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'Le temps des cerises': The Ambulance Women of the Paris Commune

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Introduction

In 1885, Jean-Baptiste Clément, songwriter and elected delegate of the Montmartre district during the Paris Commune, dedicated the words of a song entitled *Le temps des cerises* 'to the brave citizen Louise, the ambulance woman working in the Fontaine-au-Roi street, on Sunday the 28th of May, 1871' (Clement 1885: 234). This waltz, which evoked the memory of 'an open wound', caused by a story of lost love, was to become one of

the most famous French songs of all times, making cherries an emblem of the blood spilt by the communards during the government offensive led by Adolphe Thiers from Sunday 21st until Monday 29th of May 1871, this being the tragic episode also called the bloody week that put an end to the revolutionary rule of the Commune (Clement 1885: 234; Tillier 2005: 15).

Beyond the revolutionary hymn that it represents today, *Le temps des cerises* also reveals an interesting historical phenomenon: the scale of feminine involvement in the socialist uprising led by Parisian workers against the authority of the French government provisionally based in Versailles from March 18 to May 28, 1871, also known as the Paris Commune.

Although the women of the Paris Commune have frequently been depicted as ferocious fighters, setting fire to the streets of the capital, becoming well known as the *pétroleuses*, Clement's dedication reminds us that they also played a role in assisting the injured soldiers of the National Guard (Thomas 2007; Gullickson 1996 and Eichner 2004). Taking this two-month period in French political history as starting point, I will attempt to examine the contribution carried out by this group of women to medical assistance, following the call made by the feminine organization known as *l'Union des femmes pour la défense de Paris et les soins aux blessés* (*The Women's Union for the Defense of Paris and the Treatment of the Injured*), on the 11th of April 1871 (Commune de Paris 1871: 225-6).

The interest of analyzing the establishment of this corps of ambulance women is that, even if the history of the Paris Commune has been the subject of considerable research, only few works have shown interest in examining the medical aspects involved in this episode. Amongst these exceptions, we find Marcel Guivarc'h, Bertrand Taithe and Jean-Paul Martineaud's publications which emphasise the importance of this brief period for studying the transformations of the *Assistance Publique* (the network of

Parisian public hospitals) as well as those undergone by the French army medical services, the role of ambulance women has been frequently treated in a summary manner (Guivarc'h 2006: 218-220; Taithe 1999: 136-7 and Martineaud 2004: 234).

The invisibility of the ambulance women in the history of the Paris Commune can be explained on the one hand, because their activity has often been considered as being a minor task in comparison with the work carried out by surgeons. On the other hand, feminist historians have often written eulogies about the women of the Commune as fighters, but few of them have taken their contribution to the health care services seriously, as this occupation seems only to reinforce the sexual division of labour in late nineteenth century French society (Shafer 1993; Purvis 1992: 274). A third obstacle should also be mentioned, one that makes the task of reconstructing this ambulance women's corps particularly difficult: that we are not dealing with nurses in the contemporary sense that this term has acquired. It would be necessary to wait until 1878 to see the first regulation of secular nursing training in Parisian hospitals, such as those of the Salpêtrière and Bicêtre and, therefore, we cannot consider ambulance women as strictly professional care workers (Diebolt and Fouché 2011: 229-245).

Ambulance women were known by this name because they were responsible for tending to the injured at makeshift first aid posts established in each district during the Paris Commune. They belonged officially to the medical services of the National Guard but the women's committees coordinated their work in each quarter. In this historical context, the term 'ambulance' means 'not a simply a vehicle for transporting the wounded but a temporary field hospital', where emergency surgical operations were performed (Hutchinson 1996: 109-110). Therefore, we should consider ambulance women as historical figures that appeared during the secularization of the French health care system implemented during the Paris Commune, female figures that were diametrically opposed to the profile of the nun that had monopolized for centuries the management of health care in hospitals such as the Hôtel-Dieu, La Charité or Saint-Louis (Jones 1989). Indeed, the anticlericalism that characterized the period of the Commune was to arouse suspicion against of any health worker having had links with charity, such as the members of the *Société française des secours aux blessés militaires*, who were accused on various occasions of being collaborators with the Versailles government (Dunant 1871).

Furthermore, the ambulance women of the Paris Commune seem to have some historical affinities with other feminine figures that had played a role in French military history such as the launderers, the *vivandières*, and, notably, the canteen women. The canteen women were officially recognized by the French army in 1794, during the Napoleonic wars and would distinguish themselves for the efficiency of their health care and the elegance of their uniforms during the Crimean war (1853-6) (Rappaport 2007: 56; Cardoza 2010). Even if we can appreciate a frequent interchangeability between terms such as those of canteen and ambulance women, this latter group would prove their mastery in the practice of health care during the Paris Commune. Nevertheless, their medical engagement did not prevent them from also accomplishing the role of fighters when it was needed. Thus for instance, on the 12th May, the famous heroine Louise Michel (1830-1905), who was also an ambulance woman during the Commune, made the following group declaration with other citizens belonging to the women's committee based in Montmartre:

The ambulance women of the Commune declare that they belong to no company whatsoever. Their lives are entirely devoted to the revolution, their duty is to dress the wounds in the very arena of

combat, the wounds inflicted by the poisoned bullets of Versailles; and, when the occasion requires, take up arms just as the others. Long live the Commune! Long live the Universal Republic! (Michel 1871)

The complexity of these female figures led me to reconsider their participation in the health care assistance of the Paris Commune in the light of historical documents such as newspapers, posters and military archives, as well their own personal accounts and correspondence. Amongst others, Louise Michel, André Léo (1824-1900) or Victorine Brocher (1832-1921) worked for the revolutionary movement caring for the wounded soldiers. In most cases, they were deported or condemned to exile after their defeat against Thiers' army.

As I shall show, the historical reconstruction of this corps of ambulance women can help us to better understand the nuances of late nineteenth century French nursing history, if one establishes a comparison between these working class women and others who gave first aid in the context of the Paris Commune, such as the nuns or the lady volunteers closer to the Women's Committee of the Red Cross, who in majority would flee Paris because of their fear of being arrested as collaborators with the national government led by Thiers. With this aim in mind, I will

first analyse the origin, structure and objectives of the association known as the Women's Union as well as certain previous initiatives, which were put into place during the Siege of Paris, in order to allow us to examine the challenges and difficulties of ambulance women during the Commune.

The Women's Union

The precarious economic situation in which lived the Parisian population explained the increasing discontent amongst workers and why they would defy the authority represented by the French government, once the war against Prussia was over. Parisians never accepted the defeat and, notably, women who felt to have done too much sacrifices to survive during the siege that lasted for five months of bitter cold, hunger, disease and bombardment. While the Commune became officially into existence after the elections celebrated in the city by the political Left at the end of March, Thiers, the executive head of the French government, began to prepare his own army in order to declare a civil war against those who that had proclaimed the social democracy in Paris. Parisian women workers did not hesitate to organise themselves to deal with the threat represented by the Versailles government and they would create the Women's Union only few days later.

The Women's Union had for its ideologues the young Russian aristocrat Elisabeth Dmitrieff (1851-1918), correspondent of Karl Marx in the Commune, and Nathalie Lemel (1827-1921), a very active French unionist and manager of the canteen better known as *La Marmite*, which was created at the start of the Siege of Paris, in September 1870 and would contribute in a decisive manner in the fight against hunger during the Commune. In the call of the 11th April 1871, one can perceive that the Women's Union defined itself as an association orientated towards the organization of feminine forces at the service of the revolutionary movement. This group of female Parisian female workers sent out a call to all patriotic citizens in the following terms:

Citizens of Paris, descendants of the women of the Great Revolution, who, in the name of the people and of justice, marched to Versailles, taking Louis the XVI captive (...) Citizens, all resolute, all united, let us attend to the certainty of our cause! Let us prepare ourselves to defend ourselves and take vengeance for our brothers! At the gates of Paris, on the barricades, in the outskirts, no matter where! Patriotic citizens are called to unite today, Tuesday 11th April at eight o'clock this evening, 79 rue du Temple (...) in the Grand Café de la Nation in order to

make some definitive resolutions on the subject of training in all the committees of the different districts, in order to organize the women's movement for the defense of Paris (Commune de Paris 1871: 225).

The Women's Union addressed the women of Paris as the direct descendants of the women of the French revolution, who had marched to Versailles in October 1789 to show the monarchy of Louis XVI their discontent at the prize of bread. As their male comrades belonging to the First International, these female workers were convinced that they had much to say in the process of the radical democratization pursued by the Commune because they were the most exploited part of the population in late nineteenth century French society.

The situation of Parisian women workers was not at all idyllic. Most of them worked in the industrial sector for between twelve and fifteen hours in exchange for a salary that could range from 50 centimes to two and a half francs per day; half that earned by men. Furthermore, men considered women as potential enemies because they represented a much cheaper labour force. Women were not only worse remunerated than their male counterparts, they also were often obliged to resort to prostitution because of their lack of resources, in order to buy food for their children (Thomas 2007: 7).

In fact, one of their principal problems implied by endless days of work, was the high rate of infant mortality. In these conditions, women workers no longer had the possibility to breast feed their children. Victorine Brocher, mother of three children and ambulance woman described in her memoirs that women workers should content themselves with milk products like *pure lait crème* (full cream milk), an ersatz that they used to give to their children.

One day my little one got angry, he spat up the milk that he had in his mouth, and in the bottom of his glass I noticed a deposit of milky looking white; in it there was starch and plaster, not a drop of milk was in this terrible concoction (Brocher 1976: 112).

The lack of milk and bread was one of the factors that triggered women's participation in the outbreak of the insurrection that would lead to the proclamation of the Paris Commune. On the 18th March, Thiers intended to attempt the capture of cannons that had been installed in Paris to defend the city from the Prussian army during the siege. The National Guard, which was largely composed of workers, refused to give back the cannons to the French government after having signed Bismarck's armistice. At six o'clock in the morning, General Lecomte's troops arrived at the lookout

post based in Montmartre. It is said that Louise Michel alerted the neighbors in order to defend the cannons. Thanks to a crowd of people, largely composed of women, who angrily demanded milk and food with which to nourish their children, the soldiers who were under the command of Lecomte, refused to open fire and subsequently joined the National Guard (Kathleen and Vergès 1991; Linton and Hivet 1997).

This confrontation between Parisians and the French government, which is at the historical roots of the Commune, tells us much about the real motivations of the women involved in the revolutionary socialist government proclaimed only ten days later. Far from following a utopian battle for civil and political rights, an ideal that was uniquely encouraged by a few intellectuals, the fight of Parisian women was purely one to demand sufficiently paid work, with which they would be able to feed their children. In this sense, the Women's Union, as well as other independent women's committees such as the *Club de la Boule Noire* established at Montmartre's district, offered women the opportunity to fight against their poverty, thanks to the recruitment of volunteer ambulance women, in coordination with the medical service of the National Guard. It is not surprising to see that the women

workers of Paris signed up en masse to be ambulance women, because the offer of working for one and a half francs was an opportunity that they could not refuse.

The secularization of the medical services during the Commune

Ten days after the proclamation of the Commune, many anticlerical reforms were published, which abolished the financing of religious organizations and nationalized the properties belonging to religious orders. In particular, nursing sisters, who during the Crimean war (1854-6) had been associated with the congregation of Saint Vincent de Paul, were considered in the context of the Commune as reactionary figures, more concerned with souls than bodies, imposing the crucifix in hospitals and refusing scientific progress such as the thermometer, vaccination of the population, realization of autopsies or giving medical assistance to patients suffering from venereal diseases. Moved by this virulent anticlericalism, the director of private ambulances during the Commune, Doctor Narcisse Rousselle, did not hesitate to arrest the head of the French Red Cross' ambulances, Doctor Jean-Charles Chenu and to ban all—nursing sisters from his service (Rousselle 1871: 2; Bidard-Huberdière and Vicent-Leroy 1945: 33-35).

The secularization of the Assistance Publique was also accompanied by the

reorganization of the medical services of the National Guard, a reform that would be put into place by doctor Charles Edme Courtillier, General Director of the National Guard ambulances. On the 13th April, he published an order in which he considered that 'the organization of the medical service of the National Guard was completely defective' (Courtillier 1871: 255). Therefore, Courtillier would attempt to reform the medical military services by introducing a system of ambulances, which would have twenty doctors, sixty medical students, and one hundred barricaders in each company. Furthermore, 'in each battalion (there were ten per company) would be added two ambulance women, who would march with the barricaders, and whose mission would be to give drink to the wounded' (Courtillier 1871: 256). When Courtillier underlined that the mission of ambulance women was to give drink to the wounded, he was associating them with the military figure of the canteen woman, who traditionally brought a can of water, wine or spirits in order to give drink the soldiers.

Nevertheless, Courtillier's initiative about the introduction of women in the French army medical services was not completely new. There were clear precedents during the siege, when some similar projects had already been launched, such as the *Comité des femmes de la rue d'Assas*, a women's

association directed by Jules Allix that numbered around 1800 members or the so-called Battalion of Amazonian Women of the Seine, a group inspired by Félix Berry, who wished to recruit woman in order to defend the barricades and to treat the injured under the orders of an experienced doctor (Maillard 1886: 245-272; Villiers 1910: 384-389).

Courtillier's decree about the introduction of ambulance women into the services of the National Guard was put into place by the committees of the Women's Union, as well as by other revolutionary clubs based in each district such as the Montmartre Vigilance Committee. Indeed, the women of Montmartre would play a particularly active role in the recruitment of candidates and in their training. As they wrote, their engagement with the ambulance corps was an action inspired by values other than compassion, such as devotion to the revolution.

The citizens of Montmartre, united in assembly on the 22nd April, have decided to put themselves at the disposition of the Commune to form ambulance groups which will follow the corps engaging the enemy and pick up our heroic defenders on the battlefield. The women of Montmartre, driven by revolutionary spirit wish to show through their acts, their devotion to the revolution (Documents concernant les clubs et les comités de femmes, 1871).

While the women of Montmartre coordinated an ambulance in this district, Louise Michel worked in another based in Neuilly and Béatrix Excoffon organised a third one at the Fort d'Issy, where Alix Payen also worked (Michel 1898: 255). On the sixth of May 1871, the writer and social activist Victoire Léodile Béra, better known as André Léo published an article in the journal *La Sociale* entitled 'The adventures of nine ambulance women in search of a post of devotion' in which she explained the obstacles that ambulance women faced mainly due to the discrimination that they suffered during the Commune.

We are well aware that in every district of Paris, groups of devoted and courageous citizens have formed in order to assist in the defense of Paris. Some are engaged in the preparation of our fighters, generally very undernourished, with warm and healthy food, others go onto the battlefield to bring first aid to the injured and dying [...] We are also aware, however, that in Paris there are a large number of [...] Republicans who find this love shown by women for the Republic unworthy and distressing (Léo 1871).

She added to these general considerations, some bitter impressions concerning an episode that she experienced some weeks before, and that provides us with some information about the perception that their

male comrades had about the ambulance women's role.

A group of citizens from the XVIIth district, provided with a commission from the municipality, wearing red crosses, and led by a delegate of the committee, passed through the gates of Clichy on the 2nd of May, and reported to a commander of the 34th battalion in order to offer their services [...] The officer, forcing himself to be polite, could hardly hide his indifference for the mission of these Republicans. The ambulances, the injured, he didn't know, he didn't look after that sort of thing... There must be somewhere, an ambulance Director, appointed by the Commune, and a master surgeon; but where? (Léo 1781)

After having recounted the adventures in which her colleagues and herself had been involved, Léo concluded with some comments about the repudiation that they felt from the part of their comrades. While doctors and military authorities manifested only contempt towards women's participation, Léo recognised the sympathy that the national guards showed towards them.

So many formalities and obstacles are completely pointless. Paris, the revolution, is there then too much devotion in their desire to serve? [...] A young officer, encouraged by his taciturn superior, thought he had the right to be impertinent

and told these female citizens a joke that was in bad taste [...] They were there, in effect, serious men, but only in the company of that national guard [...] Elsewhere as much as in Neuilly [...] we experienced these mixed feelings very strongly, on the one hand from officers and surgeons, who without exception displayed an absence of warmth, which ranged from the taciturn to the insulting; on the other hand, from the national guards we experienced respect and fraternity which was often mixed with sincere emotion (Léo 1871).

There are many writings collecting the impressions of ambulance women in the barricades of Paris. They described the lack of bandages, medical supplies but, notably, the negative attitude of the medical and military instances of the Commune towards their efforts. In fact, communards' perception would soon compare them with prostitutes because they seemed to pursue suspicious and immoral activities in the streets of Paris. Ambulance women would receive no better treatment from the Versailles' government. Even though the Geneva Convention should have protected the health care personnel from the attacks that took place in both sides of the conflict, the Commune only recognised its validity on the 13th May and Thiers would never respect it. As shown in the following

announcement made by the National Guard, ambulance women were frequently violated and killed at the hands of Thiers' army.

But what adds to the horror of this butchery, is that a young woman, nurse in the battalion, was murdered by these wicked people, while she was treating the wounds of an injured person. Her youth, her devotion found no more mercy from these brigands than the Geneva Cross that she wore on her chest (Commune de Paris 1871).

To wear the insignia of the Red Cross society, an emblem that had been proposed to protect the sanitary personnel in armed conflicts, was in any case a symbol of neutrality during the Commune as both sides used it for political purposes. From early April, the Communards accused the French Red Cross' members of having hidden religious members and munitions in its ambulances in order to ensure their easy transportation to Versailles. This association between the French Red Cross' delegates and the Government of National Defence led by Adolphe Thiers was not a casual one, as it must be remembered that Henry Dunant, the ideologist of the Red Cross International Committee, helped the Count and the Countess of Flavigny, Director of the French Red Cross Society and of the Women's Committee,

respectively, to escape from Paris during the Commune (Dunant, 1871).

Furthermore, John Furley active militant of the British Red Cross described in horrified terms how the last volunteers assisting the wounded in the streets of Paris referred to the International Committee of the Red Cross as if were the First International; an identification, which was current amongst the communards mainly due to a profound lack of awareness about the nature of this humanitarian agency (Furley 1874: 339). The recently created Geneva Convention soon demonstrated the difficulties of its application with regard to insurrections such as the Paris Commune, where the neutrality of medical staff was frequently violated. As a result of this complex political situation, ambulance women became twofold victims, as they did not only suffer the contempt of their male comrades but also the hatred of Versailles' population, which judged them as *pétroleuses*, the incendiary women who had set fire to the Tuileries during the bloody week, when Thiers' troops killed about 20.000 insurrectionists in the streets of Paris.

What we can learn from the ambulance women during the Paris Commune

In conclusion, the historical reconstruction of this corps of voluntary ambulance

women during the Paris Commune shows that nursing cannot be exclusively interpreted as a profession that was gradually introduced into hospitals during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, but also as an activity that forged its professional identity in close connection with military life. Although ambulance women established some historical affiliations with other feminine figures, which had been already integrated in the French army such as the *vivandières* or the *cantinières*, they would differentiate themselves by defining their identity through their mastery of health care practices.

On the one hand, the process of secularisation put forward during the Paris Commune defined the profile of the ambulance women by contraposition to the nuns, who had been traditionally responsible for caring for the sick in hospitals. On the other, the tensions between the French Red Cross' members and the delegates of the Commune implied that ambulance women were also regarded as an alternative to the model represented by the bourgeois ladies dedicated to charitable work, who escaped mostly from Paris at the beginning of the insurrection. What we can learn from this study of the ambulance women in the Paris Commune is that nursing needs to be carefully

reconsidered as a form of power that secured a place for women in the context of modern wars, which furthermore, would help 'the expansion of women's public roles and their rights as citizens' (Dixon Vuic 2013: 22-29).

Even though the cherry season would be remembered by its brevity because -as Clément said in his song 'it was too short'- and the major part of the reforms that were proposed during the Commune were not completely applied, the initiative of creating a secular corps of nurses would be retrieved some decades later by personalities such as the physician Désiré Magloire de Bourneville, who encouraged the inauguration of the first school of nurses at the Salpêtrière hospital in 1878 (Taithe 1999: 137). Therefore, the history of French secular nursing cannot only be written in the light of great personalities such as Anna Hamilton, also called the French Nightingale, but must also take into consideration other less well known historical agents that were represented by Louise, the brave ambulance women, who was helping the wounded in the last barricade that remained standing during the Bloody week, at the Fontaine-au-roi street.

There were many young women called Louise during the Commune but, the woman to whom Clément was referring was probably not Louise Michel as legend

has led us to believe, but rather an anonymous ambulance woman that was described in the first page of the journal *Le Figaro* the 2nd June, 1871 in the following terms:

On Monday morning, at a crossroads in Belleville, lay the corpse of a woman stained all over with blood and mud. The head that must have been pretty, almost distinguished, kept in death an expression of ferocious hate. The right arm was extended, and one could guess that in the final moments, the women had not joined hands to ask God for the forgiveness that the men would not give her (Magnard 1871)

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