



# The Fall of Paris: The Siege and the Commune 1870-71

*Alistair Horne*

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**Alistair Horne's *The Fall of Paris: The Siege and the Commune, 1870-71* is the first book of Alistair Horne's trilogy, which includes *The Price of Glory* and *To Lose a Battle* and tells the story of the great crises of the rivalry between France and Germany.**

The collapse of France in 1870 had an overwhelming impact - on Paris, on France and on the rest of the world. People everywhere saw Paris as the centre of Europe and the hub of culture, fashion and invention. But suddenly France, not least to the disbelief of her own citizens, was gripped in the vice of the Prussian armies and forced to surrender on humiliating terms. Almost immediately Paris was convulsed by the savage self-destruction of the newly formed Socialist government, the Commune.

In this brilliant study of the Siege of Paris and its aftermath, Alistair Horne researches first-hand accounts left by official observers, private diarists and letter-writers to evoke the high drama of those ten tumultuous months and the spiritual and physical agony that Paris and the Parisians suffered as they lost the Franco-Prussian war.

'Compulsively readable'

*The Times*

'The most enthralling historical work'

*Daily Telegraph*

'Essential reading for anyone who wants to understand the civil war that still stirs the soul of France'

*Evening Standard*

One of Britain's greatest historians, **Sir Alistair Horne, CBE**, is the author of a trilogy on the rivalry between France and Germany, *The Price of Glory*, *The Fall of Paris* and *To Lose a Battle*, as well as a two-volume life of Harold Macmillan.

## The Fall of Paris: The Siege and the Commune 1870-71 Details

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## From Reader Review *The Fall of Paris: The Siege and the Commune 1870-71* for online ebook

### Raja says

I added this book to my shelf long ago, on the mistaken impression that it described the real events that were the basis for *Les Misérables*. Once I realized, three quarters of the way through, that this was not so, my desire to keep slogging through the endless litany of inept French zealots and the British author's evident contempt for the lot of them was vastly diminished, until the book itself dropped from my hands and I could go no further.

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### David says

When I think about the Paris Commune, I feel a vague sort of dread. I remember visiting the famous Père Lachaise Cemetery for the first time and seeing the wall—the infamous Communards' Wall—in front of which nearly a hundred fifty insurrectionists were executed by firing squad. I was in awe of how close this distant and horrible chapter in the history of Western civilization had suddenly become—and how prosaic it all seemed: a simple stone wall with an engraved plaque hidden away in this quiet resting place. The foreign tourists who come to visit the graves of Oscar Wilde or Jim Morrison will hardly notice the wall or remember its history—if they ever really knew it to begin with. How is it that such a disturbing interlude in the tug-of-war between established authority and democratic progress has become so obscure?

It all began, of course, in 1870 with the Franco-Prussian War. As Alistair Horne suggests, the French populace, much given to that peculiar French affliction known as *ennui*, had become itchy for a military victory, for an assertion of its national power. The Second Empire, led by Emperor Napoleon III, had grown bloated and decadent: the ruling elite and its hangers-on were given to extravagances, to orgies, to decaying morality, while the working class grew increasingly dissatisfied.

On one of the flimsiest pretexts in modern diplomatic history, Napoleon III was pressured into attacking Prussia. Of course a belligerent seeking a point of contention will generally find one—but most will latch onto a better *causis belli* than a minor breach of diplomatic etiquette. But the drums of war would admit of no turning back, and the Emperor led his forces into a disastrous war with the Germans that would cast its shadow over his nation for decades to come and lead ultimately to the fall of the Second French Empire and the exile of Napoleon III to England.

The Prussians, led (figuratively) by Kaiser Wilhelm but in fact by Bismarck, quickly crushed the French and surrounded Paris. This Siege of Paris forms the basis for the first part of Alistair Horne's easy-to-admire, but difficult-to-love book *The Fall of Paris: The Siege and the Commune 1870-71*. Horne details what life was like for the besieged in Paris, which had no access to food, supplies, and—for the most part—the outside world. Horne relies (perhaps excessively) on the journals of a handful of Parisian residents—mainly English-speaking—to flesh out the day-to-day reality of a life with dwindling resources and only intermittent hope. American Elihu Washburne, one of the few diplomats who remained in Paris during the Siege (and, later, during the Commune) provides the most interesting perspective because he seems the least biased and proves an insightful and thorough-going observer. (Another prominent reference is the famous Edmond de Goncourt's journal.)

In the Siege section of the book, Horne gets distracted by Paris's use of hot-air balloons to communicate with the outside world and the city's evolving eating habits as the Siege progresses. Eventually, the Parisian bourgeoisie is reduced to eating their dogs and cats, as well as horses, rats, and all the animals of the Paris Zoo except the lions and tigers. Horne's fascination with these details is evident, but it unfortunately drags on the narrative momentum.

Meanwhile, Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm and the entire Prussian court have made themselves at home in the Sun King's great palace in Versailles. In a bitter historical irony, it would be in the Hall of Mirrors there that the unification of Germany would be declared. All of the German domains were now a part of the German Empire under Kaiser Wilhelm. The German nation—which would harass France in the first half of the twentieth-century—was actually declared in France itself, precipitated by a war that France initiated. The Second Reich had begun.

Eventually, Paris was forced to capitulate in early 1871, inciting the fury of working class arrondissements and the leftist radicals. (Horne discusses this peculiarity in the book: the leftists, who usually disdain imperialist warfare, at least theoretically, were in fact enraged by Paris's surrender.)

Radical and working class anger grew until the republican government was forced to flee to Versailles (or else be murdered by the Parisian mobs). A new government, comprised predominantly by Jacobins, Marxists, and other anti-Bonapartists, installed itself in the Hôtel de Ville, and the Paris Commune was declared. Thiers, de facto head of the evacuated government at Versailles, regrouped and rebuilt the army. A short, gruesome civil war would ensue between the Commune and the forces of the government-in-exile at Versailles.

Eventually the army of Thiers would march on Paris and brutally crush the Commune—but not before the Communards embarked upon a scorched earth policy, setting fire to the Tuileries Palace, the Hôtel de Ville, and any building whose height or location seemed to hinder their defenses. Only by a stroke of pure luck do the cathedral of Notre-Dame and the Louvre survive today; Notre-Dame was set to be razed by the Communards, but it was adjacent to a hospital which might catch fire, so the plan was scrapped at the last moment. Many parts of Paris were in ruins—destroyed by its own citizens—and the brutal reprisals on both sides were as gruesome as they were sadistic. The Communards executed the Archbishop of Paris in their final days as a pointless act of vengeance. Now victorious, Thiers would avenge himself and his government on all Commune supporters in what can only be called massacres—like the one at the Communards' Wall in Père Lachaise.

Clearly, the Siege and the Commune are fascinating and underserved topics, and Horne, a lifelong aficionado of French history, certainly knows his stuff, but overall the book comes across as a little muddled. Horne hops around quite a bit, assuming a general familiarity on the part of his readers, and the book's clarity suffers somewhat for it. He has a great deal invested in the few perspectives he relies heavily upon (through journals), but these too hamper the momentum, situating the material in a hazy middle world between history and memoir. I'm not so sure the journal quotations enrich the history so much as they replace it at times—and some of Horne's selections, quoted at length, aren't always very interesting. I left the book with the impression of Alistair Horne as the addled professor who is always looking for his glasses when they're only just sitting on his forehead. If he focused and clarified a little more, he'd not only be a knowledgeable historian, but an entertaining one as well.

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## **Tyler Lees says**

A long read, and a rather different topic, but well-written and fascinating. This book does not tell the story of the Franco-Prussian War; rather, it tells the story of Paris during the disastrous war and the subsequent devastating rise of the Commune and its suppression, and ultimately provides a survey of a dark episode that shapes France even today.

This book is the first in a trilogy, covering three crucial years in the formation of modern France and modern Europe: 1940 and the defeat of France, 1916 and the battle of Verdun, and this book, which covers the siege of Paris and ultimate defeat of the French in the Franco-Prussian War, and the immediately following civil war.

I picked up this book in order to better understand the events leading up to the First World War; as France's defeat in 1870-1871 was key to factors leading to 1914. But this book focuses on Paris, and its role during the war, and its birth of the Commune.

As a history of the Commune, this book is a necessary read; it shows the political factors that led to its rise, and Horne goes to great lengths to explain what it was and what it was not. For example, it was not on par with the Great Terror of the French Revolution of 1792 - but the potential was there. And it was not the ideal Communistic peoples' state the Marx mythologized it to be - but its failures held many lessons Lenin made sure to learn.

If you are trying to understand what helped create the bloodshed of the 20th Century, this is an excellent place to begin.

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## **Jan Underhill says**

This book was recommended by a friend in the course of a Facebook discussion in which an author I like mentioned his near-ignorance of the Franco-Prussian War. I had to admit to the same, and found it odd, as I hold a B.A. History, and while the term is familiar, I couldn't begin to discuss it in any detail. I have corrected that situation, and now find it disturbing that the events that took place in Europe within a decade of the American Civil War and hugely influenced all the major phenomena that eventually engulfed American consciousness in the 20th century (two World Wars, Communism) are so very poorly understood.

This account is fast-paced and engrossing, and it can't be helped that the events and human behavior can only be described as appalling to the point where it's profoundly disheartening to read about. No novelist would choose to subject readers to such a litany of poor choices, failures of judgement and sheer incompetence as well as bad luck, in the course of creating a narrative. Do I dare hope that learning from waste and horror might help us to avoid repeating it? The following 100+ years don't lead me to feel that's likely. But I feel my understanding of the many more familiar events that followed has been enhanced, and peopled with fascinating characters. It was a tough but worthwhile enlightenment.

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## **Michael Kotsarinis says**

A concise account of the closing act and the aftermath of Franco-Prussian War.

This book besides providing a full and rich account of the siege and the Commune, helps the reader understand how interconnected these two events were and gives a quite unbiased account of the Commune.

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### **Sharilyn says**

Currently reading. A nice readable history of Paris. I'm really enjoying this.

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### **William Dearth says**

I gave this book five stars not so much for the quality of the writing but for the content. This is a very sad and disturbing account of a social catastrophe that rivals the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the 900 day siege of Leningrad starting in 1941. The role of women is particularly interesting in the scope of their brutality that reminds one of women's role during the French Reign of Terror in 1793.

This book does qualify as a "page turner" but for me, Horne's style is a touch awkward at times. From a historical perspective though it qualifies as required reading.

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### **Michele says**

Introduces a chunk of history I've never heard mentioned or alluded to, never mind taught in schools. I understand a lot more about the backdrop leading to WW1 now than I did before... and I've still got the 40 years between Prussia's victory over France & the outbreak of the First World War to read up on.

While I can vaguely see why the Paris commune's failure would radicalize some socialists, I'm not sure why anyone would bother trading one set of bastards for another (then again, I'm speaking from what would be a bourgeois luxury of choice).

I'm going to have to add this book to my library: there's much more to be learned from it -- I'll be going back to it in a few years.

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### **Alison says**

My love of Paris lead me to this beat up paperback at the English bookstore in Toulouse...

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### **Michael Cayley says**

A book focused on the debacle of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1, its effects on Paris, and the subsequent brutal but short-lived Paris Commune. It is full of detail, rather too much for me, and of many extracts from diaries and the like which at times felt like padding. The book clearly reflects a huge amount of research, but I would have preferred it to have been shorter and the research to have been rather more distilled into a

somewhat higher-level narrative. There are also many references to people and events which are not fully explained, so that a reader not already familiar with this major period of French history may be a little nonplussed.

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## **Lyndon Burns says**

As one of the many aftershocks of the 1789 French Revolution, the Paris Commune is naturally an ideologically charged topic, and it has attained sacred status among Marxists and their sympathizers. Horne has done extremely well to produce an account that does not editorialize, or stray into overt condemnation or admiration for either the Communards or their opponents.

When I set out to find a book that would treat the Commune objectively, I was in part attracted by the fact that Horne was accused of being biased against the Communards. Given the breathless support for the Commune espoused by Horne's critics, it was an indication that Horne might actually be looking at the events objectively - or at least not whitewashing the actions of the Communards out of ideological sympathy with them.

This was in fact the case; while some readers disparage Horne for his lack of ardor for the Communards, Horne is actually quite evenhanded. In fact, Horne evinces more sympathy for the Communards than he does for Thiers' administration. Horne is also not reluctant to describe the Republican atrocities, including several eyewitness accounts of extrajudicial killings. This cannot by a reasonable measure be considered biased in favor of Thiers' government.

I would note, however, that in his willingness to condemn Thiers, Horne repeats the falsehood that the Great Terror killed fewer people than the Republic's suppression of the Commune, contrasting the estimates of over 20,000 dead Communards with the roughly 12,000 executions during the Great Terror. This, however, is a classic apples-to-oranges comparison: by Horne's own account only 24 Communards were sentenced to death and executed, 500 times less than the Great Terror executions. All the other thousands of deaths were either extrajudicial killings, or battlefield deaths, and even civilian casualties caught in the crossfire; to include similar victims of the Committee of Public Safety boosts the Great Terror's death toll to over 200,000 - 130,000-170,000 of these in the Vendée alone.

Beyond that I would not fault Horne's lack of condemnation of the Commune. Merely stating the facts - the atrocities, the deliberate destruction of monuments and historic buildings, the idealistic claims and ideological platforms espoused by the various identities - leaves it at the reader's discretion as to how much sympathy or condemnation they have for any and all of the involved parties.

Although the narrative did bog down at times, Horne's account was in the main highly readable, and unlike most history books it was not mired in excessive detail for more than a chapter at a time, nor did it ever descend into a blow-by-blow account of the battles, as such histories have a tendency to do. My chief complaint with the text was Horne's use of French without translation. Not simply common phrases like "s'il vous plaît" but entire sentences such as "c'était trop beau pour être ouvert" are left in the original French. I can only conclude that Horne expected his readers to have sufficient command of French to be able to understand this; as a man of his generation, background, and education Horne would have had just such a familiarity with the language even without his specialization in French history. This is obviously an irksome inclusion for readers such as myself who have never learned French, and have to resort to putting the phrases into translators. Strangely, Horne bothers to include translations in the end notes for the French poetry that is



included, an indication that he did not expect his readers to be fluent in the language.

Overall this was an excellent book about the Paris Commune. In a field crowded with books that openly declare in their title or description their unreserved support for the Communards, Horne's book stands out as one that is truly objective.

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### **Adam says**

Superb.

Good history should read like a good novel. This book certainly does that.

It is a long time since I read this exciting book, but little did I know that one day I should make unexpected use of it.

One of the characters described in the narrative is Frederick Reitlinger, who escaped from besieged Paris in a hot air balloon. I have discovered that this gentleman, who was sent by Thierry to plead with the English and the Austrians to intercede with the Germans to relieve their grip on Paris, was one of my relatives. For more about this see: <http://yameyamey.blogspot.co.uk/2012/...>

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### **Sam Moss says**

Lots of military stuff, but then plenty of eye witness accounts, descriptions and context. An enjoyable read and Horne definitely plays up the sordid, the sexual and the macabre.

The last chapter is definitely enlightening and sobering. Horne explains how this episode foreshadowed/set-up many of the significant events in Europe during the 20th century (WWi, WWII, spread of communism) and also how the degradation and violence of the siege, and especially the commune, were not some bizarre outlier or from some innate part of the times but rather the Paris in this time was an extremely cultured and intelligent place and that this sort of decline into senseless violence could just as easily befall ANY democracy, any city, any civilization.

Sobering stuff and extremely relevant.

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### **Mshelton50 says**

Excellent story of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War and the time of Commune. Should be of interest to anyone interested in France and French history.

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## **Carol says**

The Franco-Prussian War is the Commune which followed is not studied to any extent in the US. And yet our painful involvement in the two subsequent world wars would seem to make this war something that Americans should be interested in since it foreshadows so much of the 20th Century's horrors. Germany's stated need to conquer and dominate Europe is clearly articulated by Bismarck that, in my opinion, no one should have surprised by later German aggression.

What struck me, among other things, were the examples of unbelievable stupidity, e.g., the French not realizing that the Germans had a single rail supply line; the French army not bringing horses to Montmartre in order to drag away the captured cannon; the Communards not realizing they had no way of arming said captured cannon---the list goes on and on.

I look forward to reading the other volumes in Horne's trilogy.

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