaced by the Third Republic in late 1870. The Prussian army had surrounded Paris and held the city under a siege for around 4 months in the cold winter of 1870/71. It is reported that the people in Paris first ate the animals in the zoo and later rats in order to survive. Eventually, the French army surrendered and accepted the conditions for the peace treaty imposed by Bismarck.

The city of Paris was mostly defended by the National Guard instead of the regular army. A large fraction of the National Guard were proletarians, some of which were said to be undisciplined and rejected to wear the official uniform. While there was a general discontent with the unconditional surrender of the French army and nationalist calls to continue the war or revenge Prussia for the defeat were widespread, the First International had gained significant influence especially within the working class of Paris, as well. This combined the general frustration within the population due to the lost war and the devastating siege with a general urge for profound social change due to arising class consciousness. Accordingly, already within the last month of the war, some attempts of uprising were undertaken with popular demands like the civil control of the military and elections of a commune. However, those early attempts were repressed and foiled. An important detail of the peace deal between the French army and the Prussians was the fact that the National Guard were allowed to keep their weapons in order to “maintain law and order” in Paris.

The central government, not unaware of the revolutionary potential of an armed Paris, secretly sent troops into the city in the night of March 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> in order to bring the cannons of the National Guard under the control of the central army. However, the attempt was soon revealed and the people of Paris quickly rushed to defend their cannons. Only a few shots were fired before the soldiers defected to the crowd that had surrounded them. On March 18<sup>th</sup>, authorities of the central government started to flee from the city, followed by a general retreat of the French Army which left the National Guard in control of the city. The republican tricolor was replaced with the red flag. The Paris Commune was born.

### **73 days of insurrection**

The composition of the Paris Commune was quite heterogeneous, thus, the process was marked by discussions and conflicts between different fractions, ideas and priorities. Among the different fractions were socialists, anarchists (especially Proudhonists), members of the First International, Blanquists, as well as moderate republicans.

On March 16<sup>th</sup> the elections of the Commune took place and two days later, on March 18<sup>th</sup>, the first meeting was held which officially proclaimed the Paris Commune. During this very first assembly around a dozen proposals were agreed upon, including the abolition of the death penalty and the

decision to send Communards (members of the Commune) to other French cities in order to support the process of building up communes elsewhere, as well.

The base of the Paris Commune was the implementation of direct democratic initiatives and institutions. The municipal elected government was accomplished by a federation of “revolutionary clubs” - public neighborhood assemblies that took the right to revoke elected members from the Commune and debated their own proposals for policies and projects. While often meeting in occupied churches, they also organized educations in democratic practice. At the same time, a democratization of the economy was initiated. Workers that formed a cooperative received the right to take-over any abandoned workplaces. Furthermore, it was tried to integrate all workers in the political processes through debates within union halls.

While there was a high impetus for social change which resulted in various decrees, only a few of them could actually be fully implemented due to the short life span of the Commune. Some of the measures that have been implemented include the separation of church and state, abolition of child labor and night work in bakeries, remission of rents, provision of empty buildings for homeless, abolition of interest on the debts, prohibition of penalties and deductions on workers’ wages, the groundwork for free education, free return by pawnshops of all workmen's tools and household items and pension payments to the unmarried companions and children of national guardsmen killed in active service.

The hopes and dreams of the Communards found a sudden end when the Paris Commune was defeated by the French Army with the devastating massacre of the *bloody week* in late May 1871. The central government in Versailles, under the leadership of Adolphe Thiers, gathered their troops to capture the city of Paris. In the morning hours of 21<sup>st</sup> of May, the army successfully entered the city and slowly captured quartier after quartier.

The National Guard was not able to defend the erected barricades for long. Since most Communards were sticking to their specific neighborhood that in sum made up the Commune, there was little coordination how to defend the city as a whole. Even though the National Guard had a huge number of fighters on paper, many soldiers switched to civilian clothes and fled as soon as the French army was advancing. In the end, only around 15.000 Communards defended the city. In addition, it is said that only around half of the Cannons in possession of the Commune were in use in the bloody week. Consequently, the French Army eventually captured Paris on 28<sup>th</sup> May in a ruthless manner and after only 73 days the dream of the Commune was halted. The army conducted thousand of extrajudicial execution, anyone seen with gunpowder on their hands or marks on their shoulders would face instance execution. One of the prosecutors of the French army is quoted of stating “In Paris, everyone is guilty”. Estimates suggest that this cruel approach resulted in the coordinated killing of 15,000 – 25,000 people. According to history professor John M. Merriman, this was the largest massacre until the Ottoman Empire committed the Armenian genocide and in retrospect can be seen as a foreshadow of the genocides and state brutality of fascism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Women in the Commune**

Women played an important role in the initiative, the buildup of alternative structures as well as in the defense of the Paris Commune while being neglected positions in official institutions. Women did not participate in the elections of the Commune and the active participation of the majority of women was rather in wounded care or carrying canned foods or other supply to the front instead of in leading roles of the National Guard. However, the autonomous structure *Women’s Union for the Defence of Paris and Care of the Wounded* that was founded 150 years ago within the Commune

was ahead of all liberal feminist initiatives up until today by realizing and publicly announcing that their fight against patriarchy can not be separated from the fight against global capitalism. Women also started to seize workshops and initiated women cooperatives.

Even though the line between myth and actual events gets blurry in this regard, there are many reports about women running around the city with gasoline canisters to burn buildings representing the authoritative nation state. After the Commune was crushed by the French Army, many women faced trials, too. Probably the best known woman representing the Commune was the anarchist Louise Michel, also known as the “Red Virgin”. In court she demanded the death penalty with the words “It seems that every heart that beats for freedom has no other right than a bit of lead, so I claim mine!” The French state however, was not interested in giving too much publicity to female defendants of the Paris Commune. Thus, just like most other women, she was not executed but deported to a French colony.

### **The legacy and meaning of the Paris Commune**

What was so special about the Paris Commune? In the end, it was a failed revolution that was crushed after only 73 days. Why is it one of the first examples that is always referred to in revolutionary history? Of course, there is not a single answer to these questions. First of all, we have to acknowledge that the Paris Commune was the first time that the capital of a Western colonialist country was liberated from the nation state through a popular uprising. Another historical significance of the Commune is the fact that the interpretations of its defeat was the decisive reason for the split of the First International in two fractions, which provoked its dissolution a few years later. In this context, another reason for the historical significance of the Commune is due to the fact that we, as leftists revolutionaries, have been putting the focus on it. During the time of the Commune, all major contemporary revolutionary theorists were writing and debating about the events in Paris which was a practical example that displayed two opposing views of tactics within the radical Left. In addition, since the vast majority of revolutionary theory that Leftists read and discuss derives from Western thinkers, it is no surprise that they refer to revolutions within the same eurocentric setting.

Until today, the Paris Commune has been a positive point of reference for revolutionaries and Leftists around the world across different fractions. While classical socialists have called the Paris Commune “the first socialist revolution”, anarchists have referred to it as “the first anarchist revolution”. Within the first weeks of the October Revolution in Russia in 1917, Lenin was counting every day - asking himself whether they would be able to last longer than the Paris Commune. It is reported that on the day that the Bolshevik was in power for more than 73 days, he was dancing in the snow in Moscow to celebrate surpassing the Paris Commune. This shows the significance and status he gave to the Commune. Marx, even though he drew major consequences from the defeat of the Commune as described below, still admired the Commune: “Working men’s Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class.”(Karl Marx, *The civil war in France*). The anarchist fraction, at the same time, saw parts of the base of their political and economic structures implemented in the Paris Commune. In this sense, the Commune is often used as a positive example of worker control of direct democracy and cooperative economy in practice in absence of significant centralist institutions.

At the same time, however, as a short-lived and smashed revolution, the Paris commune has also functioned as a practical reference for mistakes in revolutionary theory and practice as well as acted as a deterrent for any revolutionary attempts in the following years. There is no doubt that the deadly final week of the Commune was a direct threat to all contemporary and future

revolutionaries. It was a demonstration of the “almighty power” of the nation state and a clear message that it will ultimately smash any opposition. Furthermore, the defeat of the Commune showed that in case of any serious threat to the monopoly of power of the state (people organizing themselves in opposition to capitalism), the French and Prussian states that fought a brutal war just month before, suddenly united in order to smash their common enemy: Social revolution.

The events of Paris split the First International and with this the base of the revolutionary Left into the classical socialists which concluded that any revolution must seize the power of the state by putting a dictatorship of the proletariat in place of the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and the anarchists, which argued that the cause of the Commune’s defeat was rather its limitation to the city of Paris. All three, Lenin, Marx and Engels actually acknowledged the Paris Commune as an example of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. However, they criticized that a more centralized decision-making body would have been necessary in order to take more determined action against reactionaries (Lenin stated that the Commune should have destroyed its enemies instead of only exerting moral influence on them), and enforce conscription in order to be able to secure its military position. In contrast, some anarchists like Malatesta argued that the Commune already reproduced the state police and other bourgeoisie authority practices which killed the momentum of the revolution and made the Commune not worthwhile defending for the average worker, leading to most workers fleeing the city instead of defending it. Instead, they proposed the general strike in combination with the immediate dismantlement of the state through the constitution of decentralized workers’ councils as the way to materialize revolution.

While the general conclusions of imposing a temporary centralized state on the one hand versus insisting on decentralized worker councils on the other hand were obviously contradictory, there are also shortcomings of the Commune that everyone seemed to agree on. Both fractions analyzed that the implementation of revolutionary institutions and values were not radical and far reaching enough. Everyone seemed to agree for instance, that the Bank of France should have been looted right away. In addition, there seemed to be a consensus that expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the replacement of old institutions with alternatives was not implemented with the necessary urgency. Furthermore, Lenin criticized the Commune for having missed the opportunity to start an offensive against Versailles early on, before the government had time to gather troops to prepare its capture of Paris, just like the Blanquists fraction within the Commune demanded. Anarchists, in a comparable manner, recognized that the limitation of the revolution to the city instead of spreading to the countryside explained its defeat.

In the end, the legacy of any revolution is not about a dry comparison of single achievements and not even necessarily about historical correctness of the details. Even though historical details are indeed important when doing a precise analysis that allows us to draw conclusions for our future struggle, the example of the Paris Commune proves that a meaningful legacy is powerful and influences other revolutions solely by the hope and mentality of the people that are portrayed in their struggle.

## **From Paris to Rojava**

We see the Paris Commune and the Rojava revolution both as expressions of the same consciousness and most fundamental human instinct, thriving for freedom from oppression of nation-states, patriarchy and capitalism.

What does the word ‘commune’ actually mean? To begin with, the usage of the term is historically closely associated with the Paris Commune itself and may be defined as "small territorial divisions

set up after the Revolution". From an etymological perspective we see that in Old French *comuner* means "to make common, to share", while the term *communia* of Medieval Latin, is translated as "that which is common," corresponding to the adjective *communis* "common, general". Since the use of the term *commune* has been shaped by, and is still associated closely with the Paris Commune of 1871, we can say that the implementation of Democratic Autonomy in North and East Syria with the communes as its democratic basis, as proposed by Abdullah Öcalan, stands in the tradition of the Paris Commune. We, as Internationalist Commune in particular, see ourselves in the tradition of revolutionary movements around the world throughout history. In this sense we see the history of the term only as the surface of a deeper connection as we see ourselves struggling within the same tradition of Democratic Civilization.

Just as Lenin saw the October revolution in the tradition of the Paris Commune as he proved by euphorically counting every day up to the historical 73 day mark of resistance of the Commune, this legacy has been continued in the resistance of Sur in Bakur (North-Kurdistan) as well as with the revolution in Syria and Rojava (West-Kurdistan). The "city war in Bakur" in 2015/2016 had many direct similarities to the Paris Commune. Especially the heroic resistance in Sur (Amed) resembles the situation in Paris, since the district of Amed was under siege imposed by the Turkish army. In December 2015, the YPS (Civil Protection Units) declared Sure as an autonomous zone. The Turkish army answered with heavy attacks including tanks and helicopters. This struggle became known as the *Siege of Sur*. The YPS set up barricades, roadblocks, checkpoints and dugged trenches to defend their autonomy. They managed to defend the liberated quarter for three months and one week. Both, the resistance of Sur as well as the Commune were accompanied by uprising in other cities around Bakur/France. In both cases, however, they ended as isolated targets of the enemy since the revolutions were repressed by the state in other cities.

Before he died in prison in 2013, the Syrian anarchist Omar Aziz was involved in building up self-organizing structures including cooperatives and local councils in the outskirts of Damascus. Shortly before he was arrested by the military intelligence service of the Syrian state, he was quoted of announcing: "We are no less than the Paris Commune workers: they resisted for 70 days and we are still going on for a year and a half". Today, the revolution that gives hope for a democratic and liberated life for all people of Syria is continuing to flourish in the self-administration of North and East Syria.

As described above, the existence and role model of the Paris Commune was perceived as a potential threat to all European nation states. Therefore, France and Prussia did not hesitate to put aside the bloody war they had just ended and collaborated with the goal to terminate the Paris Commune. The same reality we experience today within the Revolution in the Middle East: Even though Turkey, USA, Russia, Syria (Baath) , Iran & Israel all seem to have contradicting interests and in some cases even directly confront each trough proxy-forces, at the end of the day, they have no problem at all to unite forces in order to smash the Rojava Revolution since the success of this revolution is a threat to any nation state in the region and ultimately to the concept of the nation state within capitalist modernity all around the world. This is not only theory. The US has openly stated that, notwithstanding all rhetoric, they will ultimately stand with their NATO ally Turkey. They have repeatedly proven this in practice, for instance, when giving the Turkish state the permission to invade Rojava and occupy the area between Serikanîye and Gire Spî in October 2019. As another example, Turkey, Russia & Iran/Qatar, while waging war in various regions of the Middle East through proxy forces, repeatedly issued joined statements declaring that they will not allow the self-administration of North and East Syria to persist.

Another parallel between the Paris Commune and the Rojava revolution is the strict isolation that is enforced from the enemy in order to weaken the revolution. After the *Siege of Paris* was lifted in late January 1871 as a result of the French defeat, during the time of the Commune Paris was officially under a siege again. Prior to the bloody week the siege was increasingly tightened as the

army moved closer to the city. The strict embargo that we are facing in Rojava is comparable on several levels to a classical siege. On the one hand, it weakens the revolution as the living conditions inside become increasingly difficult due to shortages. On the other hand, an embargo/siege also prevents the revolution from spreading, both its ideas as well as material support.

The Paris Commune is another prove for the fact that revolution cannot survive in one isolated place. In order to survive, revolution has to spread. The fact that the Paris Commune only could have survived if it succeeded in spreading, is one of the few analyzes that most fractions could agree upon in the aftermath. Even though there were several attempts to establish Communes in several other French cities, they were all crushed within hours or a few days at most. Malatesta argued that the French army would not have been in the position to capture Paris if the Communards had spread into the countryside to preach expropriation and support locals in the buildup of councils.

In a similar way, we need to remember never to fall into the trap of accepting the artificial borders of front lines and nation states which constitute the liberated areas of North and East Syria today as boundaries of the revolution. On the contrary, only if we manage to bring about revolutionary situations and movements in the surrounding regions of the Middle East, the Rojava revolution will be able to survive in the long run. Not only strictly in a military sense, but in combination with economic and special warfare, a revolution in a single region will always be sieged, isolated, cut-off, encircled and eventually massacred.

Any revolution sees itself confronted with the difficult balance between the (not exclusively, but especially militarily) defense of the gains and achievements that we have reached on the one hand and the implementation of radical changes in society on the other hand. As the French state in Versailles started to gather troops to prepare to recapture of the Paris Commune, many argued to give absolute priority to military defense while other fractions feared that a more authoritarian government would destroy the efforts of building up the social republic they wanted to implement. Within the Commune, the Blanquists fraction proposed to march towards Versailles immediately to crush the government under control of Thiers and take control over all of France. The majority of the voiced within the Commune however, gave priority to establishing a more solid base of legal authority within Paris. In hindsight, one may conclude that an expansive tactic in the very beginning of the uprising would have been the only chance, not only for the Paris Commune to survive, but to turn it into something even bigger. Still, the chances that we would not even talk about the Paris Commune today would not have been small if this plan was executed, since a victory over the French army (even though it was admittedly in a situation not unlikely to defect) would not have been guaranteed at all. In fact, the Commune did send troops towards Versailles (arguably too late and with faltering determination), but they had to retreat with huge losses. At the same time, if the internal consolidation proposed by other fractions would have been more successful this may have resulted in 100,000 instead of only 10,000 Communards actively defending the city, using all available cannons and rifles instead of half. Whether through an expansive spread of the revolution right in the beginning or through an internal mobilization, a lack of priority on self-defense cannot be denied in hindsight.

From the moment the YPG/YPJ took control over the initial unconnected cantons of Rojava in 2012 until the establishment of the self-administration of North and East Syria as of today, we are constantly confronted with questions stemming from the very same contradiction on a daily basis. The reason that the Rojava revolution is continuing to thrive after nearly a decade is at least partly due to the high priority that has been given to self-defense on various fronts. Still today, around 70% of the budget is dedicated for military purposed to defend the revolution. In the embargo and war situation many people are facing difficulties to sustain the basic material conditions of their families while the implementations of alternative institutions and practices are not always

progressing as fast as they could. Therefore, one may raise the question if an intensified effort and priority should be shifted towards the “civil” sphere, which would in the best case improve the immediate living conditions of the average people in order to make the revolution something worth fighting for for everyone on a material level, as well. At the same time, what is often not very visible to the outside, is the fact that we still face daily attacks and attempts to infiltrate the liberated land, especially from Turkish-backed islamist gangs. On top of that, the past years have shown that the ongoing threats of a new large-scale invasion of Rojava have to be taken seriously. While any Turkish offensive against the Kurdish Freedom Movement aims at nothing less than the annihilation of the revolution, the next big operation against Rojava is likely to be the the decisive one. In the end, arguably the most important lesson that the Paris Commune has taught us is the necessity of self-defense and organization. However, at the same time, the conclusion to copy the organizational structure and institutions of the nation state by imposing a dictatorship of the proletariat, has proven to reproduce the major contradictions of the centralist line of history in the form of capitalist modernity. The nation state does not overcome the domination of men over women, men and nature.

The Paris Commune is described “as a symbol of and unfinished political project” (Jason Barker in *Marx Returns*). We, as members of the International Commune of Rojava, see it as our responsibility towards the Communards of Paris to continue the struggle for this political project within the Rojava revolution, the Middle East and beyond.

In this sense, we invite everyone to join this struggle and follow our [Call for the Spring Offensive 'Unite In Resistance'](#). We call upon everybody to get active by themselves and to take the initiative: Block, Disturb, Occupy! Be creative, share your ideas, actions and events with us! Organize sit-ins, meetings, discussions, seminars, webinars, and conferences! Connect your local struggles with the revolution in Kurdistan and other struggles around the world!

Let us be like the spring that blossoms with all its diversity and strength, resists, gives life, and is being feared by the longest and hardest winters.

The united spring of peoples, resisting together, and committed to continue building up the practical alternative we want to live in will be feared by all our enemies and will continue the heritage of the Communards of the Paris Commune.

Vive la Commune!

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