

Essay 4: Destruction

The Paris Commune acquired an undeserved reputation for destruction. In this essay I want to look at the complexity of destroying things and what we can learn from the Commune today.

It's a bright spring day with not a cloud in the sky. Crowds have been gathering since two and it's now gone five, but there is a festival atmosphere. Those lucky enough to have tickets are in the square itself, but many thousands are massing in the Rue de la Paix to the north and the Rue de Castiglione to the south. It's a real mix of people: National Guardsmen and photographers, street kids and artists, sailors and workers. Military bands have been playing stirring music all afternoon, the 190th battalion have been playing the Marseillaise and the 172nd the Chant du Départ. A group of Americans look down curiously on the crowds from the first floor of the Hôtel Mirabeau. On the east of the square, a group of leading Communards are gathering on the balcony of the Ministry of Justice. It is 16 May 1871.

The grey tarpaulin around the column had been removed after lunch. A deep slice had been cut into the column and workers are now hammering thick wooden wedges into the cut, trying to open it up further. There's a red flag tied to the railings at

the summit, from where three thick cables run down to a capstan located at the entry to Rue de la Paix.

There is a nervous excitement in the crowd. Tensions have been exacerbated by the failed first attempt at demolition. Around 3.30, the capstan had broken and there were reports of injuries. There had been concerns anyway. Some worried the column might fall sideways and damage some of the houses. They now have paper plastered on the windows, to prevent them shattering. Some were even concerned that the impact of the collapse might be enough to break through to the sewers that run under the Place Vendôme and a bed of branches, sand and manure has been laid at the north side of the square to cushion the fall.

At 5.35 a bugle sounds. The workers leap down from the scaffolding, the crowds are pushed back behind the barriers. A lone figure appears on the platform at the top and replaces the red flag with a French tricolore. The crowd seems to hold its breath as six men heave at the capstan; the cables tauten and for a moment nothing seems to happen... and then the Vendome column, all 118 feet of it, tilts and falls, breaking apart into segments as it does so. The statue of Napoleon from the summit hits the ground with enough force to sever the head and one arm from its body. The crowd feel the impact through the ground. Some of them flood past the barriers in search of

souvenirs, though the Guardsmen soon put a stop to that. Sergeant Bergeret tries to give a speech but nobody's really listening. Sailors clamber onto the bare pedestal and fly red flags to the cheering crowds. Others are gathering in groups to have their photographs taken with the ruins.

Erasing History

The demolition of the Vendôme Column by the leadership of the Paris Commune was widely condemned as an act of barbaric vandalism. Although the column had been politically and artistically controversial since it was first erected in 1810, in its absence, it now found itself fondly remembered: 'one has to admit,' said one commentator implausibly, 'that it is a very respectable monument from all points of view'. Scientific American tearfully declared it 'one of the noblest monuments in the world'.

An idea that runs through many of the responses to this demolition was that the Commune was attempting to erase the past. In the pages of Le Monde Illustré, Journalist Victorin-Francois Maisonneuve denounced it as an act of 'violence against the truth of history' and thundered against 'these modern iconoclasts, who seemed to want to erase history and destroy all memories of the homeland'.

If this sounds a bit familiar, maybe it's because the same accusations have been hurled at those who have worked for the removal of statues of Confederate generals, colonialists and slave traders. Speaking at Mount Rushmore in July 2020, former President Donald Trump asserted that activists were engaged in 'a merciless campaign to wipe out our history'. A month earlier, as protests at the murder of George Floyd erupted around the world, French President Emmanuel Macron insisted 'the [French] Republic won't erase any name from its history. It will forget none of its artworks, it won't take down statues'. A week before that, protestors who removed the monument to murderous slave trader Edward Colston from its plinth and threw it into Bristol harbour were accused of 'denying history'.

Was the Commune denying history? Was Napoleon Bonaparte the victim of some kind of nineteenth-century cancel culture? Over the last few years as debates have raged over statues of Colston, Cecil Rhodes, King Leopold II, Robert E Lee and many others, I have been reminded of the Vendôme Column and the debates that swirled around it when it went up and when it came down.

As part of the restoration of the French Republic's rule, the idea was strongly promoted that the Commune had been nothing but barbarism, vandalism and brutality. Demolishing the

Vendôme Column fitted neatly into that narrative. It is true that the Commune ordered the Column be brought down – but on the same day, let's remember, that the French army started to intensify its shelling of the city. The Vendôme Column came down less than week before the same troops began their aggressive campaign to retake Paris. The retreating Communards tried to delay their murderous pursuers by setting fires in some key Parisian landmarks, a desperate act though not one ordered by the Commune Council. The Commune's reputation for destruction is hardly justified.

A history of demolitions

Then as now, the removal of a monument is treated as a destructively political act while its installation is mystified as innocently historical. In fact, the demolition of the Vendome Column was only one episode in a long evolution of the column and its site that takes in multiple demolitions, adaptations and transformations. The foundations of the column were originally put in place for an equestrian statue of Louis XIV which was itself torn down in 1792 during the revolutionary era. Napoleon commissioned the new monument to commemorate his victory at Austerlitz in 1805. It was designed in conscious imitation of the second-century Trajan Column in Rome, which Napoleon had considered tearing down and erecting it in Paris. The Vendôme column, dedicated to the Grand Army, and topped with a statue of Napoleon in a Roman toga, was

itself a political repurposing of an earlier proposal to put up a column with Charlemagne on top. A series of spiralling bronze reliefs, reputedly made from melting down cannons captured from the Austrian and Russian armies, wind around the column telling the story of the military campaign. Once Napoleon had been toppled and the monarchy restored, his statue was removed and melted down to replace a statue of Henri IV on the Pont Neuf that had also been demolished during the Revolution. A Bourbon white fleur-de-lys flag was put on top of the column in its place.

After the July Revolution, Louis-Philippe, the Citizen King, commissioned a new statue of Napoleon, this one in contemporary dress, and took down the flag. After the coup that brought Napoleon's nephew to power, this statue was itself removed and replaced with another, once again placing Napoleon in Roman attire, to glorify the family name and thus the new Emperor of France.

The old statue was moved to Courbevoie on the outskirts of Paris though in 1870, as the Second Empire collapsed, it, too, was taken down and ended up, in mysterious circumstances, at the bottom of the Seine. By my reckoning, there had been eight or nine demolitions and meltings-down, threatened or actual, in the history of the Vendôme Column before the Commune got their hands on it. Every statue that goes up or comes down does so for political reasons.

The reasons why the Commune took the statue down are the reasons why the column had been unpopular since it went up: as the 12 April decree put it, announcing its demolition,

the Commune of Paris considers that the imperial column in the Place Vendome is a monument to barbarism, a symbol of brutal force and false glory, an affirmation of militarism, a negation of international rights, a permanent insult to both victors and vanquished and a menace to one of the three great principles of the French Republic – fraternity

The painter, Gustave Courbet, who argued for the Column to be moved, also objected to it on aesthetic grounds, arguing that it was out of keeping with the elegantly classical proportions of the square.

After the suppression of the Commune, Courbet would become the scapegoat for the Column's demise, imprisoned and then punitively sued. Courbet did not argue for demolition and played no part in the issuing of the 12 April decree, so his persecution was a clear act of vengeance and a skirmish in the Third Republic's culture wars. As news of Courbet's support for the Commune became known, in his home town of Ornans, a statue that he had given to the town was first vandalised then demolished, evidently by people without a sense of irony.

The Column and Urban Space

The Column also served a symbolic function in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. The remodelling of Paris's urban space by Baron Haussmann used monuments to lead the eye past the facades of the new apartment buildings, along the new straight boulevards, towards monuments like the Arc de Triomphe which provide a focus for the several new boulevards that fanned out around it. By drawing the eye away past the apartments, towards these icons of Napoleonic authority, they both hide and reinforce the bourgeoisification of Paris; much of Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris meant the demolition of poor areas and the relocation of working class families to the outskirts of the city. One of the striking features of the many photographs of the Column being brought down is the sense of a day out, conviviality, the mingling of the classes and the urban poor reclaiming the city from which they had been erased.

The accusation that demolishing the column erases history may be countered by observing that the column itself erases history. Maisonneuve in his essay for Le Monde Illustré claims that destroying the column deprived the French of a chance to console themselves for their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War by remembering glorious victories. Put another way, the column would have allowed the French to erase their

recent history. Sigmund Freud in a series of lectures delivered in Massachusetts in 1909, compared the neurotic patient – whose thoughts, feelings and behaviour are consumed and distorted by some hidden event in the past – to someone who cannot pass a monument without being flooded with feeling for the events it represents. For Freud, the thought is that the neurotic is like someone with a fetish for statues, but we might reverse his observation to note that it is this perverse attachment to historical monuments that is deeply neurotic, manifesting as it does in governments sending the police to protect them and instituting longer custodial sentences for attacking a statue than for attacking a person. Of course, Freud might also have had things to say about why demolishing this distinctly phallic icon could have caused so much anxiety, but perhaps that's for another time.

De-demolition and erasure

After crushing the Commune, the French government quickly announced plans to restore the Column. The novelist and critic, Théophile Gautier, visited Paris in the immediate aftermath of the Commune and was shocked by the destruction he saw, blaming it squarely on the Communards. Particularly appalled by a columnless Place Vendome he nonetheless reflected:

So in the course of a few months a column identical with the former one shall rise again upon its pedestal, which has been preserved, in all its triumphant height, for it is puerile to blot out history. By and by people will refuse to believe that raging madness actually fastened hawsers to the trophy of our victorious campaigns in order to drag it into the mud, and they will wonder whether it be true that the glorious column did actually disappear for a time from the horizon of Paris.

In other words, it is puerile to blot out history and to prove it, the Government is going to blot out history.

Today the Vendôme Column stands restored, as if it had always been there, quietly erasing history. But for three years, its absence was one of the most towering monuments to the Commune's determination to replace war with international peace and to create a city that offered a new expansive equality between rich and poor, men and women, young and old. The Commune showed that sometimes the best monument is to take one down.

Nowhere, however, did the Commune's reputation for destruction acquire more poisonous contempt than in its characterisation of the women communards and particularly that monster of the

Conservative imagination, the pétroleuse, and it is to the women of the Commune that I turn next.