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Carolyn J. Eichner, *The Paris Commune. A Brief History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022. A volume in the Reinventions of the Commune series edited by Kristin Ross. vii+143pp. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781978827684; \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781978827691; \$19.95 (epub). ISBN 9781978827707; \$19.95 (pdf). ISBN 9781978827714.

Review by Pamela Pilbeam, Royal Holloway, University of London.

The hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Commune provoked a predictable enthusiasm to revisit this 72-day revolution. This brief 143-page account is part of a series titled *Reinventions of the Commune*. What reinventions does it explore? First, it describes the origins, events, and impact of the Commune within the context of recent re-thinking. Unsurprising for Eichner, a published author on women in the Commune, the second emphasis, although unstated as a specific aim, is the role of women.^[1] Finally, the author declares on the back cover: “Upending hierarchies of class, religion and gender, it [the Commune] emerged as a touchstone for the subsequent century and a half of radical revolutionary and radical social movements.” There are three chronologically ordered chapters which quote original material and summarize recent research succinctly. The chapter headings recall fireworks: “Illumination,” “Fluorescence,” and “Explosion,” effectively dealing successively with the origins, process, and impact of the Commune. The detail of events is well-known, so this review will focus on how effectively the author draws a reader’s attention to relevant “reinventions” and emphasizes the role of women.

Chapter one begins with the organization of “La Société du Droit des Femmes” in 1868 by three women, André Leo, Louise Michel, and Paule Mink (first illustration, p. 9). In the two years before the Commune, they organized many of the numerous large public meetings with up to fifteen thousand participants and encouraged working women to join them. They discussed topics such as women’s work, capital and interest, and marriage and divorce. The contribution of the *Internationale* to criticism of the regime is discussed. Formed in London in 1864, several future communards and female supporters joined the Paris branch, including Eugène Varlin, Leo Mink, and the Russian, Elisabeth Dmitrieff. André Leo wrote in socialist newspapers and published fifteen novels, a few of which are still in print. She argued that the position of women could be improved by gradual legal reform. The rest of the first chapter, detailing the predictable French defeat and the siege of Paris, has fewer “reinventions,” other than attempts by socialists and feminists to organize work. The Democratic Society for Moralization by Labor was formed by Michel and others to provide fabric for textile workers, and Léo argued for more jobs for women. In describing Thiers’ attempts to send troops to seize the nearly 400 cannon paid for by Parisians and built there during the siege, Eichner notes that Parisians refused to allow the soldiers to take

the cannon, but also observes that holding onto the cannon was easy because the horses needed to drag them away did not arrive. I laughed out loud.

Chapter two is in part a traditional narrative of the Commune, but there is a somewhat greater emphasis on the role of working class women in the clubs, which met in churches and were more radical than the Commune itself. In the clubs women criticized the failure to enfranchise women. There is commendable detail on how the Commune set out to run Paris. It prohibited Thiers' decree evicting those who owed rent, forbade the Mont de Piété selling unclaimed property, and allowed items worth twenty francs or less to be reclaimed for free. It opened subsidized butchers' shops and markets. Widows' pensions were extended to women in free unions. On 2 April the Commune voted for the separation of Church and State, the secularization of education, and the withdrawal of funding for church-run organizations. The first free secular state schools opened. An Education Commission was created under Edouard Vaillant. Women had an active role in education reforms, which has not been detailed in earlier accounts. Eichner elaborates on their contribution. Marguerite Tinayre, a teacher and member of the Internationale, became the first inspector of schools, Mink started a free girls' school, Michel wrote a plan for girls' education, and Marie Manière started a girls' professional school. Vaillant, head of the Education committee, equalized the salaries of male and female teachers and appointed a group of women to plan the organization of schools for girls.

Institutions such as the Prefecture of Police, the Post Office, and the National Library were taken over. The Bank of France was persuaded to fund these and pay for the National Guard. Abandoned workshops and factories could be turned into communal establishments, with compensation paid to their former owners. With the support of Frankel's Commune Commission of Labor and Exchange, Elisabeth Dmitrieff created a *Union des Femmes* to enable women to set up producer-owned cooperatives. It attracted over a thousand women adherents. The artist Gustave Courbet encouraged the Commune's support for an *Artists Federation*, which at its first meeting on 14 April attracted four hundred artists. It created an elected committee which included Honoré Daumier, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, and Edouard Manet. Reminiscent of similar bodies created in earlier revolutions, its aim was to democratize art by including craftsmen as well as decorative artists. The Louvre and the National Library were re-opened to all. The communard ethnographer Élie Reclus became the director of the National Library. The Opera was re-opened. A benefit concert for victims of the siege at the Tuileries palace which attracted ten thousand people took place on 21 May as troops arrived. Ninety newspapers and masses of wall posters were published.

On 1 May a Committee of Public Safety was set up to deal with the threat from Versailles. It tried to stop women fighting against the troops. The majority of the Communal Council were opposed to the active participation of women. Barricades were erected for defense, and combat with the army began in mid-May. Communard leaders Émile Duval and Gustave Flourens were captured and executed, in contravention of Geneva rules. In retaliation the Commune arrested the archbishop of Paris, Georges Darboy and a number of other clergy. The Vendôme column with Napoleon atop was demolished, as was Thiers' house.

The final chapter, "Explosion," deals with Bloody week. On 22 May the Commune called for a mass rising. Vigilance committees organized medical help. Boys and women fought the army. The city went up in flames, in part accidentally and in part to keep back the troops. Théophile Ferry, head of the Committee of General Security, ordered the firing of the Ministry of Finance,

the Prefecture of Police, and the Palace of Justice. The Hôtel-de-Ville was torched as the Commune abandoned it, as was the Tuileries Palace and the Palais-Royal. While denying that women were the main incendiaries, Eichner admits that both women and men set fires in defense, but the army also used fire as a weapon. Women helped build and fight on the barricades. Soldiers of the army shot thousands without trial, many after perfunctory courts martial. Women communards were frequently raped before being shot. The archbishop and five clerics were shot after a courts martial. At the end of the massacre on 27 May troops gunned down 147 communards against a wall in Père Lachaise cemetery. Varlin was shot but other communards escaped, including Leo, Frankel, and Dmitrieff. Michel gave herself up when her mother was arrested. Forty thousand communards were arrested. Some 4,500 were deported to New Caledonia. A thousand troops died in the fighting, but between 17,000 and 25,000 Communards perished. Paris remained under martial law until 1876, and the National Guard was permanently disbanded. A partial amnesty in 1879 was followed by a full amnesty a year later. A handful of other towns declared short-lived communes. Martinique rose against white colonists, while whites in Algeria declared a commune, and Kabyles rebelled against conquest. In terms of “reinventions,” more might have been said about repercussions abroad.

This is an effective, lively, up to date description of the events of the Commune which will quickly become an essential and appealing text in undergraduate courses and perhaps on postgraduate reading lists, although the works of Tombs and Shafer assume less prior knowledge.[2] The way in which evidence is presented will enable students to debate issues. Frequent quotations from contemporary observers and participants will encourage students to access original sources. The focus on the role of women will make this essential reading in courses dealing with women’s history. Eichner’s only stated objective is to demonstrate the impact of the Commune on twentieth-century radical social movements, but she leaves less than two pages to discuss that theme. In this context more might have been said about how the Commune was viewed by contemporaries, its impact abroad, the ideas of the various groups, for instance, the extent to which the communards hoped for a federalized France.[3] Karl Marx and older traditional perceptions that this was a workers’ revolution, presaging 1917, get no coverage here. Presumably, there is no place for Marx among “reinventions.”

NOTES

[1] Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2004).

[2] Robert Tombs, *The Paris Commune 1871* (Harlow, 1999); David Shafer, *The Paris Commune: French Politics, Culture, and Society at the Crossroads of the Revolutionary Tradition and Revolutionary Socialism* (Basingstoke, 2005); and most recently John Merriman, *Massacre. The Life and Death of the Paris Commune of 1871* (Yale, 2014).

[3] Quentin Deluermoz, *Commune(s) 1870-1871* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2020).

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