1871 Commune of Paris Prisoners' Letters

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Introduction

The Franco-German War hostilities finally ended in January 1871, culminating in a devastating, four-month Siege of Paris bringing severe food shortages and hardship. The new French government's National Assembly, headed by Adolphe Thiers, sat at Versailles.

Many Parisians, including workers, artisans, activists, and National Guard members (or *Fédérés*) who defended Paris during the war, feared the Versailles government was too conservative and would not represent their interests. Refusing to recognize the authority of Adolphe Thiers' administration, Parisians held unauthorized elections that resulted in their own local government, known as the Commune. In it, many saw a future possessing greater local autonomy, more democratic control of political institutions, labor reforms, expansion of social programs, and the reduced power of traditional elites and the Church. The Paris Commune was proclaimed on March 28.

Thiers, wanting to put an end to the unrest in besieged Paris, sent troops. Fighting erupted - French against the French; forces of the National Assembly against citizens of Paris and the Commune. The National Guard, a citizen militia that expanded during the Siege, became the main military force of the Commune. The *Fédérés* and local citizenry held off the Versaillais forces for 72 days before being crushed.

During Bloody Week (*Semaine sanglante*), the final suppression of May 21-28, and in its aftermath, French troops killed 20,000 citizens while arresting more than 40,000 suspects throughout Paris, many randomly. Prisoners were marched to the Palace of Versailles to appear before military tribunals. The numbers overwhelming, thousands were held in crowded, harsh conditions in nearby depots, such as Camp de Satory and the French Military Academy at St. Cyr, as well as the Orangerie on the Palace grounds, itself. Communard detainees later passed through a network of detention sites along France's Atlantic coast, at forts and islands, military depots, and prison ships known as *pontons*. [Endnotes 1,2]

The prisoners were allowed to send and receive correspondence during their captivity, providing postal historians and collectors with a contemporaneous view of the experience. [Brown, pp.73-89; Parlange] Recently, a collection of 92 covers to and from Communard prisoners has surfaced after a hibernation of more than 60 years. Its contents provide the focus of this article. [Taylor, pp.6-11]

The Collection

The collection consists of 92 folded letters, and covers bearing contents, 41 written by prisoners, 51 by family members, employers, and advocates. The correspondence was generated between May 29, shortly after capture, and September 10, before prisoners' fates had been determined. Early outgoing correspondence informed family members of the prisoner's location and where to address mail. Often, writers expressed the shock and dismay of their capture. Later correspondence, outgoing and incoming, focused on acquisition of documents and testimonials to aid in prisoners' release. [Fiset, pp.67-75]

Virtually all outbound correspondence consists of unfranked folded letters bearing postage due markings. Incoming letters, fully franked, usually arrived in envelopes, often accompanied by enclosures such as certificates and testimonials. Postage stamps and postal money orders for purchase of food and scarce comfort items were also included.

Figure 1 shows a folded letter documenting a prisoner's presence at the Orangerie on the Palace of Versailles grounds seeking help for his release. It is local (Paris district) mail postmarked June 2, 1871, received the next day and forwarded. It has been assessed 15 centimes postage due, to pay the 10-centime local letter rate plus 5 centimes surcharge for unfranked mail. He writes:

> *I write you having been arrested for serving in the Medical Corps of the "Commune." You are the only one who can take me out of the sad plight in which I involuntarily find myself.*
>
> *This is why, in the name of my father, whom you know to be infirm and who has become sick because of what happened to me, I ask you to come to my aid quickly. I may have to leave here soon.*



Figure 1. Local mail from a prisoner at the Orangerie on the Palace of Versailles grounds with postage due assessed.

Most correspondence (73 letters) was addressed to and from prisoners detained aboard prison ships moored in four Atlantic and Channel ports. Twenty-four of the 25 *pontons* used as floating prisons for the Communards are represented in the collection. Nineteen other letters, which are not included in this article, were addressed to and from prisoners held in coastal prisons located near the four harbors.

Often taken by surprise during the chaotic final week of the Commune, most arrestees were marched off with only the clothes on their backs. Few had funds to pay the 20-centime inland postage rate then in effect. As a result, most letters were assessed at the unpaid-letter tariff of 30 centimes, to be paid by the addressee.

A double line "30" often appears on the front of such correspondence. Incoming mail, on the other hand, was invariably prepaid correctly. Occasionally, prisoners received postage stamps sent by correspondents, explaining the presence of two franked letters in the collection originating on the *pontons*.

Figure 2 shows a small, folded letter from a prisoner detained at St. Cyr, one of the military detention depots in the Versailles area. Written May 29, it was postmarked two days later. Visible is the double line "30" indicating postage due for unfranked mail. The writer's plea to his Paris correspondent is short and to the point: *Please come and reclaim me.*



Figure 2. Unfranked prisoner's folded letter from the French Military Academy at St. Cyr with 30 centimes inland mail postage due assessed.

The Communards

The prisoners' letters in the collection reflect good literacy, enabling readers to gain clarity into the mindset of the authors and conditions of their captivity. Those most committed to the Commune appear to have been educated. They included political activists, socialists, anarchists, and others seeking to retain and advance political, economic, and social reforms. Artists and craftsmen, teachers, shopkeepers, and skilled workers made up the majority of insurrectionists.

A major constituency of the Commune was the rank and file of the National Guard. During the Siege, many Parisians joined to help defend the city. A large portion later radicalized in support of the Commune revolutionary government. However, while every able-bodied man in Paris was required to serve, the actual active number was somewhere between 25,000 and 50,000, mostly from working-class neighborhoods. At the beginning of the Commune, as many as 20 percent of the National Guard was reported absent without leave.

But the radical Communards frightened a lot of people, including small shopkeepers, the clergy, and much of the mercantile and professional classes. Those from upper- and middle-class neighborhoods tended to support the Versailles government. Thus, Parisian support for the Commune was not universal.

Arrests

The French Army officially recorded 43,522 arrests during and after Bloody Week. Among them were 1,054 women and 615 children under the age of 16. The women and most of the children were held in prisons rather than spending their captivity on the *pontons*.

More than half (22,727) of the captives were released before trial for extenuating circumstances on humanitarian grounds. Trials were held for 15,895 prisoners, of whom 13,500 were found guilty. Death sentences were handed out to 95 prisoners.

As government troops breached defense lines at the beginning of Bloody Week and advanced through the city, they made mass arrests of anyone suspected of being a Communard. Apprehensions often occurred indiscriminately. Several outgoing letters of prisoners reflect early experiences.

For example, a son writes to his father from the decommissioned naval transport ship, *L'Aube*, in Brest harbor:

> *I was arrested the 23rd of May at my home. Not having ever been a part of the National Guard and having always opposed the views of the Commune, I would never, for any price, have accepted their principles. I have always fought them, so they want to denounce me.*

Another detainee on *L'Aube* writes to his brother on June 1:

> *I was arrested on May 22 while going to pay a visit to Joseph. You know me. I have never been involved in politics.*

A husband aboard *La Vengeance*, in Lorient harbor, laments to his wife on June 3:

> *I had hardly gone but several steps when two soldiers coming up jostled my elbow with the recoil of their guns. Upon my "Can't you watch what you're doing!" I was brutally led away. And without preliminary questioning they led me to Camp Satory.*

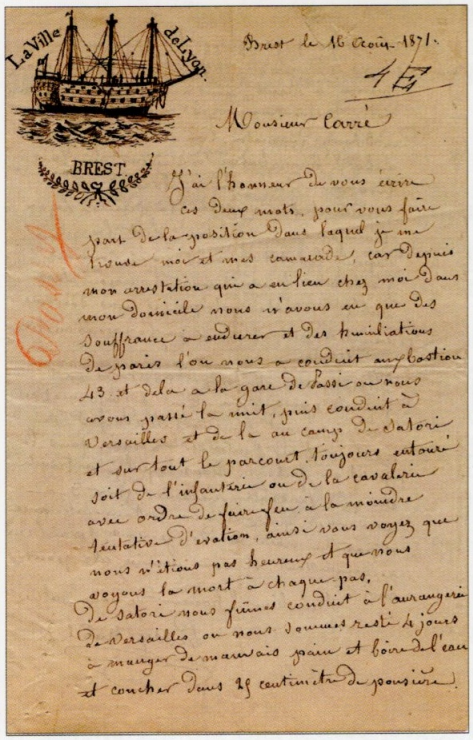
Some of the prisoners were apprehended upon hearsay. A suspicion, doubtful attitude, or grudge by a neighbor, sufficient cause for seizure by soldiers rampaging through neighborhoods. An acquaintance in Paris writes on June 28 to a prisoner on *L'Orne*, at Rochefort harbor:

> *Someone had intentions to personally denounce you in a spirit of revenge or bitterness. Unfortunately, many have been victimized in this way. On my word of honor I did not give your name.*

The march to Versailles

Following arrests in Paris, captives were marched to Versailles to face trial in military courts. Their numbers overwhelmed the court system. Thus, the vast majority were soon transported to captivity in the Atlantic and Channel ports of Brest, Lorient, Cherbourg, and Rochefort to await interrogations, trials, and their ultimate fates.

Michel Passy, a 29-year-old Paris jeweler, writes to a colleague on August 16, 1871, describing in detail events surrounding his arrest. His experience appears consistent with other reports recorded in prisoners' correspondence:



Since my arrest, which took place at home in my house, we have had to suffer and endure every humiliation. From Paris we were taken to Bastion 43, and from there to the railroad station at Passy, where we spent the night; then to Versailles, and from there to the camp at Satory – constantly moving about, always surrounded by the infantry or the cavalry with the order to open fire at the least sign of escape. Thus, you can see that we were not fortunate and that we saw death at every step.

From Satory we were taken to the Orangerie at Versailles, where we stayed four days, eating bad bread and drinking only water, and sleeping in 25 centimeters of dust. They made us leave the Orangerie in order to take us to the railroad for Brest. We did not yet know our destination, and on our arrival at Brest at three o'clock in the morning, we were put on board a steamboat which served the harbor. Finally, we were put on the vessel La Ville de Lyon, which had been converted to a hulk. It is here that we have been prisoners for the past three months. Now they are submitting us to interrogation, and we are waiting for the day when we will be put at liberty.

Figure 3. First page of Passy's letter with sketch of the* ponton *on which the author was incarcerated.

Passy annotated his letter with a sketch of his *ponton* worthy of a skilled jeweler. (Figure 3.)

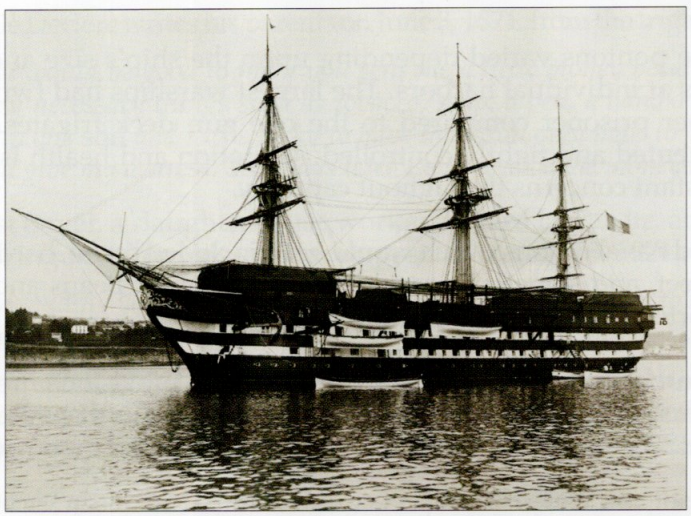


Figure 4. **Le Fontenoy,** *decommissioned warship at Brest harbor, now a* **ponton.**

The *pontons*

Passy's prison ship, *La Ville de Lyon*, one of the largest of the decommissioned warships, a 90-gun, steam-powered, three-masted ship of the line, could house 1,200 prisoners. Among the 25 *pontons* in service in the four harbors, others of its class each confined 800-1,100. Decommissioned, 40- to 50-gun frigates, such as *La Vengeance* and *La Prudence,* held half the number of prisoners. Now obsolete and with many of the ships stripped down, prisoners were confined to the former gun decks converted into cage-like compartments.

Figure 4 shows a phpto of the *ponton, Le Fontenoy*, a former 90-gun ship of the line now anchored at Brest harbor. As many as 843 insurgents from the Commune were detained on board.

An English correspondent writing for *Le Radical*, observed that elderly men and children under the age of 16 were housed on a special unnamed *ponton*. [*Le Radical*] Paul Marillier, a 16-year-old writing to his parents four days after his arrival in Brest harbor, confirms the vessel's name:

> *I write you today from Le Tilsett where we were brought on the 23rd of June – young boys of 16 years and old men of sixty. We don't know why we were brought here. Some say it is because we will be getting our release sooner; others say something else.*

Le Tilsett held 715 prisoners. The 25 *pontons* in the four harbors and the numbers of prisoners held aboard each vessel may be seen in Figure 5. [Endnotes 3, 4]

Cherbourg		**Rochefort**		**Brest**		**Lorient**	
Ships	Pop.	Ships		Ships	Pop.	Ships	
Le Bayard	860	*L'Orne*	818	*La Ville de Bordeaux*	1,095	*La Pénélope*	449
Le Tourville	817	*L'Iphigenie*	412	*La Marne*	736	*La Vengeance*	606
Le Ville de Nante	876	*La Pandore*	545	*Le Tilsitt*	715	*La Prudence*	443
Le Tage	888	*La Foudre*	322	*Le Duguay-Trouin*	922	Isles/forts	
L'Arcole	870	Isles/forts		*Le Breslaw*	929	Belle Île-en-Mer	904
Le Rhone	894	Bayard	587	*L'Aube*	872	Noirmoutiers	105
Isles/forts		Furas	250	*L'Hermione*	898	d'Yeu	600
Homet	425	d'Enet	150	*La Ville de Lyon*	1,057		
Pelée	414	Liedot	124	*Le Fonteroy*	843		
St. Marcouf	200	d'Oleron	1,044	*Le Napoleon*	1,075		
Chaussey	130	d'Aix	1,333	*L'Austerlitz*	1,028		
		Madame	372	*L'Yonne*	780		
				Isles/forts			
				Quelern	1,000		
				Tréberon	1,000		

Figure 5. Census of Communard prisoners held aboard* pontons *and at coastal installations.

Living conditions

Living conditions on board the pontons varied depending upon the ship's size and the attitude of naval commandants at individual harbors. The largest warships had two gun decks, allowing more space per prisoner compared to the one gun deck frigates. Life aboard the pontons was regimented and tightly controlled; sanitation and health issues, both physical and mental, constant concerns throughout captivity.

Food: In theory, the diet followed naval rations which would have included bread, hardtack, occasional fresh meat, salted beef, and sometimes rancid bacon or cheese. Beans and rice flavored with fish oil were reported as foul smelling and unpleasant.

Prisoners with money could purchase more palatable food and other provisions brought alongside the *pontons* by vendors. As a result, numerous outgoing letters in the collection include requests for funds, while incoming letters sometimes mention postal money order enclosures.

On November 15, 1871, Achille Cretin, in captivity for nearly six months aboard *Le Rhone*, at Cherbourg, writes to his brother in Paris:

> *I received the two pounds of tobacco and the five stamps . . . . I have bought a half cheese for three stamps, for you know how long I have been deprived of it. I eat with good appetite. Every day at 11:00, I reward myself with a little piece of cheese.*

Cretin's letter, shown in Figure 6, was one of two in the collection bearing franking that avoided the 10-centime penalty surcharge for non-franked correspondence. From the letter's content it appears stamps and postal money orders could be used as cash.



Figure 6. Outbound mail from a prisoner franked with a stamp provided by his correspondent.

Achille Declerc writes his parents on June 3, 1871, from the frigate, *La Penelope*, at Lorient harbor:

> *You would be good to me if you sent me a little money because I badly need to buy myself very necessary things such as tobacco, soap, a pen, a handkerchief, etc. For I left our home with one* sou *and I was lucky to have that. You only have to go to the clerk at the post office and give my address. Two days later I will receive the money order.*

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Ernest Boyer, a slaughterhouse worker, aboard *La Foudre*, at Rochefort harbor, received the following text from his employer, posted August 18, 1871:

> *I'm sending you a sum of ten francs in a postal money order to reduce a little of your suffering. I hope you will soon be returned to us.*

These quotes, as well as content in other letters, suggest both safety in sending money through the mail and availability of provisions for purchase. The parents of their son aboard *Le Tourville*, at Cherbourg harbor, were not so sure. From Tours, on August 13, 1871, they write:

> *You ask about the 20 francs that you requested before. You must remember that we don't have much money. It is too hard to send. We can only send you five francs; try to use it well so it won't be confiscated.*

Daily life: Conditions aboard the *pontons* were severe due to overcrowding. Poor ventilation, sanitation, and disease existed aboard the prison ships, as did restricted movement and inadequate food. Lice were everywhere. Deaths occurred regularly. Stresses over prisoners' fates were constant because acquittal, imprisonment, or deportation were beyond an individual's control. Required to perform cleaning and maintenance duties aboard ship, many prisoners did so without complaint, knowing cleanliness was a means to less misery. Short periods above deck brought fresh air and an opportunity for exercise.

Boredom prevailed. From *La Pandore,* at Rochefort harbor, Alexander Nota writes to his wife on June 10:

> *Almost all of us are from Vincennes so we are not quite so bored. For amusement, in each room we have the sea in front of our eyes. We watch it go up and down, and it distracts us a little.*

At night, on some *pontons* prisoners slept in shifts, as there were not enough hammocks for everyone.



Figure 7. Engraving published in* Le Monde *showing sleeping arrangements in shifts aboard a ponton.

Figure 7 illustrates this in an engraving published in *Le Monde* (July 29, 1871) showing prisoners in a "dormitory" (*dortoir*) asleep on the floor with hammocks fully occupied overhead.

Pleading for release

Much of the correspondence centers on efforts to free prisoners from custody. This involved showing the individual was not involved in the insurrection but taken into custody by mistake. He had to show he was never a member of the National Guard, was employed throughout the life of the Commune, possessed good character, and was committed to the welfare of his family. Testimonials from family, neighbors, employers, and especially officials loyal to the national government were well tested means to convince the military tribunals of a prisoner's innocence.

Charles Joseph Beauvais, a sculpture from Paris, instructs his wife from *La Penelope*, at Lorient harbor:

> *Will you ask my employer for a character reference, to be initialed by the Police Commissioner of the Quarter. This is necessary before I can be set at liberty.*

Figure 8 shows the front of an incoming folded letter postmarked July 28, 1871, to a stonecutter imprisoned aboard *L'Orne*, at Rochefort harbor. The correspondence has been signed by three Paris employers. One witness writes:

> *The undersigned declares that the man Jeanrault Silvain, aged 29, born at Crozant, living in Paris for 20 years, husband of Abair, born at Valenne, has worked for me as a stonecutter at various times; that I have never heard anything but praise for him. I re-hired him a few months ago, and I am ready to take him back as soon as he returns.*
>
> *I am therefore making the present statement, to urge his release as quickly as possible.*



Figure 8. Incoming folded letter with testimonials from three employers of the prisoner.

Several letters emphasize employment opportunities for released prisoners. For example, a Paris employer writes on September 11, 1871, to a prisoner aboard *L'Hermione*, at Brest harbor still awaiting trial three months after his arrest:

I certify that you have remained in our employment since the 12th of last May, and that if you are determined to be not guilty you can take up your employment immediately upon return to Paris.

In a folded letter, shown in Figure 9, seven individuals signed a certification on August 12,1871, on behalf of a prisoner aboard *La Ville de Nante*, at Cherbourg harbor:

The undersigned certify and attest that the named: Andre Devignot, aged 50, living at 94 Blvd. Rochechouard, Paris 18, having been arrested and made prisoner the 22nd of May 1871, at 2 o'clock PM on the Blvd. de Courcelles, while going to lunch with a friend (Mr. Canvel, 2 Rue Lony) is today at Cherbourg on the vessel, La Ville de Nante.

They certify also that he never was a part of the National Guard, that he has never borne arms, that he spent most of his time at the home of his parents in the country in the Department of the Seine & Marne and that in a word he has in no way participated in the civil war and that he has never caused any harm and that his conduct is above reproach.

Therefore, we have executed the present certificate to help him be set free.



Figure 9. Incoming folded letter with a character reference signed by seven individuals.

Some testimonials may have carried more weight with the military tribunals than others. Official statements by Paris officials, attorneys, and others known to support the national government were sought by prisoners.

A July 27, 1871, letter from Counsel to the Court of Appeals to a prisoner also aboard *La Ville de Nante*, reads:

I have the honor of explaining to you that from inquiries made here of persons known to you... it appears you could not have had any part in the insurrection of the Commune.

Another letter, written by an attorney at the Court of Appeals of Paris, on June 30, 1871:

I have sent back to Versailles to General Appert a petition signed by Monsieur Demangeat, counselor to the Court of Appeals and by myself, as well as a certificate signed by the concierge and the tenants of the house where you live at number 8 Rue Delambre.

I therefore think that in a few days from now you will be given your freedom.

Not all prisoners of the Versaillais were French citizens, as Figure 10 shows. The Chancellor of State's office at Geneva writes on July 31, 1871, to a Swiss national held on *L'Arcole*, in Cherbourg harbor:

Dear Fellow Citizen: Your letter arrived at City Hall, but the Council of State will not read it until day after tomorrow, Wednesday August 2.

I do not wish, however, to make you wait longer for news of its receipt and assurance that all the official proceedings will be made with the view of hastening the evidence of your innocence and for setting you free.



Figure 10. Letter to a captive Swiss national from the Chancellor of State's office, Geneva.

On June 25, 1871, a detained Italian national aboard *Le Breslau*, in Brest harbor, writes to the Italian consul:

I solicit your kindness and help. I was arrested during the French insurrection but had nothing to do with it or the National Guard.

Mail censorship

It remains unclear the extent to which prisoners' correspondence was examined by their captors. There may have been interest in controlling information concerning poor conditions aboard the *pontons*, or issues of unrest. Discussion of extremes appear to be absent from the letters. However, evidence of censorship is scant. Only two covers in the collection bear markings indicating inspection. Figure 11 shows a letter from *L'Arcole*, at Cherbourg, bearing the marking "VU: BON A EXPEDIER" ("Seen: Good to Send"). Brown documents 19 examples, 15 of them outgoing from prisoners. Interestingly, all 21 examples involved Communards detained in the Cherbourg area. [Brown, pp.79-80]



Figure 11. Censored letter from a* ponton *prisoner at Cherbourg harbor.

Conclusion



On December 20, 1872, after more than a year-and-a-half in captivity, Communard prisoner, Hypolite Jeannot, was about to be released from Landerneau Prison, near Brest. He writes to Col. Gaillard, chief of military justice at Versailles concerning documents relative to his work as a mason-contractor:

Figure 12. From a Communard prisoner about to be released after 19 months of captivity.

> *As I prepare to leave here, in view of the pain I suffered on 12 February 1872 at the hands of the 11th military court at Rambouillet, I appeal to your kindness to retrieve three documents remaining in my record that will be indispensable in my private life, including finding a job.*

Jeannot's letter exemplifies the lengthy suffering of many prisoners in the aftermath of the failed Commune. At the end of 1872 more than 10,000 Communard prisoners remained incarcerated in Versailles government prisons and *pontons*. By then, roughly 15,000 people had been tried by military tribunals, 13,000 found guilty. Between 1872 and 1876 nearly 4,000 participants in the Commune would be deported to the penal colony of New Caledonia.

The fates of these individuals, of course, extend beyond the scope of this article since the correspondence in this collection ends in September 1871. The letters during this brief period nevertheless provide a poignant record of the early weeks and months of Communard prisoner life -- circumstances of their arrests, attempts to gain their freedom, and anxieties endured as fates were yet to be meted out. The collection as a whole provides a narrative that would not be possible were the letters only presented individually.

Endnotes

1. For a concise, scholarly history of the Commune, see Robert Tombs (1999). *The Paris Commune 1871*, Longman Press, London.
2. A good summary of the history of the Paris Commune may be seen at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris_Commune?utm_source=chatgpt.com
3. For a list of hulks and numbers of prisoners, see *L'Annales de L'Assemble Nationale*, Vol. 43, Décembre 1875, p.147ff.
4. Demographic data on the imprisoned Communards may be found at *La répression judiciaire de la Commune de Paris: des pontons à l'amnistie (1871-1880)*. https://communards-1871.fr/index.php?page=cartes_donnees/tris_plat

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