

The Insurgent Barricade

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In May 1995 Alain Corbin organised a conference on the history of the barricade, quite a novel departure at that time. Being asked to focus exclusively on one part of the insurrectionary process intrigued those of us invited to contribute. The findings, published by the *Société de l'histoire du dix-neuvième siècle*, drew attention to the barricade as a feature of 19th-century revolutions, particularly in France. The theme was taken up subsequently by Thomas Bouchet and Jill Harsin.⁽¹⁾ Bouchet highlighted the repercussions of the failed revolt rather than the impact of barricades on the events. Harsin offered descriptions of a variety of politically disruptive events from urban revolts to attempts to assassinate Louis-Philippe, but said little about the actual function of the barricade.

Mark Traugott has written an impressive number of works on 19th-century France include a ground-breaking study of the June Days, *Armies of the Poor. Determinants of Working-Class Participation in the Parisian Insurrection of June 1848*, a compilation of worker autobiographies which are essential reading for an undergraduate student of 19th-century social history, *The French Worker: Autobiographies from the Early Industrial Era* (1993) and seminal articles on 1848.⁽²⁾ Holding a joint Chair in History and Sociology at the University of California, his stated determination to discuss concept and narrative separately gives this study a new perspective and agenda. While chapters one to three and five to eight are descriptive accounts of the use of barricades, the other chapters are more wide-ranging and theoretical. The more narrative chapters insist on a different chronology and a broader geographical perspective than most earlier studies. Historians have tended to assume that barricades only became a feature of urban revolt in the 19th-century. Traugott insists, quoting contemporary accounts and illustrations, that barricades were used two centuries earlier. The book also emphasises far more comprehensively than any earlier work the extent to which the French example was replicated in all the European revolts of 1848. Indeed if the 'Arab spring' of 2011 had occurred

before this volume appeared, there may well have been a chapter at least on Freedom Square, Cairo.

Barricades evolved from the heavy chains that were strung from side to side of urban streets in parts of Europe in medieval times by prosperous citizens to defend themselves, sometimes from royal troops, sometimes from the local 'underclass'. At the end of the 13th century the citizens of Ghent successfully used chains stretched across their streets to assert Flemish autonomy. In 1356 armed conflict was intense in France, both between Valois and Navarre factions and from the English under Edward III. In the extreme threat of civil disorder, Étienne Marcel, a wealthy merchant and senior administrator (*prévôt de marchands*) of Paris ordered the forging of heavy chains, firmly attached on the walls on either side of the main Paris streets. However the chains were not reinforced by barrels etc and the term barricade was not used.

In the late 16th century chains were reinforced with barrels (hence the term), carts, preferably loaded with heavy objects, paving and cobble stones, hefty lumps of furniture and whatever chunky material came to hand. The first defences that were identified as barricades were erected in Paris in 1588, although there is evidence that similar constructions were used a generation earlier. In 1588, during his conflict with the duc de Guise, Henri III tried to maintain control of Paris by stationing over 6,000 troops in the capital. Traditionally the capital had been held in order by its own militia. Citizens stretched chains across the main streets to try to keep out the king's troops. The comte de Brissac, a close associate of Guise, suggested that the chains be reinforced with barrels filled with earth and paving stones. Within a few hours the Latin Quarter was covered in barricades and the king's troops were unable to gain control. Brissac is thus often credited with inventing barricades, but perhaps only because their use on this occasion led to political change, contributing to the demise of the Valois dynasty. The idea of using barricades for urban defence spread to Lyon in 1589 and later to other cities.

The next significant instance was during Louis XIV's minority when the Frondes, conflict between the *parlements*, representing the aspirations of the local elites, and the Regent, the Queen Mother, led to a period of prolonged upheaval. In 1648 again the specific provocation which sparked off barricade construction was the presence of massed royal troops in Paris. What was striking was the speed with which barricades were thrown up and the scale, perhaps 1,260 barricades were defended by 100,000 Parisians for three days. Almost equally disturbing for the authorities was the ubiquity of a popular memory of 1588 and the spontaneity of these barricades. The barricades of 1648 did nothing to resolve the conflict, but the memory of the sustained upheaval of which they were a part, ensured that Louis XIV and his successors were careful to protect royal power. Barricades disappeared in France until the 1789 Revolution.

Barricades next contributed to political change in Brussels in 1787. The Austrian Emperor Joseph II, as ruler of Brabant, attempted to institute reforms reminiscent of those urged by Enlightenment writers, including religious toleration and the abolition of guild privileges. The local elite, Roman Catholic, intensely conservative and proud of the autonomy of their Estates and their Civil Guard, protested at the lack of consultation. They stretched chains, reinforced by paving stones etc, to keep royal troops out of Brussels. Their successful rising and other instances of barricade construction led to full scale revolution and temporary independence in Brabant, terminated by invasion by French republican troops in 1792 and the imposition of precisely the reforms attempted by Joseph II.

In the prolonged upheaval of the 1789 Revolution, barricades were erected on a number of occasions, although historians tend to overlook them, and this author seems to note them merely to be absolutely precise, without trying to claim that these instances had any importance. Barricades were built on 14 July 1789 when the Bastille fell to a revolutionary crowd. They also appeared in Paris in June 1791 after the king's flight to Varennes and twice in 1795, but they were very minor features of disruption in this period.

It was in the 19th century that barricades made the greatest contribution to political change. They were built in 1827 when Charles X clashed with the National Guard, and with far more import in July 1830, when the barricading of central Paris lost the king his throne. Spurred on by the Parisians, the Belgians raised barricades against the Orange dynasty, and successfully proclaimed their independence. In June 1832 came the most dramatically documented set of Parisian barricades, vividly recounted by Victor Hugo and still built

nightly in a London theatre. In February 1848 the Paris revolution which unseated the Orleanist king, Louis-Philippe, saw barricades erected by the same skilled workers, in the same locations as in 1830 and 1832. Even more notable, barricades were a central feature of the unprecedented tsunami of revolts that followed the Parisian example in most European capitals.

Barricade culture was conveyed in engravings and the new European illustrated press, which quickly informed its middle-class readers of the Paris revolution. Many of these images appear in this volume, although one should recall that the art by which today's undergraduates remember these events, Meissonnier, Hugo, Flaubert and Delacroix was, with the exception of *Liberty Guiding the People*, produced after 1848, Meissonnier's *Memory of Civil War (The Barricades, 1848, shown first at the Salon in 1850-1851)*, Hugo's *Les Misérables* in 1862 and Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale* in 1869. Perhaps a better example of direct influence was the fact that foreign workers who had participated in the Paris revolution often took to the streets in their own capital cities, just as today's Libyan rebels learned their fighting in Iraq. 1848 was the highpoint of barricade building, but only the Parisian February vintage actually led to a permanent change of regime. In 1871 barricades were confined to France, mainly to Paris, and were stylised symbols, rather than practical weapons, as the illustrations (p. 16 and p. 192) reveal.

The two final chapters focus on the wider perspective. There were 155 instances of barricade construction over three centuries, 92 of which occurred in France. Graphical representations show they were a real threat of regime change only in 1588, 1648, 1789, 1830, 1848 and 1871, and then mainly in France. Around 4,000 barricades featured in the 1830 revolution. Their revolutionary efficacy declined with railways, the telegraph and the replacement of narrow streets with wide boulevards. However their mythic, symbolic influence went on to far exceed their practical impact in trying to unseat a regime. Unlike other insurrectionary techniques, the barricade was remarkably consistent in its structure over three centuries, as was the way in which insurrectionary crowds spontaneously organised themselves. Barricades could inspire less committed citizens and their opponents. The latter, usually the military, might, as in 1830 and February 1848, be won over to the rebels by the sight of local people, including retired military and women and children, defending a barricade, and providing the hungry, thirsty soldiers with sustenance.

Perhaps another reason why barricades ceased to be effective after February 1848, which is not dealt with in this book, was that soldiers became hardened to guerrilla warfare when they used artillery techniques that did not necessitate them seeing their enemy at close quarters. Traugott constantly repeats that barricades were designed to defend a neighbourhood. He might have taken this further to consider whether barricades had less resonance when workers no longer worked and lived in the same area. This was the case in Paris by the March 1871, and perhaps contributed to the failure to erect barricades spontaneously. The increasing power of the state to deprive those who manned barricades of their liberty and a livelihood, which is also not mentioned in this volume, is another factor which smothered insurrection after June 1848 in France. Louis Hinckner, in *Citoyens-combattants à Paris, 1848-1851*.⁽³⁾ shows how those who fought on the barricades in 1830 and February 1848 were treated subsequently as heroic citizens to be rewarded, whereas those who joined barricades in June 1848, December 1851 and March 1871 always remained rebels, unworthy of a state pension, even from the Third Republic. Unfortunately Traugott does not discuss such aspects of the psychology which made people into barricade insurrectionaries.

This review has put together a continuous narrative of barricades and their relative success, which undergraduates may seek and at first will be disappointed at its absence in this volume, despite the excellent graphs (pp. 81–2). The substantial appendix A (pp. 243–311) consists of a database of barricade events, which includes not only comparable statistical data for each barricade, but also a brief summary of each event, but the overall effect is bitty and disconnected. The volume will be valuable for students, particularly those working on 19th-century history and those trying to fathom why fascination with barricades grew as their effectiveness as revolutionary tools declined. The three-century chronological span is admirable. This discussion on barricades and the culture of revolution should make students think, provoke debate, and take the topic further.

Notes

1. Thomas Bouchet, *Le Roi et les barricades. Une histoire des 5 et 6 juin 1832* (Paris, 2000); Jill Harsin, *Barricades. The War of the Streets in Revolutionary Paris, 1830–1848* (Basingstoke, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Mark Traugott, *Armies of the Poor. Determinants of Working-Class Participation in the Parisian Insurrection of June 1848* (Berkeley, CA, 1985); *The French Worker: Autobiographies from the Early Industrial Era* (Princeton, NJ, 1993).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Louis Hinckner, *Citoyens-combattants à Paris, 1848–1851* (Villeneuve d'Ascq, 2008).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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