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Paris Commune 1871

**“They were all the more  
monstrous because they were  
women, they transgressed  
everything”**

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## **An interview with historian Mathilde Larrère on the role of women in the Paris Commune.**

**What can we say about the role of women during the events of 18 March 1871 which marked the beginning of the Paris Commune? Can we draw a parallel with other revolutionary days where the place of women is often highlighted, like the march on Versailles on 5-6 October 1789, and the demonstration for International Women's Day on 8 March 1917 which started the Russian Revolution?**

There were a large number of women on 18 March to prevent the soldiers from seizing the cannons of the Butte Montmartre, which can be explained quite simply because it was early in the morning and women got up first to look for water, fuel and so on. But there were also men - if only because the women raised the alarm - and in particular the *fédérés*, who were all men inasmuch as the National Guard was closed to women. [1] So, when the soldiers and the people fraternized on the Champ des Polonais, it was quite mixed. On 5-6 October 1789 [during the French Revolution] women were the driving force (it was a corporation of women, the Dames de la Halle, which launched the movement), before being joined by the National Guard; and on 8 March 1917, it was International Women's Day (this day has since then been fixed on 8 March). But, in these different cases, everything happened as if the role of women during these days was only retained in return for their being rendered invisible the rest of the time, whereas they were also present on 10 August 1792, during other events of the Commune, the Russian Revolution and so on. Their presence is thus visible when linked to their social and domestic role, in particular taking care of food: on 5 October 1789 it was a revolt about wheat, it was bread that they went to seek in Versailles, even if ultimately it was the king they brought back; and on 8 March, 1917, for many women in St. Petersburg, those from the working-class neighbourhoods, it was less a demonstration for women's rights than a demonstration for bread and for peace. Their participation in revolutionary events should not therefore be restricted to these days, however inaugural.

**Afterwards, they were not able to participate in the official institutions of the Commune. Did they demand it?**

The right to vote for women was not considered in electing the Commune on 26 March, and in fact there was relatively little demand for it. The right to vote was not a primary demand of women at the time: they had many others, and this is even more true of female participants in the Commune, who for the most part were socialists or “Montagnardes” (social democrats), but we will come back to their demands. It was the same thing during the French Revolution: we talk a lot about Olympe de Gouges and her Declaration of the Rights of Women and Citizens, which is a way of demanding the right to vote (without ever saying it explicitly), but the work of Dominique Godineau on revolutionary women shows that they asked much more to be able to join the National Guard than for the right to vote.

**Was the participation of women in the fighting something specific to the Commune?**

No, women have always been in combat, but we have to clarify what it was about. Fighting with arms in hand was more limited for women in the revolts before the Commune, if only because women did not necessarily know how to use guns, and because there was a weight of mentalities which made it impossible to imagine that women could kill when they give life. So they were kept away from the rifle. On the other hand, they took part in the barricade fighting (in particular in 1830 and 1848). The barricade is there to obstruct a street, and the soldiers rush into the street and are stranded. The fighting then takes place in two dimensions: on the one hand, there is a face to face between the soldiers and the barricade (on which there are armed men), and, on the other hand, the people throw various objects from the windows - and in many cases this was women. This second dimension is just as important (for those working on law enforcement during the July Monarchy riots, there were more skull fractures than gunshot wounds),

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but it is often overlooked. In addition, women reloaded the guns, treated the wounded, supplied the barricades and so on. The specificity of the Commune is that women more often participated in the fighting with weapons in hand, especially on barricades abandoned by male combatants.

**One of the significant women’s organizations during the Commune was also linked to the fighting: the Union for the Defence of Paris and Care of the Wounded. Can you say a few words about it? What other types of settings could women organize themselves in?**

Yes, this was an organization created by Élisabeth Dmitrieff, who was the envoy of the IWA [International Workers’ Association, official name of the First International], from London to Paris. Originally there were two men who had to leave, but one of them couldn’t leave because he was ill, and she replaced him at short notice.

This organization is interesting in its two aspects: the defence of Paris, which corresponds to the transgressive demand of women to be able to bear arms; and care for the wounded, which, on the contrary, falls under the traditional role of women in the gendered distribution of tasks. It was the most structured organisation and was quite centralized, with three levels: local committees by arrondissements, in which representatives were elected constituting a committee, and finally an executive commission headed by Elisabeth Dmitrieff.

But other organizations existed, clubs in particular, such as the Montmartre club, in which André Léo participated. There were, moreover, certain tensions between these organizations: for example, when André also joined the Union for the Defence of Paris and Care of the Wounded, this dual membership greatly irritated Élisabeth Dmitrieff. These different executives were “women only” (even if the term is anachronistic), directed and organized by women, just like the women’s clubs during the French Revolution or in 1848 (as well as the newspapers in 1848) although in some cases men could help. Women understood that this is how they should organize themselves in order to be able to act and be heard!

**What other famous female participants in the Commune can we name?**

Apart from Louise Michel, all of them are largely forgotten. And if we remember Michel and, to a lesser extent Brocher, it is mainly thanks to their writings. Yet many other figures deserve to be known. For example, André Léo, author of a major text, “La guerre sociale”, in which she denounces the desire, for a century, “to make a revolution without women”; Dmitrieff, who has disappeared and about whom we know very little after the Commune; Paule Minck; or even Nathalie Lemel, a little better known, close to Eugène Varlin, who before the Commune had created an important workers’ and popular cooperative canteen, La Marmite. But for most of the *communeuses*, we have few documents, apart from a few names on posters or the records of their trials in Versailles. That being said, even if they are a little more so than women, the male *communeux* are also relatively unknown, with the exception of Vallès, Courbet, Pottier and so on.

**Besides entry into the National Guard and more generally the right to bear arms, what significant demands were made by women during the Commune?**

They demanded what the women of 1848, to whom they were quite close socially and through political training, were already demanding: the right to work, and to be paid the same wages and therefore the same recognition of qualifications as men. They also demanded the right to education, the right to divorce, the recognition of “illegitimate” or “natural” children, the recognition of concubines (that they have the same rights as married women), and some, notably Louise Michel, demanded the abolition of prostitution.

**Which of these demands were met?**

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Within the framework of the Women's Union for the Defence of Paris and Care of the Wounded, there was a lot of thinking about the work of women and Élisabeth Dmitrieff managed to wrest promises of equal pay, and there was even a decree, for a particular profession, guaranteeing equal pay; it even established cooperatives of producers (of women therefore). For instruction, many schools for boys and girls were opened. Concubines were recognized, since the Commune decreed that the wives or concubines of National Guards wounded or killed in combat could receive a pension; and there was also a recognition of natural children. On the other hand, women were not accepted into the Federated National Guard: they took up arms themselves during the *Semaine sanglante*.

### **What was the place of women in the labour movement at the time?**

It was very difficult. Not only was the labour movement dominated by men, but a number of currents were against women working, which they considered unfair because they were paid less. And they began to see them - even if this would be more the case later - as strike-breakers, which is not confirmed in the sources available since the division of labour was so gendered that a woman was not going to perform a man's job.

They also considered factory work to be unethical, and there were many within the labour movement and the International who wanted women, especially married women, to return to the home, even if it meant working from home, that is to say in even worse conditions than in the factories. In the French labour movement, there is added to this the weight of Proudhonism, and the deep misogyny of Proudhon.

This was certainly not the case for all activists. For example, Eugène Varlin was very much in favour of equality between men and women and in particular equal pay, and when he founded La Marmite with Nathalie Lemel, she had the same organizational role as him. But they were minorities: there were several congresses or conferences of the International before the Commune - notably during the universal exhibitions - which ended with texts that were deeply misogynistic and opposed to the work of women. It was against this that Dmitrieff, André Léo and Paule Minck fought before the Commune: they gave very well attended lectures where they defended the right to work and equal pay. The slogan “equal pay for equal work” is a slogan of the Paris Commune.

### **Can we speak of a feminist movement in France at the time?**

It is difficult, because the Second Empire had largely crushed the feminist movements which had been able to form in 1848. It was reborn slowly, around these figures like André Léo or Paule Minck, but also Maria Deraismes, at the head of the newspaper *Le Droit des femmes* founded in 1869, and which played an important role in the Association pour le droit des femmes created in 1870.

But it was especially within the labour movement that a socialist feminism, or a feminist socialism, organized itself. It was after this that a feminist movement developed outside the labour movement, around the suffragettes, with Hubertine Auclert and Marguerite Durand.

### **After the end of the Commune, did women suffer any specific repression from the Versailles?**

Yes, but it is ambivalent. On the one hand, more women than men benefited from dismissal, where it has for a long time been said that justice was more lenient with women. But, on the other hand, if we look at the people who were convicted, we notice that women had harsher sentences: 13% of the women convicted were sentenced to death, against 0.9% of men convicted; and 13% were sentenced to forced labour and 13% to deportation, while these figures are 2.3 and 11% for men. Because they broke all the rules! They were all the more monstrous in the eyes of the *Versillais* because they were women: they transgressed the order of the sexes by leaving the place reserved for them at the time (the kitchen and the cradle) and entering politics - and obviously entering it by the revolutionary

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route. This is how we can understand the figure of the *petroleuse* through which female supporters of the Commune were stigmatized. From the first fires of the Commune, this stereotype is present: it is found in the Versailles press, iconography, and trials, which always tried to prove that they had started the fires (the *Versillais* forgetting that they were the ones who sent the first firebombs!).

### **Did the defeat of the Commune have negative consequences for the situation of women and their demands in the years that followed?**

Not particularly. There was the restoration of “moral order” by the *Versillais*, but it affected everyone, it was not unique to women. And when the Third Republic was established, it certainly excluded the right to vote for women, but because women were considered too *cléricales* [under the influence of priests] without this having a direct link with the Commune. There was therefore no “backlash” as there was after the French Revolution with the promulgation of the Civil Code (1804). The advances obtained were suppressed, one after the other, but this is true of all the work of the Commune, which has been erased.

*\*Interview conducted by Yohann Emmanuel for l'Anticapitaliste la revue.*

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[1] The *fédérés* were men from the battalions of the National Guard of the different arrondissements which federated together to defend Paris from the Prussians.