

Louise Michel was the icon of the Paris Commune in 1871

Some called her a bloodthirsty she-wolf; to others, she was the great citizen, the red maiden, good old Louise. Her courage in battle and her fearlessness in court are legendary.

Although Louise Michel never missed an opportunity to die in battle, she lived to a ripe old age.

In political graffiti across France, she is as ubiquitous as **Che Guevara**. She is the only one of the female fighters who has not been forgotten. She herself, however, always spoke with great pride of the ideas, courage and strength of the other women.

LM

The camp didn't need much guarding; anyone who escaped was devoured: in the sea by sharks, in the mountains by the Kanaks. One evening, I set off to join them. I said goodbye to my comrades.

"Louise, you're mad. Just because you didn't get the bullet, do you want to get eaten alive?" They came up with all sorts of other reasons to try and stop me.

The air was heady, filled with the scent of flowering vines and niaouli. The full moon shone down on me, and so I quickly found the Kanaks, who were gathered round a fire. The men leapt to their feet, reaching for their weapons, whilst the women clutched their children to their chests. "Gouchenérée!" I called out to them, "Sisterly friend". They stood as if turned to stone: a white woman, unarmed and alone, addressing them in their own language!

Later, the other deportees would describe me as more Kanak than the Kanaks themselves. 'Kanak' means 'human being' among the indigenous people of New Caledonia. Imperial France used its colony to house a series of penal colonies. I had been sentenced to life-long deportation, convicted as a fighter in the Paris Commune of 1871.

Louise Michel was born on 29 May 1830 in Vroncourt, a village in the Haute-Marne some 400 kilometres east of Paris.

She was the illegitimate daughter of Marie-Anne Michel, a maid at the château. Her father, the son of the lord of the manor, did not acknowledge her, but his parents, Étienne-Charles and Louise-Charlotte Demahis,

brought her up as their granddaughter, in the free-thinking spirit of Rousseau and Voltaire.

As a child, Louise could not bear to see suffering. So she helped wherever she could, stealing whatever was needed from the larder or helping herself to money from the cash box. She left notes saying: 'You have the castle, but I have the key.' This brought no disciplinary consequences, only an offer to increase her pocket money. But that would never have been enough. And it will always remain so. She gives away whatever is needed. She knows no distinction between 'mine' and 'yours'. That will not change throughout her entire life. On one occasion, she gives away her dress and returns wearing only her petticoat; she gives food brought to her in prison by friends to her fellow prisoners. A nice anecdote to illustrate this:

The captain of the ship taking the Communards to New Caledonia is impressed by her character. He cannot bear the thought of her having no shoes. He takes the Commune Rochefort aside, with whom he enjoys chatting. He has brought a pair of ladies' shoes for a relative which might fit her. Rochefort is told to say that he'd picked up a pair that was too small. She never finds out the truth

Let us return to her childhood.

She receives a good education: she reads plays by Molière, Corneille and Hugo with her grandfather, who tells her about the Great French Revolution. He himself changes his aristocratic name, De Mahis, to the bourgeois Demahis. Her grandmother teaches her to play the piano and to paint.

Added to this is her mother's sister, Victoire, who allowed herself to be drawn into religious mysticism by missionaries,

LM: In the dimly lit church, her tall, gaunt figure reminded us of druidesses, Vestal Virgins or Valkyries. She cast a spell over all of us nieces, probably me most of all.

Voltaire, Rousseau and Catholic mysticism – what a bewildering, rich world that stirred the imagination, from which my desire for creation, change and revolution developed, a desire that led to fanatical zeal, as is inevitable with the avant-garde.

Our landscape, the landscape of Champagne, was the ideal breeding ground for fantastical poetry.

The legends and the songs of the bards are a source of enrichment.

Much to the horror of her modest mother, Louise has grand plans:

LM: *My dream is so grand, I myself so small – yet ready!
Fate – will you make this giant dream a reality?
When I speak to you of it, Mother, why do you tremble?
That distant vision – I see it in the days to come
No fear holds me back in raging storms.*

Louise Michel sees her future as a writer; she publishes her work and maintains a lifelong friendship and correspondence with the poet Victor Hugo.

After the Demahis' death, she decides to train as a teacher.

She moves to Paris to work as a primary school teacher, campaigns for the overthrow of Napoleon III and for a social republic, and lives in Montmartre, where the working class resides.

She refuses to take the oath of allegiance to the Emperor and is therefore barred from teaching in state schools. So she founds a 'Free School'.

She became an extraordinary teacher with innovative methods that engaged the children – she never bored them; she took them out into nature; she wrote plays which she performed with the children. She drew the backdrops on the blackboard.

In Paris, she worked at Madame Vollier's boarding school and soon became her business partner. There she met her colleague Adèle Esquiros, **a writer** who had already been active in *the Club des femmes* as early as 1848 and, as she was also a teacher, in the *Society for Women's Education*. She was also co-editor of the feminist magazine **Die Stimme der Frauen** (*The Voice of Women*).

She became a member of the Union des Poètes. That was in 1862.

Her mother moved to Paris and often felt lonely in the evenings

LM: I loved her so much, and yet my devotion was to the struggle for freedom, justice and the goal of a social democratic republic. I was part of the revolution. And in the evenings, the meetings for political discussion would go on late into the night. I worked as a secretary for the Société Démocratique de Moralisation, which championed workers' rights and called for equal pay for women and men, as well as the separation of church and state. The latter, which had already been demanded during the Great Revolution, we finally achieved during the *Commune*. And many more clubs soon followed.

There was a course on women's rights run by Madame Jules Simon; Andrée Léon and the feisty Maria Deraismes were there. It was the twilight of the Empire, with all its lethargy. And we could already sense the dawn of a new era. These women's issues centred in particular on fair pay for women – a wage on which they could live and which would also spare them the only lucrative trade available to them: prostitution.

As is so often the case, I noticed that we weren't on an equal footing with the men in our discussions, that they were merely pretending to want to support us.

They say that whilst the man demonstrates his power with a great deal of fanfare, it is the woman who rules in silence. But what happens in the shadows is worth nothing. It is time to do away with this Stone Age mentality. We've had enough. The proletarian is a slave; the wife of the proletarian is the slave of all slaves.

In practical terms, I could also observe this attitude of excluding women in the fact that, when I wore men's clothing, I could go anywhere.

They organise as much further education as possible: vocational school for women, reading sessions for mothers, and a course for very young people – children who were already forced to work and could only spare a little time for studying in the evenings.

LM: The police would often turn up at our lessons to inspect this dangerously conspiratorial establishment. We welcomed them and congratulated them, because they too now wanted to learn something.

Under the title 'No Idiots, No Madmen', Louise Michel advocated a supportive approach to education and new directions in psychiatry – including talk therapy, in 1861, long before Freud. Together with her friend Julie Longchamp, with whom she had studied, she put her ideas into practice. Many contemporary psychiatric initiatives draw on this today.

The incompetent monarchy lies in ruins:

*The Empire is languishing and kills on a whim.
In its house, where the floor reeks of blood,
it reigns; but in the ether, like a soft murmur,
the Marseillaise. The sun rises in a blood-red glow.*

Napoleon III has declared war on Germany and, at the first opportunity, lost the Battle of Sedan with incredible losses. He fled. The Empire had fallen. But now the republican regime is splitting into a socialist camp and a conservative-reactionary one – and this latter wing is retreating to Versailles.

But Paris has not surrendered; it is under siege by the Germans. After all, there is a monarchy there – and here a republic that could spread.

LM: It is now time to think of the many women who fought alongside us back then. During the siege, we worked to ensure the distribution of supplies. We organised this by taking what we needed from those who had plenty. And with some of the moneybags, we had to adopt a rather intimidating stance.

Not a single woman betrayed us; not one defected to the other side – they would rather have died than surrender. We organised ourselves in the Vigilance Committee and the Women's League, and did our utmost to help out in the first-aid posts.

More women's clubs were formed, and the female teachers at the vocational school and the nursery also got involved. Everyone's sole thought was to show solidarity with other groups during those terrible days, even if they tended to be middle-class. There was no time for sectarianism – we had to think generously and openly. We helped as much as we could; the aim was to alleviate despair and, above all, to keep fighting and never give in.

We were the women of Paris, in the city districts as well as in the suburbs, and we were anything but cowards. Beware, old world, of the courage of women. We hadn't worn ourselves out; we weren't any better than the men, but power hadn't yet corrupted us. In the struggles that followed, women were the most relentless fighters, and there were plenty of us. I think we women loved the revolt – after all, we had even more reason to do so than the men. And how much I loved my fellow students – and they loved me.

More women's clubs were founded. I became chairwoman, and a little later also of the 18th District Vigilance Committee, but that was of little consequence. We women did not ask ourselves whether something was possible, but whether it was useful.

And then it was carried out.

Meanwhile, the regime in Versailles had had time to prepare for an attack – with the help of Bismarck’s army, too.

LM: And then the morning of 18 March dawned. I had stayed at the summit of Montmartre; some of us were sitting together discussing the situation. Then two suspicious-looking figures turned up, claiming they wanted to see the mayor; they were babbling nonsense and were locked away as a precaution. Then another man appeared, whom we initially kept a wary eye on. The very next moment, a shot rang out, and one of our sentries fell. I quickly bandaged him up together with a woman from the canteen, just as Clemenceau arrived with bandages. There had been no warning shot from our cannons; that could only mean trouble. I ran down the hill with my rifle hidden under my coat, shouting: ‘Treason! Treason!’ Everyone from the Vigilance Committee rushed out; we formed a column and ran back up. The alarm bells were ringing. And we ran – we knew there was a battalion at the top, ready for battle. We would die for freedom.

No, we weren’t running – we were flying up the hill. Death was certain for us, but Paris would rise up. The summit appeared bathed in white light. A sunrise of liberation. And suddenly I saw my mother beside me; she had come, worried about me. I almost froze with fear for her. But there, at her side, were a crowd of women; many were rushing up with us, towards where the soldiers were aiming their weapons at us, and we all ran towards them – the women and the children too. They stood in front of the soldiers, threw themselves in front of the guns; some even climbed up onto them. But death had not waited for us. The soldiers did not move. Not even when General Lecomte bellowed the order to fire. Louder than he, a sergeant shouted: ‘Rifles up!’ The attempt to remove the cannons had been thwarted. The Revolution had begun.

What was the Commune, and what made it so exemplary?

LM: The Commune was there, and with it the realisation of our long-cherished dreams. The finished plans sprang from the drawers; the clubs were like buzzing beehives. The Commune was alive and pulsating.

We spoke of the end of private property just as much as we did of the need to find fuel. It was about a new form of women’s work and the end of the economic divide. Added to this were the fighting on the barricades, filling sandbags, and organising the ambulances and soup kitchens.

'We want work, but the product must belong to us; no more exploiters and masters. Work and a good life for all,' was our appeal to the women of Paris.

Paule Minck and I were concerned about female unemployment, so we began setting up workshops. We intended to establish them in every arrondissement. We worked feverishly, planning and implementing whatever was possible.

Our ideas were meant to inspire people beyond Paris; independent co-operatives could spring up all over the world – internationalism was a matter of course for us. We had contacts through the *International Workingmen's Association*, which I had also joined, and through the *Union des femmes*, founded by Nathalie Lemel, Elisabeth Dmitrieff and others from our ranks of militant women. Blanche Lefebvre set up *the Club of the Social Revolution*. The club focused primarily on women's issues, including women's suffrage, for which Hubertine Auclert was a leading campaigner.

The education system was particularly important to us: schools were to be state-run, compulsory and free of charge, and all religious symbols had to be removed. Teaching was based on the broadest possible foundation, with the aim of fostering a comprehensive world view. Paule Minck opened a new school for girls in Montmartre that matched our vision of imaginative, creative and stimulating teaching.

They were to be fascinated, not bored, for boredom is the worst affliction for young children.

Yes, with every day, with every hour, we opened up a new world of ideas for ourselves, but also of the good life. It was about luxury for all, a simple, natural life – neither wasteful nor meagre, but good for everyone. It included workers, women, children, the elderly, the unemployed and the homeless.

During those seventy-two days, amidst a constant state of threat, attacks and fighting, we worked on a vision of paradise, brought it to life and made incredible progress. It was an existence defined by action, without hierarchies, in which everyone could take part. That was the communal luxury we had longed for.

The city functioned and the buses ran, even if they had to get creative with diversions during the fighting.

Yet when violence is necessary, one must fight without compromise. Afterwards, however, it is a matter of moving away from the impatient cry of 'Now!' towards the evolutionary development of a humanist republic.

In 1871, she fought fearlessly on the barricades for the Paris *Commune*. After its suppression, she was sentenced by a court-martial to lifelong deportation.

On the long sea voyage, she discusses with Nathalie Lemel the corrupting influence of power, which she observes in all regimes – even during the *Commune* – and this leads her to anarchism.

In the penal colony in New Caledonia, Louise Michel throws herself enthusiastically into the countryside, nature, flora and fauna, the great cyclones – and the indigenous population. She learns their language and records their myths and culture in two publications. She was able to learn from Daoumi, a young Kanak who had worked in the camp to find out something about white culture. He felt there was nothing particularly special in what he could learn there. LM taught him the bare essentials; she, in turn, benefited from his knowledge.

Daoumi was in love with a white girl, who returned his love. Her parents forbade the marriage. She said it broke her heart. But it was not she who died, but Daoumi.

LM: We in Europe think that cannibalism is a custom practised by very primitive people. But a primal myth shows that it is in fact a crime. For custom demands that a dead body be laid out, ritually covered with palm leaves, even if the person was killed in battle as an enemy. The prejudice that the Kanak are cannibals may also stem from the fact that they often refer to murder as 'eating'.

One of the Kanak legends:

LM: *White man, where do you come from?
In your country, you eat every day, because even
even a single day of fasting.
What will you bring us of your riches?*

*The white man does not give gifts.
The white man spreads out across the land with his companions.
They sow the grain that feeds the race of the pale-skinned
and keep it for themselves!
We welcomed them as brothers, but they were not.*

After five years, Louise Michel is granted limited civil rights and is allowed to teach – not only the children of the deportees, but also those of white citizens.

LM: On Sunday, my house was full from morning till night with Kanak people, young and old, from all over, who were eager to learn as much as possible from me.

After ten years, an amnesty is granted. Louise does not want to leave the country; she wants to set up a school for the Kanak, she still wants to learn so much more from the indigenous people. But she learns that her mother has had a stroke and returns home.

On her return to Paris, she is given a triumphant welcome. She resumes her campaigning and delivers her rousing speeches in cities across France, in England, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and, shortly before her death, even in Algeria.

She is often attacked by political opponents – not only verbally, but also physically. Here is one anecdote: in Brittany, she turns a landlady away, but offers her and her companion a cup of coffee.

LM: The coffee was poisoned. I got a stomach cramp and vomited several times. But Charlotte was feeling absolutely dreadful; we feared we wouldn't get her to Nantes alive. I explained to Girault that these people who wanted to poison us were only doing so because they didn't know us. It was late at night when we arrived in Nantes. On the way to the hotel, a group of men started heckling us. I approached them in a friendly manner and spoke to them, which calmed the situation down. That way, Girault could see that I was right.

Later, he was constantly amazed by me, for neither the commotion in the halls, nor smashed carriage windows, nor stones being thrown – not even their attempt to push us off a bridge – could discourage me. We were strangers in Brittany – until they had a chance to get to know us.

Even on the journey south, attempts were made to derail the train so that I could not keep my lecture appointment. 'I think it's very good that they're practising how to derail trains. On the day of the Revolution, they'll help us,' I said to Girault.

Of course, it was all down to the informers.

We had to walk and hurry so as not to miss the train. We were wedged into the roaring crowd, which was shouting: 'Throw them into the water, let them drown!' So I shouted too: 'Throw them into

the water, into the water!’ That threw them into confusion; they could no longer tell where we were.

The more often we returned to towns, the fewer attacks there were and the more interest there was. Our ideas smouldered, stirred people, and gained traction.

Her lecturing schedule became increasingly gruelling – she fell ill with pneumonia. It was serious; the doctor feared she might only have a few hours left. Some newspapers wrote her obituary.

*That silly Dr Bertollet,
‘La bonne Louise’ – she’s still alive, after all!*

I’d rhymed that out myself; the poem went slightly differently and ended with:

*Death is wise, for his scythe
is still willing to spare Louise Michel.*

She eventually travels to Algeria: what she witnesses there in terms of oppression under French rule horrifies and outrages her. She merely hopes that the report on this disgrace will lead to strong protests in France.

The superiority of white people is evident only in their destructive power, which, as Michel observes in New Caledonia, also destroys nature. Louise Michel’s conclusion:

LM: Colonial rulers bring not civilisation, but misery and subjugation.

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Until her death, LM fought unyieldingly and fearlessly for freedom and justice; generous and open-minded, though at times naïve, she championed the weak, the exploited, the oppressed – ‘Les Misérables’. For:

LM: It is not the palaces that should burn,
but the ugly, filthy huts

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Louise Michel, with her insatiable thirst for knowledge, was a pioneer in botany and psychotherapy, a linguist, an archaeo-anthropologist, arguably the first ethnologist, and remains to this day the patron saint of animal rights activists.

What she also is: quite mad. For example, she wants to escape from the penal colony in the midst of the fiercest cyclone on a raft made of barrels,

in order to raise a liberation force in Sydney. Sydney is at least 14 days' sail away; she cannot swim, and there is no money for a force. But swimming is not necessary, and she does not give money a second thought – why should she, when the ideal of freedom is at stake? The British in Sydney will surely champion the cause with enthusiasm.

In almost every town in France there is a *Rue Louise Michel*; in Paris, the metro stops at *Louise Michel* station in the Levallois-Perret district, and the large park stretching from the foot of Montmartre up to the Sacré-Cœur is dedicated to her. Around 200 schools bear her name.

Plays have been written, songs composed and films made about Louise Michel's life. Several awards bear her name, and in the field of psychiatry, reference is made to her innovations.

At her funeral, attended by over 100,000 people, Charles Malato – who had shared her empathy for the indigenous people of New Caledonia – said:

'The greatest and most beautiful poetry was, without a doubt, her life itself.'

There is an endless amount to say about her; there are now a number of new books about her ...