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Legacies of *l’année terrible*

Nowhere did the words *l’année terrible* more fittingly describe the experiences of 1870–1871 than in Paris. Under siege from 19 September 1870 until 26 January 1871, the capital was forced to endure bombardment, starvation, disease, isolation, and inaction, only to have to face the indignity of occupation and a German victory parade down the Champs-Élysées on 1 March 1871. The crowds who amassed on the streets to celebrate the declaration of war against Germany in July 1870 could scarcely have imagined that it would end that way; after all, when the siege began there were over 400,000 men ready to protect the city against around 200,000 enemy troops. Such strength in numbers was not, however, matched by effective strategic thinking as the disastrous sorties from Le Bourget, Champigny, and Buzenval clearly revealed. Civilian suffering exacerbated public fury at the failure to break out of the impasse and so when the government negotiated an armistice on 28 January 1871, the extreme left backed by many more moderate Parisians rose up in a violent convulsion of anger, calling for *résistance à outrance* and proclaiming a new Paris Commune. Clashes between forces supporting the Commune and the reconstituted army based at Versailles on 2 April marked the beginnings of the civil war which was to bring violent suppression and around a further 22,000 dead.

Events in the capital resonated in the political life of the nation. Paris lost its position as the seat of government until 1879, while the constitution of 1875 sought to shift power towards the countryside and away from the radical cities. For all but the far left, the civil war made the image of Paris as the vanguard of patriotism, home of the Revolution, and guardian of the Republic one to fear rather than one to admire. Paris had, of course, long suffered from an image of decadent corruption.

While in part rooted in a history of real or perceived difference between urban and rural societies, it was the Girondins who contributed most significantly towards establishing a discourse of hatred towards Paris as a place of arrogance, chaos, and disorder.\textsuperscript{1} By the outbreak of war in 1870, notions of Paris as the centre of revolution had been combined with images of extravagance under Napoleon III. For their own part, elements of the Parisian left developed myths of the city standing alone against the hostile elements of reaction, arguing that republicanism had been suppressed by provincial forces in 1848 and that the Second Empire had been imposed upon Paris by rural conservatives.\textsuperscript{2} As he led the crushing of the Commune in May 1871, Thiers saw an opportunity finally to rid the capital of its ‘dangerous’, revolutionary elements; he therefore espoused particularly brutal methods in the hope of terrorizing and purging problematic communities.\textsuperscript{3} The corruption of the capital became a favoured theme for the right after 1871, but although the Catholic Church considered that Paris was not alone in needing to repent, Lyon, Toulouse, and the other cities associated with revolution did not carry the same stigma. Repairing the reputation of the capital and repositioning it as a symbol of the political nation thus required replacing images of the Commune with those of the siege. As this chapter seeks to suggest, however, the two aspects of l‘année terrible could not be so easily separated, and memories of the Franco-Prussian War were perhaps inevitably viewed through the prism of memories of the Commune.

In the aftermath of the Commune, memories of the siege of Paris sat uneasily with representations of the broader war experience. Indeed, myths of the army and people united in the national defence seemed nonsensical when juxtaposed with the brutal civil war that followed. More broadly, in the eyes of the monarchists and the moderate left, the political recovery and stabilization of the Republic necessitated a strict separation in the two phases of the Parisian experience and a determined effort to discredit Communard claims that the insurrection had risen in the name of patriotism. The relationship between Paris and the provinces was also problematic. While the capital had an image of frivolity and decadence, its excesses under the Second Empire had been influenced by a regime that owed its existence to support from the rural provinces. Politics and culture in the capital thus addressed the crisis with efforts to manage representations of l‘année terrible, even though broader expressions of Parisian identity remained inexorably permeated by the enduring legacy of the war and the Commune.