

intersections online

Volume 11, Number 1 (Summer 2010)

Patrick C. Jamieson, "Foreign Criticisms of the 1871 Paris Commune: The Role of British and American Newspapers and Periodicals," *intersections* 11, no. 1 (2010): 100-115.

ABSTRACT

In one of the most important instances of French political history, local citizens in March of 1871 rose up against their national government to form a shortly lived local authority known as the Paris Commune or *La Commune de Paris*. The events surrounding the formation and establishment of this authority were at the center of international news. Historians have recently become interested in the integrity of the representations of Commune participants by primary observers, journalists, and historians, due to these sources' reliance upon common stereotypes. This essay uses as its lens British and American newspapers and periodicals from the period in an attempt to understand these stereotypes. I attempt to characterize a common set of themes that frame reports on the Commune, and then group publications in relation to their philosophical outlook and their journalistic methods. Through this analysis we can see: 1) a consistent criticism of the French 'national character'; 2) a perpetuation of gender stereotypes of French women generally and female *Communardes* in particular; and 3) a virulent fear of the rise of Communism.

http://depts.washington.edu/chid/intersections_Summer_2010/Patrick_Jamieson_Foreign_Criticisms_of_the_1871_Paris_Commune.pdf

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Foreign Criticisms of the 1871 Paris Commune

The Role of British and American Newspapers and Periodicals

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La Commune de Paris¹

Never has a revolution more surprised the revolutionaries²

Benoit Malon, member of the Commune Council

The story of the Paris Commune begins with the conflicts of the Franco-Prussian War. Following the defeat of Napoleon III on the 4th of September 1870 by the Prussians, French republicans created a Government of National Defense in order to continue war with Prussia.³ As the Prussian army further encroached on the city, all Parisian men between the ages of twenty and forty were mobilized into a citizen's militia known as the National Guard. After a four month long siege by the Prussians, the Government of National Defense, led by Adolphe Thiers, agreed to an armistice on the 28th of January 1871. A general election was held on the 8th of February, where Thiers became leader of the overwhelmingly monarchist National Assembly, prompting a heightened level of fear amongst National Guardsman and the Left-leaning citizens in Paris.

In the early morning of the 18th of March 1871, Thiers attempted to quietly disarm the National Guard by sending his troops to the top of the Butte Montmartre⁴ in order to capture several cannons and armaments stored on the hill by the National Guard since February. Much to the surprise of Thiers, a

¹ I would like to thank Walter Adamson, Samuel Candler Dobbs Professor of Intellectual History at Emory University, for his invaluable support and mentorship on this project. I would also like to thank Alain St. Pierre, European History Librarian at the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University, for assisting me in locating the primary materials for this project. Additionally, many thanks to Andy Urban, postdoctoral Research Fellow at Emory University, for his comments on a draft of this article.

² Donny Gluckstein, *The Paris commune: a revolutionary democracy* (London: Bookmarks Publications, 2006), 11.

³ It is important to acknowledge that the French Republicans were by no means united under a single political faction. As Collette Wilson notes, many in France believed a republican form of government should be re-established, but as to specifics, there existed a wide range of opinions. See Collette E. Wilson, *Paris and the commune, 1871-78: the politics of forgetting*, Cultural history of modern war (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 3.

⁴ The hill that is now the site of the Basilique du Sacré Coeur in the Montmartre district of Paris.

group of Parisian citizens noticed the soldiers and soon a large crowd developed around the hill in Montmartre. Primary accounts describe a slow, but developing group of onlookers and protesters near the bottom of the hill. Louise Michel was a local activist who experienced the events firsthand and described them later in her memoirs:

Learning that the Versailles soldiers were trying to seize the cannon, men and women of Montmartre warned up the Butte in a surprise maneuver. Those people who were climbing believed they would die, but they were prepared to pay the price. The Butte of Montmartre was bathed in the first light of day, through which things were glimpsed as if they were hidden behind a thin veil of water. Gradually the crowd increased. The other districts of Paris, hearing of the events taking place on the Butte of Montmartre, came to our assistance.⁵

Michel's diary describes the morning as the build up to a climax where two French Generals were shot and killed by the crowd.⁶ Fearing further conflict, Thiers and his government retreated to Versailles and the Central Committee of the National Guard instituted self-rule in Paris and held elections on March 26th. On March 28th, the government known as the Paris Commune was officially born and Paris was under self-rule.

From the end of March 1871 until the end of May 1871, Paris was ruled independently of France. The history behind the revolution and its government is by no means of minimal importance. Historians have spent a great deal of time recounting every event and action of the Commune in an attempt to better understand the complex forces at work. A growing trend has developed in recent years in regards to historical scholarship on the Commune, however. Historians have become enamored with detailed issues of historiography in an attempt to better understand and qualify the biases of early observers, journalists, and writers on the events in Paris. Additionally, historians have also begun to reinterpret the reporting of the Commune that occurred in various newspapers, periodicals, and primary accounts.

There exists no doubt that the Paris Commune was at the center of international news in 1871. "The origins, evolution, improvisations, and the final collapse of the Commune were observed with keen fascination by the international

⁵ Louise Michel, Bullitt Lowry, and Elizabeth Ellington Gunter. *The Red Virgin: memoirs of Louise Michel* (University, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 1981), 64. See also Edith Thomas, *Louise Michel* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), 64.

⁶ *Ibid.*

community,” Albert Boime writes.⁷ American and British daily newspapers, periodicals, and journals are a fascinating vehicle to explore the Commune and to understand foreign opinion of it. We see several prevailing attitudes and common themes throughout these writings. Additionally, the differences, in terms of national origin and publication type, prove interesting in understanding and categorizing these attitudes.

Therefore, the focus of this article will not so much be on correcting—or even reinterpreting—the history of the Commune. Rather it will focus on identifying and characterizing common themes in reporting. Through this analysis, we can see several distinct elements of Anglo-American journalism on the Commune: first, the emphasis on the centrality of Paris within French politics and culture and the consequent criticism of rural French citizens; second, a sharp criticism of France’s national character and a well-developed view of *Frenchness*; third, a heightening fear of Communism at home and abroad and; fourth, the sharp criticism and “dispassionate objectivity” over the roles French women played.⁸ By no means does this article represent a comprehensive study of foreign journalism on the Commune, as it limits itself to two countries and a small selection of publications. The publications chosen for this article, however, are paradigmatic of the larger reporting themes of their respective groups. Thus, the primary intention of this article is to highlight central themes within this journalism and to bring to light the similarities and differences between these publication’s reports, articles, and editorials.

The Emphasis on the Centrality of Paris in French Culture

Both British and American news sources and journals emphasize the centrality and independence of Paris within French politics and culture. Additionally, many, if not most, take the opportunity to criticize the rural peoples of France while depicting Parisian society as ‘snobby.’ There is no doubt that Paris was a central component to French politics and culture long before the Commune and long after. Paris, following the French Revolution of 1789 and the 1848 revolutions across Europe, became increasingly separate from France. As

⁷ Albert Boime and Olin Levi Warner, “Olin Levi Warner’s Defense of the Paris Commune,” *Archives of American Art Journal* 29, no. 4 (1989): 2.

⁸ I use the term “Frenchness” here to indicate a unique understanding of French politics and culture by outsiders during the time. Gullickson uses the term “dispassionate objectivity” to refer to the work of previous historians on the Commune, especially in regard to the earliest histories. I have chosen to apply this term more broadly, to implicate both early historians and early journalists, since journalist’s accounts and articles played an important role in the writing of the history on the Commune. See Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly women of Paris: images of the commune* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 9.

historian Robert Tombs notes, “The [national] government...intended to assert its authority over Paris. The Montmartre expedition was the outcome.”⁹ This separatism was of interest to many journalists. Not only did journalists see Paris as politically unique from France, but they also viewed its turmoil as similar to other Western countries, such as America during the Civil War. Journalist Frederic Harrison, in London’s liberal *Fortnightly Review*, in May of 1871 wrote, “The principle of decentralization is one peculiarly necessary to France, and is ultimately applicable to Western Europe.”¹⁰ Harrison sees the “history of France for generations” as the “oppression of the cities by the country.”¹¹ Additionally, Harrison could have noted that Paris’ desire for independence and its differences from France could be seen as similar to the conflict in America a decade earlier with much of the South seceding from the Union and forming the Confederacy.

Others looked to Paris as a representation of “French intelligence, French genius, [and] French civilisation.”¹² Publications highlighted the differences that Paris had from the rest of France in order to convey a larger idea of superiority. Within this commentary was also a comparison between urban and rural French peoples. London’s *Fraser’s Magazine* attempted to characterize those people involved in the Commune in a poor light—as seemingly lesser people than other Parisians: “It seems intolerable and unjust that such a city should be thwarted or overborne by the votes of the uneducated and superstitious boors.”¹³ Other writers sought to place Paris on a pedestal high above most European cities. “There are cities, and cities large and small,” Frederic Harrison wrote for the *Fortnightly Review*, “but Paris is not a mere city, but is a special social organism, animated with the nature and passions of men, but of a nature not precisely homogeneous with man’s.”¹⁴ Further, some publications even saw Paris as more detrimental to the French Republic. *Harper’s Magazine*, a New York-based weekly, claimed “there can be no republic in France so long as Paris is the capital.”¹⁵ The mob of that city can and will overawe the Government, and an army strong enough for security against the mob would be too strong for the safety of a republic.”¹⁶

⁹ The “Montmartre expedition” refers to the actions of French people on the morning of March 18, 1871 in the neighborhood of Montmartre in Paris. See Robert Tombs, *The Paris Commune 1871* (Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 1999), 1.

¹⁰ Frederic Harrison, “The Revolution of the Commune,” *Fortnightly Review*, May 1871, 567.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 562.

¹² W.R.G., “The Condition of French Politics,” *Fraser’s Magazine*, May 1871, 546.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Harrison, “The Revolution of the Commune,” 562.

¹⁵ While *Harper’s* was not explicitly affiliated with a political party at the time, it leaned heavily towards Republican loyalties.

¹⁶ “Paris and France,” *Harper’s Weekly*, April 8, 1871, 306.

Journalists furthered their criticism by often using other countries as points of comparison to France. As British journalist F.M. Whitehurst commented, “In America they are clever, hard-headed, and have not three or four dynasties watching on the hills of exile for the proper hour to swoop down on the property of the nation.”¹⁷ Uttering a similar tone, an editorial in *The Nation*, an American publication, noted that the Parisians “care nothing about ‘checks and balances,’ about the independence of the judiciary, the freedom of the press, the protection of personal or local self-government, personal liberty, or any of the other great questions over which the Western world has so long contended.”¹⁸ They care nothing even about a republican form of government, as Americans understand it.”¹⁹ Emphasizing the centrality of Paris in French culture and politics was one distinct way that journalists commented on their own country’s views of *Frenchness*.

A Larger Commentary on French National Character

Many journalists took the opportunity of covering the Commune in order to comment more extensively on their own nation’s views of France’s national character. Special attention should be paid towards the types of publications these criticisms appeared in. In a general sense, both British and American periodicals and weeklies were far more critical of France than their daily newspaper counterparts. Historian Phillip Katz furthers this point by writing that illustrated weeklies deserve “special mention” in the American context of covering the Commune. Every week these publications printed sensationalist headlines and “especially common were crude portraits of Commune ‘celebrities’ and bird’s-eye views of Paris in flames.” Additionally, many of the illustrations in these weeklies were simply replicated from the weeklies in England and France.²⁰ On the American front, *Harper’s Weekly* is exemplary of negative analysis on the French national character. The magazine took the opportunity to characterize the people of France as “ignorant, angry, and without the habit of political patience and methods, torn by furious rivalries and inflamed by crude theories.”²¹ Additionally, *Harper’s* published scathing illustrations of the events to complement their articles. Painting a picture of the French people as irresponsible, naïve, and unintelligent was very common for

¹⁷ F.M. Whitehurst, “The Second Siege of Paris,” *Belgravia*, May 1871, 338.

¹⁸ *The Nation*, like *Harper’s*, was strongly loyal to the Republican Party at this time.

¹⁹ “The Assembly and the Commune,” *The Nation*, no. 309 (1871): 377.

²⁰ Phillip Mark Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre: Americans and the Paris Commune* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 71.

²¹ “Paris and France,” 306.

the weekly. As the publication saw it, the people of France and Paris were “ignorant and unaccustomed to responsible political action,” which “teaches them to prefer order at any cost—order even at the price of liberty.”²² *Harper’s* therefore expressed their hope that the Commune would be a failed experiment. For the publication, the demise of the Commune would only confirm the suspicions they espoused in their writings. In a June 10, 1871 editorial, the publication wrote: “The effort of the Commune ends, therefore, without the least sympathy or respect. If there were men interested in it whose views were positive, humane, and reasonable, they were wholly powerless.”²³

As Katz has noted, many of illustrations in American periodicals were replicated from British and French periodicals. Most likely though, the American periodical writers were also greatly influenced by other sources that they viewed and often replicated or reiterated similar viewpoints.²⁴ *The Nation* echoed similar tones in its editorials on the Commune to *Harper’s*: “In fact, it would be difficult to produce from history an expression of selfishness narrower or more material, more short-sighted and more devilish in its intensity, than the organization which has just perished in the flames of Paris, and we do not know anything more repulsive in its accompaniments than the apologies made for it....”²⁵ The American journalists were certainly critical of the Commune, and *Harper’s* appears frequently throughout this essay as it editorialized and sensationalized almost all aspects of the events. Other American publications did write in a similar fashion on the Commune as well.

British publications were equally critical of French national character. *Fraser’s Magazine* commented: “In French cities, as observers have often remarked, there seems to be some spontaneous generation of irrationality and passion which rapidly grows to absolute lunacy; each man contributes his quota of wrong-headedness, credulity, and viciousness, and the aggregate of such contributions is multiplied by some unknown factor, til the sum total almost transcends conception.” Additionally, the author goes on to characterize the “unfortunate national temperament” of France that has “a habit of ending, not in compromise, but in conflict.”²⁶ A major goal of this commentary was to demonstrate British cultural, moral and political superiority over the French. Another writer saw the revolution surrounding the Commune as “abortive” and argued it “must fail.”²⁷ It

²² Ibid.

²³ “The Victory of France,” *Harper’s Weekly*, June 10, 1871, 522.

²⁴ Katz, 71.

²⁵ “The Assembly and the Commune,” 379.

²⁶ W.R.G. 547.

²⁷ Harrison, 579.

becomes clear that many journalists were interested in the failure of the Commune so they could later justify their writings. British journalists often used a condescending tone as well. A *Times* correspondent described the situation in Paris on April 4th as “lugubrious” and “grotesque.”²⁸ In a similar fashion, journalist D. A. Bingham reported, “the streets were filled with swashbucklers who indulged in fanciful uniforms and quaint denominations, and appeared to be under no control.”²⁹ Historian Gay L. Gullickson analyzes this statement arguing that at the time, different military groups in Paris each had unique uniforms, thus the descriptions are unfounded. Ultimately, Bingham’s words should be read as a *caricature* in lieu of fact.³⁰ Additionally, many of these articles should be looked at under the same microscope, as we see that common insults espoused by these writers are often slanderous.

Furthermore, journalists saw the opportunity to comment on French national character through the comparison of the Commune to the 1789 French Revolution and the Reign of Terror. One historian notes, “Major newspapers gave their readers the impression that anarchy ruled in Paris, with bloodthirsty mobs sweeping the streets in search of innocent victims. Visceral images of the revolution of 1789 were recalled, suggesting a return to the Terror, mob rule, and the guillotine.”³¹ The juxtaposition of images from the Reign of Terror and the Commune was no accident, and arguably intentional. A British correspondent writing for the *Times* reported, “Last night, many people were half expecting a Reign of terror, in the best style of the last century, and dire was the consternation of innocent tourist.”³² Connecting the horror of the French revolution that was less than a century old with the events of the Commune not only sensationalized the stories, but also brought fear to many readers unfamiliar with the happenings.

²⁸ “The Commune of Paris,” *Times* (London), April 6, 1871, 10.

²⁹ Gullickson, 100.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Boime and Warner, 3.

³² Gullickson, 67.



Detail, "Baracade in Paris," *Harper's Weekly*, May 6, 1871, p. 412.

Depictions of Reds, Communists, and Fear

News sources, especially in America, were becoming increasingly worried about the rise of what they perceived as a Communist movement in Paris. This 'red fear' was based on both fascination and anxiety over the ideology. Because of the Commune's close ties with labor unions, the International Working Men's Association, socialists, and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the Commune thus "further reinforced the bourgeois notion of class war," as Gay Gullickson notes. "Journalists regularly referred to the 'Reds' in Paris and used 'communist' as a synonym for 'communard'...."³³ Some journalists even used all three terms interchangeably. Both American newspapers and periodicals followed a similar path in criticizing the Commune and exposing it to the rest of the world. One historian notes that, "[t]he chorus of abuse in the American press quickly mounted as the Commune unfolded, and after its destruction it was frequently used to epitomize all the horrors of 'communist' philosophy.... The Commune [brought] out [people's] worst anxieties about the family, religion, property, and social order."³⁴ The Paris Commune became the great fear of anti-

³³ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁴ Boime and Warner, 3.

Communist Americans who saw the actions of the working class in Europe as a major threat. It is important to note that there were varying degrees of sensationalism present in these publications.

In general, periodicals and weeklies tended to go more in-depth on the worries of the Commune, but this by no means should exclude daily publications such as the *New York Times*, which was a sounding board for anti-*red* sentiments during the period. As Katz notes, “[n]ot surprisingly, American newspapers followed the line that the whole thing had been plotted by Karl Marx and the International Working Men’s Association.”³⁵ A common theme in the *New York Times* was to instill *red* fear in the headline of the story. There was an apparent obsession with *red*. Even on the three year anniversary of the Commune government in Paris, the *Times* wrote in an article titled “Recalling the Paris Commune: An Assemblage Where Every Shade of Red Could be Seen.” In the article, the newspaper lamented: “Flaming programmes, deep scarlet entrance tickets, boutonnieres of red immortelles and ribbon. . . . Children wore red sashes, red dresses, and red hats, and men adorned themselves with satin neckties of the approved roseate hue. Many of the young girls present, who took part in the ball afterward, had seized the opportunity, in their Communistic sympathy, to spread the patriotic color on their faces.”³⁶ U.S. papers also carried headlines such as “Red Flag Floating over the Louvre and Tuileries” and “The Rouge Revolt.”³⁷ *Red* was an easy way to quickly identify Communist sentiments with the Commune in the headline of a newspaper or article.

The word *Communist* had an equally revolting context for the *Times*. It is important to note the distinction between the *Commune* and *Communists*. As discussed earlier, many confused the Commune as being associated with *Communist* ideals, but the two were by no means mutually exclusive in overarching philosophies. The *New York Times* published articles such as “Paris Under the Communists.” The paper lamented in the article: “Unfortunately, the approaching establishment of the Commune in Paris is only the beginning of the worst. . . . It is not easy to see how a sanguinary civil war can be averted under conditions like these. . . . Civil conflict, even if long and bloody, would be better than this.”³⁸ The *New York Times*, however, was not the only paper to criticize Communist symbols in Paris. *The New York Herald* often featured more shocking

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “Recalling the Paris Commune: An Assemblage Where Every Shade of Red Could be Seen,” *New York Times*, March 24, 1884, 5.

³⁷ “Red Flag Floating over the Louvre and Tuileries,” *New York Times*, April 2, 1871, 1; “The Rouge Revolt,” as cited in Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 67.

³⁸ “Paris Under the Communists,” *New York Times*, March 28, 1871, 4.

headlines and as Gullickson argues, was by no-means a “pro-Commune newspaper.” The paper often referred to *Communards* as *Communists*, in an attempt to incite fear and false information on the spread of international Communism.³⁹

American weeklies and periodicals were highly critical of the French Commune, publishing sensational illustrations and in-depth stories about the horrors of Communism. *Harper’s Weekly* took on the Commune as a central issue. *Harper’s* criticized the Commune in April of 1871, writing, “The despotism from which for a moment it sometimes emerges is self-perpetuating. For, by keeping the people ignorant and unaccustomed to responsible political action, it teaches them to prefer order at any cost—order even at the price of liberty.” The weekly published headline such as “A Club of Paris Reds” on April 22nd, “The Communists in Paris,” on May 6th and “Paris Under the Red Flag,” on May 20th.⁴⁰

London daily papers took on a far less critical role than their American counterparts. While the country’s publications were critical of the Commune and used *red* frequently and some presented a similar tone to the American papers, it was far less prevalent. A London newspaper, the *Daily News*, published an editorialized article about the Commune titled “The Red Republic in Paris,” on March 29th of 1871. Additionally, *Reynold’s Newspaper*, also of London, published “An Interview with the Red Government of Paris,” on April 2nd. Moreover, *The Pall Mall Gazette* reported on the end of the Commune in an article titled “The Suppression of the Red Revolution: A New Reign of Terror,” on May 30th.⁴¹ For the most part though, London papers remained less partisan than their American counterparts. Dailies outside of London, however, presented a different and more biased look at the events going on in Paris. In Preston, England, a city about forty miles outside of Liverpool and well over two-hundred miles from London, the local paper, the *Preston Guardian etc*, typified rural British newspaper’s coverage on the Commune. “There is chaos in Paris; and the end is not yet,” the paper lamented in its article titled, “A New Enemy in Paris—The Reign of Anarchy and Murder.”⁴² Rural British publications, in general, reflected similar sentiments to American publications. The main difference between the British view and the American view was the use

³⁹ Gullickson, 79.

⁴⁰ “A Club of Paris Reds,” *Harper’s Weekly*, April 22, 1871; “The Communists in Paris,” *Harper’s Weekly*, May 6, 1871; “Paris Under the Red Flag,” *Harper’s Weekly*, May 20, 1871.

⁴¹ “The Red Republic in Paris,” *Daily News*, March 29, 1871; “An Interview with the Red Government of Paris,” *Reynold’s Newspaper*, April 2, 1871; “The Suppression of the Red Revolution: A New Reign of Terror,” *The Pall Mall Gazette*, May 30, 1871.

⁴² “A New Enemy in Paris-The Reign of Anarchy and Murder,” *The Preston Guardian etc*, March 25, 1871, 4.

of the word *Communist* or *Communism* to incite fear. British publications might have been critical of *Communism*, but their criticism was not as explicitly spelled out as it was in American publications.

Journalists on the Role of Women in the Commune

Another important and only recently explored topic is the actual role of women in the Commune. Women's roles in the political order marked a drastic change from the private sphere they traditionally occupied. Historians have begun to uncover the similar myths that originated in early historical reports by primary observers and out of news publications. Historian Gay Gullickson argues in her historiographical study of the Paris Commune that "dispassionate objectivity has often eluded historians of the Commune."⁴³ Gullickson's research suggests that early historians have misinterpreted and even neglected to mention some history of the Commune in order to advance negative female stereotypes. Journalists often advanced these stereotypes in order to portray women as uncivilized creatures. American and British newspapers and periodicals in the weeks and months following the Commune were no exception to this critique. The role of these female participants, or, *Communardes*, and the false accusations of wrongdoing, were common amongst Anglo-American publications at the time. Unlike earlier distinctions that can be drawn between American and British sources, or daily and weekly publications, inaccuracy about women's roles appears everywhere.

There exists no doubt that women played central roles on the 18th of March and throughout the Commune's short history. "Dispassionate objectivity," on the part of journalists, however, has over exaggerated and falsified that role. As Gullickson notes, "composite or stereotyped female figures are liberally sprinkled through the newspapers, histories and memories of the Commune." These composite women play a dual role; they both "reflect cultural assumptions about woman's nature and appropriate behavior," while they also "assign meaning to women's actions and embody judgments of them and on the Commune."⁴⁴ Again, sensational headlines, condemning illustrations, and falsified eyewitness reports surround the story of these Parisian women. Moreover, they represent a larger judgment similar to other themes of journalism on the Commune.

⁴³ Gullickson, 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.



Detail, "Women of Paris," *Harper's Weekly*, May 27, 1871, p. 485.

Journalists reduced the women of the Commune to several different stereotypical positions within common French and nineteenth-century society. Journalists relied on what cultural historian Marina Warner calls "a lexicon of female types."⁴⁵ This group of women consisted of symbolic caricatures and compilations of actual women's actions and does not accurately portray the role

⁴⁵ Here, Gullickson uses Warner's analogy to describe contemporaries and historians, but it can be argued that the "lexicon of female types" was equally portrayed by journalists at the time because of the similar categories of women journalists wrote about. The oversimplification of complex historical actors is the main point behind this analysis. Historians have relied on these early reports produced by journalists for information, thus continuing these stereotypes portrayed by many journalists. See Gullickson, 118.

of women during these events. Essentially, the lexicon “defined and limited understanding of the Commune,” as Gullickson notes.⁴⁶ Many women were depicted by multiple sources to be *amazons*. Women were known as the “amazons of the Seine,” the “amazons of Paris,” and the “amazons of the Commune.”⁴⁷

The use of *amazons* implies a certain raw and brutal characteristic of the women. It symbolizes a move into yellow journalism. The use of the word is beyond editorializing. *Harper's* was quick to use the term to describe the character of the French women participating in the Commune. As the magazine described in “Women of Montmartre,” “[t]hese are the Amazons of the Commune, and give us an idea of what the warrior-woman really is—coarse, brawny, unwomanly, and degraded; picturesque certainly, but by no means pleasing.”⁴⁸ This type of characterization of women as masculine, unsexed, and barbaric was quite common amongst publications. British papers followed the same trend. As reported in an article titled “The Suppression of the Red Revolution: A New Reign of Terror,” *The Pall Mall Gazette* reports that “one gaunt Amazon had a sort of uniform coat with a white band and red cross upon the arm, and when she arrived, we were told, she wore epaulets.”⁴⁹

Harper's published numerous articles with women as the focus such as “Women of Paris”—prefaced by a large and almost vulgar drawing of a horde of angry Parisian women marching with the flag of the Commune to the beat of a drum. In articles specifically relating to women of the Commune, *Harper's* almost always included a lurid illustration. Additionally, the magazine commented on women's roles in a larger sense: “Every Paris revolution has produced its particular class of female patriots, who, ten times more cruel and unreasonable than men, spur their masculine compatriots on to those unnecessary acts of vengeful cruelty for which the Parisian revolutionists are so notorious.”⁵⁰ U.S. daily publications such as the *New York Herald* characterized the *Communardes* as “debased and debauched creatures, the very outcasts of society.”⁵¹ The characterization of women in this vulgar sense is by no means accidental.

⁴⁶ Gullickson often uses the word “caricature” to describe how women were portrayed by both historians and journalists.

⁴⁷ Gullickson, 86.

⁴⁸ “Women of Montmartre,” *Harper's Weekly*, July 8, 1871, 620.

⁴⁹ “The Suppression of the Red Revolution: A New Reign of Terror,” *The Pall Mall Gazette*, May 30, 1871, 5.

⁵⁰ “Women of Paris,” *Harper's Weekly*, May 27, 1871, 485.

⁵¹ Gullickson, 177.

Conclusion

Thus far, this article has been an exploration into the common themes amongst the reporting on the Commune. It should be noted, however, that some journalists during this period did condemn what was being written on the Commune and cried foul on inaccuracy and sensationalism. While these journalists represented a small majority, historians should recognize them. John Russell Young was an American journalist who had been sent to Paris in May of 1871 by the State Department. Young wrote about his experiences extensively for the *New York Standard*. Young discovered though, as Boime points out, that “the Communards and their experiment had been viciously libeled and slandered.”⁵² Boime continues, writing that “Young recognized that his report ran counter to the popular version, and he stated that it would have been easier for him to have seconded the wild accounts...” Even further, as Young wrote, “The newspapers do little more than scream, and you wade through column after column with much of the feeling of stumbling through a morass or a field of biers.”⁵³ Young was one of the sole eyewitnesses to understand the current effects of sensationalized journalism while simultaneously having a forum to voice his concerns. Another correspondent from London, writing for the *Standard*, lamented a similar idea on May 30th. “How grossly these newspaper correspondents have exaggerated. Had I not been in Paris myself...I should certainly have myself been of the opinion that the accounts of what had taken place had been, to say the least of it, highly coloured...the damage is exceedingly partial.”⁵⁴ Calling foul on reports coming from Paris during the months of the Commune was only done by a few. It is important to note discontent and recognition of a lack of journalistic integrity by a few peers of those journalists who espoused the opinions and lies discussed in this essay, however.⁵⁵

It must be qualified, at the very least, that it is impossible to be fully objective. Certainly, foreign correspondents were especially critical of French politics and culture because they could be and perhaps their readers wanted to read this criticism. Foreign correspondent’s views also help identify the prevailing attitudes of Americans and Brits on the Commune. These biases suggest that American and British citizens were highly critical of the Commune because of the detrimental effects a successful outcome could have on their political and social

⁵² Boime and Warner, 4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁴ Gullickson, 169.

⁵⁵ On American publications see, Frank Luther Mott, *American journalism: A history of newspapers in the United States through 260 years: 1690 to 1950* (New York: MacMillan, 1950).

spheres. In a larger sense, virulent anti-Communism on the American front helps to foreshadow the events of the Cold War almost a century later. It also helps show fears over the changing role of women in Britain during the Victorian era. This essay attempts to characterize different types of publications under central philosophies and methods of reporting. Through it, commonalities in reporting begin to emerge. In general, periodicals provided more in-depth analysis and were more sensational than dailies. We see that both American and British periodicals were equally critical of the French national character, and both even attempted to connect the Commune with the French Revolution. Additionally, we see both presses interested in advancing the false stereotypes of the *Communardes* out of fear that the social position of women in their own countries might be altered. The biggest difference that emerges out of this essay is on the issue of Communism. Americans were virulently anti-Communist while the British were not nearly as concerned. In addition to seeing these sources as a lens to understand foreign attitudes on the Commune, it is equally important to see them as a challenge to writing history.

Often times, historians are faced with the difficult task of identifying what is correct and what is not; what is exaggerated and what is understated. And like journalists, historians also cannot fully escape bias themselves. By understanding the biases that are almost inherent in the majority of these publications' treatment of the Commune, however, and the themes these publications create and envelop, one can better qualify their own writing on the history of the Commune.

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