

Materialist Conception of History

FOR BEGINNERS

Lesson 21.

FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR AND THE PARIS COMMUNE.

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THE vacant throne of Spain was giving concern to European chancelleries. At last the Spanish ministry found a suitable candidate in Prince Leopold of Germany. This candidate was obnoxious to France and when this prince of the Hohenzollerns consented, a storm of protest broke out in the French press. Of course we are told what the press says "is public opinion."

Louis Napoleon's exploits in Mexico had proven a miserable fiasco. The opposition was gaining power and Napoleon felt he could gain his popularity by a victorious war against the Germans. Under pressure of foreign powers Spain was forced to withdraw the offer which she had made, and Leopold renounced his candidacy through his father King William I. The French Ambassador was commanded to obtain from King William a declaration that the candidacy of Leopold of Hohenzollern would never be supported again. The king refused to confer with the French ambassador, and France, being affronted declared war. Bismarck was as anxious as Napoleon for war, as his papers have shown since his death.

The Germans desired the return of Alsace and Lorraine because of its vast natural resources of iron and coal. Germany was entering the world's markets in competition with the other world powers. The French were being defeated on all lines; by 1871 the French army was in a terrible plight. The recruiting officers pressed into the army men whom they could not arm nor even feed.

The sting of hunger was so great in Paris that horse flesh became a delicacy. The women waited out in the cold for hours for a starvation allowance. Children died on the empty breasts of their mothers. Wood was worth its weight in gold, and the people had only the fantastic "success dispatches" to warm them. Engels' preface to Marx's "Civil War in France," says: "Finally, on the 28th of January, 1871, Paris starved out, capitulated, but with honors hitherto unheard of in military history. The forts were surrendered, the line fortifications disarmed, the weapons of the line, and of the Guards Mobile were handed over to the Germans, and the men themselves regarded as prisoners of war. But the National Guard retained its weapons and cannons and only entered into a truce with the conquerors."

The Prussians were forced to salute the armed revolution which they intended to revenge. The Red Flag floated over the Hotel-de-Ville.

The masses were in favor of the Commune because they saw through it their emancipation could be accomplished.

Thiers, who was head of the Government at Versailles, seeing the danger of the rule of landlords and capitalists, attempted to disarm the Parisian workers. He sent some troops to steal the artillery belonging to the National Guard, which had been manufactured and paid for by public subscription during the siege of Paris. The attempt failed. Paris armed herself to a man and declared war on the French Government at Versailles. On the 26th March the Paris Commune was elected.

Among the first things done by the Commune was to abolish the night work of bakers, and also the registry office for procuring employment, which had been the monopoly of scoundrels appointed by the police. The abolition of pawnshops as being incompatible with the right of workmen to their tools and to credit. The highest salary of a functionary of the Commune was not to exceed \$1200 a year. The separation of the Church from State and the abolition of all state payments for religious purposes.

All things appertaining to the individual conscience i.e., religious symbols, dogmas, prayers were abolished and the carrying out of the principle of religion as far as the State was concerned was a purely private matter.

Some Socialists have endeavored to evade explaining religion by expressing religion as a private question of the individual, but it is not so, as we find the question put when taking the census or if you are unfortunate enough to be brought before the police court for a contravention of capitalist laws.

The Commune fetched out the guillotine and publicly burned it amid loud applause. The column on Place Vendome which had been constructed by Napoleon I. after the war of 1809 out of captured cannon was overthrown, because it was a monument of national vanity and international jealousy.

The government troops were driven out of Paris when the Commune was declared. Then came the siege of Paris by the French Government. Paris was continually bombarded by the very people who had stigmatized the bombardment of the same city by the Prussians as a sacrilegious outrage. The Commune was formed and chosen by universal suffrage; the majority of its members were working men. The Commune was a working body and not a parliamentary body. The police were stripped of political attributes and turned into responsible agents of the Commune. The Commune prohibited landlords to dismiss tenants and prolonged overdue bills; therefore are we surprised all the monarchists, bourgeoisie, all slaveholders which composed the Assembly at Versailles yelled: "Paris is only a rebel, the Central Committee a band of brigands." When the struggle was keen the Central Committee issued a fine proclamation: "Workmen, do not deceive yourselves about the import of the combat. It is the engagement between parasitism and labor, exploitation and production. If you are tired of vegetating in ignorance and wallowing in misery, if you want your children to be men enjoying the benefit of their labor and not mere animals trained for the battlefield and the workshop, if you do not want your daughters, whom you are unable to educate and overlook as you yearn to do, to become instruments of pleasure in the arms of the aristocracy of money, if you at last want the reign of justice, workmen be intelligent, arise!"

The Commune first degree was the suppression of the standing army and the arming of the people as a substitution. Even although the majority of the functionaries abandoned their posts at the signal from Versailles from street inspection, lighting, markets, public charities, telegraphs, etc. These services were soon set right by the Commune, and the committee overcame a greater difficulty of providing for three hundred thousand persons without work. Its true secret was that it was essentially a working class government; as Marx puts it: "The produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor." Marx points out the strange fact, in spite of all the talk of the emancipation of labor, that no sooner the workers attempt their emancipation than the mouthpieces of present society exclaim: the workers intend to abolish private property, the basis of all civilization. The Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labor of many the wealth of the few.

The Commune sprang up in the Provinces, at Marseilles, Toulouse and Narbonne, but the middle-classes betrayed the workers. The revolts of these towns died out one by one, and the revolutionists of the provinces were completely disorganized, therefore Paris had very little help from that quarter. M. Thiers suppressed all the goods trains and kept all correspondence destined for Paris. Thiers struck a bargain with Bismarck. The Prussian had sur-

rendered the neutral zone to the Versailles troops. Lissagaray in his history of the Commune says: "Of all Thiers' crimes, one of the most odious will certainly be his introducing the conquerors of France into our civil discords and begging their help to crush Paris." One of Thiers' former colleagues of the Chamber of Deputies of 1830, himself a capitalist, but a devoted member of the Commune, addressed Thiers on a placard thus: "The enslavement of labor by capital has always been the corner stone of your policy, and from the very day you saw the Republic of Labor installed at the Hotel-de-Ville, you have never ceased to cry out to France: 'These are criminals.'"

Marx says in "Civil War in France," p. 55-56: "The financial measures of the Commune, remarkable for their sagacity and moderation, could only be such as were compatible with the state of a besieged town. Considering the colossal robberies committed upon the city of Paris by the great financial companies and contractors, under the protection of Haussmann, the Commune would have had an incomparably better title to confiscate their property than Louis Napoleon had against the Orleans family. The Hohenzollern and the English oligarchs, who both have derived a good deal of their estates from church plunder were of course greatly shocked at the Commune clearing but 8,000 francs out of secularization."

The Commune had good odds against it. Bismarck let loose all the French prisoners and gave help with Prussian troops, all done in the name of law and order. The press as usual lied about the conditions existing in Paris. They issued official despatches from Versailles, picturing Paris as the pandemonium of all the lacklegs of Europe recounted thefts and arrests en masse, detailed sums and names. According to them women no longer dared to venture on the streets; 1,500,000 persons oppressed by 20,000 ruffians were offering up prayers for Versailles. M. Thiers, leader of the French government at Versailles, telegraphed "The insurgents are emptying the principal houses of Paris in order to sell the furniture." The traveller to Paris found the streets for the first time since the revolution of 1848, had no police. Lissagaray says: "The pillagers had only pillaged the guillotine." Persons full of indignation against Paris were so struck with its orderliness and tranquility, in a few hours caught the Paris malady.

Marx's "Civil War in France," page 58, says: "Wonderful, indeed, was the change the Commune had wrought on Paris. No longer any trace of the meretricious Paris of the Second Empire. No longer was Paris the rendezvous of British landlords, Irish absentees, American slaveholders, and shoddy men, Russian ex-serfowners and Wallachian bayards. No more corpses at the morgue, no nocturnal burglaries, scarcely any robberies. . . . 'We,' said a member of the Commune 'hear no longer of assassination, theft and personal assault, it seems, indeed, as if the police had dragged along with it to Versailles all its Conservative friends.'"

The Commune had a placard posted up at the Hotel-de-Ville: "Every individual taken in the act of stealing will be shot." The Commune papers even in the excitement of the battle had no appeals to plunder or murder, while the Versailles papers of the Law and Order bunch demanded shooting en masse as soon as Paris has been vanquished. During the Commune elections, M. Thiers telegraphed the provinces: "The elections will take place today without liberty and without moral authority." The elections were conducted in a way becoming a free people. At the approach to the halls, no police, no intrigues. The liberty was so absolute that in all Paris not one single protestation occurred.

The only reprisals registered against the Commune (Continued on Page 7)