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Reassessing the Paris Commune of 1871: A Response to Robert Tombs, "How Bloody was the *Semaine Sanglante*? A Revision"

In recent years, the Paris Commune of 1871 has transformed from being a hotly-contested subject of political significance to a comparatively neglected area of modern European history. Robert Tombs' work in seeking to reassess a fundamental and deeply controversial aspect of this episode is therefore very much to be welcomed. The repression of the Paris Commune became one of the central tropes for the left in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet as Tombs has highlighted, considerable uncertainty still surrounds the numbers of Communards killed by the Army of Versailles during the *semaine sanglante* of 21 to 28 May 1871 and the manner with which they met their deaths. Tombs has, with perhaps surprising ease, uncovered evidence that has led him to revise his original calculations of the number killed from around 25,000 to perhaps 20,000 and now to between 6000 and 7500. Tombs now also suggests that around half of all the deaths occurred after the fighting as a result of court martials and that, therefore, organised mass killings were exceptional rather than widespread, as had previously been believed. To this end, Tombs has gathered a good deal of convincing and seemingly precise documentary evidence that stands in stark contrast with the often vague estimates that can be found in many contemporary accounts and in some of the more recent scholarship on the subject.

This response to Tombs' paper will therefore seek merely to add caveats to these new findings. First, while Tombs puts forward a very persuasive case, comparisons with the Franco-Prussian War highlight some of the difficulties in gaining accurate numbers of those killed and buried and the caution with which some of the sources should be treated. Second, I should like to advance some reservations towards Tombs' contention that a smaller number of victims of the repression than had previously been supposed may explain why the Commune had a surprisingly limited impact upon the political landscape of the early Third Republic. The consensus among several cultural historians that memories of the Commune were suppressed in the period thereafter derives from a rather narrow analysis of *l'année terrible*. By taking a broader approach, encompassing the Franco-Prussian War as well as the Paris Commune, a picture emerges in which memories of the Commune and its repression were woven into the very fabric of political culture in the early Third Republic.

The apparent ease with which Tombs appears to have raised serious questions about the scale and nature of the repression during the *semaine sanglante* raises wider questions for historians about critical approaches towards a variety of sources. Yet there are several explanations for the apparent willingness to accept what might prove to be at best imprecise and at worst wildly inaccurate figures for those who were killed. First, since the 1980s, the Commune has ceased to be a major subject of contention between the political left and right. Instead, focus has shifted towards other avenues of research, such that in recent years, more attention has been devoted to the memories and representations of the Commune than to the events and actions of March to May 1871. Tombs' research thus pertinently returns our attention to an important aspect which stands at the heart of

the Paris Commune of 1871. A second reason for the apparent willingness to accept contested statistics is that often the historians who have not explicitly sought to establish definitive conclusions on the repression have merely cited others' figures. Thus while Tombs suggests that Colette Wilson "states firmly" that "20,000 (perhaps many more) men, women and children were killed," in fact Wilson offers no definite numbers. Later on in her book, Wilson uses Jacques Rougerie's figure of 20,000 to 43,522, while on the book sleeve, a death toll of between 20,000 and 35,000 is put forward.¹ David Shafer's figures, which Tombs also cites, derive from Rougerie as well.² To be sure, Tombs might additionally be held responsible for the figures which have been reproduced in some recent publications. Indeed, in my own work on memories of the Franco-Prussian War, I adopted a figure of 20,000 dead, which was based upon Tombs' earlier work.³

In the absence of any detailed official records of how many were killed in the *semaine sanglante*, and in the context of the chaos in the French capital, there was little to prove or disprove the hugely divergent claims advanced by supporters and opponents of the Commune. Camille Pelletan made an initial attempt to marshal evidence about the numbers killed in the repression, while the Communard Pierre Vesinier was one of the earliest to perpetuate myths of slaughter at Père Lachaise.⁴ During the 1980s, Rougerie sought to establish a more accurate picture of the repression. Yet it seems remarkable that Tombs should be the first historian to bring together information from the Paris archives, lists of those buried during the *semaine sanglante* and records of exhumations from public spaces. Even if the army or local authorities had kept detailed records of the death and burial of every Communard, however, we cannot assume that there would be no lacunae in the figures. The difficulties in gaining any accurate picture of the number who died during the *semaine sanglante* can perhaps be better understood by drawing comparisons with the records of deaths and burials during and after the Franco-Prussian War. Despite the legal obligation to account for and provide a permanent resting-place for every fallen soldier, and despite the detailed records kept by local authorities, the army and the Interior Ministry, there remain significant disparities between the numbers listed as having been killed and the numbers who were buried.

Under the terms of article 16 of the Treaty of Frankfurt, which ended the Franco-Prussian War, the two belligerent powers agreed to provide permanent graves for all soldiers who had died on their territory. Dozens of boxes of detailed records about how men were buried and exhumed and the construction of war graves, cemeteries, and memorials can be consulted at the Archives Nationales.⁵ The gruesome reports about the state of exhumed corpses and the detailed spending accounts are in stark contrast with the absence of any attempt by the state to gather comprehensive information about the deaths and burial of those who perished in the repression of the Commune just a few months later. Yet despite the minute and painstaking work conducted after the Franco-Prussian War, there are large numbers of soldiers who remain unaccounted for. On completing its obligations under the Treaty of Frankfurt in 1878, the French government reported that 87,396 soldiers had been buried in France at a cost of over two million francs.⁶ Taking the specific case of Paris,

¹ Colette E. Wilson, *Paris and the Commune, 1871-78: The Politics of Forgetting* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 117.

² David A. Shafer, *The Paris Commune* (London: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 97-8.

³ Karine Varley, *Under the Shadow of Defeat: The War of 1870-71 in French Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008).

⁴ Maxime Du Camp, *Les Convulsions de Paris*, Tome 4, *La Commune à l'Hôtel de Ville* (Paris: Hachette, 1881), p. 302.

⁵ AN F⁹ 1350-1430.

⁶ Département de l'Intérieur, *Exécution de la loi du 4 avril 1873 relative aux tombes des militaires morts pendant la guerre de 1870-1871. Rapport présenté au Président de la République, par M. de Marcère, Ministre Secrétaire d'Etat au Département de l'Intérieur* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1878), p. 299. This figure did not, of course, include all those buried on German-annexed Alsace-Lorraine.

however, there remain significant disparities between the numbers reported as killed and the numbers who were buried. During the battle of Champigny in early December 1870, French forces lost 6000 men in the space of just three days.⁷ The quantity of bodies needing to be buried was so overwhelming that the French and German armies had to agree a temporary ceasefire to be able to collect the corpses from the battlefields.⁸ Men had to be buried in a variety of locations, including on private property, but despite combining the figures for sixty communes near to the battle zone, a total of only 3760 bodies only can be accounted for. The ossuary at Champigny housed the remains of only 1007 French and 376 German combatants.⁹

One of Tombs' key contentions is that there is no clear evidence to support Camille Pelletan's claims that some of the Communard dead had to be buried outside Paris because the cemeteries within the city were overwhelmed. Tombs argues that moving the dead would have been impractical and unnecessary, since there was enough spare capacity in the capital's cemeteries. Yet by looking at how those who died in the Franco-Prussian War were buried across Paris and the surrounding areas, a picture emerges in which bodies were often moved, especially after exhumation. In total, official records account for the burial of 12,088 soldiers across 65 communes in the *département* of the Seine; of these, over 6000 were inhumed in the cemeteries of the capital, principally at Père Lachaise and Montparnasse.¹⁰ Since the fighting took place outside the city itself, this raises questions as to why the dead appear to have been transported into Paris from outlying areas. Part of the explanation might lie in the numbers of men who died in civilian and military hospitals. Bertrand Taithe gives a total figure of 6725 soldiers admitted to the major military hospitals, including Vincennes which was outside Paris, over the course of the siege.¹¹ While medical care might have been rudimentary, it seems highly unlikely that almost all these men could have died in hospital. If those who died in the Franco-Prussian War were transported across the city, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that some of the Communard dead might have been moved to cemeteries outside Paris, especially those who had been exhumed.

Even if it were not the case that large numbers of bodies had to be transferred from cemeteries that had run out of space, there remain distinct possibilities that the figures which were obtained by Tombs may be incomplete. Tombs includes within his data evidence derived from reports and correspondence relating to exhumations dated between 1871 and 1872. Yet article 6 of the law of 23 Prairial XII (1804) stipulated that there must be a delay of five years before bodies could be exhumed and moved to another grave. The exhumation of Communards who had been buried in shallow graves on public thoroughfares or private property were thus exceptions, permitted for reasons of hygiene. It therefore seems likely that there were bodies which were exhumed and relocated after the statutory delay of five years had passed which are not included in Tombs' figures.

These caveats to the figures compiled by Tombs might not make a significant difference to the overall numbers of those killed during the repression of the *semaine sanglante*. However, they highlight the difficulties inherent in trying to match the numbers reported to have been killed with the numbers of bodies buried across Paris.

⁷ Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 278.

⁸ J. d'Arsac, *Les Frères des écoles chrétiennes pendant la guerre de 1870-1871* (Paris: J. Grillot, 1892), p. 91.

⁹ Département de l'Intérieur, *Exécution*, p. 217.

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 216; Clément de Lacroix, *Les morts pour la patrie. Tombes militaires et monuments élevés à la mémoire des soldats tués pendant la guerre* (Paris: Chez l'auteur, 1891), p. 57

¹¹ Bertrand Taithe, *Defeated Flesh: Welfare, Warfare and the Making of Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 91.

A key corollary to Tombs' revised picture of the repression during the *semaine sanglante* is that the real story may not be about how memories of the Commune were suppressed, but rather how myths of the slaughter were invented. I would also question the notion that uncomfortable memories of the Commune were simply brushed under the carpet as France recovered from the disasters of *l'année terrible*. This was not, as Tombs suggests, because the arbitrary mass killings were fewer than previously believed, however. It is rather because memories of the Commune became so deeply embedded in French political culture. The Commune was inseparably bound up with memories of *l'année terrible* more broadly; that is to say, with the fall of the Second Empire, the creation of the new Republic, the siege, the notions of *guerre à outrance*, the new ideas about the nation, the defeat, and the humiliating peace terms. In the intensely troubled political atmosphere of the early Third Republic, memories which might have been dispelled from one political, cultural, or social milieu became central to another. The deeply divisive nature of the Commune ensured that its memory was rather more difficult to suppress than its supporters.

The scholarship about how memory functions within societies may help us better to understand the aftermath of the Commune. It is now well-established that groups and individuals use collective memory to define and legitimise their claims. It is also widely accepted that collective memory does not seek to preserve the past, but rather to reshape it to suit specific ends. Any aspects that do not fit a particular agenda merely become discarded or rewritten.¹² We might therefore question whether 'forgetting' even occurs at all. Indeed, Freud suggested that humans do not forget, but merely shift memories into their subconscious.¹³ Even if "forgetting" does take place, it may not necessarily be harmful. Psychoanalysts suggest that repressing memory may be a means of coping with trauma or may simply be a consequence of the brain's need to construct order.¹⁴ Moreover, Friedrich Nietzsche contended that "forgetting" is necessary because too much memory can be ultimately destructive, while Ernest Renan, writing a decade after the Commune, argued that it is essential for national unity.¹⁵ The shifts in the construction and manipulation of collective memory are part of a wider struggle for power. In the political void that followed the defeat by Germany and the crushing of the Commune, when the future direction of the nation was unclear, the stakes could scarcely have been higher.

One of the particularly significant arguments put forward by Tombs is that if the repression had really been as bloody as was previously assumed, one might have expected the Commune, which cast itself as a symbol of republicanism, to have had an important negative impact upon the development of the fledgling Republic. The fact that the Republic not only survived but consolidated its foundations seems remarkable, given its inauspicious beginnings. One explanation may be that in the years that followed, Parisian voters made a sophisticated distinction between moderate republicans, who were careful to distance themselves from any association with the Commune, and the more radical, Jacobin, Blanquist, internationalist and socialist groups. Yet it may also be because Parisian elections were not conducted in static political isolation. Voters in the early to mid-1870s were making their choices in the context of a belligerent Government of Moral Order and the very real threats facing the survival of the new Republic from conservatives and monarchists. Those who despised the Commune and all it represented used it as a political weapon against republicans. After the killing of twenty-three priests and the Archbishop of Paris at the hands of the Commune, the

¹² James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 134.

¹³ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), p. 346.

¹⁴ Monica Wehner, "Typologies of Memory and Forgetting Among the Expatriates of Raboul," *Journal of Pacific History* 37 (2002): 72.

¹⁵ Paloma Aguilar, *Memory and Amnesia: Role of the Spanish Civil War in the Transition to Democracy* (New York: Berghahn, 2002), p. 18; and Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Conférence faite en Sorbonne, le 11 mars 1882* (Paris: C. Lévy, 1882).

Catholic Church made its views particularly clear, often in an assertive, provocative manner. In sermons, pilgrimages, writings, images, and the construction of basilicas dedicated to the cult of the Sacré Coeur, the Catholic Church kept the Commune at the forefront of political discourse. Far from seeking to suppress its memory, Catholics sought political capital from reminding Parisians of its bloody dénouement. The growing support for republican candidates in elections across Paris during the 1870s was therefore not merely a sign of a seemingly incongruous return to relative political normality despite the experiences of the Commune. It was rather that many Parisians chose to support republican candidates because they felt confronted by a much less palatable alternative.

Because memories of the Commune were so politically damaging, moderate republicans had to be extremely cautious in avoiding any association with it. The acute sensitivity with which moderate republicans continued to treat the Commune was clearly manifested when it came to the symbols associated with the revolutionary left. Extraordinary measures were undertaken to prevent their public display as much for fear that they would foment revolt as for concern that they would play into the hands of conservative opponents of republicanism. Even after they had consolidated their hold over government in the late 1870s, it was only with great reluctance that moderate republicans agreed to grant an amnesty to former Communards in 1880.¹⁶

Republican sensitivity about the Commune may also have had an impact upon the lack of debate about the numbers killed in the *semaine sanglante*. Tombs suggests that one of the reasons that the high figures put forward by the left were not widely disputed by republicans was because they did not want to defend the Army of Versailles. While it may be the case that few republicans wanted to go so far as to endorse the bloody repression of the Commune, they went on to place their hopes for national revival in a force that was scarcely distinguishable from the Army of Versailles. Indeed, the military parade at Longchamps on 29 June 1871, which was widely hailed as the beginning of the recovery from *l'année terrible*, was virtually the same force that only a few weeks earlier had swept through the streets of Paris in search of Communards. After the defeat by Germany, the army was held up as a model of the virtues needed to restore the nation's honour and unity. The reason that republicans were prepared to accept a version of events that damaged the reputation of the very institution to which they pinned their hopes for national revival was that while few wanted publicly to endorse the actions of the Army of Versailles, even fewer wanted to be seen to endorse the Commune. To have appeared to defend the Army of Versailles might have been ill-advised; to have appeared to defend the Commune would have been political suicide.

In this respect, Tombs' suggestion of the emergence of a tacit agreement to avoid reviving divisive memories would seem to apply to only limited segments of French political opinion. If conservatives used the Commune to damage moderate republicanism during the 1870s, the far left did the same during the 1880s. After their return from exile, the former Communards Henri Rochefort and Olivier Pain advanced a provocative proposal to erect a monument in memory of the victims of the repression. The initiative was predictably blocked by embarrassed moderate republicans on the grounds that "les souvenirs de guerre civile doivent tomber dans l'oubli et non se perpétuer dans les monuments."¹⁷ Numerous efforts by former Communards and their supporters to commemorate the Commune were repeatedly opposed by moderate republicans who feared reviving memories of 1871. Indeed, it took until 1908 for the municipal council of Paris to begin work on funerary memorials to the Communard dead in the cemeteries of Père Lachaise and Montparnasse.¹⁸

The Catholic Church's efforts to represent itself as a victim of the left heavily influenced political and cultural discourse on the Commune in the years that followed. It is therefore hardly surprising

¹⁶ Jean-Marie Mayeur and Madelaine Rebérioux, *The Third Republic from its Origins to the Great War, 1871-1914*, trans. J. R. Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 74.

¹⁷ *L'Intransigeant*, 4 December 1880; see also *Le Gaulois*, 30 November 1880.

¹⁸ Madelaine Rebérioux, "Le mur des Fédérés: Rouge 'sang craché,'" in ed. Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, tome 1: *La République* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp. 626-37.

that supporters of the Commune should have responded with counter-myths of martyrdom. Thus after originally celebrating the dawn of the Commune on 18 March, during the 1880s, the left shifted to focus upon its violent demise during the *semaine sanglante*.¹⁹ The suppression of the Commune fitted neatly into socialist analyses of counterrevolution and bourgeois betrayal, placing the events of 1871 into a model that connected the revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848.²⁰ Meanwhile, the transition from commemorative activities such as banquets and concerts in the 1870s to annual gatherings at the *mur des fédérés* was in part also a consequence of a changing political environment and the Communards' return from exile after the amnesty of 1880. More broadly, it fed into a trend of pilgrimages to *lieux de mémoire* and a cult of the dead which saw cemeteries become places of social gathering.²¹

We will probably never know the precise scale or nature of the repression during the *semaine sanglante*, but Tombs has shed important new light upon the flawed evidence which many of us working on this period have previously cited. While myths of arbitrary slaughter and the martyrdom of Communards at the *mur des fédérés* might have shaped public perceptions in the period thereafter, I would not go so far as David Shafer in suggesting that they matter more than what actually happened. Seeking to establish a more accurate picture of the repression is important because ultimately the scale and nature of the killings raise wider questions not just about the legitimacy of the Third Republic and the French army, but about the construction of the nation as well.

The notion that memories of the Commune were buried as part of a conspiracy of silence has now become as much part of the mythology as the *semaine sanglante* itself. Yet the desire to return to relative normality after the disasters of *l'année terrible* may be a consequence neither of a concerted 'collective amnesia' nor of the repression costing fewer lives than previously believed. It may simply have been a natural response by a city that had endured not merely the horrors of the Commune but also a siege and a humiliating defeat. The French capital had experienced many upheavals in its recent and more distant past, but as a cosmopolitan, vibrant city, its residents were also remarkably resilient to political and social turmoil.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 620.

²⁰ Most famously exemplified in Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France: An Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association* (London, 1871).

²¹ Madelaine Lassère, "Le XIXe siècle et l'invention du tourisme funéraire," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 44 (1997): 601-616; Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (London: Allen Lane, 1981); and Michel Vovelle, *La mort et l'occident de 1300 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), pp. 610-3.