

Attack on the Paris Commune, 1871

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Parisian radicals, with strong support from most of the citizens of Paris, took over the government of the city after the Franco-Prussian war. The Paris Commune existed from March 28 to May 1871. The local National Guard unit was their military arm. (Note: all the facts reported here came from this source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris_Commune)

The French Imperial government fell during the war when the Emperor, Napoleon III, was captured in September of 1870. The Third Republic was established and continued fighting. Liberals in Europe were encouraged and Garibaldi himself led a volunteer force to aid them in the final stages of the war. France was defeated soundly by Prussia in the war. After the armistice was signed in February of 1871, two French generals were killed in Paris by the revolutionaries and the Commune was established. The agencies and army of the Third Republic fled to Versailles. The Parisian National Guard elected Garibaldi as their leader, in absentia, but he declined the honor. Perhaps history would have turned out differently had he accepted. The Parisian National Guard attacked Versailles, believing that National Guard units controlling the defenses would not fire on them. However, those units had been replaced by regular army. The attack was repulsed. The regulars executed their prisoners, so the Commune began executing prisoners and suspected collaborators.



The loss of the war had left the French army with only 30,000 men, far fewer than the National Guard. The government immediately began to rebuild the army and then sought to regain control over Paris. Even though the Emperor was gone, the Republic was too conservative for the Paris Commune, which was described at the time by Karl Marx as the first experiment with a dictatorship by the proletariat.

A French military force of 60,000 was sent to restore order under the leadership of Marshall MacMahon. They outnumbered the Parisian National Guard units, but the Guard had weapons, including artillery, and an intense commitment to their cause along with strong popular support in Paris. They had some training but were not of the caliber of the French regulars who opposed them, and they were not led by skilled professional officers, with a few exceptions. The French force was superior in both numbers and quality and the outcome might have been regarded as inevitable, even to the fanatics defending the city. Even so, the Communards would go down fighting, flaunting their ideological commitment in the face of a society controlled by the bourgeoisie.

The progress of the invading French army was impeded by barricades thrown up by irate Parisians. Military resources, including cannon, had been widely distributed so the fighting was district by district. The Guard fell back before the regulars, taking refuge in palaces and public buildings that had frequently been used by the old government and the monarchy. The intention of the Commune was to destroy all symbols of the aristocracy, including the Louvre; arson was the order of the day.



The American ambassador in Paris detested the communards. A Londoner in Paris at the time also wrote that they were terrible. Marx, Engle and Lenin thought they were great. A journalist said that both sides were insanely homicidal. All witnesses could only be said to directly observe limited aspects of events. Historians continue to try to sort out the truth.

The Scenario for the Wargame

Wargame scenarios can be envisioned for most of the famous historical sites in Paris and for battles in the central districts. This hypothetical battle will center on a National Guard armory, which provides cover, is protected by artillery and is the refuge of three National Guard units. They have one brass cannon unit. The size of the regular army force attacking the palace, for the purposes of this scenario, is assumed to be 10 infantry regular units and one field gun unit. The French army is divided because it is fighting all over the central part of Paris.

Game pieces are shown in the photo. In the center you will see the two sniper units, three reinforcement units and a mob unit (girl with rolling pin). You also will need a handful of dice, hit counters, terrain, and event cards. I used the thirty event cards suggested by Thomas (Thomas, 2014) with six more: “mob attacks from left”, “sniper unit attacks from left”, “sniper unit attacks from right”, and three “reinforcing unit arrives.”

I shuffled all the cards together into one stack and drew one card at the beginning of each round. I also used 45 hit counters, 15 for each side plus 15 for the mob. My method of keeping track of hits is to take away one counter for each hit. When the counters are gone, one unit has received 15 hits, so I remove a figure. This is much simpler than trying to keep track of hits separately on each unit.

Sample Event Cards

Number Of Cards	Name	Event
10	No Event	Nothing happens.
4	Confusion	1-3 of one's own units may not move this turn.
4	Ammunition Shortage	1-3 of one's own units may not shoot this turn.
2	Demoralization	A single unit on one's own side acquires 1-6 hits.
4	Initiative	A single unit on one's own side may either move twice, move and then shoot, or shoot twice.
4	Rally	1-3 of one's own units remove 1-3 hits.
2	Enemy Panic	A single enemy unit acquires 1-6 hits.
1	Mob Charge	Mob attacks from left.
1	Sniper	Sniper attacks from left.
1	Sniper	Sniper attacks from right
3	Reinforcements	A reinforcing unit arrives.

Following Featherstone (1973), I assume each unit represents ten soldiers. The solo player is the commander of the French army regulars. The player is of course free to change the number of figures per unit and the number of units as he or she sees fit.



The battle begins with an artillery duel. The French regulars are not in a hurry to take the armory because they are winning the war and generally are in control in all locations where fighting is still occurring. However, their mission is to subdue the opposition, so they advance in a skirmish line down the boulevard toward the armory.

Victory conditions for the French regulars are simple: capture the armory while losing as few soldiers as possible. Victory conditions for the Guard are more existential: kill as many of their attackers as possible before being overwhelmed. The game ends after thirty rounds. Rounds go quickly when you roll a handful of dice at a time, one die for each unit.

The defenders are set up on the north edge of the table. The attackers enter on the south edge. The rules are taken from Thomas' *One Hour Wargames* (Thomas, 2014). However, some special rules apply to mobs. A mob (unit) of irate citizens may charge the flank of the column. The mob has only hand-weapons and will charge the column. Soldiers in the column can turn but must wait until the next round to shoot. If a citizen contacts a figure, the chances of a casualty is 1/6. Soldiers are assumed to hit the mob with every shot. The number of hits is determined by the die (from 1 to 6).

Sniper units may also pop up randomly. These are Guard soldiers separated from their units. The snipers may shoot as soon as they appear. They benefit from cover, so the effectiveness of return fire is reduced. Snipers attack flanks so the French army regulars must use one round to turn before they can return fire.

For both mob attacks and snipers, the commander of the French regulars must decide how many units should use a round to turn in place. If they turn, they will not be able to shoot at the armory until they have turned back.



This scenario is envisioned as a solo game, but a friend could roll the dice for the defenders. Attackers may move or shoot in one turn but not both.

Movement is six inches and shooting is twelve inches (except artillery, which can shoot 48"). Hits are determined by rolling six-sided dice. A hit is rolling a 4, 5 or 6. Subtract two for being under cover so only a six is a hit when the regulars are shooting. The Guardsmen all are under cover. None of the Regular Army are under cover.

No hand to hand combat is allowed; soldiers prefer to eliminate their opponents by shooting them. However, there is an exception pertaining to the mob. The mob strikes the regular army unit with make-shift hand-weapons but they do so very ineffectively (hits = 1/6).

The game ends when you have gone through the deck, when one side is decimated, when you tire of rolling dice, or when the cat jumps on the battlefield and spills your coffee.

This is a simple solo game but a friend could roll the dice for the defenders.



Test Run

1. Elapsed time was 55 minutes. I could not roll sixes. The Guard units in the armory finally were all killed, despite poor shooting by the French regulars. Snipers were dead also. Eight of the regulars were still alive; five had been killed. Both artillery units were still operational. The defending gunners ran away. Score: five units killed by Guard and seven by Regulars. (Eight if you count the mob.) This is a clear win for the regulars but not an easy one. Note: I started back through the cards a second time, which I now believe to be a mistake.
2. Elapsed time was 20 minutes. Four cards were left but all defenders were killed except the artillery unit. The mob unit was dead. Ten regulars were still shooting; since they had received three reinforcing units, losses were three units. The snipers were dead. I assumed the gunners would withdraw sharpish. This was an overwhelming victory for the regulars.
3. Elapsed time was 29 minutes. This time I continued until all defenders in the armory were killed including the artillery unit. All cards were used. Two sniper units were still shooting. Ten regulars were shooting at them along with the artillery. Since the regulars had possession of the armory and the cards were gone, I declared the action completed. The Guard only is credited with three units killed whereas the regulars get five (plus the mob) and possession of the armory.

Concluding Thoughts

A solo game that runs around thirty minutes is long enough for me because my back starts to hurt. I enjoyed the battle and found myself cheering for whichever side was losing. The defenders were expected to lose but I had hoped they would do better. Perhaps they should be given another unit.

The cards threw important twists into the battle. Knowing which card might come up is not ideal. I suggest that a deck of fifty event cards should be developed. Shuffle all fifty but use only the first thirty cards drawn in a single battle. You would then not know which events are going to occur during the battle.

References

Featherstone D and Curry J, D. F. (1973). *Donald Featherstone's Solo Wargaming*. London: Kayle and Ward.

Thomas, N. (2014). *One Hour Wargames*. Yorkshire: Pen & Sword Books Ltd.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paris_Commune

