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Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray  
**History of the Paris Commune of 1871**

With a New Foreword by Eric Hazan



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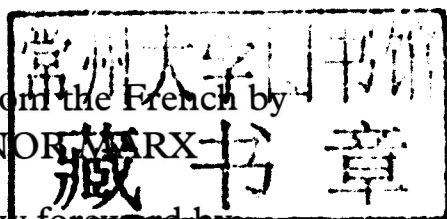
Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray

Translated from the French by

ELEANOR MARX

With a new foreword by

Eric Hazan



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**HISTORY OF THE PARIS COMMUNE  
OF 1871**



## Publisher's Note

Eleanor Marx's translation of Lissagaray's *History* was made from a manuscript revised by the author and approved by Karl Marx. Lissagaray himself regarded it as the definitive edition of his work. Editing has therefore been confined to a minimum, though some minor mistranslations from the original French have been corrected and a number of anachronistic terms, generally derived directly from the French, have been revised to make their meaning clearer. Other French terms recurring in the text are explained in the glossary provided.

Lissagaray's own appendices and notes, which contain valuable documentation of the events described, are reproduced in full. A general index has been added to this edition together with a full index of names enabling the reader to identify the hundreds of protagonists who appear in the book.

## Foreword to the 2012 Edition

Those who recount events in which they took part, from Xenophon to Churchill, generally like to give themselves the leading role. The most common reason for their writing is to justify and celebrate their personal contribution to history. In this respect, and many others as well, Lissagaray is a case apart. He fought in defence of the Commune, rifle in hand, and many even believe that he was himself the Federal in Chapter XXXI who defended singlehanded the last barricade, on Rue Ramponeau, on 28 May. But he does not make a single appearance in his *History of the Paris Commune*. In the magnificent picture he paints of 'Paris on the eve of death', in Chapter XXV, he introduces 'one of the most timid men of the timid provinces', whom he leads through the city, and we might well believe that he invented this companion in order to say 'we' ('On retracing our steps, we pass by the *mairie* of the eleventh arrondissement') and avoid saying 'I'.

Yet this is certainly not a question of modesty. 'Lissa', as he was known, was a rather proud and irascible Gascon, a pamphleteer and duellist. The true reason for his absence from the text is that he did not write this book in order to relate his personal memories – unlike Jules Vallès and Louise Michel, for example – but rather to combat the slanders and lies that the victorious bourgeoisie poured by the bucketload over the defeated Communards. In an open letter published in *Le Rappel*, on 25 July 1880, he addressed himself to the two friends who had agreed to be his seconds in a duel with a journalist:

I thank you for having helped to shed the light of day on the ineffable cowardice of our insulters in the *figariste* press over the past nine years. The same people who acted as Gallifet's\* dogs

\* General Gallifet commanded the repression of the Commune.

during the sack of Paris, denouncing the survivors, finishing off the wounded, spitting on the dead . . . the same people who, for these nine years, piled filth on the deportees and exiles . . . These are the literary scum who for all these years, in sole control of newspapers and bookstores, invented their own legend of the deeds and men of the Commune.

These 'literary scum' did not include only journalists, but also major names in literature, from Flaubert to Zola, from the Goncourt brothers to Maupassant, Barbey d'Aurevilly and Alphonse Daudet. If Lissagaray turned historian, it was to re-establish the truth: 'Time presses,' he wrote in the preface to the first edition of his book in 1876, 'the victims are gliding into their graves; the perfidies of the Radicals threaten to surpass the worn-out calumnies of the Monarchists.' And in a preface of 1896, added for the second edition and titled 'So That People Know', he wrote that deeds would speak for themselves,

summed up, to be sure, by a former fighter, but who was neither a member, nor an officer, not a functionary, nor an employee of the Commune, a simple rank-and-filer who knew men of all milieus, saw the deeds, experienced the dramas, and who gathered and sifted testimonies over many years, with no other ambition than to explain to the new generation the bloody furrow traced by its elders.

This man who embarked on a book that would take twenty-five years to complete was no mere beginner. In August 1868, in his native department of Gers, he founded *L'Avenir*, a 'democratic newspaper' published three times a week.<sup>†</sup> Lissagaray, as editor-in-chief, announced his paper's orientation in its first issue: '*L'Avenir* aims to rally in the Gers all the scattered forces of the great party of revolution.' A year later, having 'gone up' to Paris, he became editorialist on *La Réforme*, a paper of radical tendency, then on *La Marseillaise*,

\* In the introduction to her translation, published in 1886, Eleanor Marx states somewhat ambiguously that the author 'wrote nearly a hundred pages especially for this English version', and that the translation 'was made from the *Histoire de la Commune* as prepared for a second edition'. By the time the second French edition was finally published, however, Lissagaray had made further emendations and additions. For this reason, some of the quotations given in this foreword differ from the English version.

† See the excellent biography of Lissagaray by René Bidouze, *Lissagaray, la plume et l'épée* (Paris: Les Éditions ouvrières, 1991).

a platform for all the currents of the revolutionary left – neo-Jacobins, Blanquists, Internationalists, advanced Radicals – with Millière as its director (shot on the steps of the Panthéon during the Bloody Week), and the famous Rochefort as editor-in-chief, following the ban on his own paper, *La Lanterne*. In this feverish period in the latter days of the Empire, Lissagaray was a striking figure of the Jacobin current in ‘public meetings that further increased this blaze of ideas. People thronged together. In nearly twenty years Paris had not seen people speaking freely.’ His activities, moreover, brought him two months in the Paris prison of Sainte-Pélagie, an obligatory stay for overactive opponents under the Second Empire. The man who would live to relate the seventy days of the Paris Commune was therefore a seasoned activist and journalist.

The book’s long and impassioned prologue recounts the final years of the Empire in Paris, the rise of demonstrations and strikes, the development of the International (‘this mysterious International that was supposed to number millions in both members and treasure’), the solidarity movements with Italian republicans and with Poland under Russian occupation. Lissagaray has no words harsh enough for ‘the Left’ (the capital letter is his own, as a sign of derision): ‘There were now two oppositions: that of the parliamentarians of the Left, and that of the Socialists, with a large number of workers, clerks, and petty-bourgeois’. A little later, this parliamentary Left would find itself almost unanimously on the side of the Versaillais during the Commune – Lissagaray never misses the opportunity to target one of his ‘heroes’, Louis Blanc, already famous for his treachery and cowardice during the June Days of 1848:

In that lachrymose and Jesuitical tone with which he has travestied history, in those long-winded sentimental periods which serve to mask the aridity of his heart . . . Louis Blanc . . . wrote: ‘As to those engaged in the insurrection, we tell them that they ought to have shuddered at the thought of aggravating, of prolonging the scourge of the foreign occupation by adding thereto the scourge of civil discords.’

We should note in passing the effectiveness and trenchancy of Lissagaray’s style; he was one of the best writers for the press in an age when French journalists really did know how to write.

The rise of the International in France and Germany was unable to prevent the Franco-Prussian war of July 1870. Yet, 'for the honour of the French people, another France shows itself. The workers of Paris seek to bar the way to this crime of war, while the old dregs of chauvinism discharge their muddy waters.' A great demonstration against the war crosses Paris, 'Ranvier, a painter on porcelain, well known in Belleville, marching at their head with a banner'. But 'the dogs of war were unleashed, and lungs resounded in a Paris that envisages victories, well-informed journalists claiming they will enter Berlin in a month'.

Rather than victories, the war rapidly turned into such a disaster that the regime could not hold out. Lissagaray tells how the people, when they learned on 4 September that Napoleon III had been captured at Sedan, forced the Left to proclaim his resignation:

At ten o'clock, notwithstanding the desperate efforts of the Left, the crowd fills the galleries [of the Assembly]. It is time. The Chamber, on the point of forming a Ministry, try to seize the government. The Left supports this combination with all its might, waxing indignant at the mere mention of a Republic . . . Gambetta, forced to the tribune, is obliged to announce the abolition of the Empire. The crowd, wanting more than this, asks for the Republic, and carries off the deputies to proclaim it at the Hôtel de Ville.

But the leaders of the Left, cunning as always, forestall the movement and set themselves up as a self-proclaimed government. Lissagaray ferociously writes: 'Twelve individuals thus took possession of France. They invoked no other title than their mandate as representatives of Paris, and declared themselves legitimate by popular acclamation. They took the great name of Government of National Defence. Five of these twelve had already lost the Republic of 1848.'

A few days later, the Prussian army established positions around Paris and embarked on the long siege that would last until January 1871. The Government of National Defence and the army, commanded by Bonapartist generals, feared a popular uprising more than a defeat by the Prussians, which they considered inevitable: 'This gross ignorance very soon alarmed the Revolutionists. They had promised their support, but not blind faith.' They decided to appoint in each arrondissement a Committee of Vigilance, which would



delegate four members to a Central Committee of the twenty arrondissements. This tumultuous mode of election had resulted in a committee composed of working men, employees and authors, known in the revolutionary movements of the last years. This committee had established itself in the hall of the Rue de la Corderie, lent by the International.

This committee, prefiguring the Central Committee of the National Guard that would play a determining role in the weeks that followed, published a manifesto to be stuck on Paris walls, demanding

the election of the municipalities, the police to be placed in their hands, the election and control of all the magistrates, absolute freedom of the press, public meeting and association, the expropriation of all articles of primary necessity, their distribution by allowance, the arming of all citizens, the sending of commissioners to rouse the provinces.

This was a genuine revolutionary programme, which the Commune would largely apply. Naturally, 'the bourgeois journals denounced the committee as Prussian'.

The four long months of the siege of Paris made clear to the people the treason of their government: the Commune was initially a patriotic upsurge, a gesture of national pride, before being a revolutionary social movement – this feature, moreover, being what brought it the essential support of the radical petty bourgeoisie:

What then is [the government's] aim? To negotiate. Since the first defeats they have no other. The reverses which exalted our fathers [an allusion to 1792, Danton, the battle of Valmy] only made the Left more cowardly than the Imperialist deputies . . . Hardly established, these defenders sent M. Thiers all over Europe to beg for peace, and Jules Favre to run after Bismarck . . . When all Paris cried to them, 'Defend us; drive back the enemy,' they applauded, accepted, but said to themselves, 'You shall capitulate.' There is no more crying treason in history.

Paris capitulated on 28 January 1871. A National Assembly was rapidly elected. ('At the signal of the elections, the scenery, laboriously prepared, appeared all of a piece, showing the Conservatives grouped,

supercilious, their lists ready.'). With its monarchist majority it met initially in Bordeaux, but during the Commune it would of course sit in Versailles.

In Paris, however, 'One single thought prevailed: the union of all Parisian forces against the triumphant Rurals. The National Guard represented all the manhood of Paris . . . It was resolved that the confederate battalions should be grouped round a Central Committee.' Who were its members? 'The agitators, the revolutionaries of La Corderie,\* the Socialists? No; there was not a known name among them . . . From the first day the idea of the federation appeared what it was – universal, not sectarian, and therefore powerful.' Lissagaray, we can sense, liked this idea of impersonal power: 'Since the morning of 10 August 1792, Paris had not seen such an advent of unknown men.'

In March 1871, tension grew between the Assembly that had placed Thiers at the head of government, and the people of Paris. The Assembly voted that all rents that had not been paid during the siege were now immediately due:

Two or three hundred thousand workmen, shopkeepers, model makers, small manufacturers working in their own lodgings, who had spent their little stock of money and could not yet earn any more, all business being at a standstill, were thus thrown upon the tender mercies of the landlord, of hunger and bankruptcy . . . After priming the explosion in this way, the Assembly adjourned until 20 March after obliging M. Thiers to declare from the tribune 'that the Assembly could proceed to its deliberations at Versailles without fearing the paving stones of rioters'.

The explosion would take place on 18 March. During the night, Thiers sent the army to seize the cannons of the National Guard that had been installed in Montmartre and other popular quarters of Paris – cannons that had been paid for by the National Guards themselves, and belonged to them. In the morning, when the faubourgs awoke,

Around the milkmaids and before the wine shops the people began talking in a low voice; they pointed to the soldiers, their machine-guns levelled at the streets . . . As in our great days [of 1792], the women were the first to act. Those of 18 March,

\* In other words, the Internationalists.

hardened by the siege – they had a double ration of misery – did not wait for the men. They surrounded the machine-guns, apostrophized the sergeant in command of the gun, saying, ‘This is shameful; what are you doing there?’ The soldiers did not answer. Occasionally a non-commissioned officer spoke to them: ‘Come, my good women, get out of the way.’

General Lecomte, surrounded at Montmartre, ‘three times gave the order to fire. His men stood still, their arms ordered. The crowd, advancing, fraternized with them, and Lecomte and his officers were arrested.’ (Lecomte would be shot the same day, along with another general, Clément Thomas, one of the butchers of the June Days of 1848.)

By eleven o’clock, ‘the people had vanquished the aggressors at all points, preserved almost all their cannon, of which only ten had been carried off, and seized thousands of chassepots.’ On the morning of the 19 March, ‘the red flag floated above the Hôtel de Ville. With the early morning mists the army, the Government, the Administration had evaporated. From the depths of the Bastille, from the obscure Rue Basfroi, the Central Committee [of the National Guard] was lifted to the summits of Paris in the sight of all the world.’ It sent delegates to seize the ministries and various services: ‘Varlin and Jourde went to the Ministry of Finance; Eudes to the War Ministry; Duval and Raoul Rigault to the Prefecture de Police; Bergeret to the Place [i.e. Ministry of the Interior]; Edouard Moreau was put in charge of the *Journal Officiel* and the Imprimerie Nationale.’ Scarcely one of these delegates would survive the Commune.

‘The honour and salvation of the Central Committee was that it had only one thought, to return power to Paris.’ To this end it organized elections, so free that a number of conservatives, opponents of the Committee, were elected to it. The day after, 28 March,

two hundred thousand ‘wretches’ came to the Hôtel de Ville there to install their chosen representatives, the battalion drums beating, the banners surmounted by the Phrygian cap and with the red fringe round the muskets; their ranks, swelled by soldiers of the line, artillerymen, and marines faithful to Paris, came down from all the streets to the Place de Grève [Place de l’Hôtel de Ville] like the thousand streams of a great river . . . Suddenly the noise subsided. The members of the Central

Committee and of the Commune, their red scarfs over their shoulders, appeared on the platform . . . Ranvier cried out, 'In the name of the People the Commune is proclaimed.' A thousandfold echo answered, '*Vive la Commune!*' Caps were flung up on the ends of bayonets, flags fluttered in the air. From the windows, on the roofs, thousands of hands waved handkerchiefs. The quick reports of the cannon, the bands, the drums, blended into one formidable vibration.

Lissagaray devotes a great deal of space – almost half the book – to the underlying causes of the Commune's defeat and the final disaster. You get the sense that he is seeking to draw lessons from it for the next time round. Twenty-six years after, he reflected on his reasons in his response to an inquiry conducted by the *Revue Blanche*:\*

How would you summarize the causes of the fall of the Commune?

Failing to occupy Mont-Valérien and waiting until 3 April to march on Versailles were the key failings at the beginning. The interference of the Central Committee in affairs after the elections, the manifesto and split of the twenty-two minority members on 15 May,<sup>†</sup> the Commune's mania for legislating when what mattered was to fight and prepare for the final struggle – these were the germs of defeat. And once the Versaillais had entered Paris, the defeat was hastened by Deslescluze's proclamation of 22 May, which flouted all discipline, by the dispersion of Commune members to their respective districts, by the virtual inaction of the artillery park at Montmartre, and by the fire at the Hôtel de Ville . . . If there had been two hundred barricades planned in advance, strategic and mutually supporting, ten thousand men would have been enough to defend Paris indefinitely.

\* *Enquête sur la Commune de Paris* (Paris: la Revue Blanche, 1897; republished by Éd. De l'Amateur, 2011, introduced by Jean Baronnet).

† The Commune was the first assembly in history in which more than a quarter of the representatives were workers. It subsequently divided into a majority – Blanquists and neo-Jacobins – who wanted an authoritarian revolutionary government, and a minority, made up of Internationalists and various socialists, who stood for social measures and were particularly opposed to the idea of a revolutionary dictatorship. The members of the minority included Gustave Courbet, Jules Vallès, and Marx's future son-in-law Charles Longuet.

The Commune's poor barricades, unplanned and not supporting one another, would not hold out for more than a week.

These were not the traditional strongholds two storeys high. The improvised barricades of the May days were only the height of a few paving stones, scarcely as high as a man. Behind them there was sometimes a cannon or a machine-gun. In the middle, wedged between two stones, the red flag, the colour of vengeance. Regiments by the dozen faced these wretched ramparts.

The struggle soon came to focus on the popular quarters of the north and east. On 23 May, Montmartre was taken, and the massacres began:

Hardly arrived at Montmartre, the Versaillais staff offered a holocaust to the shades of Lecomte and Clément-Thomas. Forty-two men, three women, and four children were conducted to No. 6 in the Rue des Rosiers and forced to kneel bare-headed before the wall, at the foot of which the generals had been executed on 18 March; then they were killed.

The Commune fell back on the *mairie* of the eleventh arrondissement. The barricades on Boulevard Voltaire stopped the Versaillais who had occupied the Place du Château d'Eau (now Place de la République):

We saw Delescluze, Jourde, and about a hundred Federals marching in the direction of the Château d'Eau. Delescluze wore his ordinary dress, black hat, coat, and trousers, his red scarf, inconspicuous as was his wont, tied round his waist. Without arms, he leant on a cane . . . At about eighty yards from the barricade the guards who accompanied him kept back, for the projectiles obscured the entrance of the boulevard . . . The sun was setting. The old exile, unmindful whether he was followed, still advanced at the same pace, the only living being on the road. Arrived at the barricade, he bent off to the left and mounted upon the paving-stones. For the last time his austere face, framed in his white beard, appeared to us turned towards death. Suddenly Delescluze disappeared. He had fallen as if thunderstricken on the Place du Château d'Eau.



The final barricades of the Commune – several streets dispute the honour of having hosted the very last – were erected on the slopes of Belleville. They fell one by one in the course of that Sunday, under a radiant sun. ‘By degrees the firing was lulled, all was silent. About ten o’clock the last Federal cannon was discharged in the Rue du Paris, which the Versaillais had taken. The piece, charged with double shot, with a terrible crash exhaled the last sigh of the Paris Commune.’

Lissagaray escaped the mass executions, the military courts, the pontoon prisons of Brest, the deportations to Guyana. He managed to hide out in the house of a prostitute, then to cross into Belgium, and from there to England, the main refuge of the outlaws of the Commune. In the second edition of his book, he describes the life of the Communards in London: ‘The working men quickly found employment, many being among the elite of their trade’ – engravers, painters on porcelain, leather embossers, sculptors in ivory, all skilled crafts whose practitioners were at the heart of revolutionary Paris. ‘The women – dressmakers, florists, milliners, linen-drapers, imbued with French taste – were immediately taken on in the workshops and created new models’. This new beginning was harder for ‘the exiles without a manual trade, clerks, teachers, doctors, men of letters’, many of whom gave French lessons – Brunel ‘taught the sons of the Prince of Wales at Dartmouth Naval College’ – or managed to resume their artistic activity, like the sculptor Dalou or the painter Tissot. Quarrels among the exiles were frequent (especially between Vallès and Lissagaray): ‘No doubt the exiles of 1871 included bitterly opposing groups – all such communities are riven by hatred – but they would all be found following the coffin of a comrade wrapped in the red flag.’

In London, one of the rallying points of the exiles was the house of Karl Marx, where Lissagaray became a regular visitor. A long and painful love affair developed between Lissa and Tussy (Eleanor), the youngest of Marx’s daughters. Her father was resolutely opposed to her affair with a Frenchman (Marx distrusted these petty-bourgeois followers of Proudhon), who was poor into the bargain. Tussy’s mother, Jenny, was equally hostile to her daughter’s marriage to a man twice her age (Lissa was thirty-four at the time, Tussy seventeen). The eldest of the Marx girls, Laura, married to Paul Lafargue, also disliked Lissagaray, who would hold a grudge against Lafargue

for the rest of his life. In the end, Tussy gave in to her family, but in March 1874 she wrote to her father: 'I want to know, dear Mohr, when I may see L. again. It is so *very* hard *never* to see him . . . could I not, now and then, go out for a little walk with him?'\* Poor Tussy would undertake the English translation of Lissagaray's *History*, which finally appeared in 1886.

In 1873, Lissagaray published a pamphlet in Brussels, *La Vision de Versailles*, in which he spoke for the dead of the Commune against the Versaillais, in a kind of funeral accusation:

You massacred thirty thousand people; you banished, exiled, imprisoned and deported twenty thousand more. The political scaffold is erected, while France crouches in chains at the feet of Bismarck, the certain prey of the first bold general who tries to seize it – this is your work! It is enough. Give us an account for our blood.

The first edition of Lissagaray's book appeared in Brussels in 1876, published by the bookseller Kistemaekers. It did not escape the notice of the police, and its distribution was banned in France. Twenty years later, an edition much expanded by long research was published in Paris by Dentu. Lissagaray, who returned to France after the amnesty of 1880, rejoined the struggle. He started a newspaper, *La Bataille*, staffed by former Communards, 'which will belong to all who seek the suppression of classes by the advent of working people'. Neither Marxist nor Guesdist, and still less Broussist (the movement of Paul Brousse, opposed to class struggle), this paper incessantly promoted the union of all revolutionaries. It supported workers' struggles, opposed colonial expeditions, and played an active part in the struggle against the anti-republican manoeuvres of General Boulanger. Lissagaray did not lay down his arms until the end.

On his death in 1901, his coffin was followed to Père-Lachaise by two thousand friends, including the Communard veterans Pascal Grousset, Charles Longuet, Maxime Lisbonne, Maxime Vuillaume, and Édouard Vaillant, who gave the funeral oration for a man a contemporary journalist described as 'for all seasons,

\* This letter is reproduced in full in Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx, Vol. 1: Family Life 1855–1883* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1972, pp. 13–14).

intelligent, intractable with arrivistes whether powerful or not, merciless towards renegades, hard on himself, with little indulgence for others: his pen and his sword always sharpened'.\* It is this 'sharpened pen' by which Lissagaray lives on to our day with his *History of the Paris Commune*.

Eric Hazan

Translated by David Fernbach

\* Ibid., p. 228.