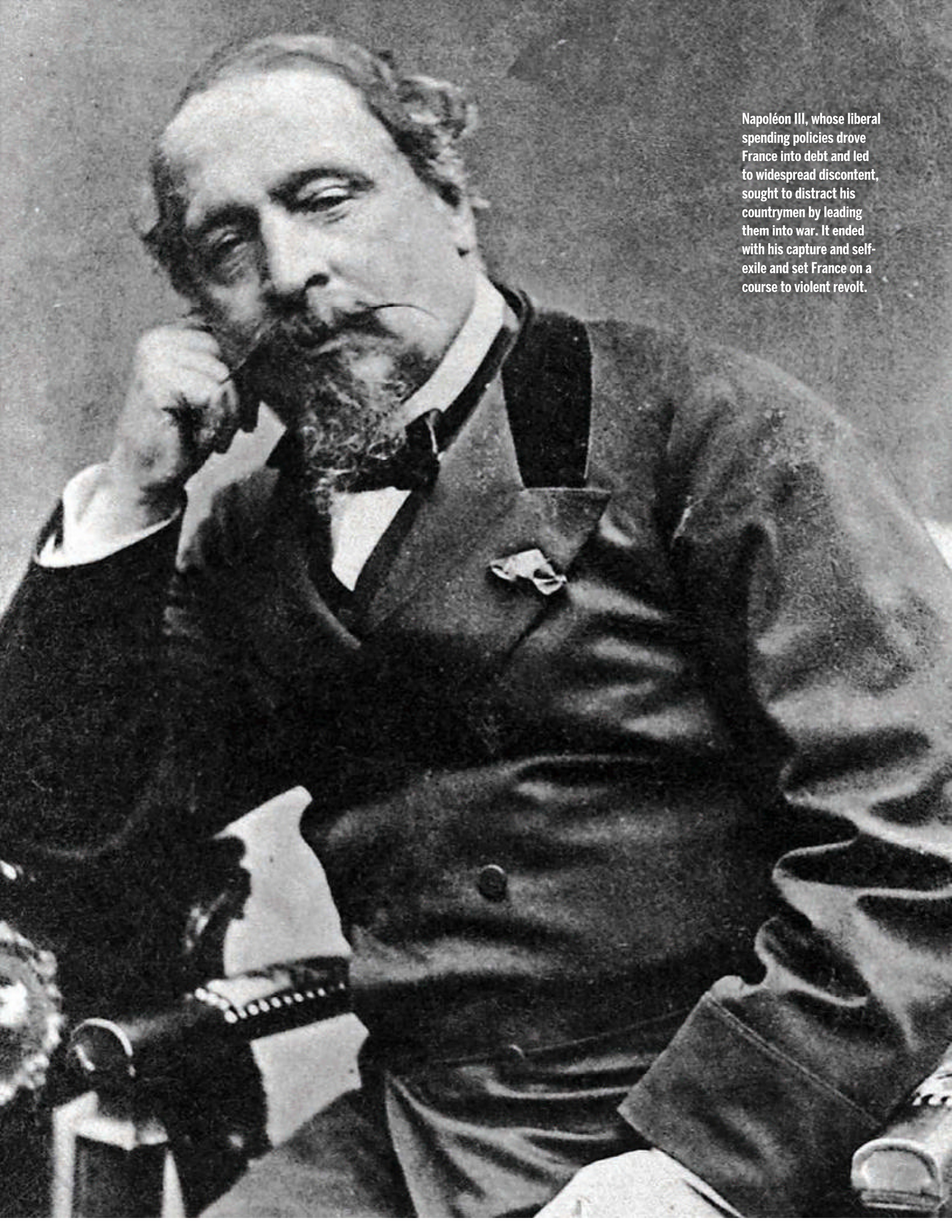


While Paris Burned

In 1871 a revolt born of frustration and outrage seized control of the French capital, sparking war between armies of fellow countrymen By Ron Soodalter



Napoléon III, whose liberal spending policies drove France into debt and led to widespread discontent, sought to distract his countrymen by leading them into war. It ended with his capture and self-exile and set France on a course to violent revolt.

Napoléon III's French troops were ill-prepared compared to Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's well-trained army. Napoléon surrendered to Bismarck on Sept. 2, 1870, after a decisive French defeat at Sedan, as depicted in this 1912 illustration.



Saturday, May 27, 1871

Paris' elegant Père-Lachaise Cemetery was designed as a place of rest and reflection for the living, where death was an accepted presence—but not like this.

Some 200 members of the National Guard and their fellow Communards had held the cemetery—last remaining stronghold of the Paris Commune after a week of bloody fighting—against the troops and artillery of the French army, but by late afternoon cannon fire had demolished the gates, and hundreds of regular infantry poured in. With rifles and bayonets they engaged the defenders in desperate hand-to-hand combat among the shattered tombs and disturbed graves. By evening, surrounded and outnumbered, the remaining 147 guardsmen—many of them wounded—surrendered. They were marched to the cemetery wall and summarily shot, their bodies tossed or rolled into an open trench. The next day in parks and squares across the city the army rounded up and shot hundreds more—men and women, some of whom had taken no part in the weeklong fighting but had merely been caught up in the army's sweep. Everyone involved—soldiers, guardsmen, Communards, simple citizens—shared a common heritage.

They were all French.

If ever a ruler was said to have lacked the common touch, it was Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, who ruled France as Napoléon III. In 1851, just three years after being elected president of the French Republic, he staged a coup d'état and established himself as emperor. Many people in rural France—conservative, staunchly Catholic—supported or accepted the newly declared Second Empire. But the working classes of Paris resented it. Over the next two decades Napoléon III did little to appease them. The class system was firmly entrenched throughout France but markedly so in its capital. Although Paris' poor and working classes lived in the same city as its middle and upper classes, they were worlds apart in every other sense.

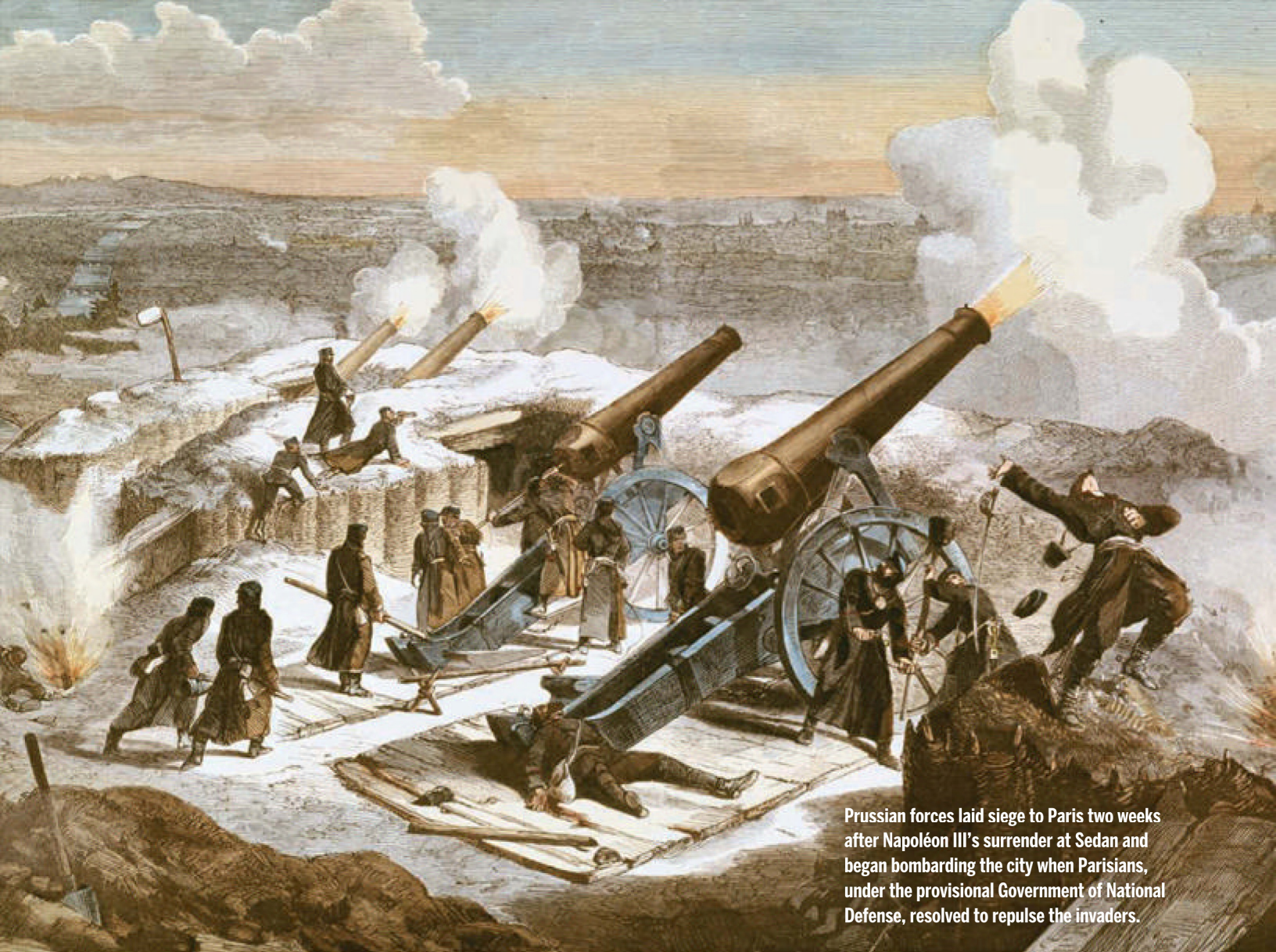
Napoléon III, who enjoyed the support of the rich and the bourgeois business community, strove to make Paris a bastion of commercial security and a place of beauty and elegance in the eyes of the world. During his rule the western quarter of the ancient city thrived with wide boulevards, expensive stores, hotels, cafés and restaurants.

The Catholic Church, which maintained a strong presence in Paris, spent much of its time and energy on the more “respectable” conservative classes, generally leaving working-class families to their own religious devices. The church's message to the poor was, in the words of historian John Merriman, to “resign themselves to poverty in the valley of tears that is this world” and anticipate their reward in heaven. Not surprising, then, that the urban poor in Paris and other large cities such as Marseilles and Lyon, albeit stoked by anti-Catholic radicals, grew to harbor a sharp anticlerical resentment.

Meanwhile, conditions in Paris' working-class neighborhoods declined from bad to uninhabitable. Housing was squalid and becoming increasingly less available as more people moved into the city seeking work in the factories. The emperor's costly urban renewal programs, while renovating sections of the city and annexing surrounding communes for new housing, destroyed an estimated 100,000 apartments in more than 20,000 buildings, forcing people to leave central Paris altogether or move to increasingly crowded neighborhoods in the eastern and northeastern sections. The luckless and indigent simply took to the streets, finding shelter where they could. Various historians have estimated the number of Parisians living in poverty by 1870 at nearly a half-million, or one-fourth of the population. One observer, staggered by the squalor, described central and eastern Paris as “a gothic city, black, gloomy, excrement- and fever-ridden, a place of darkness, disorder, violence, misery and blood.”

Working-class, militant, socialist, communist and republican Parisians were not shy about expressing their dissatisfaction, and when faced with what they viewed as an unjustifiable situation, they displayed a propensity for going to the barricades. They had done so no fewer than eight times since 1828, most notably during the abortive uprisings of 1831 and 1848. In fact, critics suggest that one of Napoléon III's underlying purposes in implementing the system of boulevards was to provide direct military access to the neighborhoods most inclined to rebel.

Between 1868 and 1870 discontented Parisians held nearly 1,000 public meetings. Middle-class militants railed against the regime in coffeehouses and a rapidly increasing number of political clubs, making common cause with the



Prussian forces laid siege to Paris two weeks after Napoléon III's surrender at Sedan and began bombarding the city when Parisians, under the provisional Government of National Defense, resolved to repulse the invaders.

poor and working class. Workers' organizations—which, ironically, Napoléon III permitted, along with the right to strike—expanded their ranks. It would require very little to light the fuse that would end the Second Empire, and the emperor himself provided the match.

Over the years Napoléon III's liberal spending policies had resulted in an ever-increasing national debt, causing widespread unrest and a general lack of confidence. The emperor settled on a stratagem to unite the French people and perhaps add to France's territorial holdings. It was a tactic employed by countless rulers throughout history who sought to distract their subjects from more pressing domestic issues. He led the country into war.

On July 19, 1870, the French Empire declared war on an increasingly belligerent Prussia and its allied German states. Despite failing health, negligible military experience and the fact his ministers had no workable war plan in place, Napoléon III assumed field command of the French army. His officer corps was complacent, riven by class tension and unfamiliar with modern European warfare, while many of the soldiers

were reluctant conscripts or untrained reservists. The forces of Prussia's "Iron Chancellor," Otto von Bismarck, on the other hand, were superbly structured, trained and experienced.

France suffered defeat after humiliating defeat, and by August the Prussian army was marching on Paris. Throughout the nation there was a sense of outrage and betrayal, but especially in the capital. In mid-August a group of revolutionary socialists seized a fire station in an unsuccessful attempt to start an insurrection against the conservative imperial government. Meanwhile, Napoléon III, as concerned with quelling the brewing civil unrest within his capital as defending it against the advancing Prussians, appointed one of his generals, Louis-Jules Trochu, military governor of Paris.

On September 1 the emperor suffered a resounding defeat near Sedan and the next day surrendered himself and 100,000 of his troops. When the news reached Paris, the Empress Eugenie and members of the upper and middle classes fled the city as furious demonstrators throughout Paris demanded an end to the empire and restoration of the republic. On September 4 the National Assembly announced formation of the Third Republic, structured under the newly created

The Prussians began an around-the-clock bombardment of the city. Yet the frightened, freezing and starving Parisians held out

Government of National Defense. The name, however, was misleading, as the new government comprised almost entirely middle-class conservatives, with Trochu as president. The Second Empire was finished, but its replacement—while outwardly espousing republican values and committed to repulsing the Prussian invaders—excluded radical republicans and socialists from its ranks, soon proving as distrustful of the left-wing opposition as the monarchy.

Two weeks later the Prussian army laid siege to Paris. Conditions within the city quickly deteriorated, exacerbated in late October by the surrender at Metz of another 140,000 French troops. Although no armistice had been declared, the war was all but over. Paris was on its own, isolated from the rest of France and growing increasingly desperate. Food supplies within the city first ran low and then ran out, reducing Parisians to eating cats, dogs, mice, rats and, ultimately, the exotic animals in the Jardin des Plantes zoo. In early January the Prussians, also eager to end the costly war, began an around-the-clock bombardment of Paris, lobbing hundreds of artillery shells into the city daily. Yet the frightened, freezing and starving Parisians stubbornly held out.

When word leaked out the new government had entered negotiations with the enemy, cries of “Treason!” arose in various quarters. The republic put down another hastily formed insurrection, as the gap between radicals and conservatives widened.

In late January upward of 100,000 French soldiers under Trochu tried to break the siege by engaging the Prussian line west of Paris. They were badly beaten, leaving more than 4,000 dead on the field. Disgusted with the army’s poor performance, an angry mob gathered outside government headquarters at the Hôtel de Ville, demanding the removal of Trochu and establishment of a socialist commune government. Defending the government in Paris were regular army troops and the *Garde Mobile*, comprising tens of thousands of conscripts, while opposing the administration was a loosely constructed militia force known as the National Guard, many of whose 200,000 or so members came from the city’s working-class neighborhoods. A number of guardsmen attended the protest at the Hôtel de Ville, and at one point gunfire erupted. When the protesters withdrew, five or six of their number lay dead in the street. First blood had been spilled.

On Jan. 28, 1871, the Government of National Defense signed a preliminary armistice with Prussia, agreeing to cede the disputed border regions of Alsace and northern Lorraine and pay an indemnity later set at a crippling 5 billion francs, payable to the Prussian army, which would remain in France



Following the debacle with Prussia, the French elected Adolphe Thiers—no fan of the emperor or socialists—to head the French Third Republic.





Thiers' attempt to forcibly remove cannon from Paris provided the final spark for the 1871 uprising. The fighting culminated in the Père-Lachaise Cemetery, above, foreshadowing the fate of many of the Communards.

until payment was complete. In exchange, Prussia would release the hundreds of thousands of captured French soldiers and spare Paris a lengthy occupation. After a brief victory parade, the Prussians withdrew east of the city. Predictably, most Parisians who remained in the city—those who had held out for four bitter months on the promise their government would see the war through to victory—felt betrayed.

Soon after the war the Government of National Defense disbanded, and France held national elections. In February voters seated a largely reactionary government with a rigid conservative at its head. Adolphe Thiers, a 5-foot-2 martinet and outspoken opponent of both Napoléon III and the revolutionary socialists, was named head of the new government. Among their first measures, Thiers and the National Assembly, which had moved to Bordeaux during the siege, passed the Law of Maturities, requiring all debts and rents that had been suspended during the siege to be paid within 48 hours—a mandate that bankrupted many small businessmen, caused tens of thousands of Parisians to default on their bills and put many families into the street. Thiers then suspended the pay of the politicized National Guard, which had been orga-

nizing a rival government in Paris. The moves only solidified the bond between Paris' poor and working classes, many of whom feared a return to the monarchy. With France's wealthier families still holed up in their country estates, Paris was, in Merriman's words, "under the control of ordinary people who demanded municipal rights and social reform."

In a bid to quell opposition, Thiers' government banned leading leftist newspapers and condemned two popular socialist leaders to death in absentia. Talk of violent insurrection spread throughout Paris, and on March 17 Thiers took a step that virtually guaranteed it.

The National Guard was in possession of hundreds of cannon left behind in Paris at war's end. Thiers was unwilling to leave the guns in the hands of potential revolutionaries. Without notifying the respective district mayors of his intentions, he sent 20,000 regular army troops to seize the guns.

When the soldiers arrived in the city the following morning they found large crowds in the streets, summoned by the bells in the city's steeples. At first all was calm, some citizens even chatting amiably with soldiers. Tensions increased during an exchange of shots that killed a guardsman and a regular officer. But as the soldiers closed in to remove the cannon, guardsmen and citizens alike called on the troops to abandon their mission, and many complied. Throughout

The reality of the situation became increasingly clear. The Commune was engaged in a civil war it could not win

the city more and more soldiers “turned up their rifle butts,” indicating their refusal to shoot. When an alarmed General Claude Lecomte ordered his men to fire into one gathering crowd, the troops ignored the command, instead allowing guardsmen to capture the general and his officers. In the early afternoon a mob of men and women seized Lecomte and General Jacques Clément-Thomas, beat them, stoned them, stood them against a garden wall and shot them. If any single act could be said to have sparked the 1871 revolution, it was their execution. Thiers had pressed the Parisians into violent insurrection, and there was no going back.

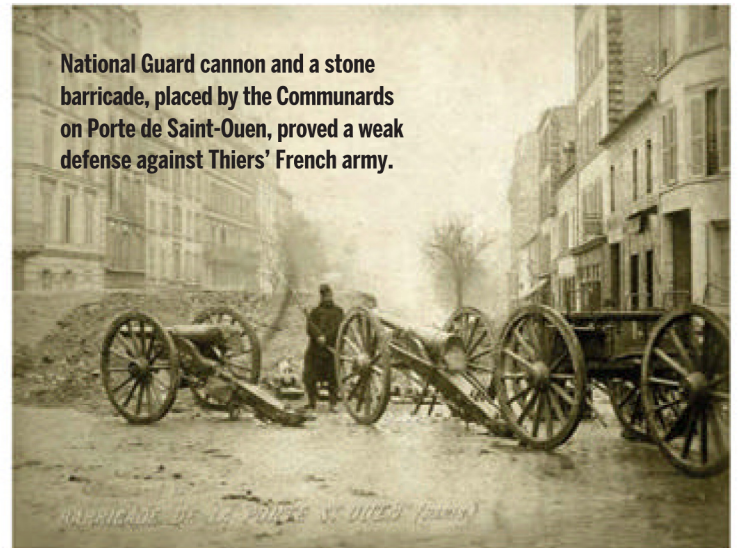
Amid the revolutionary turmoil, Thiers, citing his inability to “promise the assembly complete safety in Paris,” had relocated it to Versailles. By default the National Guard’s nascent Central Committee now became the leading governing body, and it sent guardsmen to take control of key strategic locations in the city. Choosing the Hôtel de Ville as their headquarters, the guardsmen replaced the French tricolor flying over the building with a red flag. Meanwhile, Thiers fled Paris and ordered the evacuation of all regular troops in and around the city to Versailles. Some of the more extreme leftists urged the Central Committee to have the National Guard pursue and destroy this contingent, but the soldiers were allowed to leave unhindered. Many committee members actually believed the men of the French army would ultimately refuse to fight their countrymen and join their cause en masse. Their failure to take the early offensive or to make adequate defensive preparations while they still had time doomed the revolution from its outset.

Instead, the Central Committee busied itself staging elections for the new Paris Commune. The results were predictable, with the overwhelming majority of the 90 elected officials coming from the various groups on the political left. Within days of the election some 20 moderates and five radicals refused their seats, while tens of thousands of Parisians fled in anticipation of the coming storm. The remaining council members expended considerable time in long, increasingly heated meetings, organizing public services and enacting its revolutionary policies.

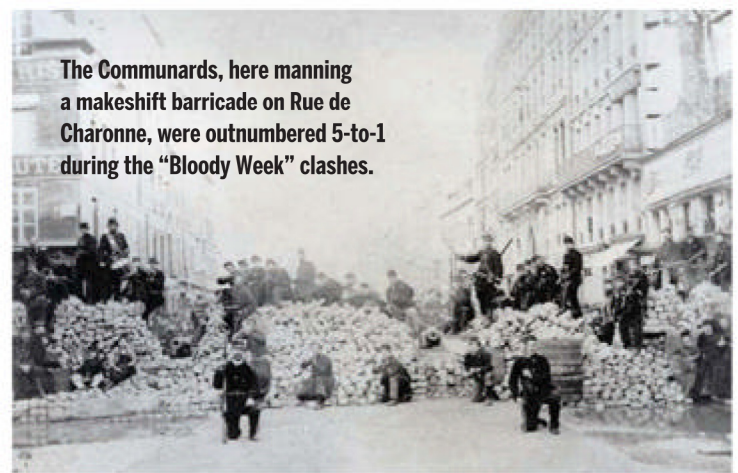
The “Communards” who supported the new government represented a cross-section of Parisian workers—skilled and semi-skilled, artists and artisans, day laborers and domestic servants, shopkeepers and clerks. In the immediate wake of the election and subsequent reforms, a general euphoria pervaded the city. Liberal newspapers flourished, while the Commune shut down those sympathetic to Versailles. The reality of the situation, however, became increasingly clear. The Commune was engaged in a civil war it clearly could not win.

While the Commune leaders spent their days planning an egalitarian utopia, Thiers took aggressive action. He severed all communication with Paris and on April 2 began indiscriminately shelling the city. With the approval of Bismarck, whose army remained virtually at the city gates, Thiers bolstered his own army and prepared to invade Paris. The Commune had prudently refrained from taking over the Bank of France, as a seizure of its reserves would have collapsed the currency. Incredibly, however, the bank loaned the Commune nearly a half-million francs a day even as it financed Thiers’ military preparations to the tune of millions of francs.

Belatedly, on April 3 an ill-supplied Commune force of some 27,000 guardsmen set out to attack Versailles. The result was catastrophic. Thiers’ army counterattacked, killing or capturing some 3,000 men. During the bitter fight



National Guard cannon and a stone barricade, placed by the Communards on Porte de Saint-Ouen, proved a weak defense against Thiers’ French army.



The Communards, here manning a makeshift barricade on Rue de Charonne, were outnumbered 5-to-1 during the “Bloody Week” clashes.

REPUBLICAN FRENCH ARMED FORCES

877 killed
6,454 wounded
183 missing

Paris Commune Casualties

COMMUNARDS

6,667 identified dead *Estimated total 10,000*
38,000 arrested
7,000 deported

In its suppression of the revolt the French army slaughtered Communards with abandon, killing as many as 10,000. These Communards lay in crude coffins, but scores were left unburied.



Versillais units shot many captured guard leaders as criminals. In retribution, the Commune took hostage many Parisians sympathetic to Versailles, including dozens of Catholic clergymen, and decreed that “every execution of a prisoner of war or of a partisan of the regular Government of the Commune of Paris, shall immediately be followed by the summary execution of a triple number of hostages.” Any remaining hope of accord swiftly dissipated.

As word of the executions of generals Lecomte and Clément-Thomas had spread through the various quarters, thousands of Parisians had thrown up barricades. Now the order came to erect even more. These generally comprised rows or piles of cobblestones, with space allotted for the placement of the National Guard’s cannon. The defenders armed themselves with everything from muskets to pitchforks to clubs, while the soldiers of the French army carried the Model 1866 bolt-action, breechloading Chassepot rifle—far superior to any weapon found behind the barricades. The Chassepot was fitted with a spring-latched sword bayonet, which boasted a 22.5-inch gracefully recurved and terrifying blade.

In addition to superior artillery, the army also fielded one of the most modern rapid-fire weapons available, the Reffye *mitrailleuse*. It featured a cluster of 25 rifled barrels, which fired in succession as rapidly as the weapon’s gunner could turn its hand crank. The soldiers nicknamed it the “coffee grinder.” Hunkered behind their cobblestone barricades, the Communards would come to know it devastatingly well.

The French army entered Paris on May 21. In the absence of any real defensive strategy the Commune itself collapsed almost immediately, although pockets of supporters by the thousands continued to fight ferociously in the streets for a hellish week. As the National Guard lacked a viable com-

mand structure, its various battalions were forced to fight as separate units, each defending its own district. Unable to form a cohesive force, they were no match for the well organized, highly motivated and better-armed Versailles troops, who outnumbered them 5-to-1. Those guardsmen not killed outright in the fighting were summarily shot.

The mortality was staggering. As the days passed the inadequacy of care for the wounded and injured became critical. There simply were not enough medical facilities, understaffed and lacked suitable sterilization supplies. To cite one horrific example, 15 amputees at the Hôpital Beaujon all perished of gangrene or septicemia.

From the beginning of hostilities, thousands of Communard women acted as nurses, caregivers and—in a number of instances—combatants. Many accompanied their husbands into battle, and as the number of dead and wounded escalated, the women took up arms to fight in their stead. They dubbed themselves the “Amazons of the Seine.” Thiers’ soldiers made no distinction—they shot men and women, prisoners and suspected sympathizers alike.

Over the next six days the army stormed the barricades one by one, pouring through to slaughter the Communards singly, by the dozens and by the hundreds. Soldiers rampaged unchecked through the streets—often abetted by vengeful Parisians who had opposed the Commune. They even fired upon those who sought refuge by jumping into the Seine. Foreigners were shot out of hand on suspicion of being agitators. Over and over the commands, “To the line!” and “Take him to the brigade!” signified death sentences. The chatter of the *mitrailleuses* became a common sound through the streets of Paris. Finally, on May 28 the firing ceased. There was practically no one left to shoot.

The Communards shot some 63 hostages during the battle, including the archbishop of Paris and several priests. The Commune had arrested the archbishop in hopes of exchanging him and fellow priests for imprisoned socialist firebrand Louis Auguste Blanqui. Thiers had refused. The execution of the clergymen was a public relations gaffe of massive proportions, alienating any possible support from the few in devoutly Catholic rural France and elsewhere who might have empathized with their cause.

Dwarfing the number of slain hostages, however, is the unchecked butchery of the French army. At the end of what came to be known as “Bloody Week,” an estimated 10,000 Communards lay dead in ditches, empty lots, building sites and in the streets. Some bodies were burned or dumped into mass graves, while others were simply thrown into the Seine. In the shadow of its scorched buildings, Paris had become a reeking abattoir, the stench of rotting corpses everywhere. A stunned journalist with the *London Times* reported on the slaughter:

The laws of war! They are mild and Christian when compared with the inhuman laws of revenge under which the Versailles troops have been shooting, bayoneting, ripping up prisoners, women and children, during the last six days. ... The French are filling up the darkest page in the book of their own or the world's history.

Thousands of bodies were left to rot where they fell. “The ground is strewn with their corpses,” Thiers told the Assembly. “May this terrible sight serve as a lesson.” As one student of the rebellion noted, “The City of Light had become the City of Blood.”

The sanctions that followed were as devastating for the Communards as the weeklong battle itself. Cavalrymen escorted nearly 40,000 Parisians to Versailles or Camp de Satory for imprisonment. While more than half were released, nearly 16,000 faced trial, the overwhelming majority of whom were found guilty. Dozens were executed, while thousands more served prison terms or were deported. Many ended up at the French penal colonies in New Caledonia and French Guiana, where—according to a chronicler—“death was certain, but came slowly and painfully.”

The Commune was dead, crushed beyond all recognition or hope of revival. Adolphe Thiers, described by contemporary socialist newspaperman Henri Rochefort as a “sanguinary Tom Thumb,” rode his victory into the president’s chair.

Today the Paris Commune is remembered, when it is remembered at all, for the unthinkable vicious manner in which it was suppressed. Yet despite its more contentious doctrine and actions,

and the fact it was poorly structured, poorly led and slow to act, the Commune had managed to govern Paris for an extraordinary 10 weeks, during which it passed some measures far ahead of their time, including universal education, relief for the poor and infirm, establishment of homeless shelters and pensions for those killed in government service. It is intriguing to contemplate the achievements they might have made if granted the time to find their way. Ultimately, however, we are left with an image of a failed revolt, born of frustration and outrage, and doomed as much by its ungrounded optimism and naiveté as by the political and military forces against which it rose. **MH**

*Ron Soodalter is a regular contributor to Military History. For further reading he recommends *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune*, by John Merriman; *The Terrible Year: The Paris Commune, 1871*, by Alistair Horne; and *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Paris Commune*, by Gay Gullickson.*

