

Commentary on Robert Tombs's "How Bloody was la Semaine Sanglante? A revision," *H-France Salon*, vol. 3 issue 1: 1-13 and Society for French Historical Studies Conference Panel "Communal Myths?" 12 February 2011: <http://h-france.net/Salon/h-francesalon.html>

Response by Robert Tombs, St John's College, Cambridge.

I have been privileged to be able to present my findings on *la semaine sanglante* to the conference of the Society for the Study of French History, where it received verbal responses from Philip Nord and David Shafer; and then to have had it posted in an *H-France Salon*, where it received further detailed and highly considered responses from Karine Varley and Quentin Deluermoz. To those four, to the conference organizers, and to David Kammerling Smith I express my sincere thanks. I hope that the quality of the comments seems to H-France's readers a sufficient justification for such a degree of exposure. Certainly, it has given this question a very thorough and public examination, as I had hoped, and as would hardly have been possible elsewhere. It is my intention to publish an extended and revised edition of the paper, which will have benefitted greatly from the scrutiny it has received. I would, however, like to make brief responses here to the important, interesting, and very different points raised by Karine and Quentin.

Karine Varley, a specialist in memory and commemoration following *l'année terrible* of 1870-71, employs her expertise to raise a number of fairly technical objections to my data and its interpretation, and this is crucial: if my facts are wrong or unreliable, then there is no argument. Her main point is that the confusion of war makes precise counting of casualties impossible. This is no doubt true—I have never claimed exactitude—but the examples she gives to illustrate her argument are not, in my view, convincing, and even strengthen my confidence that my data are broadly accurate. She gives as a specific example of the confusion of war the uncertainty about casualties and bodies at the time of the Champigny sortie of December 1870, when a large force from the Paris garrison attacked the German siege lines to the south-east of the city. This was a notoriously poorly organized and hasty operation, carried out in terrible weather in no-man's-land; and it is not surprising that a large number of men were unaccounted for. As she says, "French forces lost 6,000 men in the space of three days." Even allowing for those who were literally lost or had run away, many dead soldiers must have been left behind when the French force retreated back to Paris. Indeed, the whole story of the war from the French point of view was one of defeat and often hasty and disorderly retreat, and most of the major battlefields were under German occupation at least until 1873. It was a situation in which confusion over casualties and the fate of corpses was unavoidable. But this is entirely different from the violence of *la semaine sanglante*, which took place overwhelmingly inside the city walls, in a densely populated and thoroughly policed area, and hence where—I argue—it is most unlikely that large numbers of dead were unaccounted for.

She also suggests that the large number of soldiers buried inside Paris during the German siege, despite the fighting all being outside the city, shows that it was common practice to move bodies some distance for burial, hence undermining my scepticism concerning accounts of large numbers of Communards being buried outside the city. Again, I am not convinced. First, if it were true that dead soldiers were brought into the city to be buried in its cemeteries, that might on the contrary be thought to strengthen rather than weaken my belief that burial in these cemeteries was the norm. It would support my conclusion that large numbers of bodies buried in the Charonne cemetery date

from the period of the war, not the Commune. Second, as she herself points out, many of the soldiers buried in the city during the German siege came from hospitals inside the city. So these men may not in fact have been transported far for burial. Her point about the Law of 23 Prairial XII is ingenious, but I wonder if it is not based on a misconception? Surely it applies to bodies legally buried in cemeteries? But even though I am not convinced by her arguments, I am grateful for her searching scrutiny of the data.

Her broader points stem from her observation that “the real story” may be “how myths of the slaughter were invented,” and that “the construction and manipulation of collective memory are part of a wider struggle for power,” with which I agree. She doubts my suggestion that Paris politics returned to normality with surprising speed. I think we might both agree that popular politics in Paris during the 1870s and 1880s have been remarkably little studied (I seem to recall an old doctoral dissertation from the university of Dakar, never published, as the main—if inaccessible—authority here). It is certainly true, as she points out, that Parisian votes for republican candidates have to be considered in the light of “a much less palatable alternative”—viz., royalists or Bonapartists; but of course Blanquists (many of them former Communards) and other socialists still refused to be reconciled to the “bourgeois republic.” But that so many were reconciled seems to me of interest. As she points out, there was an often bitter division, and a dilemma, within the various left-wing factions of the “Republican party” which it would be interesting to trace more precisely.

A not dissimilar point about myth and memory was raised by Philip Nord and David Shafer during the Charleston conference: that it did not fundamentally matter how many people were really killed during *la semaine sanglante*, as it was believed that a very large number had been, and that there were other repressive acts which ensured that 1871 was “a massive trauma” that left a long and bitter memory. I admit that this objection came as a surprise, and I was glad that one of the participants in the discussion—I think it was Matthew G. Stanard—dissented from that view on the grounds that the number actually killed must have had a direct effect on the long-term memory of numerous families (a view with which I concur) and, hence, on Parisian memory over the coming decades. Phil, of course, is right that the repression of the Commune left a bitter legacy. The question, it seems to me, is the precise nature of that legacy. We know something about commemoration at Père Lachaise (thanks to Danielle Tartakowsky and Madeleine Rebérioux), and a little about historiography (thanks recently to Alex Dowdall), and much about artistic representations (thanks to Gonzalo J. Sanchez and Bertrand Tillier), about ruins (thanks to Eric Fournier), and about fires (Jean-Claude Caron). But this work, largely focused on materials and commemorations, however high its quality, seems to me rather little in total—given the importance universally ascribed to the event. We can do little more than speculate about the diversity and significance of memories of the Commune (for example, in newspapers, electoral campaigns, popular literature, memoirs ...) and their uses in Parisian grass-roots politics in the early Third Republic, other than the excellent (but unique) study of the Blanquists by Patrick H. Hutton. I would be very glad if my work on the Commune helped to stimulate new research. Phil Nord suggested that “the cooperatives, the mutual aid societies” of the 1870s drew on the legacy of the Commune. How so exactly? We have no study of the political role of ex-Communards both before and after the amnesty. Some prominent ex-Communards were reintegrated quite smoothly into Parisian politics, which might suggest that the trauma and anger were not eternal and that many Parisians had moved on. If there were not quite so many families mourning their dead, that might be part of the explanation.

One obvious question on the subject of memory is who was blamed for the violence, and here I suspect that the answer is not simple. One suggestion I have made was that the Army of Versailles, or rather certain of its commanders, absorbed much of the blame. Karine Varley doubts this on the grounds that the army, and even the Army of Versailles, were part of the Republican patriotic image

from as early as 1871. Indeed. But purging the national army of royalist and Bonapartist generals became a crucial political issue: none of the Versaillais commanders had a long-term future—except, ironically, General de Galliffet and Colonel Boulanger, whose careers might tell us much about memories of the Commune and attitudes to the army in republican and even socialist milieux. Many Blanquist former Communards supported Boulangism.

Quentin Deluermoz, a specialist on the earlier civil violence of 1848, has provided a wide ranging and thoughtful commentary on the issues arising from my findings, which he is willing to accept at least for the sake of argument. (Some of his doubts I will address in a future published version of my paper). He then places the issue within the historiographical developments, both Anglophone and Francophone, of recent years. Statistics, he observes, are not enough. Here I agree. Ideally, the course of my research should have been the other way round: I should have begun by establishing how many people were killed and then studied what he terms “les gestuelles de violence ... les rationalités qui s’y logent ... les systèmes de perceptions en vigueur.” This is in fact what I tried to do in my earliest work on this subject, and it was from that starting point that I came back to numbers. My original concern was to study the killers, not the victims, so as to understand how such a bloodbath could have been perpetrated. I applaud his question, “dans quel XIXe siècle s’inscrit cette repression sanglante?” I asked in my paper, “how a revision might prompt some changes in our view of the ‘narrative’ of nineteenth-century France.” Here Quentin makes some interesting suggestions—further questions, rather than answers. However, he seems to suggest that I am arguing that 1871 was not “le plus grand massacre de civils du XIXe siècle français,” and I should correct this seeming misapprehension. It clearly *was* the greatest civilian massacre in nineteenth-century French history, by far. What I said was that it could no longer be considered the apogee of political violence in French history—a very different matter—and that it made France seem “less of an exception in Western Europe.” But nevertheless it was the worst single episode of civil violence in Western Europe between the French and Russian revolutions.

Violence in French society was arguably in decline, Quentin suggests (following Alain Corbin). Horror concerning violence was more marked. The Commune and *la semaine sanglante* might paradoxically have to be understood as one of the possible outcomes of this “processus d’intégration,” one of those founding massacres identified by Alain Corbin which consolidate power and decide the outcome of social conflict in an era of political consolidation. Hence the reluctance of moderate (bourgeois) Republicans to support the (plebeian) Commune or to break with Versailles. Hence too the refusal of moderate politicians of all parties to recognize the Commune as a political phenomenon arising from a political crisis. Instead, they insisted on its irrational and criminal nature. To do otherwise—to accept it as a civil war between political parties—would risk returning France to a state of utter political confusion.

But Quentin is also right, in my view, to remind us of the particular context, “la guerre d’abord”—a point which I have often stressed. Without the war of 1870–71, a Parisian insurrection on the scale of the Commune is inconceivable and a civil war impossible; and hence *la semaine sanglante* unthinkable. One thing my lower figure for deaths does, I suppose, is to make it a more probable-seeming outcome of a civil war, of a major battle between two armies whose combined numbers probably approached 200,000. The whole trauma of *l’année terrible*—the defeat, the suffering, the disillusion, the fear, the resentment, the danger of national collapse—is of course the setting for the Commune and its destruction. This must surely cause us to hesitate to “read” 1871 primarily within Quentin’s “processus d’intégration.” If, as he points out, many histories of the nineteenth century leave a gap in 1871, either stopping before it or beginning after it, one reason is that it was an exceptional year. But a less respectable reason for such a lacuna is—as we all seem to agree—that historians are not sure how to describe its causes or its consequences.

The Commune was certainly a time at which France's historical ghosts came back to haunt it: the Committee of Public Safety faced the "Chambre Introuvable." Many people were very frightened, and their fear fed their hatred. John Roberts (in a little known and I think never translated article) analyzed the terrors and paranoia of the Right very well. Parisians similarly feared the arrival of "Chouans" and "Vendéens." Enthusiasts on both sides clamored for blood and cheered on the executioners. In this atmosphere, catastrophic bloodshed was in the cards; and it is understandable that people on both sides believed an unprecedented massacre had really taken place during *la semaine sanglante*. If I am right in saying that it was not as apocalyptic as was long believed, then I agree with Quentin that some rethinking is necessary. Rethinking is perhaps also more possible: as he says, the phenomenon I have tried to re-describe is not one of a violence so extraordinary that it creates an "effet de sidération" leaving the historian "sans voix" in the face of the incomprehensible.

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