

A LEADER OF THE COMMUNE: THEOPHILE FERRE

1871—1921. *It is fifty years ago this month since the Paris Commune was drowned in blood. This sketch of one of its outstanding figures is therefore as timely as it is moving.*

Th. Ferré



“I AM a socialist, a communist, an atheist! When I am the stronger, look out for yourselves!” A little dark man, with a long nose, piercing black eyes under glasses, a huge black beard, and black hair, so addressed the President of the Court trying him, on July 19th, 1870, on a charge of conspiracy to murder Napoleon III. The scandalized President ordered him to be removed to the cells, but as there was no proof that he was connected with the plot in question he was in the end released.

It was not the first time that Charles Theophile Ferré, then aged 25, and barely a year from his death, had come into conflict with the police. He had been sentenced before, and, along with his fellow-Blanquist, Raoul Rigault, had led a prisoners' revolt in Sainte-Pelagie.* A follower of Blanqui, he was regarded only as an effective orator, not as a leader. His appearance, which was described as that of an excited cock sparrow, was against him.

During the war of 1870, after the proclamation of the Republic, Ferré fought in the ranks of the National Guard. He had no striking share in the events of the 18th of March next year, although he was on the Montmartre Vigilance Committee, and first comes into notice when elected to the Commune by the XVIIIth *arrondissement*. He took little part in debates, but, with his fellow-Blanquists, Cournet and Rigault, organised the police—one of the very few services competently carried on during the Commune.† The streets were orderly and decent—violent crime was practically unknown. The spies who swarmed into Paris from Versailles very quickly, if they were at all active, found their way into the hands of the “terrible Procureur,” Rigault, and Ferré, who on May 14th took Cournet's place as delegate for Public Security. The very dangerous “plot of the three-coloured armlets,” which might have led to an insurrection of bourgeois National Guards within Paris, was scotched by them.

Into their hands also fell the records of Napoleon III.'s Prefecture of Police, spy section. From these they were able to identify the traitors within their own ranks. The strangest, most heartrending discoveries sometimes resulted. Mazzini's own secretary, Major Wolff, was actually on Bonaparte's pay-roll—the same Wolff who had helped to found the International. It was as though we were to find to-day that Angelica Balabanova, secretary of the Third International, was in the pay of Sir Basil Thompson. And these spies were even in the Communal Assembly itself.‡ Ferré, before leaving, burnt the whole foul accumulation of documents to ashes.

* Details are lacking of his early life: if any PLEBS reader can put me on to any account which is more detailed, I will be grateful.

† I wish to withdraw a remark made on p. 66 of my *Workers' International*, which suggests that this service was incompetent. I was misled by Lissagaray (p. 224), a most prejudiced writer.

‡ As Emile Clément, Pindy (?), Blanchet-Pourille.

Finally, they were able to collect a large number of valuable hostages, including the Archbishop of Paris, Bonjean, President of the Haut Cour, and Jecker, instigator of Napoleon's Mexican invasion. The Commune succeeded for a while in checking the Versailles murder of prisoners by threatening reprisals on these men.

When the Versaillese entered Paris, Rigault and Ferré fought bravely. Rigault was killed in a vain attempt to collect sufficient National Guards to fortify the Island of La Cité. And as the other members of the Commune hid their red sashes and crept away to hide from the responsibility they had assumed, Ferré was soon the sole representative of revolutionary authority.

The Communards were pushed back day by day by the closing iron ring of troops. Behind this advancing wall the officers of the French Army were supervising the killing of prisoners. The organised, merciless and loathsome massacre of all Communards and suspected Communards was in full swing. The last defenders of the Commune, maddened by this brutality and by despair, demanded the execution of the hostages, as decreed by the Commune. Ferré, having the courage to assume the necessary responsibility and not hide his fears, Girondin-like, behind the "uncontrollable fury of the mob," decided to carry out the decree. He saw to the shooting of the spy Veysset. He authorized the shooting of the Archbishop and others—the executions of La Roquette.

No one can but pity these murdered men. Many, no doubt, were guilty, but most were untried and many innocent. The Archbishop especially was an upright and saintly man. But hard and terrible though this last act was, it is difficult to condemn either Ferré or the maddened soldiers of the Commune. There has never been a Government which, under similar circumstances, would not have carried out its solemn threat. The Commune's last blow was as justified as any it had struck before.

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Ferré, along with other members of the Commune, appeared before the Third Court Martial, presided over by Merlin, with Gavreau as prosecutor, both brutal officers, the last of whom went mad later, and at this date had only just come out of an asylum.

The Commune was a "scratch" assembly and reflected all the faults and virtues of the Paris workers. Collect haphazard a number of workers to-day, and what should we find? Probably one or two thorough bad lots, a number of chatterers, a mass of honest and mediocre men, and a very few first-rate fighters. Such was the Commune. There was Blanchet, a forger; Pindy, an alleged spy; Pyat, a coward and boaster; there were innumerable talkers and many silent undistinguished men; and a few—very few—who were fit for the task they had undertaken.

They say that shepherds put a few goats among their flock, and that the presence of these prevents the imbecile sheep scattering at a night alarm. The Commune, when it came to judgment, behaved little better than a flock of sheep. But the goats—the few brave men who could have rallied the second-rate men—were dead. Delescluze and Rigault had been killed in the street fighting. Flourens and Duval had been murdered as prisoners outside the walls of Paris months before. Varlin's battered and unrecognizable corpse was in some hastily dug trench near Paris. Ferré alone, aided by Trinquet, a shoemaker, had to rally this frightened mass.

But at the trial the weak men broke and ran. Urbain, proposer of the decree on the hostages, said : " I can only express my great regret for the proposal I made to the Commune, and the indignation I felt over the burnings and the final crimes."

Regère, member of the Committee of Public Safety : " I only came to meetings of the Commune about four in the afternoon and I left before the end. The Commune wasted time in useless discussions and rushed through a lot of decrees at the end of meetings, when I was never there. And I affirm I never knew anything about the decree on hostages."

Rastoul : " M. le président . . . I protest with all my powers against the murders and crimes committed or planned during the bloody agony of the Commune. Neither closely nor distantly, directly nor indirectly, will I accept any solidarity with the men who burnt Paris and shot the hostages."

Courbet, the great artist, said that he had only voted for pulling down the Vendôme column on æsthetic grounds, and fawningly repudiated any responsibility for the Commune's acts.

All the time Ferré was trying by example to inspire these men to behave at least decently as the workers' representatives facing a victorious enemy. At the outset he refused to plead. Throughout the trial, however, he intervened with any question or comment which enabled him to expose any meanness or dishonesty of the Government, or to emphasize again his opposition to the society which was condemning him. Merlin and Gaveau, president and prosecutor, had long ago abandoned any attempt at impartiality and interrupted his final statement persistently. His counsel secured for him permission to read the last sentences.

Ferré : " I am a member of the Commune and in the hands of its conquerors. They want my life. Let them take it. I will not save it by cowardice. I have lived free, and I will die free. I wish to add one thing. Fortune is capricious, and I leave to the future my memory and my revenge."

Merlin : " The memory of a murderer."

A lawyer, his professional sense of honour outraged, protested that Merlin, a presumed impartial judge, had called Ferré a murderer. The fashionable audience howled at him, and when silence was restored Merlin answered smiling : " I agree that I made use of the term you mention. I take note of your remarks."

Ferré was sentenced to death. His father, guiltless of any crime, was also in prison ; his mother, driven mad by ill-treatment, had died insane ; his brother, equally innocent, was very ill in prison from Versaillaise brutality. Only his young sister was left to give him any help in his last hours. Before his death the colonel in command of the prison, Gaillard, thought of a hellish device to break his spirit. He took his young brother, now completely insane, and thrust him into Ferré's cell. For days Ferré, awaiting death, had to bear the ghastly sight of this raving lunatic, who had once been his brother.

Sentence had been passed on September 2nd, but it was not till November 28th that he was told to get ready to die. He stopped to write to his sister.*

* I translate almost literally. Paraphrase should not be allowed to obscure the exact phrases of this last document.

Tuesday, 28th November, 1871.

9.30 in the morning.

MY VERY DEAR SISTER,—In a few instants I am going to die ; at the last moment your memory will be with me ; I beg you to ask for my body and reunite it to our unfortunate mother's. If you are able, insert in the papers the time of my burial so that friends can accompany ; of course, no religious ceremony, I die a materialist as I have lived.

Put a wreath of immortelles on our mother's grave.

Try to cure our brother and console our father ; tell them how much I loved them.

I embrace you a thousand times and thank you for all the kindness and care you lavished on me ; overcome your grief, and as you have so often promised me, rise to the circumstances. As for me, I am happy. I am going to end my sufferings, there is no reason to be sorry for me.

All to you,

Your devoted brother,

TH. FERRÉ.

He added a postscript to the effect that she should claim his clothes and papers, but that he had given his money to prisoners more unfortunate than he. His neat writing was perfectly steady and regular.

He was taken out to be shot with Bourgeois, a soldier found in the Communard ranks, and Rossel, who for a while had served as its general. None of them showed any fear, but Rossel was melodramatic and delayed matters. They were taken out into the great plain of Satory, France's Salisbury Plain, and tied to three posts some distance apart. It was a bright November morning. Ferré refused to have his eyes bound. Merlin himself commanded the fire. Ferré, scarcely wounded by the volley, was killed by a shot through the ear from a soldier's rifle. At a signal from Merlin, the band began to play and the regiments drawn up to watch the execution defiled past the corpses to the sound of a cheerful march tune.

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