

Re-presenting the Radical Past: The Paris Commune of 1871

Vladimir Lenin danced in the snow when the October Revolution surpassed in duration the Paris Commune of 1871. The Commune was and remains an archetypal popular uprising, the event which revolutionaries have mourned, revered, and critiqued. And for others, the two month long Commune was the world turned upside down they had long feared and would continue to fear and despise.

Our goal in this course is to ask how the Paris Commune has been represented—given meaning through the variety of ways it has been presented--since the heady days of 1871. No depiction, description or explanation is innocent. The mantras of objectivity and balance may be impossible ambitions and impediments to understanding, interpreting and explaining certain historical events like the Paris Commune. Any effort to present the Paris Commune requires decisions on the part of the author and the audience—what to show and what to see. Unless we make ourselves aware of these decisions, we can learn neither about the past nor the present of those seeking to tell us about this past.

In this class, we will examine representations of the Paris Commune, the way the function consciously and unconsciously in explanations of what occurred and what this meant, in a variety of media, including journalism, memoirs, works of history, literature, graphic novels, lithographs, paintings, and film. Each student will write one-paragraph responses to the discussion material each week and post these on Blackboard. All students will read all posts. These posts will serve as starting points for discussion in class. Students will also write two 7-page papers. Each of these three elements (posts and discussion, paper no. 1, and paper no. 2) will contribute one-third of the final grade.

Week 1 Brief meeting as a class followed by individual meetings with the instructor during the week.

Week 2 Discussion of David Shafer, *The Paris Commune: French Politics, Culture, and Society at the Crossroads of the Revolutionary Tradition and Revolutionary Socialism*

Week 3 Discussion of the first half of Alistair Horne, *The Terrible Year, the Paris Commune, 1871* or the first half of Rupert Christianson, *Paris Babylon: The Story of the Paris Commune* [Half the class will read each. Among other things, the discussion will develop students' ability to talk about a text to an interested audience which hasn't read it.]

Week 4 Discussion of the second half of Alistair Horne, *The Terrible Year, the Paris Commune, 1871* or the second half of Rupert Christianson, *Paris Babylon: The Story of the Paris Commune*

Week 5 Discussion of Gay Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune*

Week 6 Read a text on the Commune (either a history or a memoir) assigned to each individual student by the instructor several weeks earlier. See the instructor during this week to talk about your ideas for the paper.

Week 7 First paper due. Prompt: What is the argument of the text? How is the Paris Commune represented in the text? What is the relation of the argument to the representation? Make reference to material discussed in class where appropriate. (7-10 pages) In the class meeting this week, a number of students will be asked (in advance) to be prepared to present and lead discussion of their findings.

Week 8 Discussion of Olivier Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871* or Louise Michel, *Red Virgin* [Half the class will read each memoir.]

Week 9 Discussion of Photography and Painting.

Required reading: Selection on reserve of Albert Boime, *Art and the French commune: imagining Paris after war and revolution* (primarily close examination of paintings) and assessment of photographs available on <http://www.library.northwestern.edu/spec/siege/titles.html>

Week 10 Discussion of Jean Vautrin, *The Voice of the People*

Week 11 Analysis in class of Tardi, *Le Cri du peuple* (4-volume graphic novel)

Weeks 12-13 Viewing and Discussion of Peter Watkins' film *The Commune*. We will meet on a Saturday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. in Hamilton 569 and view and discuss this six-hour film. I'll take the class downtown to lunch. (This day will take the place of two weeks of class.)

Week 14 Analyze a novel, paintings and/or lithographs agreed upon in advance individually by each student with the instructor. See the instructor during this week to talk about your ideas for the paper.

Week 15 Second Paper Due. Prompt: What is the representation of the Paris Commune in the work? What argument does this convey? What is the relation of the representation and the argument? Make reference to material discussed in class where appropriate. (7-10 pages) In the class meeting, students who did not present after their first paper will be asked to present and lead discussion of their findings.