

*H-France Salon, Volume 3, Issue 1***How bloody was la Semaine Sanglante? A revision.**

Robert Tombs  
St John's College, Cambridge  
rpt1000@cam.ac.uk

Paper Presented at

57<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the  
Society for French Historical Studies  
Charleston, South Carolina  
12 February 2011

From the earliest commentaries to the latest scholarly publications, the exceptional level of violence during la Semaine Sanglante, 21-28 May 1871 – “one of the bloodiest weeks in the annals of human butchery”<sup>1</sup> for one historian – has been a central element of perceptions of the Paris Commune as a whole, of class and political antagonisms in France, and even of those in nineteenth-century Europe more generally. Karl Marx made it the peroration of his contemporary *Civil War in France*: the Commune’s “martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class. Its exterminators history has already nailed to that eternal pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them.”

The unparalleled scale of the slaughter has formed the keystone for a range of historical narratives. Almost all writing since the 1870s, polemical and scholarly, has taken up the theme. Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, one of the Commune’s first and certainly most durable historians, asserted soon after the events that 20,000 had been killed and later, in 1876, that at least 17,000 and probably 20,000 people had been killed. Camille Pelletan, in *La Semaine de Mai* (1880), the most detailed ever study, as well as being a moving and powerful work, asserted that the minimum figure was 30,000.<sup>2</sup> Lesser known Communard sympathizers gave much higher figures, of 50,000 killed or more. For Emile Zola, this was the apocalyptic purge of a sick society. For Lenin it was a pointer to future class war: “20,000 killed in streets ... Lessons: bourgeoisie will *stop at nothing*. Today, liberals, radicals, republicans, tomorrow betrayal, shootings.”<sup>3</sup> For several recent cultural historians, it has been a traumatic secret that had to be repressed or even somehow expunged from memory.<sup>4</sup> For François Furet, it was the final paroxysm of the French revolution: “this last great uprising in the French revolutionary tradition ... the one which created the most fear and shed the most blood ...formed the ultimate exorcism of a violence which had been an inseparable part of French public

---

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), p. 341.

<sup>2</sup> Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, *Histoire de la Commune de 1871* (Paris: Maspero 1972, which reproduced the revised Dentu edition of 1896), p. 381; Camille Pelletan, *La Semaine de Mai* (Paris: Dreyfous, 1880), p. 396.

<sup>3</sup> “Plan of a lecture on the Commune,” 1905, in V.I. Lenin, *On the Paris Commune* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup> See especially Albert Boime, *Art and the French Commune: Imagining Paris after War and Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 1995) and Colette E. Wilson, *Paris and the Commune, 1871-78: The Politics of Forgetting* (Manchester University Press, 2007).

life since the end of the eighteenth century. In this Paris in flames, the French Revolution said farewell to history.”<sup>5</sup>

My own earlier work fully shared this orthodoxy: indeed, lest it be thought that I am being too critical of colleagues at any point in this paper, let me say at the outset that I labored to document and theorize the orthodoxy. As this paper is a revision of my own research too, I hope readers will forgive occasional autobiographical allusions. In my Ph.d. dissertation I wrote, “25,000 [deaths] is no wild estimate,”<sup>6</sup> and in the revised published version that “the total number of Parisians killed could ... be anything between 10,000 and 30,000, with the most probable figure about halfway between.”<sup>7</sup> The scale and intensity of violence in May 1871, and its organized and ideologically targeted character, seemed beyond the norms of nineteenth-century European experience, and I made tentative comparisons with colonial violence and the mass killings of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup>

However, I began to have doubts. I won’t go into details in this short paper, but they were due to inconsistencies with the accepted account that came up in the course of research. These made me want to investigate how many people were in fact killed. Sparing you failed attempts using various archives and official publications, I did eventually find some evidence, which went into a short article published in France as long ago as 1994,<sup>9</sup> suggesting that the total death toll was not 20-30,000, but about 10,000, and the gist of the argument appeared in 1997 in the revised French edition of my Ph.d.-based monograph. My main conclusion was that this suggested that the number killed in cold blood, after the fighting, by court martial, accounted for a high proportion of total deaths – perhaps half – and so pointed towards organized mass killings as the unique and baleful feature of this episode, rather than random violence by uncontrolled soldiers.<sup>10</sup> I then awaited an outcry from Commune specialists – a combative bunch – or at least a reaction. Instead, nothing. Specialists and non-specialists continued to write what had always been written. David A. Shafer concluded in 2005 that 17,000 to 30,000 died.<sup>11</sup> Jack Hayward wrote in 2007 of “summary mass executions of some 20 to 25,000 Communards.”<sup>12</sup> In the latest English-language monograph on the Commune, Colette E. Wilson states firmly, “some 20,000 (perhaps many more) men, women and children were killed.”<sup>13</sup> In a major 2008 study of post-revolutionary France, Robert Gildea concluded that some 10,000 were killed in the fighting and another 10,000 prisoners were executed.<sup>14</sup> Michael Rowe added a chilling detail – “the army used its primitive machine guns against the columns of chained prisoners.”<sup>15</sup> Pierre Milza, in a major history of the Commune published in 2009, did actually refer to my argument, but only to dismiss it with a devastating put-down: “on ne voit pas très bien ce qui ... permet [à l'historien britannique] d'avancer un bilan du massacre aussi éloigné de celui que propose

<sup>5</sup> François Furet, *Revolutionary France 1770-1880* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 506.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Tombs, “The forces of order and the suppression of the Paris insurrection of 1871” (Ph.d. dissertation: Cambridge University, 1980), p. 308.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Tombs, *The War Against Paris 1871* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 191,

<sup>8</sup> Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler, eds., *On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 554, 564.

<sup>9</sup> “Victimes et bourreaux de la semaine sanglante,” in *1848: Révolutions et Mutations du XIXe siècle* 10 (1994): pp. 81-96; *La Guerre contre Paris 1871* (Paris: Aubier, 1997), pp. 323-35.

<sup>10</sup> This had been the quasi-official excuse of Thiers and MacMahon, enshrined for posterity in Ernest Lavisse’s famous *Histoire de la France contemporaine* (1921) vol. 7, p 313: “Les soldats, exaspérés ... arrivaient disposés à traiter les insurgés en assassins et en incendiaires. L’ordre officiel de faire prisonniers les fédérés qui se rendaient ne fut pas observé” – a gross distortion.

<sup>11</sup> David A. Shafer, *The Paris Commune* (London: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 97-8.

<sup>12</sup> Jack Hayward, *Fragmented France* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 158.

<sup>13</sup> Colette E. Wilson, *Paris and the Commune*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Gildea, *Children of the Revolution: The French, 1799-1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), p. 244.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Rowe, “New regimes,” in *Times Literary Supplement* (21 Nov. 2008), p. 23.

le général Appert.”<sup>16</sup> Laure Godineau, in the most recent book on the Commune, refers to the various estimates of the death toll, including mine, without expressing a judgment.<sup>17</sup>

So I am most grateful to the organizers of this conference for the opportunity to bring the subject before a major group of French history specialists and perhaps even to establish some consensus. This paper begins by presenting the results of this research, which I believe is reasonably conclusive in suggesting an “order of magnitude” for the death toll – precise figures are impossible. There is then an attempt to assess how the victims met their deaths, and what this tells us. I then consider how the traditional “myth” (as it must logically be seen) of *la semaine sanglante* came into being, and the functions it fulfils. In conclusion, there are some suggestions of how a revision might prompt some changes in our view of the “narrative” of nineteenth-century France, and this, I hope, might give rise to discussion.

## I

General Félix Antoine Appert called in aid by Milza has to be the starting point of any investigation.<sup>18</sup> Lissagaray first asserted that “le chef de la justice militaire avoua dix-sept mille fusillés” – an assertion repeated by Pelletan, who added that it was “le chiffre que les rapports des chefs de corps fixaient.”<sup>19</sup> This was later accepted by canonical republican histories such as that of Lavissee, and since practically all historians of this subject have referred to Appert directly or at second or third hand as settling the question: because if even an army general “admitted” to shooting 17,000 people the real number must be greater. Lissagaray’s reference is not, as some historians have supposed, to Appert’s official report on the judicial repression of the Commune.<sup>20</sup> This says nothing about summary executions. In fact, it is to a statement made by Marshal Patrice de MacMahon, commander in chief of the Army of Versailles before a parliamentary inquiry in August 1871. As this has proved such a key statement, regularly repeated and misinterpreted, I am referring you to the relevant verbatim text (appendix 1).<sup>21</sup>

You will see that MacMahon did not know how many people were killed in the fighting in Paris, but did not deny the possibility of 17,000 as the total of *killed and wounded* throughout the *whole two months* of the civil war, as had reportedly been suggested by Appert. Neither MacMahon nor Appert “admitted” to having “shot” 17,000 people – the former explicitly denied it. In reality, neither of them was in a position to know how many people had been killed: enquiries among their senior subordinates – the “rapports des chefs de corps” that Pelletan implied had given this figure – had elicited the response that no record had been made of Communard casualties and that information was “très incomplete.”<sup>22</sup> So the key evidence cited for 130 years is worthless, based either on a hasty misunderstanding or a deliberate distortion.

Following the deafening silence that greeted my first excursion into this subject, I would probably not have returned to it had it not been for an enquiry from the City of Paris, who asked me whether it would be reasonable to put a plaque in the Charonne cemetery (in eastern Paris) stating that 9,000 Communards had been buried there following *la semaine sanglante*. If this were true, not only would

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Milza, *L’Année terrible*: vol. 2 *La Commune* (Paris: Perrin, 2009), p. 468.

<sup>17</sup> Laure Godineau, *La Commune de Paris, par ceux qui l’ont vécue* (Paris: Parigramme, 2010), p. 216.

<sup>18</sup> I have made this point elsewhere, but it seems necessary to repeat it here, not least given Milza’s recent argument.

<sup>19</sup> Lissagaray, *Histoire*, p. 381; Pelletan, *Semaine de Mai*, p. 372.

<sup>20</sup> “Rapport d’ensemble de M. le Général Appert sur les opérations de la justice militaire relatives à l’insurrection de 1871,” Assemblée Nationale, annexe au procès-verbal de la session du 20 juillet 1875 (Versailles, 1875).

<sup>21</sup> “Déposition de M. le maréchal Mac-Mahon” (28 Aug. 1871), in *Enquête parlementaire sur l’insurrection du 18 mars 1871* (Paris: Librairie Législative, 1872), p. 183.

<sup>22</sup> See several reports by generals from June 1871, in Service Historique de l’Armée de Terre series Li (“Guerre de 1870-71: Armée de Paris”) carton 125 [SHAT Li 125].

it of course completely discredit my estimate of some 10,000 for the whole city, but it would indicate a much higher death toll even than Pelletan's, who had not included this 9,000 in his grand total of over 30,000. The Charonne story turned out to be unfounded, but it spurred me into further investigation.

Several new sources have come to light.<sup>23</sup> Much of the material was discovered quite easily by a student who had done an undergraduate special subject with me on "l'année terrible" and was curious to do some research. I mention this because it underlines the fact that the data are not difficult to obtain – if one looks. The Archives de Paris have the results of an internal enquiry made in 1872 by the city administration into the number of people buried in all the seventeen Paris cemeteries between 20 and 30 May 1871 (that is, including *la semaine sanglante*, 21-28 May), and there is correspondence among various officials. The Archives also contains detailed lists of the numbers and original locations of bodies exhumed from streets and open spaces within the city and correspondence concerning this process. The archives of the Assistance Publique (which administered the city's health service) have details of the monthly death rate in Paris hospitals during 1870-71 in comparison with normal months and also details of treatment and deaths in the Paris hospitals during the period of the civil war, with separate statistics for Communard casualties. In addition, there are cemetery records, a report by the city highways department, and a report by the police, which I had used in earlier research. The various sources give, I believe, probably as full and reliable account as can be expected and a far sounder basis for a conclusion than anything hitherto available.

The basic step is to estimate the total of deaths. Here, there is a strong degree of agreement among the sources and even, to some extent, with the polemical findings published in the 1870s. The data are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1: derived from "État indiquant le nombre de corps inhumés sans mandat du 20 au 30 mai 1871" (Archives de Paris)**

Est [i.e. Père Lachaise]	878	Ivry	650
Nord [Montmartre]	783	Grenelle	30
Sud [Montparnasse]	1,634	Marcadet	185
Auteuil	68	St Vincent	6
Batignolles	14	La Villette	13
Belleville	11	Passy	350
Bercy	425	Vaugirard	140
Charonne	134	St Ouen	-
		La Chapelle	-

The approximate number of emergency burials in the Paris cemeteries over this period is 5,322.<sup>24</sup> The *registres d'inhumation* (ledgers of burials kept in each cemetery) which appear most complete are, not surprisingly, close to the figures in the table.<sup>25</sup> The city highways department reported 5,517 bodies brought in from the various parts of the city – not quite the same thing, hence some variation

<sup>23</sup> I would like to thank a former Cambridge history student, Patrick Turner, who kindly undertook initial research at the Archives de Paris, and also provided valuable intellectual input, and Madame Filloles of the Archives de Paris.

<sup>24</sup> Including the new cemetery at Ivry, just outside the city walls.

<sup>25</sup> The Montmartre register is somewhat erratic, and the real total is probably somewhat higher than 739. I had intended to verify registers in all the Paris cemeteries, and also to reexamine those consulted (by kind permission of M. Gaston Fischer) when doing earlier research. But I was unfortunately refused permission to do so, despite the intercession of Madame Odile Christienne, deputy mayor of Paris responsible for archives. The bizarre – indeed Balzacian – grounds for this refusal are apparently that the registers contain information concerning "family secrets." I have not given up hope of completing this research, though I would be surprised if it elicited anything that fundamentally changed the overall picture.

in the figures.<sup>26</sup> The police archives record a higher total of 6,902, which included those buried on waste ground outside the cemeteries. Pelletan, of course, gives a very much higher figure. In order to compare these figures I have drawn up Table 2 by arrondissement, with the aim of showing where discrepancies occur.

**Table 2: Totals by arrondissement from the various sources**  
*Major discrepancies are shown in bold italics*

	Police	Highways	Cemetery reports	Cem. registers	Pelletan
12 <sup>th</sup>	425	600	425		425
13 <sup>th</sup>	650	404	650		<b>5,000</b>
14 <sup>th</sup>	1,634	1,623	1,634	1,684	1,900
15 <sup>th</sup>	175	171	170		280
16 <sup>th</sup>	418	535	418		<b>879</b>
17 <sup>th</sup>	14	38	14		100
18 <sup>th</sup>	974	787	974	739	<b>5,500</b>
19 <sup>th</sup>	<b>1,589</b>	<b>385</b>	<b>13</b>		<b>1,600</b>
20 <sup>th</sup>	1,023	974	1,023		<b>2,000</b>
Totals	6,902	5,517	5,322		17,684

[*Note: there are cemeteries only in these 9 outer arrondissements*]

The substantial disagreement across the board for the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement concerns whether or not they include burials in the Carrières d'Amérique (underground quarry shafts in an unbuilt area of north-eastern Paris). Otherwise, there is a fair level of agreement between the various sources, except Pelletan. Even then, his really major disagreements come only from his assertions that 5,000 and 5,500 bodies respectively were buried at the cemeteries at Ivry (here counted under the 13<sup>th</sup> arrondissement) and Montmartre (18<sup>th</sup>). Nothing in any of the archival sources lends credence to these claims: the cemetery report for Ivry states 650 and the register at Montmartre 739. These were not documents publicly available, and it is hard to see why they should have been deliberately falsified or wildly inaccurate, as Pelletan asserted, especially as they had important administrative and financial purposes.

Both Lissagaray and Pelletan further assert that large numbers of bodies were buried or burned in open spaces within the city, with the implication that most were never found. Lissagaray, for example, tells a macabre and often repeated story that large numbers of executed prisoners (or even dying wounded prisoners) were buried in the Square Saint-Jacques, a small park in the centre of Paris, and that they pushed their hands up out of the soil. This is one of the most notorious stories of the time, often repeated. However, immediately after the fighting, the police and the mairie made frantic efforts to find and remove all bodies left lying in the streets or hastily buried in open spaces.<sup>27</sup> There are many letters from residents demanding action, and the city administration was under strong pressure. Private individuals and public authorities strongly objected to the presence of bodies in shallow graves under their windows or in their gardens. Public health was the major concern, but there were others. One school, for example, had bodies buried in the playground, some of which, it was reported, might have been the fathers of children at the school. The authorities were intent on ensuring that no burial sites became places of pilgrimage – relatives were laying flowers on improvised graves. As quickly as possible, therefore, bodies were exhumed and reburied in mass graves in the city cemeteries. It seems unlikely given the circumstances that many were overlooked. In the Square Saint-Jacques, where one standard history claims that 1,000 were buried, only a few dozen bodies were found.<sup>28</sup> Detailed records of these exhumations were kept. They

<sup>26</sup> "Rapport de l'ingénieur en chef 8 June 1871," Archives de Paris [AP] VO (NC) 234 "Voie publique :Commune de 1871."

<sup>27</sup> See Archives de Paris series 1326 W carton 60 [AP 1326 W 60].

<sup>28</sup> The exact figure is uncertain: a total of 62 bodies were exhumed from the Square Saint-Jacques and two other parks.

totaled 1,328 for the whole city<sup>29</sup> – far lower than the ‘several thousand’ stated by Pelletan.<sup>30</sup> Some of this total needs to be added to the earlier total buried in the cemeteries. There is, however, some double counting, as it is clear from several sources that some exhumations were already included in the cemetery totals, and many if not all are already counted in the Prefecture of Police total (which included bodies buried in the *Carrières d’Amérique*).<sup>31</sup>

Another largely new fact emerges from the correspondence concerning these exhumations and the cemetery burials during *la semaine sanglante*: they also include civilians who had died of natural causes or as “collateral damage,” hostages executed by the revolutionaries, and soldiers of the Versailles Army who were sometimes buried in the same improvised graves as the Communards – “sans distinctions, des corps de soldats, de fédérés, et meme de personnes frappés accidentellement.”<sup>32</sup> Hence, the grand total of burials for that week also includes non-Communard dead. The normal weekly death rate in Paris was about 1,000. The number of Versaillais soldiers killed during the week of street fighting was probably some 500.<sup>33</sup> Consequently, a figure of up to 1,500 might have to be deducted from the total number of Paris burials to give the true number of Communards – but it is impossible to be sure how many, as some bodies might have been claimed by their families and buried separately. Taking account of all these considerations, a reasonable approximation of Communards buried inside the city walls during and soon after *la semaine sanglante* is probably between 6,000 and 7,500.<sup>34</sup>

However, both Lissagaray and Pelletan state that large numbers of bodies were taken outside the city for burial or incineration at unspecified sites: Pelletan says 10,000-12,000.<sup>35</sup> I am aware of no verifiable evidence supporting this assertion. There is no hint of it in the documents I have examined, and as far as I am aware, there has been no subsequent discovery of mass graves on or beyond the scale of Katyn or Szerebrenica in the now fully built-up suburbs. There was no reason for doing this anyway: it would have been highly unpleasant, labour intensive, expensive, and terrible publicity – hundreds of cartloads of putrefying corpses driving miles across the city from the north-eastern quarters (the main site of fighting) out to the southern suburbs, when they could easily be buried in the nearest cemetery. Pelletan’s explanation was that the city cemeteries could not cope.<sup>36</sup> Hence the need to take bodies outside for disposal, and also, he suggests, the cause of inaccurate or falsified cemetery records. But the cemeteries do seem to have been able to cope – one cemetery manager even complained that he had spent money digging far more graves than he had bodies to put in them.<sup>37</sup> An internal report in 1874 denied stories that bodies had been hastily buried pell-mell

---

<sup>29</sup> AP 1326 W 60, “État des exhumations faites après la Commune (1871) des cadavres qui avaient été inhumés sur la voie publique.” This document is referred to by both Maxime Du Camp in his rabidly anti-Communard *Les Convulsions de Paris*, 4 vols (Paris: Hachette, 1878-79), and by Pelletan.

<sup>30</sup> *Semaine de Mai*, p. 394.

<sup>31</sup> For example, reports from the city highways department from early June 1871 note that bodies found in or exhumed from “la voie publique” had already been buried in the city cemeteries. AP VO (NC) 234.

<sup>32</sup> Report by the Contrôleur du Service des Cimetières, 9 June 1887, AP 1326 W 60

<sup>33</sup> Both Du Camp and Pelletan said that the Versaillais had over 800 killed, but this was MacMahon’s official tally of army casualties for the whole period of the civil war – the only official figures published – not only for the fighting inside Paris. My original “guesstimate” for the Paris fighting was half the total figure (*War against Paris*, p. 238 n. 79) but that may be a little low. Around 500 soldiers killed seems a not excessive estimate – less than 0.5 percent of the troops engaged.

<sup>34</sup> My minimum figure is based on the highest archival (rather than hearsay) total of some 6,900 burials (the police estimated 6,900, seemingly including reburials, and the highways department figure plus the total of exhumations gives an almost identical total) minus a substantial estimate (900) for non-Communard dead (hostages, soldiers and civilians); my maximum figure is the police figure, plus 800 (said to have been found subsequently near the Parc Monceau), minus a low estimate (200) for non-Communard dead.

<sup>35</sup> *Semaine de Mai*, p. 394.

<sup>36</sup> *Semaine de Mai*, p. 384.

<sup>37</sup> “Rapport à Monsieur l’Inspecteur general” from the Garde Conservateur of the Passy cemetery, 10 June 1871, AP 1326 W 60.

in pits or piled up in several layers: all were placed ‘one beside the other’ at regulation depth.<sup>38</sup> My supposition is therefore that – unless some new evidence comes to light – there was no mass disposal of bodies outside the city, though it is quite likely that men killed earlier in the fighting in the suburbs or illegally executed were disposed of there.

I conclude, therefore, that the approximate number of Communards killed during la semaine sanglante was between 6,000 and 7,500. This is considerably lower than previous estimates – including mine.<sup>39</sup> Is it implausibly low? Some may find it so, whatever documentary evidence is presented. These reactions are explicable by the fact that very high figures have been repeated so often that they have become an inherent part of the story. Even the figures of over 30,000 dead given by Pelletan are not impossible, of course. It is odd, however, that his exhaustively argued work is rarely if ever cited by Commune historians, who tend to rely on Lissagaray’s version of Appert’s “admission.” This shows how shaky the foundations are for the traditional view, and simply to restate (as not a few historians do) that there is a consensus among historians on this subject is unconvincing. To look at plausibility another way, even my relatively low figures for Communard deaths mean a daily death toll well above the average daily losses of the whole French army in 1916.

## II

How did these thousands of people meet their deaths? Some were killed fighting on the barricades. Some died later from their wounds – probably a sizeable proportion, given the limits of military medicine at the time, when people suffering serious head and abdominal injuries rarely lived long enough even to be treated. Some were summarily shot on the spot as rebels captured bearing arms. Others were taken for trial before drumhead courts martial, and some of these were sentenced to death and executed forthwith – especially targeted were leaders, foreigners, volunteers and suspected criminals. The most notorious places of judgment and execution were at the prisons of La Roquette and Mazas, the nearby Père Lachaise cemetery, the Châtelet theatre and nearby Lobau barracks, and the Luxembourg palace (the Senate) and its gardens.

Two sources shed light on the proportions of deaths due to these various causes. The register of the Montparnasse cemetery was kept in considerable detail for the 1,684 bodies recorded as buried there, giving the date of arrival and the place from which the body came. For the purposes of the analysis that follows, I use my estimate of 6,000 to 7,500 deaths. The Montparnasse cemetery accounts for about 25 percent of this total number, and it therefore seems reasonable to treat it as a representative sample.

Some of the places from which bodies were brought to Montparnasse are unambiguous: ‘le Luxembourg’ or ‘le Sénat’ must refer to the court martial there; these, I assume, were people who had been executed. Similarly those from ‘le caserne Lobau’, another notorious killing place. When several at a time came from the Val de Grâce, Gros Cailloux, or Ambulance de la Presse – large military hospitals – I assume they had died from wounds received in the fighting. Those brought in ones and twos from miscellaneous streets were those who had been killed in the fighting or who had been refused quarter and shot – two categories that are impossible to distinguish now and were often difficult to distinguish then. However, the provenance of many corpses is ambiguous. Often

---

<sup>38</sup> Report of “Inspection-Générale du Service,” 8 October 1874. AP 1326 W 60. Although the body of the Communard leader Charles Delescluze had been buried in a common grave in the Montmartre cemetery to prevent his burial site from becoming a site of pilgrimage, the administration knew exactly where it was, and indeed it was exhumed on 26 November 1883 and reburied at Père Lachaise.

<sup>39</sup> My minimum figure is lower even than that given by Maxime Du Camp, *Les Convulsions de Paris*, vol. 2, p. 471, universally condemned as tendentiously low – “une plaisanterie déplacée,” wrote Pelletan in *Semaine de Mai*, p. 393. It is clear that Du Camp based his figures squarely on administrative returns from the cemeteries, which I can now show to be genuine; but he seemingly did not realize that these figures included non-Communard dead, both civilian and military.

several came from local *mairies*: were these execution sites, or places to which people took bodies left lying in the street, or first-aid posts?

Consequently, I suggest two possibilities: a ‘worst case’ (which assumes that in *all* cases where several bodies were brought from a particular place they had been executed in cold blood); and a ‘best case’ (which assumes that in cases of doubt people had been killed in the fighting, and also that some places from which several bodies came – for example, the church of Saint Germain l’Auxerrois – were temporary hospitals rather than places of execution.) These two hypotheses are then extrapolated from the Montparnasse total of 1,684 to account for the whole range of 6,000–7,500 deaths throughout the city.

Table 3: Causes of death  
*Median figures are given in bold*

‘Worst case’			
Killed in fighting/summarily executed (30%)	1,800	<b>2,025</b>	2,250
Died of wounds in hospital (29%)		1,740	<b>1,957</b>
<u>Executed after the fighting (41%)</u>		2,460	<b>2,767</b>
Total		6,000	<b>6,750</b>
‘Best case’			
Killed in fighting/summarily executed (41%)	2,460	<b>2,767</b>	3,075
Died of wounds in hospital (38%)		2,280	<b>2,565</b>
<u>Executed after the fighting (21%)</u>		1,260	<b>1,417</b>
Total		6,000	<b>6,750</b>

Hospital records provide a supplementary clue as to which of these hypotheses is more plausible by giving statistics of deaths from wounds received in combat in the city’s civilian hospitals. (It is a striking comment on working conditions in the city that the official report notes that the number of fractures caused by bullets during the fighting was about the same as that caused in normal times by work accidents.) There were 2,555 admissions of wounded Communards and 784 deaths, of which 648 during May and June.<sup>40</sup> The high mortality rate (30%) was not unusual for battle casualties.

I am now making a somewhat bold assumption: that a reasonable approximation – it can be no more than that<sup>41</sup> – of those dying in hospitals throughout the city can be obtained by adding together the total of those who died in the *civilian* hospitals in May and June due to “blessures par armes a feu” – 648 – and an estimate of those dying in *military* hospitals and dressing stations during *la semaine sanglante* by extrapolating from the Montparnasse cemetery figures. The number buried at Montparnasse from *known* military hospitals and dressing stations is 433 (29 percent of the total buried there). Extrapolating (multiplying by 4) gives 1,732 deaths in military hospitals for the whole city. Adding the 648 from the 21 civilian hospitals gives a total of 2,380 dying from wounds in known hospitals – 35 percent of the median figure of 6,750, which seems not far out of line with

<sup>40</sup> “De l’influence du siège de Paris et des événements de la Commune sur le nombre et la gravité des affections traitées dans les hôpitaux civils,” Archives de l’Assistance Publique-Hôpitaux de Paris 542 FOSS dossier 125.

<sup>41</sup> Approximate for several reasons: statistics are only given monthly, not weekly, so it is not possible to be exact about how many died during, or as a result of, *la semaine sanglante*, rather than as a result of injuries received earlier in the conflict, so this figure may be an over-estimate. But to balance this, there may be a substantial additional number of deaths from combat injuries but listed as dying from “infections purulentes,” “plaies,” etc. As a control, the excess hospital deaths in May and June 1871 compared with the same months in 1872 is over 1,000 – although the population in 1871 was much lower and there were far fewer industrial injuries. So all in all, a figure of several hundred dying of wounds in hospital during or immediately after *la semaine sanglante* seems the right order of magnitude.



the 20 percent recorded in the Montmartre cemetery register as coming from only two large hospitals – the Lariboisière and the Saint-Martin military hospital.<sup>42</sup> It will be seen in Table 3 that these estimates fit with my “best case” hypothesis, which should probably be even “better,” as bodies must have arrived from other temporary hospitals and dressing stations which I cannot identify.

This brings me to a particularly contentious point: the number executed in cold blood after the fighting. From the very beginning – in journalistic accounts, agonized poems of protest by Victor Hugo, the jottings of Edmond de Goncourt, the vituperation of Marx – this has been the crux. Later historians – including me – have taken up the theme. I wrote that it was this targeted, quasi-official massacre – reflecting xenophobic, social and even anthropologic prejudices about criminal types and revolution – which gave “Bloody Week” its uniquely sinister character.

Yet I am now suggesting a very different conclusion: that the number executed in cold blood, by order of the military authorities, and after some sort of trial, was probably around 1,400, far fewer than the number who died in hospital or in the heat of combat. Some may find this new estimate unacceptable because it appears to minimize the sufferings of the Communards and the crimes of the Versaillais. Those shot by the La Roquette court martial alone, according to Pelletan may have “exceeded 3,000” (a figure that I earlier accepted). Another 3,000 for the Châtelet. For the Luxembourg, “many hundreds.”<sup>43</sup> If the total I am now suggesting for those executed is closer to reality, then one would have to think of the main courts martial – Châtelet, La Roquette, Luxembourg – being responsible for hundreds, not thousands, of victims; and the several smaller tribunals attached to divisions and brigades only for dozens. If this were so, then it might well be that the 135 bodies brought from the Luxembourg Palace to Montparnasse cemetery were the total condemned by that court martial.<sup>44</sup>

We know something about these military tribunals. They mimicked legal procedure – indeed, probably continued the practices of drumhead courts martial established by decree of the Republican Government of National Defence in September 1870. These had untrammelled powers of life and death over soldiers and civilians. Those in Paris in May 1871 were usually run by gendarmerie provost-marshals with legal experience and kept at least some records. The tribunal at the Luxembourg Palace even had a chaplain who offered to hear the confessions of those condemned. One man was allowed to get married before facing the firing squad. Notoriously, the National Assembly deputy Jean-Baptiste Millière was taken to the Panthéon a few minutes’ walk away to be shot on its steps. I mention these details because clearly some time was involved in such proceedings. Suppose that it took only 10 minutes on average to bring in a prisoner, elicit details, present some basic evidence (such as circumstances of arrest), carry out a rapid interrogation (concerning employment status and activity during the Commune, for which some documentation survives<sup>45</sup>), and pass sentence. If the tribunal sat for eight hours non-stop, it would be able to pass 48 sentences a day – but some of these were acquittals or remands to detention at Versailles. The tribunal sat probably for 4 or 5 days, from 24 to 28 May. It thus seems plausible that 135 people – the number recorded as being buried at the nearby Montparnasse cemetery – were sentenced to death during that time. But it does seem implausible that it could have condemned thousands or even “many hundreds.”

If some 1,400 people were executed it is still – or ought to be – a shocking atrocity. But it is undeniably very different from the “summary mass executions” of tens of thousands of Communards that many historians assume to have been the horrific climax to the cataclysm of 1870-71 and,

---

<sup>42</sup> Registre d’inhumation, vol. 82 (mars-juin 1871), Montmartre cemetery, av. Rachel, 75018 Paris.

<sup>43</sup> *War against Paris*, pp. 180, 182. Pelletan, *Semaine de Mai*, marshals many unfortunately unverifiable accounts.

<sup>44</sup> Registre d’inhumation, vol. 87 (mai-novembre 1871), Montparnasse cemetery, bd. Edgar-Quinet, 75014 Paris.

<sup>45</sup> Records of interrogations, Ly 35, cahier 309

indeed, very different from the estimates in my own earlier work.<sup>46</sup> Suggestions that this bloodshed was comparable with twentieth-century mass killing seem difficult to sustain.

### III

Let me ask you for the moment to accept my hypothesis. What we would then have to explain is not almost unprecedented violence, but an almost unprecedentedly traumatic *myth* of violence: how it was elaborated and why it was subsequently believed almost without question. Historians who have assumed that memory of the trauma of *la semaine sanglante* must have been occluded by various cultural stratagems – for example, painting happy Impressionist pictures of previous scenes of massacre, or frantically removing all physical traces of violence,<sup>47</sup> are barking up the wrong tree. It is the creation of myth, not the occlusion of memory, which is the issue.

This opens up an important theme in post-Revolutionary political culture: fears and fantasies of both Red and White Terror and their polemical uses – a subject that I can only touch on briefly. We are all familiar with the horror stories of the September Massacres of 1792, widely publicized and elaborated by émigré writers; and of the atrocities by the Vendée rebels and the terrible reprisals by the Republicans (the so called “Franco-French genocide”). Then came the White Terror of 1815, the killing of Swiss Guards in 1830, and on a much larger scale the real and imagined atrocities recounted by both Left and Right concerning June 1848 and December 1851. Horror stories became a familiar part of the spine-chilling language of revolution and counter-revolution and a crucial element of French political polemic. Atrocities were expected, accounts were exaggerated and turned to political account, and there was a widespread willingness to believe them. Statistics were an important part of the polemic.

In the nightmarish circumstances of May and June 1871, exaggeration was understandable. Even willful misunderstanding or distortion of the evidence is forgivable in the tense atmosphere of the 1870s, when French democracy was threatened. There was an additional motive: it was urgent to gain public sympathy for an amnesty by stressing the savagery of the repression already suffered, and hence making the case that the thousands of Communards suffering in exile or languishing in New Caledonia should be considered as victims, not as perpetrators.

The main lines of the story emerged very quickly thanks to exiled writers, mostly in London. Many of the details that follow I owe to a graduate student of mine, Alex Dowdall, who has kindly given me permission to cite some of his work.<sup>48</sup> Only months after the events, Lissagaray was claiming in his first writings from exile that 20,000 had been killed,<sup>49</sup> and Benoît Malon, a member of the Commune who had escaped to London, claimed 25,000 killed, of whom 20,000 summarily executed.<sup>50</sup> In 1872 the death toll was raised to 30,000 by Georges Jeanneret, also to 30,000 by the anonymous Geneva pamphlet *L'Ordre Règne a Paris! Mai et Juin 1871*,<sup>51</sup> and to upwards of 40,000 by another member of the Commune in London, Pierre Vésinier.<sup>52</sup> Communard writers were therefore

---

<sup>46</sup> *War against Paris*, p. 191.

<sup>47</sup> See Boime, *Art and the French Commune*, and Wilson, *Paris and the Commune*. For more convincing discussions of representation, memory, and meaning, see Bertrand Tillier, *La Commune de Paris, révolution sans images? Politique et représentations dans la France républicaine, 1871-1914* (Seysse: Champ Vallon, 2004), and Hollis Clayson, *Paris in Despair: Art and Everyday Life under Siege, 1870-71* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), part IV.

<sup>48</sup> Alex Dowdall, “Narrating la Semaine Sanglante, 1871-1880” (M. phil., Cambridge University, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> Prosper Olivier Lissagaray, *Les huit journées de mai derrière les barricades* (Bruxelles: Bureau du Petit Journal, 1871), p. 168.

<sup>50</sup> Benoît Malon, *La troisième défaite du prolétariat français*, p. 474.

<sup>51</sup> Anonymous, *L'Ordre Règne a Paris! Mai et Juin 1871* (Genève: Imprimerie Coopérative, 1872), p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Pierre Vésinier, *History of the Commune of Paris* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1872), p. 336.

largely agreed on a toll of around 25 -30,000 dead,<sup>53</sup> *before* a mass of supposed evidence was produced at the end of the 1870s by Pelletan in his avowedly pro-amnesty work *La Semaine de Mai*. How could these early writers have had any idea how many people had been killed?

Similar narrative strategies were used by both pro- and anti-Commune writers competing to establish rival martyrologies. Both sides relied heavily on supposed eye witnesses to provide often gruesome examples of violence which the authors themselves had not seen. In Dowdall's words,

accumulation of [this] anecdotal evidence [created] a totalised picture of the essential brutality of one's political and social enemy ... Most authors move quickly from the claustrophobic recital of individual acts of brutality to an almost bird's eye view of the violence being enacted upon the city as a whole.<sup>54</sup>

These narrative structures make very high estimates of the death toll seem plausible, even unavoidable.

Both pro- and anti-Communard writers soon after the events evoked a historical crescendo of revolutionary and/or counter-revolutionary violence in France since 1789 or even earlier reaching a climax in May 1871: "il n'y a rien de pareil dans l'histoire de nos guerres civiles," wrote Lissagaray. "La Saint-Barthélémy, Juin 48, le 2 Décembre, formaient tout au plus un épisode des massacres de Mai."<sup>55</sup>

For the Left, this has been unanswerable proof that the Right was more ruthless, more savage, than the most extreme revolutionaries. Comparisons were regularly made between the Terror of 1792-4 (only 12,000 victims over the whole of France, according to Pelletan<sup>56</sup>) and *la Semaine Sanglante*, stated to be several times worse despite its chronological and geographical compression. For Pelletan, May 1871 was therefore unique: "Il n'y a rien de tel dans toute notre histoire."<sup>57</sup> This trope remains the orthodoxy: Benedict Anderson, in the *New Left Review* (canonized by Wikipedia), writes, "in one horrifying week [the Versaillais] executed roughly 20,000 Communards or suspected sympathizers, a number higher than those killed ... during Robespierre's 'Terror.'"<sup>58</sup>

But this is simply not true: May 1871, for all its undoubted horror, was far from being the apogee of violence in French history. How might that change our narratives of the nineteenth century? I hope that this will be a subject for discussion, but perhaps I might make, in conclusion to this paper, a few preliminary suggestions. The Versaillais, for various reasons, had reiterated, and seemingly persuaded themselves, that they were not fighting ordinary Parisians, but liberating them from a cosmopolitan revolutionary hard core combined with a criminal underclass.<sup>59</sup> One senior general was expressing a widespread view when he reported to his commander-in-chief, "la masse des gardes nationaux ne veut pas marcher; il ne reste qu'un noyau de fanatiques, recrutés parmi les gens sans aveu ou les ouvriers paresseux et prêts à tout faire."<sup>60</sup> It may be that this held them back from an indiscriminate massacre. Several military commanders even expressed fears that the repression had not gone far enough: "les misérables que nous venons de combattre ne se regardent pas comme vaincus. Ils se proclament hautement dans le quartier."<sup>61</sup> They worried that their soldiers were

<sup>53</sup> For example Prosper Olivier Lissagaray, *Histoire de la Commune de 1871* (Brussels: Henri Kristemaeckers, 1876), p. 438; Henri Rochefort, *Un Coin du Voile, Aperçu des événements de Paris* (New York: Imprimerie du Messager Franco-Américain, 1874), p. 5.

<sup>54</sup> Dowdall, "Narrating la Semaine Sanglante," p 42.

<sup>55</sup> Lissagaray *Histoire*, p. 439. He makes a similar point in *Les Huit Journées de Mai*, pp. 155-6.

<sup>56</sup> Pelletan, *Semaine de Mai*, p. 403.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398.

<sup>58</sup> *New Left Review* (July-August 2004, p. 94.

<sup>59</sup> This is analyzed in some detail in my *War against Paris*, chapter 7.

<sup>60</sup> General de Cisse, commander of 2<sup>nd</sup> army corps, to MacMahon, 12 May 1871, SHAT Li 123.

<sup>61</sup> General L'Hérillier (commander of 3<sup>rd</sup> arrondissement), report of 8 June 1871, SHAT Lu ('Guerre de 1870-71: Armée de Versailles') carton 36.

going out drinking with “des gens qui pourraient fort bien les avoir combattus derrière les barricades.”<sup>62</sup>

If we are not in fact talking about a massacre of 20,000-30,000 people, these perceptions are less bizarre. It is also easier to understand how most leaders of the Commune managed to survive, and many returned to politics after the amnesty in 1880. It also seems less surprising that the political and social life of Paris, in the view of some contemporary observers, returned to normal fairly quickly. For example, elections held in June 1871 returned Radicals in working class districts of Paris, and most Parisian workers consistently supported the Third Republic. In the later 1870s, commemorations of the Commune took the form of lectures, dinners, and even dances on 18 March: only from 1880 onwards did the rally at the Mur des Fédérés in May focus on the memory of the massacres.

More broadly, if you agree that we cannot see *la semaine sanglante* as the apogee of political violence in France, how might this change our basic perspectives? It makes France less of an exception in Western Europe. It suggests that the period of the Second Empire was not building up to an unprecedented explosion of social and ideological violence, and this perhaps makes its liberalization in the late 1860s, followed by Napoleon III's plebiscite victory of 1870, seem more viable. It carries the implication that the Commune was a very exceptional and unpredictable event rather than the culmination of a long period of antagonism dating back to the 1790s. This redirects our attention to Haussmann's remodeling of Paris<sup>63</sup> – had it had some success in making Paris more controllable, or had it on the contrary created unique dangers? This might fit with the Commune's isolation within France, with only short-lived echoes in a few other towns. Unlike in June 1848 there was also no rallying of rural France against “les Rouges,” and unlike in 1851, no rural uprising to defend the Republic. In short, if the undoubtedly dreadful experience of 1871 was rather less traumatic and less determined by history than we usually think, it makes it less surprising that it had so few consequences for the development of the Third Republic.

---

<sup>62</sup> Cisse (now Minister of War) to MacMahon, 10 June 1871, SHAT Lu 92.

<sup>63</sup> A question discussed most fruitfully (though not in my view wholly convincingly) by Roger V. Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (University of Chicago Press, 1995).

**Appendix 1: MacMahon's statement:**

**M. Robert de Massy:** Pourriez-vous nous dire, Monsieur le Maréchal, quel a été le nombre des hommes fusillés à Paris?

**M. le Maréchal:** Quand les hommes rendent leurs armes, on ne doit pas les fusiller. Cela était admis. Malheureusement, sur certains points on a oublié les instructions que j'avais données. Je dois dire toutefois qu'on a beaucoup exagéré le nombre des exécutions de ce genre, et, sans pouvoir le préciser, je puis affirmer qu'il a été très-restraint.

**M. de Massy:** Mais dans le combat?

**M. le Maréchal:** Il m'est impossible d'en dire le chiffre; je ne le connais pas.

**M. Vacherot:** Un général m'a affirmé que le chiffre des hommes tués dans le combat ou sur les barricades, ou après le combat, s'élevait à 17,000 hommes.

**M. le Maréchal:** Je ne sais pas sur quoi il a pu se baser dans son évaluation, qui me paraît exagérée. Tout ce que je puis dire c'est que les insurgés ont perdu beaucoup plus de monde que nous.

**M. Vacherot:** Ce chiffre peut-être s'applique à tout le siège et au forts d'Issy et de Vanves.

**Monsieur le Maréchal:** Le chiffre est exagéré.

**M. Vacherot:** Le général Appert, car c'est de lui que je tiens le renseignement, entendait peut-être parler des morts et des blessés.

**Monsieur le Maréchal:** Oh! alors c'est différent.