

The Paris Commune

RECLAIMING
COMMUNES PT. 2/6



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The Paris Commune was the first working-class government in history.

Not only was it an irreversible step forward for humanity, but it offered some key lessons that have shaped revolutionary struggle since.





Coming to Power

1870 was a year of political turmoil in France. Emperor Napoleon III was captured in the Franco-Prussian War and the Prussian army surrounded Paris. The Government of National Defense replaced the Second French Empire on the promise of beating the Germans back, only to capitulate to the Prussians and negotiate an unpopular settlement.

Within this context, Parisian workers, including large sections of the French National Guard, rose up and established a direct workers' government in March 1871.

“On the dawn of March 18, Paris arose to the thunder-burst of “Vive la Commune!” What is the Commune, that sphinx so tantalizing to the bourgeois mind?”

— Karl Marx



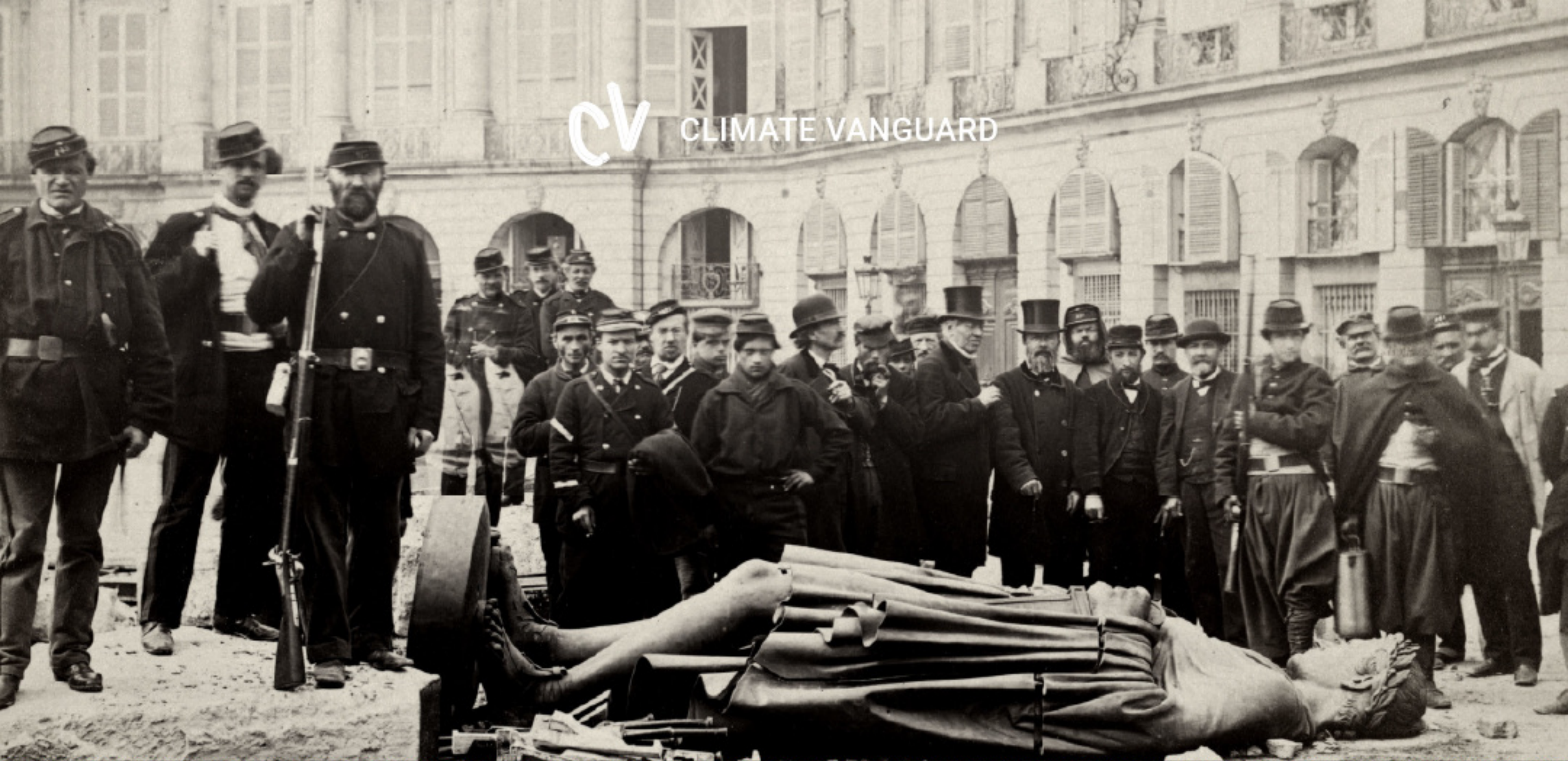
The provisional government's first act was to call elections and form the Commune Council – a body of working-class self-government that presided over Paris.

They quickly got to work, implementing a number of transformations, including:

- Paying Council members and civil servants a worker's wage
- Subjecting Council members to recall
- Transferring factories to worker-controlled co-operatives
- Banning night shifts for bakers
- Seizing and redistributing unoccupied housing
- Freezing rents
- Making education free and universally accessible
- Dissolving the police and military in favour of an armed citizenry



In effect, they **smashed the existing bourgeois state, replaced it with communal forms of government** that were accountable to the working masses, and began a popular programme of **collectivising production.**



Lessons from the Commune

For Marx, the Paris Commune clarified the **centrality of the dictatorship of the proletariat in revolutionary transition.** It was living proof that workers could directly run society, but this required gaining access to the institutions of government and fundamentally transforming the state to serve their interests.

“Working men’s Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class.”

— Karl Marx

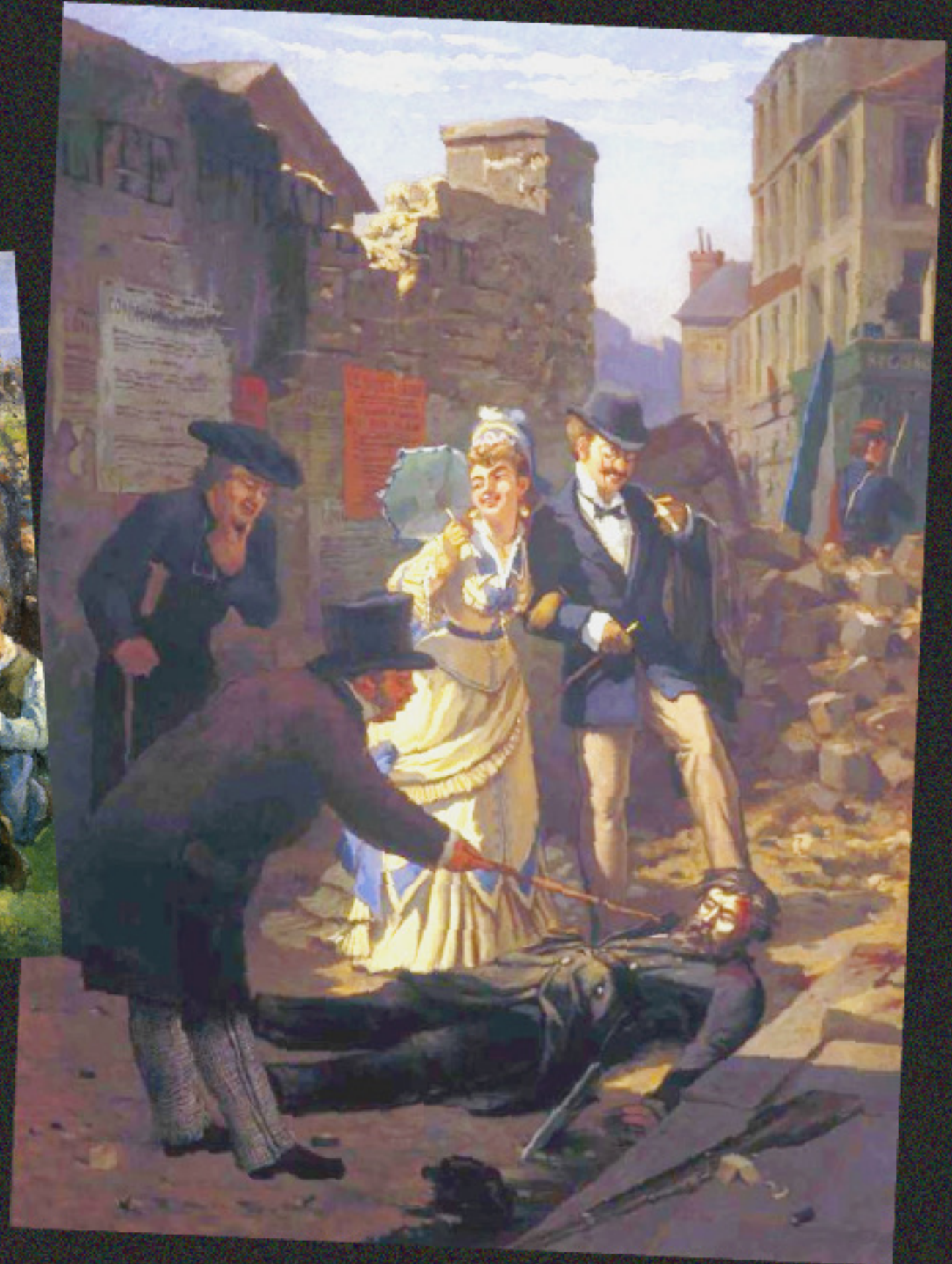


The Commune's Defeat

But just 72 days after it was established, the Paris Commune was brutally crushed by the French state.

An estimated 20,000 Parisians were killed by Versailles troops during the “Bloody Week” of May 21st.

This, too, provided an important lesson: the Commune had not gone far enough in expropriating the ruling class. It remained a localised project that left the wider French state untouched.



Marx remarked that the **Communards didn't seize the Bank of France and they allowed the captured bourgeoisie to return to Versailles to regain their strength.**

In 1908, Lenin also reflected on the lessons of the Paris Commune, noting that *"instead of launching a resolute offensive against Versailles that would have crowned its victory in Paris, it tarried and gave the Versailles government time to gather the dark forces and prepare for the blood-soaked week of May."*



The Paris Commune marked a critical advance in the history of working-class struggle and solidified key lessons about the place of a communal project in the wider process of revolutionary transition.

“[The Commune] cannot be stamped out by any amount of carnage. To stamp it out, the Governments would have to stamp out the despotism of capital over labour—the condition of their own parasitical existence.”

— Karl Marx