The artists and writers who endured the Prussian siege of Paris have left a matchless record of one of the central events of the nineteenth century.

by Otto Friedrich

The bonneted women in black all cluster together under their umbrellas, waiting stoically for something. It is not yet dawn. Nothing in Edouard Manet’s powerful etching tells us why the women have assembled here, but one can guess that they are hoping for a chance to buy food. As for why they must wait in the rain, Manet’s only clue, poking above the umbrellas in the center of the scene, is a lone bayonet held high by an unseen soldier on guard duty. Manet has returned to the world of Goya, whose Disasters of War he knew well, only now the disasters are not those of Spain in 1812 but of his own Paris in 1870.

The Queue at the Butcher Shop is the unassertive title of the picture, and it is the only one that Manet is known to have done on the five-month Prussian siege of Paris. He had, of course, other things to occupy him. He had evacuated his wife, stepson, and mother to Oloron-Sainte-Marie, in the Pyrenees. He had shut down his studio at 81 rue Guyot and sent his thirteen most important pictures to a friend, Theodore Duret, for safekeeping in a cellar vault. They included Olympia, Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe, and The Balcony. Two days later, on September 18, 1870, the first Prussian troops arrived on the eastern outskirts of Paris.

“At the moment there is no café au lait, and the butchers are only open three times a week, and one has to queue at their doors from four o’clock in the morning,” Manet wrote to his wife, Suzanne, on September 30 (letters could leave encircled Paris only by balloon). “We are down to one meat meal and I think all Paris will have to do the same. Today Paris is one vast camp: From five o’clock in the morning until evening, volunteer militia who aren’t regular servicemen drill and are being turned into real soldiers. . . .”

Manet’s wartime letters to his distant wife were almost unfailingly cheerful and optimistic. To his young pupil Eva Gonzales, who had taken flight to Dieppe, he showed himself considerably more anxious. “I believe that we unhappy Parisians are going to play the parts of actors in something dreadful,” he wrote her. “It will be death, fire, plunder, carnage, if Europe does not arrive in time to stop it.”

At the age of nearly thirty-nine, Manet enlisted in the National Guard and took his place in an artillery unit assigned to defend the city ramparts. So did his friend and fellow painter Edgar Degas. Manet wrote to Suzanne:

I wish you could see me in my big artillery cloak—an excellent garment, absolutely indispensable for active service. My soldier’s knapsack is also filled with everything essential for painting and soon I’m going to start making some studies from life. . . . I will have every opportunity of doing some interesting things. . . .

“A Berlin! A Berlin!” the Parisian crowds had shouted that July as they cheered for Emperor Napoleon III and his declaration of war on Prussia. France was generally thought then to be the most powerful nation in Europe, Prussia a troublesome upstart possessed by
dreams of uniting the broken fragments of Germany. The actual pretext for war was an obscure quarrel over the throne of Spain, long held by the Bourbon dynasty of France but now secretly offered by army insurgents to a prince of Prussia's Hohenzollern family.

Many historians blame this maneuver on the wiles of Prussian prime minister Otto von Bismarck; others believe that Bismarck simply recognized an opportunity to assert Prussian military leadership—"a red rag to the Gallic bull," as he himself put it. In either case, the French foreign minister, the duke de Gramont, whom Bismarck considered "the stupidest man in Europe," responded just as Bismarck might have requested, declaring that war was necessary to preserve "the interests and honor of France."

In leading his armies to the battlefield, Napoleon tried to hide the fact that he was gravely ill with a bladder stone. Equally hidden was that his redoubtable army was ill equipped and ill prepared to confront the 300,000 German invaders. After a series of exploratory clashes, the Prussians trapped Napoleon's entire army on September 1 outside the Meuse River town of Sedan. "I never dreamed of a catastrophe so appalling," Napoleon later wrote to the Empress Eugénie. "I should have preferred death to the pain of witnessing so disastrous a capitulation.... I am in despair. Adieu. I kiss you tenderly."

In Paris, disbelief, incredulity, denial, and rejection. The idea that the most powerful army in the world had simply surrendered, that the emperor himself was a humble prisoner—it was not possible. Edmond de Goncourt wrote in his diary on September 3:

Who will be able to paint the dejected faces, the heedless coming and going of feet aimlessly beating the pavement, the anxious aside of shopkeepers and concierges on their doorsteps, the black crowds at street corners... the rush to the newspaper kiosks, the triple lines of people reading under every street light...? Then there is the rumbling clamor of the crowd, among whom anger follows on stupefaction. Then there are large bands running along the boulevards with flags in front of them, repeatedly shouting: "Down with him!"

With the emperor held in a Prussian castle, the beaten empire dissolved. A medley of Paris politicians proclaimed a Government of National Defense under General Louis Trochu and called for continued resistance. But the Prussian army encountered little opposition as it inexorably advanced until it surrounded the ancient walls of Paris.

The former emperor found himself an exile in England for two years before his bladder ailment killed him. The poets are the ones who keep score, and so it was the long-banished Victor Hugo who wrote the epitaph for Napoleon III:

From on high, the distant and formidable eye
That never winks at crime was upon him;
God pushed this tyrant, today just a ghost,
Into who knows what darkness, where history shudders,
And where He never before consigned anyone.
There, as at the bottom of some sinister pit,
He lost him.

Once the Prussian siege was under way, Manet went on a tour of northeastern Paris and found a state of virtual chaos. He wrote to his wife by the balloon postal service:

Everybody has left. All the trees have been cut down. They're burning everything, hay-stacks are burning in the fields, pillagers are hunting for potatoes which haven't been dug up... I believe we are ready to put up a stiff defense....

Manet's letters are surprisingly enthusiastic and combative. He missed his wife, but he was glad she had left.

To begin with, women are only a worry to the men... and besides, very few women have stayed behind. Even a lot of men have gone away, but I think that they will pay for it on their return. This evening I went with Eugène [his younger brother] to the meeting in Belleville where the names of absentees were read out, and it was proposed to post their names throughout Paris and to confiscate their goods and sell them for the benefit of the nation....

Even men who patriotically remained in Paris were subject to sudden outbreaks of public hysteria about Prussian spies. Several Jews were roughed up for speaking with German accents. An American clergyman who was sitting on a bench on the Champs-Elysées and writing in his diary what he had eaten for breakfast suddenly found himself under arrest on a charge of drawing a secret map of Paris.

"Here we are at the decisive moment," Manet wrote in late September, long before any moment was near.

There is fighting on all sides all around Paris. The enemy yesterday inflicted some rather considerable losses. The militia took the fire with courage... I haven't written you these last few days because I have been on guard duty on the fortifications. It's very tiring and very hard. We sleep on straw, and there isn't enough for everybody. Still, war is war....

And again: "The day before yesterday, we fired 25,000 artillery shells at the enemy, which inflicted some rather considerable losses." And again: "The Prussians have the air of repenting having undertaken the siege of Paris." And again: "The Prussians dare not and cannot attack us."

During this noisy stalemate, another kind of war was beginning—also a noisy stalemate—that pitted many Parisian workers and soldiers against their own government. The city's so-called Red Club, outlawed under the empire, had reopened as centers of argument, agitation, and boisterous social life. Manet was among those who took part. He wrote to Suzanne:

Yesterday, I went with Degas and Eugène to a public meeting at the Folies-Bergère. We heard General Cluseret [later a leader of the commune]. It was very interesting. The provisional government actually is not very popular, and the true republicans seem to be proposing to overthrow it after the war.

The National Guard, which had recruited such patriotic idealists as Manet and Degas in the defense of Paris, also served as a kind of welfare relief organization. Its pay of one and a half francs a day provided its 300,000 men with the only wages available in the besieged city, but since the army's suspicious commanders gave the guards little mil-
itary responsibility, many of them spent much of their time grumbling and carousing. And after Marshal François Bazaine, on October 29, surrendered the 180,000-man army that the Prussians had bottled up in Metz, the Parisians foresaw a national surrender. Apparently quite spontaneously, a crowd besieged the Hôtel de Ville and kept General Trochu and his aides prisoner for several dangerous hours. Only after much maneuvering and bargaining could the so-called Government of National Defense restore what passed for order in its own capital.

Manet’s letters to his wife continued heroic. “The army of Paris made a grand sortie against the enemy positions on Friday,” he reported on October 23. “There was fighting all day. I think the Prussians lost many men.” But Manet himself was suffering an unexplained “foot ailment” that kept him confined to quarters much of the time. And smallpox had broken out. And the food shortage was beginning to be a constant torment. “For the moment, we are reduced to 75 grams of meat per person; milk is for children and the sick,” he wrote on October 23. And the following week: “We are now on a diet of horse flesh; donkey is regarded as a feast fit for a prince.”

The Germans had thought that the siege would last only about two weeks. Bismarck had scornfully predicted that “eight days without café au lait” would be too much for the degenerate Parisians to endure. The French had not known quite what to expect, and, as in most other aspects of this war, they had made few plans. Shepherds brought flocks of sheep and cattle to pasture in Napoleon’s cherished public gardens in the Bois de Boulogne, and the trees there were chopped down for firewood. But the Bois itself was outside the city walls, and the government seemed to have no plans to impose rationing to prevent hoarding or speculation. A siege of a modern metropolis of 2 million people was simply unimaginable. It could not happen.

When the animals of the Bois de Boulogne had been eaten, the unimaginable began to be imagined. Two trotting horses that Czar Alexander had given to the emperor, prize animals valued at more than 50,000 francs, went to a butcher for 800. It was no longer possible to feed the zoo animals, so the animals went on the block. Not all at once. The first to go were those of which the zoo had many specimens—deer and antelope, for example, and camels. The lions and tigers survived through the whole siege, perhaps because of their value, perhaps because nobody wanted to attack them. Some of the monkeys were also spared, at least for a time, out of what an English journalist called “a vague and Darwinian notion that they are our relations.” All in all, according to one less than infallible accounting, the Parisians devoured 65,000 horses during the five-month siege, plus 5,000 cats and 1,200
How The Other Side Lived

Hapless, hungry Parisians had little idea how comfortably the enemy had installed himself in the countryside. Perhaps it was just as well. This account of life in the Prussian camp is excerpted from Alistair Horne's study of the siege and its aftermath, The Fall of Paris (Penguin Books, 1981).

Life was reasonably agreeable and secure. Occasionally nightfall brought an unpleasant shock when someone infringed the strict blackout precautions; but otherwise French shellfire did little to upset the leisurely routine of life. Out of the line, the besiegers spent their time pleasantly enough, rowing on the lake at Enghien or skating when the winter set in, or just gorging at the wondrous of Versailles.

At first, as the Parisians by driving in all herds and collecting all food within range of the metropolis had created a kind of “scorched earth,” provisions had been scarce and extremely expensive. But the admirable quartermasters of the Prussian Army soon had an efficient system of supplies flowing direct from the Fatherland. Rations were supplemented with parcels of Wurst, smoked cheese, and tobacco from sweethearts and well-wishers at home.

Excellent wine “liberated” from French cellars was also plentiful. But, despite this looting of cellars—the prerogative of the conqueror everywhere—gratuitous vandalism was not excessive. When the Siberian cold of December struck, doors, furniture, paneling, and sometimes even grand pianos were smashed up for firewood.

But on the whole, the besiegers were well behaved and relations with the inhabitants could have been much worse. At Versailles, a Frenchwoman confided that “much as she detested the Prussians, she must admit that a woman could walk with greater immunity from affront along the boulevards after dark than she could have done when the French troops were in garrison.” But, as many Prussians discovered, molestation was superfluous; in a time of hunger, blandishments of chocolate and sugar have a remarkable way of purchasing smiles—if not more. So morale was excellent—as was the troops’ health, at least until the end of December.

Bismarck had made his first siege headquarters in the Rothschilds’ Château de Ferrieres. In a washerwoman’s cottage Bismarck’s entourage had been amused to find a copy of Les Liaisons Dangereuses. Bismarck himself had been less amused when the Rothschild steward insisted there was no wine in the house, for he claimed that to his certain knowledge “there were more than 17,000 bot-
dogs. The fashionable Jockey Club listed “rat pie” on its menu.

Even more than in Manet’s letters, food becomes a kind of leitmotif in the brilliant journals of Edmond de Goncourt. For all his vanity and snobbishness, Goncourt was a superb reporter, working for a newspaper that existed only in his own head. Grief-stricken over the death of his younger brother and collaborator, Jules, who had succumbed to syphilis just before the war began, Goncourt abandoned the joint journal they had kept since 1851, but he could not resist recording the fall of the empire and then the great siege.

He went everywhere, recording. When the republicans opened up the imperial archives and began searching for evidence of scandal and corruption, Goncourt inevitably went to the Tuileries to watch, inevitably felt intrusive, inevitably joined in the search. He wrote:

Unpainted wooden filing cases are ranged against the walls clear to the ceiling, and overflow with papers in bundles and cartons. Tables on sawhorses sag under the disorderly mountain of letters, papers, receipts, bills of sale. Held by a tack stuck into the gold frame of a mirror is the instruction for Inventory of the Correspondence. I feel as though I have entered the black chamber of the Revolutionary inquisition, and this detestable opening up of history is somehow repugnant to me. . . . I pick up one of the papers at random; it is a bill to that great spender Napoleon III for darning his socks at twenty-five centimes apiece.

Goncourt was fascinated by the spectacle of the city of Paris trying, like some blind but powerful organism, to provision and protect itself against the impending disaster. He knew, of course, that the poor went hungry even in peacetime, but he watched with a kind of bemused stoicism as even the prosperous began to encounter unfamiliar difficulties.

September 24: . . . Restaurant bills of fare are becoming limited. The last oysters were eaten yesterday; eels and gudgeons are all that is left in the way of fish. . . .

October 1: Horsemeat is slipping quietly into the Parisian diet. Day before yesterday Pélagie [his servant] brought home a piece of steak which, seeing her doubtful expression, I did not eat. At Peters’ yesterday they brought me roast beef; . . . the meat was watery, without fat, and striped with white nerves. . . . The waiter assured me, though not very firmly, that this horse was beef.

October 10: This morning I go for my ration card. . . .

October 20: The big central market is very strange. Where they used to sell fresh fish all the sillas are selling horsemeat; instead of butter they have beef or horse fat in big squares like yellow soap. . . .

October 23: . . . [In a rue de Tournon shop] in a pool of blood you see two large deer, their throats slit and their entrails cast aside as though to a pack of dogs. Enormous carp push their bluish noses to the surface of the rippling water in a child’s bathtub. By the light of a candle guttering in an old copper candlestick you see the golden neck of a young bear pierced by a round hole, and his four paws folded in death. These were boarders at the Zoo whom ravenous Paris will fight over tomorrow. . . .

November 24: The ragman on our boulevard, who nowadays is standing in line at the public market for a cookshop proprietor, was telling Pélagie that he has bought cats at six francs apiece, rats at one franc apiece, and dogmeat at one franc a pound for his principal.

December 6: On today’s bill of fare in the restaurants we have authentic buffalo, antelope, and kangaroo. . . .

...However, the fabulous game-birds in the park at Ferrières offered compensation, and soon the steward proved more compliant.

Bismarck’s secretary, Dr. Moritz Busch, who kept a detailed account of the great man’s table talk, reveals that when he was not throwing out brutally cynical observations on how to deal with France, or complaining at his treatment by Molte and the king, or discoursing on the joys of hunting in his native Pomerania, conversation tended to revolve round the theme of food. At length the time he could devour eleven hard-boiled eggs for breakfast, but now he could only manage three; boast how in his diplomatic training he and his fellows practiced drinking three-quarters of a bottle of champagne while negotiating.

Early in October, reluctantly, Bismarck moved his headquarters to Versailles, where the king had set up court. There the glutinous obsessions with the pleasures of his vast stomach continued, spiced by a liberal flow of offerings from adulators at home—prompting the faithful Busch to make entries like the following: “Today’s dinner was graced by a great trout pate, the love-gift of a Berlin restaurant-keeper, who sent the Chancellor of the Confederation a cask of Vienna March beer along with it, and—his own photograph!”

Even within Paris, few can have been so concerned with what they were eating: “December 8th . . . we had omlettes with mushrooms, and, as several times previously, pheasant and sauerkraut boiled in champagne. . . . December 13th . . . we had turtle soup, and among other delicacies, a wild boar’s head and a compote of raspberry jelly and mustard, which was excellent.”

At times even Bismarck rebelled. On December 21 he interrupted a mealtime discussion on the French sortie of the previous day to exclaim: “There is always a dish too much. I had already decided to ruin my stomach with goose and olives, and here is Reinfeld ham, of which I cannot help taking too much, merely because I want to get my own share. . . .”

Sometimes there was speculation on the bill of fare of the besieged. Lightly the talk would stray to thoughts of cannibalism, to which Bismarck contributed: “I believe I have read that they prefer women, who are, at least, not of their own sex. . . .”

Such was the way in which, while Parisians drew in their belts ever tighter, life went on in the archenemy’s household.
The prolific military artist Paul Grolle painted numerous scenes of the Franco-Prussian War. Here, members of the Paris National Guard, whose training and performance were generally poor, are shown street-fighting. The man in the red, baggy trousers is a Zouave.
December 8: . . . You talk only about what is eaten, can be eaten, or can be found to eat. Conversation does not go beyond that. “You know, a fresh egg costs twenty-five sous!” . . . “I saw some dog cutlets; they’re really very appetizing; they look just like mutton chops.” . . . Hunger is beginning and famine is on the horizon . . .

December 31: . . . I am curious enough to go into the shop of Roos, the English butcher on the Boulevard Hausmann. I see all sorts of bizarre spoils. Hanging on the wall in the place of honor is the trunk of young Pollux, the elephant in the Zoo; and among nameless meats and exotic horns an employee offers camel kidneys for sale.

The proprietor is exhorting a circle of women: “It’s forty francs a pound for filet and trunk . . . Yes, forty francs . . . You think that’s high? But you know, I’m not sure that I’ll manage to break even. I counted on 3,000 pounds, and it has only come to 2,300. . . . The fees, you want to know the price of the feet? . . . Twenty francs . . . Oh, let me recommend the blood sausage. Don’t forget that elephant blood is the most generous blood of all. His heart, did you know, weighed twenty-five pounds. . . . And there is onion, ladies, in my blood sausage.”

I settle for two larks, which I carry off for tomorrow’s lunch . . .

At Yolins’ . . . I see the famous elephant blood sausage again; indeed I dine on it.

The killing of the zoo’s celebrated elephants, Castor and Pollux, also inspired Victor Hugo to bitterly comic poetry. He wrote in L’Année terrible, a fat volume of verse devoted to many different aspects of the siege:

We’re eating horses, rats, bears, donkeys. Paris is so well caught, squared, walled in, tied up,
Guarded, that our belly is Noah’s Ark;
Into our guts, every animal of good or ill repute.
Penetrates, both dog and cat, the mammoth, the pynmy.
They all enter, and the mouse encounters the elephant . . .

Hugo, the empire’s great public enemy, had just returned to Paris in triumph on the eve of its encirclement. A member of the legislature of the Second Republic, he had misguidedly supported Napoleon for the presidency but angrily broke with him on the night of Napoleon’s coup d’état. Indeed, he had gone to the Place de la Bastille that day and harangued the soldiers and police in an effort to keep them loyal to the republic. The police came to his house that night, searched the place, smashed furniture, and terrified Hugo’s wife and daughter. Only at the insistence of his mistress did he flee to Belgium in disguise. After nearly two decades of noisy exile on the island of Guernsey, Hugo clearly saw that Napoleon’s declaration of war against Prussia would soon mean the end of the empire and of Hugo’s own exile. On the day of Sedan, Hugo was awaiting the debacle in Brussels, less than 100 miles away. He wept at the news and boarded the next train to Paris. By the time that train reached the Gare du Nord, thousands of Parisians had gathered to welcome the white-haired exile. “Vive Victor Hugo!” they shouted. They threw flowers. They even recited whole verses of Hugo’s Les Châtiments. Again, the old man wept.

Hugo wrote an impassioned appeal to the Prussians to accept the fall of the empire as the limit of their victory, but neither Bismarck nor chief of staff Helm von Moltke was inclined to spare the French capital the hardships of total defeat. Goncourt went with Théophile Gautier to call on Hugo, and he described the returned hero with characteristic malice:

The god is surrounded by female creatures. There is a whole sofa full of them; the honors of the salon are done by an old silver-haired woman in a dress the color of dead leaves, with a low-cut neck revealing a considerable expanse of old skin . . . As for the god, he seems old to me this evening. His eyelids are red; his complexion is brick-color . . . his beard and hair are tangled. A red jersey sticks out beyond the sleeves of his coat; a white scarf is wound round his neck. After all sorts of activity, doors opening and closing, people entering and leaving, actresses coming for permission to recite something from Les Châtiments in the theater . . . Hugo drops down on a low chair and in his slow speech which seems to come out after laborious reflection, he begins, apropos of microscopic photography, to talk about the moon, the great desire he has always had to know about its details . . .

Goncourt, who kept referring to Hugo as old, was then forty-eight, Hugo sixty-eight. But the younger man was almost morbidly fascinated by Hugo’s lechery, describing him as “one of those sexagenarians attacked by acute priapism.” Aside from his wife and mistress, whom he left in charge of his grandchildren, Hugo would set out from his hotel every evening at ten and go to the home of a sympathetic journalist named Paul Meurice. “Where,” as Goncourt quoted Madame Meurice in his journal, one, two, three women were waiting for him and frightening the tenants who ran into them on the stairs. These women were of every sort, from the most distinguished to the most sordid. And through the ground-floor windows of Hugo’s room Madame Meurice’s maid, strolling in the garden, would witness naked bits of strange sexual rites. This seems to have been Hugo’s chief occupation during the siege.

No, Hugo had many occupations, and like all other Parisians he was obsessed with food. The zoo authorities sent him gifts of bear steaks and antelope chops, which he gratefully ate, but he also had humbler fare and even wrote a small cookbook advising his fellow Parisians how they could best make use of such necessities. “Horsemeat has never been regarded as a delicacy,” he wrote. “When twice boiled, however, it can be delicious, particularly when served with horseradish sauce.” And further: “Garden weeds, lightly boiled, make an excellent substitute for vegetable soup.” And again: “Civilized men and women find it difficult to eat rat meat when it is served broiled or baked. We are the victims of our prejudices. It has been discovered, however, that this meat, when chopped into small pieces to resemble minced beef, makes a palatable filling for meat pies . . .”

Behind its thirty-foot walls, Paris was vulnerable to artillery fire. Moltke argued for siege alone, but Bismarck wanted the enemy capital and its 2 million inhabitants shelled into submission. Uncharacteristically, he seemed to see some moral purpose in this destruction of the city that his wife referred to as “that mad Sodom.” The
Paris Besieged, 1870

--- Prussian siege line
- Prussian-occupied fortresses
- railroad
--- city walls

The Prussians constructed a siege line, represented by the dashes on the map at right, around Paris, then waited for starvation and artillery fire to force capitulation. They expected the decadent Parisians to last about two weeks without their café au lait. But the Parisians managed to hold out five months behind their 30-foot walls, best shown by the crenelated line on the map above, which also locates the sites of important events during the siege.

First shells fired at Sodom on January 5 wounded a baby lying asleep in its cradle and a girl walking home from school near the Luxembourg Gardens. The barrage continued at a rate of 300 to 400 shells per day.

Manet, who in December had become a headquarters staff officer, with the rank of lieutenant, kept sending his wife jaunty letters. “The bombardment ... has had little effect,” he wrote.

The Prussians have sent us up to this moment something like seven to eight thousand shells, which have only killed or wounded a very few people. . . . I think we can hold on here for a long time; at least, we will do it as long as possible. Hatred is mixed up in it. The bastards are making us suffer too much; they’ll have to watch out if they get beaten. . . .

The Prussian shelling did inflict remarkably little damage. During nearly
a month of constant cannonading, the Prussians fired about 12,000 shells, killed only 97 people, wounded 278, and damaged 1,400 buildings. The Krupp guns were essentially instruments of terror—Concourt read of a German newspaper declaring that "the psychological moment for bombardment has arrived"—and yet the psychology of terrorization is still an imperfectly understood weapon. The London Blitz seems to prove one thing, Hiroshima the opposite. When a funeral was held in Paris that January 11 for six small children, all killed by a single shell, were the survivors demoralized or determined to fight harder? United States Minister Elihu Washburne, the only major envoy to remain at his post throughout the siege, thought the latter: "It apparently made the people more firm and determined."

It was this moment of bloody stalemate that Bismarck chose for the strange culmination of all his policies, foreign and domestic, the triumph for which he had originally provoked the war—if it was indeed his provocation. In the Palace of Versailles—that monument to the Sun King, who had so often sent his troops smashing into prostrate Germany—King Wilhelm of Prussia on January 18 proclaimed himself emperor of all the Germans.

And though neither shelling nor blockade had subdued the Parisians, Bismarck had now acquired a new weapon: the coldest winter in years. Concourt began recording the effects as early as December:

December 8: We shall lack not only food but also light. Oil for lamps is becoming scarce, candles are at an end. Worse than that, with the cold weather we are having we are getting close to the time when we will be without coal, or coke, or wood. Then we shall endure famine, cold, and darkness.

December 9: What weather for a war in this frost and snow! You think of the suffering of men condemned to lie down in this frozen dampness. You think of the wounded finished off by the cold.

December 25: It is Christmas. I hear a soldier say: "By way of celebration we had five men frozen in our tent."

December 26: ... It is a question of a supply of wood for making charcoal which people have begun to pilage. The cold, the frost, the lack of fuel with which to heat the little meat that people get has put the feminine part of the population in a fury and they are falling on trellises and wooden fences, tearing away everything on which they can get their angry hands. If this terrible winter weather goes on, all the trees in Paris will go down to satisfy people's urgent need of fuel.

Along with war and famine, there was pestilence. In the frozen week of January 14–21, 1,084 Parisians succumbed to pneumonia and other respiratory ailments—more than six times the rate just eight weeks earlier. Deaths from smallpox climbed to 380, more than double the rate at the start of the siege. Typhoid killed another 375, more than eight times the earlier rate.

Even Manet was beginning to lose his enthusiasm. "The life that I lead is unbearable," he wrote to his mother on January 15, "and I rejoice every day that I made you leave..." And to his wife that same day: "No more gas, only black bread, and the cannon all day and all night. The poor Saint-Germain quarter is going to be in a sad state. Still nothing from our side. When does it end? Soon, I hope..."

On several occasions the defenders of Paris tried to fight their way out of the encircled city, but they were beaten back. Though they outnumbered the thinly spread Prussians, more than half the French forces were (like Manet) poorly trained, poorly equipped, and poorly led National Guards. General Trochu and his chief aides deeply distrusted the National Guards, suspecting them all of disobedience and radicalism. So it was partly punishment and partly desperation that inspired Trochu to assign the Guards to the forefront of the last great sortie, on January 18, toward the southwest, toward Buzenval, toward Versailles.

"It was a great and proud spectacle, that army marching toward the guns booming in the distance," Concourt reported from his vantage point at the barricade by the Etoile.

Among the men are gray-bearded civilians who are fathers, beardless youngsters who are sons, and in the ranks women carrying their husband's or their lover's rifles slung over their shoulders. It is impossible to convey the picturesqueness brought to the war by this citizen multitude conveyed by cabs, unpainted omnibuses, moving vans for Erard pianos, all converted into military supply vehicles.

Victor Hugo, too, wrote of watching the marching columns, "drawn by that grand and vital sound / That humans make when they go forward." He was particularly struck by the presence of the women carrying guns "in the tradition of the women of Gaul." And at the city gates, he professed to "hear voices say: 'Adieu—Our guns, women! / And the women, their brows calm, their hearts breaking, / Give them the guns that they have first kissed.'"

The reality was considerably less poetical. Loaded down with about eighty pounds of gear, the guardsmen had to wait for hours until all the troops arrived. Many of them fought bravely, but confusion and incompetence dominated the battlefield. There was something characteristic in a regiment described by one of Trochu's staff officers, Captain Maurice d'Herisson:

The drummer beat the charge; the colonel gave the word of command, "En avant!" the regiment shouted, "Vive la Republique!" and—nobody stirred. That went on for three hours—Ducrot [General Auguste-Alexandre Ducrot, Trochu's right-hand man] appeared on the scene in person and shouted "En avant!" He was answered by the shouts, but nobody moved.

This went on all day, and at dusk the guardsmen opened fire on d'Herisson's party, claiming to believe that they were German uhlan.

When Trochu ordered a withdrawal the next morning, a tallying of casualties showed that the French had lost 4,000 men, the Prussians only 700. General Ducrot reported:

Hardly was the word retreat pronounced than... the debacle began... Everything broke up, everything went... Across the open country, the National Guards were taking to their heels in every direction... Soldiers wandering, lost, searched for their company, their officers...
There was now no alternative to surrender. On January 23, Captain d'Hersisson set out across the Seine in a leaky rowboat with the white-haired, top-hatted figure of Jules Favre, the foreign minister in the Government of National Defense, to find Bismarck. When they reached German headquarters, Favre talked windily of Paris's resistance. “Ah, you are proud of your resistance?” Bismarck retorted, “... Do not talk to me of your resistance. It is criminal!”

“I am struck more than ever by the silence, the silence of death, which disaster brings in a great city,” Goncourt wrote. “Today you can no longer hear Paris live. Every face is that of a sick man or a convalescent. You see only thin, drawn, pale faces; you see only yellowy pallor like horse fat.”

Manet was in bed with the flu during these last days of the war. “I hope to be over it soon,” he wrote from his bedside on January 18, the day of the last great sortie.

I’m supposed to be on duty tomorrow, and I’m really annoyed that I cannot get on a horse, but these days it’s easy to get an inflammation of the chest. There are 4,000 people dead this week in Paris from illness alone...

And then, finally, on January 30:

It’s all over and the three of us [the three Manet brothers] are still on our feet and all in one piece. There was no way of holding out. We were dying of hunger and even now we are suffering very much. We are all thin as laths. I myself have been sick for several days as a result of getting overtired and from bad food. ... You really have to have gone through what we did to know what it is like. ... I will come and fetch you as soon as possible.

Bismarck’s terms were harsh: the surrender to Prussia of all Alsace and most of Lorraine, and the payment of 5 billion francs (roughly $1 billion) in reparations. He professed to doubt, though, whether the so-called Government of National Defense actually had any authority to sign a peace treaty; he insisted on a new national election.

This election, on February 8, produced remarkable results: Of the 768 representatives to the new republican legislature, more than 400 were monarchists; they were overwhelmingly conservative and dedicated to peace at any price. They chose as their leader Adolphe Thiers, the wizened, white-haired little man who had served as a royal minister to King Louis-Philippe nearly a quarter of a century earlier and who had opposed Emperor Napoleon’s misguided war from the start. Now seventy-three, Thiers was a shrewd maneuverer and a ruthless believer in order, as he would soon show in crushing the radicals of the Paris Commune. But before he could rule, he had to sign Bismarck’s peace treaty. He wept and signed.

Along with land and money, Bismarck’s treaty demanded that Paris be subjected to the humiliation of a two-day Prussian occupation. And so, on the morning of March 1, while a crowd watched in sullen silence, a young lieutenant of the 14th Prussian Hussars led six of his horsemen up to that Arc de Triomphe that so vaingloriously boasts of Napoleon Bonaparte’s military victories beyond the Rhine. The Prussian horsemen jumped over the chains obstructing the center of the arch and then began their triumphant parade down the Champs-Elysées—a company of uhlans with their blue-and-white flags and their lances in their saddles, then a succession of blue-coated Saxons, Bavarian riflemen, and Bismarck’s cuirassiers with their white jackets and plumes.

The Parisians, pretending resistance, had shut down all shops and draped their windows in black. One hostile crowd on the place de la Concorde threateningly surrounded the towering figure of Bismarck himself. The chancellor coolly took out a cigar, accosted the most haughty-looking of the Parisians, and asked him for a light. That threat dissolved. The parade continued.

The Parisians would not forget or forgive. “I can already feel the coming of that immense revenge,” Victor Hugo declared in a speech to the legislature even before the Prussians went home. “Someday, France would stand up against,” Hugo predicted, and then would demand not only Alsace and Lorraine but the whole left bank of the Rhine. And it was all too true; more wars lay ahead before the scars could finally be considered settled.

OTTO FRIEDRICII is the author of Olympe de Gouges in the Age of Manet (Harperteen), published earlier this year, from which this article is adapted.