

Choosing June: Did France's Second Republic Intentionally Spark a Class War?

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The first four months of France's Second Republic were marked by escalating tensions between a bourgeois political class in which center-right officials were increasingly consolidating power and a radical working-class movement capable of rapidly mobilizing large-scale street demonstrations. Those tensions came to a head when the Executive Commission announced its plan to close the National Workshops, a massive program aimed to ensure universal employment. The announced closure triggered an intense class conflict known as the June Days of 1848. After the workers' hard-fought but eventual defeat, Karl Marx put forward a theory that the Second Republic had deliberately provoked the uprising in order to crush the power the working class had won at February's barricades.¹ Historians spent decades amassing evidence to support Marx's claim,² yet over the past half-century the theory appears to have faded from the scholarly radar. Social historians of the 1970s scrutinized Marx's arguments about the class make-up of the struggle but were less concerned with the provocation thesis, and recent historians tend to fault government incompetence without considering the possibility of deliberate provocation. Nevertheless, police reports, correspondence between the Prefecture of Police and the Executive Commission, and memoirs of Second Republic officials offer compelling evidence that certain authorities both 1) knew closing the workshops would trigger a revolt and 2) sought to close the workshops for precisely that reason. I will argue that scholars abandoned the provocation thesis without effectively refuting it, and the case deserves further examination.

One contributing factor to the dearth of recent interest in the provocation thesis may be that the question was not well-suited to the methodology of social history, which dominated scholarship on the June Days during the 1970s. Social historians' statistical approach was far more effective in evaluating Marx's interpretation of the June Days as a class war. For example, in their study of the June Days combatants, Charles Tilly and Lynn H. Lees offered a detailed breakdown of participation in the insurrection by trade; geography; and membership in the workshops,

National Guard, and workers' societies. Although they provide a more nuanced view of the professions of the June Days rebels, they concluded that Marx was "essentially right" in characterizing the conflict as a struggle between two distinct social classes.³ They discussed the manner in which the workshops were closed as perhaps "the final indignity" for many artisans who had joined the workshops to temporarily receive unemployment relief, but did not address the government's motivations.⁴ Although leading social historian Roger Price referred to the decision to close the workshops as "choosing armed confrontation" he did not claim it was a calculated attempt to incite a revolt, but wrote more vaguely that "the manner in which the dissolution was decreed was revealing both of the government's incompetence and also of the general desire of conservatives to end an uncertain situation."⁵

Since the 1970s, historians have generally adopted a similar view. They fault the government for abruptly announcing the dissolution of the workshops in the *Moniteur* without public debate or official explanation to people who depended on that income for survival. While scholars generally criticize the government's ham-fistedness, they tend not to give more than a glancing mention (if any at all) to the provocation thesis. Maurice Agulhon wrote that the Executive Commission made the decision to close the workshops when it "finally succumbed to pressure from the Assembly." He believed the Assembly sought "revenge" for the working-class occupation of the Assembly on May 15 but did not discuss whether specific officials were trying to force a battle with the proletariat.⁶ In a more recent work, Mark Traugott argued that after officials fired workshop director Emile Thomas on May 24, the government's hostility toward the workshops caused it to lose the influence it had previously established over their membership, leading to a rapid escalation from civil disobedience to rebellion. He concluded, "the government had made a self-fulfilling prophecy of its fear that the workshops would turn against it"⁷ but stopped short of evaluating the case for deliberate provocation.

For their part, Marxist historians who argued for the provocation thesis especially cited the memoirs of Maxime du Camp, an upper-class Parisian who fought with the National Guard during the insurrection. Prior to the June Days, du Camp wrote, "everyone was complaining" about the National Workshops. By everyone, he apparently meant bosses, the Prefect of Police, and the National Guard, because he laid out the grievances of all three groups. He then described widespread fear among government officials that radicals were manufacturing weapons in secret and intended to launch an insurrection during a popular banquet planned for July.⁸ Michel Goudchaux, who served as Minister of Finance and Deputy to the National Assembly at the time of the June Days, reportedly told Camp that the government did not want to forbid the banquet. It was wary of repeating the events of the February Days, when the government attempted to cancel a Reform Banquet hosted by lower-class regiments of the National Guard and triggered a revolt that led to the overthrow of the July Monarchy. Instead, the Second Republic "resolved to hasten the dissolution of the National Workshops, in order to immediately engage in combat and to vanquish the insurrectionary army before it was completely organized."⁹

We should not take Michel Goudchaux's confession lightly because he did in fact play a significant role in the closure of the workshops. On June 15, the National Assembly was debating

France's plans to colonize Algeria when Goudchaux took the floor. The colonization plans were generally a good idea, he agreed, but he had a different measure to propose. "It is urgent, in my opinion, to immediately dissolve the National Workshops." In a long speech – which the Assembly president permitted him to make over one representative's repeated objections that it had nothing to do with Algeria – Goudchaux bemoaned the mentality of the working class. Since February 24, he claimed, "the workers [have] ceased to be honest." They had previously "resigned to devote themselves simply to tough, grueling labor." Lately, however, people preaching certain doctrines had convinced them that by refusing to work, they could ask for more.¹⁰

In the conservative National Assembly elected in April, Goudchaux found many supporters for his screed against the mentality of the working class, yet neither he nor his supporters fully explained why they found the matter urgent enough to interrupt debate on an unrelated subject. Instead, Goudchaux offered a vague warning that if the Assembly did not resolve the matter of the workshops, "the Republic will perish.... I could tell you the depths of it, but I will not tell you because I do not want to frighten you too much."¹¹ It is quite likely he truly believed the Republic would perish if the National Workshops were not immediately dissolved; as he reportedly said to Maxime du Camp decades later, he believed radicals were preparing to revolt during their July banquet.

Contemporary police reports attest to the fact that Goudchaux was not alone in his concerns. Just two days before he interrupted the Algeria debate, a Parisian police officer named P. Carlier filed a report about the upcoming banquet. Notable extremists, Carlier wrote, were hoping to hold this "famous banquet" on July 14, to coincide with the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, though certain members of the National Workshops preferred a Sunday. In either case, the matter was cause for extreme anxiety, he warned, as it would be used as pretext for a coup. But the government could turn the situation to its advantage, he argued, and "retake all the power it had lost over a period of time, if it clearly forbids this banquet." The previous week, Carlier had urged the arrest of the socialist politicians who composed the Luxemburg Commission, but the municipal Chief of Police had rejected the proposal.¹² Prefect of Police Trouvé-Chauvel expressed similar anxieties in his reports to the Executive Commission. On June 13, he reported that a popular banquet had taken place without incident, but he had concerns about "others," especially the one he was certain was planned for the 14th of July. He noted the involvement of the anarchist Proudhon and the socialist Lagrange.¹³

The internal correspondence of Parisian authorities also supports Marx's argument that class interests – and an unease about the newfound power of the working class – influenced the government's desire to engage in hostilities with the National Workshops. On May 25, Trouvé-Chauvel briefed the Executive Commission on what he called a "grave event"; a group of workers in the hat-making industry had demanded higher wages from their bosses. Despite earning wages averaging 7 to 8 francs a day (which he considered "already highly elevated"), they were going on strike. He warned Workshop director Emile Thomas that strikers planned to sign up for the National Workshops.¹⁴ By guaranteeing wages, the National Workshops provided bargaining power to workers. Even if they did not intend to go on strike, the knowledge that they could do so

without immediate fear of starvation gave employers an incentive to come to the bargaining table. By including a potential strike in one of his reports to the national executive body – which tended to focus on analyzing the probability of an insurrection and the government’s preparedness – the Prefect of Police revealed his belief that collective labor action should be treated as a national security threat.

Four days later, Trouvé-Chauvel more bluntly spelled out his class allegiances. In a May 29 report on heated demonstrations in Paris, he claimed that the National Guard “is ready to act energetically; because all citizens who have some industrial or commercial interest prefer a violent crisis to a state of lethargy that will surely continue to eat away at them.” He wrote that the largest crowd of the night contained numerous “badly-intentioned people” and noted their chants against the bourgeoisie and aristocrats. The Prefect of Police complained at length about the government’s “lack of energy” arguing, “the half-measures, the hesitations demoralize good citizens, encourage perturbators, and the most complete anarchy becomes more imminent each day.”¹⁵ In this report, Trouvé-Chauvel went beyond stating his desire to serve the interests of the upper class against the working poor; he quite plainly argued in favor of civil and class warfare on the streets of the city in which he was charged with maintaining order.

One scholar to argue directly against the provocation thesis is Frederick de Luna, who claimed it would not have been logical for the government to incite another battle so soon after the February Revolution. He held there was no evidence the Second Republic intended its decree to trigger an insurrection and asserted that “the thesis of provocation rests on the unhistorical assumption that the triumph of the government was inevitable, when in fact the issue was in doubt for some time, and in the end four days of difficult combat were necessary to defeat the insurgents.” Luna further (and somewhat contradictorily) argued that any eagerness on the part of deputies to engage in a street battle was warranted on the grounds that the left was preparing an insurrection.¹⁶

If the government was convinced it would inevitably face an uprising, surely pre-empting it by provoking it early seems a less risky move than waiting for radicals to act on their terms. Additionally, Luna falsely assumed the Second Republic would have correctly judged the strength of the uprising. Their closest point of reference for the capabilities of the radical left was May 15, when a crowd temporarily occupied the National Assembly. The people were not prepared to engage in armed conflict and quickly dispersed once the Assembly managed to call in National Guard regiments from the wealthier districts of Paris.¹⁷

Although Maxime du Camp published Goudchaux’s remarks about dissolving the workshops so as to engage in armed combat with workers, he took a position similar to Luna. Referring to Goudchaux as a “highly honorable” man, du Camp asserted he would not have lied, yet he questioned whether the former Minister had remembered correctly. “I believe that there was less Machiavellianism in all that,” Camp wrote, “universal exasperation was sufficient to blind intelligences and push toward dangerous rigours: ‘The national workshops must be disbanded,’ said Goudchaux ; ‘Yes, this situation must end,’ added M. de Falloux.”¹⁸

It is possible, however, that the government acted with both incompetence and malice. Incompetence because the strength of the rebellion appears to have taken officials by surprise, and

malice because the uprising itself was highly predictable. When the dissolution decree was published in the *Moniteur* on June 21, Minister of the Interior Recurt remarked, “the insurrection is tomorrow.”¹⁹ He was off by just one day.

Reports from the Prefecture of Police to the Executive Commission make it clear that the government understood – for almost a month in advance of the June Days – that closing the National Workshops would result in armed conflict between the workers and the government. They understood this because the Second Republic had attempted to close the workshops once before, and the resulting wave of protests convinced them to temporarily shelve the plan. On May 24, the Executive Commission ordered the workshops’ then-director Emile Thomas to begin the process of ending the program he oversaw. In addition to terminating their employment, the Commission’s plan would have imposed the same draconian conditions that would later motivate thousands of people to take to the streets on June 22. Namely, they sought to deport workers who had resided in Paris for less than six months and mandated younger members enlist in military service. Emile Thomas was relatively conservative; he had gained his position because many in the Assembly feared that Louis Blanc, who had initially proposed the program, would turn it into a socialist experiment. Nevertheless, Thomas found the Executive Commission’s orders too severe. He refused to carry them out, at which point the duly-elected representative was promptly arrested and spirited away to Bordeaux, where he could not reveal the nature of the plan to do away with the Workshops.

When the public learned of Thomas’s disappearance, members of the National Workshops suspected the truth and took to the streets in protest. On May 27, large crowds gathered demanding to know why Thomas was arrested. In a report to the Executive Commission, the Prefecture of Police stated plainly that “many were saying that they had arms and ammunition, and that they would overthrow the government if it closed the National Workshops.” Beginning at 7:00 AM the next day, workers gathered at various locations around Paris to continue their demonstrations. Police reports described the members of the workshops as highly agitated and noted that the goal of their protests was to maintain the current organization of the National Workshops. The report went on to cite general fears that “anarchists” were preparing to rise up against the government and the bourgeoisie, but had not yet chosen a date.²⁰ Writing about this week of protests decades later, Maxime du Camp recalled workers chanting “down with bourgeois! Down with artists!” He went on to describe these demonstrations as “the preface to the June insurrection.”²¹

It seems government officials, radical workers, and members of the National Guard all recognized the high probability that closing the National Workshops would trigger a revolt. They had already seen the strength of working-class reaction when the public merely suspected the workshops’ closure. At the time, the public did not know about the government’s plans for deportation and mandatory military service. Yet less than a month later, the Executive Commission moved forward with an identical plan to the one they had tabled in May. Tensions had not eased during that time. Crowds continued to demonstrate on the streets. On June 6, a new newspaper called the *Tocsin des Travailleurs* stated in its first issue that the government was preparing to dissolve the National Workshops and workers must sound the tocsin: a revolutionary-era signal to

revolt.²² The only significant differences in circumstances were that the government had stationed more troops around Paris, and that prominent officials from ministers and other deputies to the Prefect of Police – alarmed about the possibility of a popular banquet on July 14 – were placing increased pressure on the Executive Commission to dissolve the workshops.

Even after issuing its fatal decree, the government had one more opportunity to prevent a revolt. It was fear of deportation that motivated many workers to take to the streets on June 22. Throughout the day, police reports list multiple instances of different crowds chanting “we will not leave!” One officer overheard the people saying that “they will not leave for the Solonge [where the government was proposing to send them], that they would like better to die here.”²³ One of these crowds, numbering approximately 500 people, marched to the Luxemburg Palace, occupied the *Jardin des Plantes*, and demanded to meet with the Executive Commission. Five members of the National Workshops were allowed entry as representatives of the group, but the only member of the Executive Commission who was in residence at the time was Marie, the Minister of Public Works. A vehement opponent of the workshops, Marie became furious after recognizing the leader of the delegation, a lieutenant in the National Workshops named Pujol, as a participant in the popular occupation of the National Assembly on May 15. The conversation disintegrated rapidly, and Marie famously exclaimed, “if the workers don’t want to leave for the provinces, we will constrain them to go by force...do you hear? By force!”²⁴ Marie’s response to Pujol reveals a reflexive disdain for workers whose lives would be uprooted and whose very survival would be threatened by policies he was implementing. Given the chance to ease tensions with the protesters, he instead invited them to rebel.

Although there is no evidence that leaders of the government sat down to map out the June Days uprising and coordinate their response, there seems at least to have been an implicit understanding that closing the workshops would incite an insurrection. The Executive Commission understood it in May when they canceled their first attempt, and nothing suggested the workers would have been more accepting in June. Further, reports from the Prefect of Police to the Executive Commission clearly and repeatedly argued in favor of provoking an armed confrontation with the radical working class. Documents created prior to the revolt offer compelling evidence to corroborate the version of events that Goudchaux later relayed to Camp. These documents also provide insight into the paranoia and contempt with which the Second Republic viewed its radical proletarians. The government celebrated the revolution that birthed it yet obsessively prepared for battle against its revolutionary class. The right to employment was enshrined in its constitution, but collective bargaining power was treated as a national security threat. Given these attitudes, it does not seem so far-fetched that for fear of a banquet in July, the Second Republic chose class war in June.

Endnotes

¹ Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France (1848-50)* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1936), 57-58.

² Works that have supported the provocation thesis include: Georges Duveau, *1848* (Paris : Editions Gallimard, 1965), Gaston Martin, *La Révolution de 1848*, (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1959) and Emile Tersen, *Quarante-huit*, (Paris : club français du livre, 1957), Jean Dautry, *Histoire de la Révolution de 1848 en France* (Paris : Editions Hier et aujourd'hui, 1948), Georges Renard, "La Deuxième République Française (1848-1851)" *Histoire Socialiste (1789-1900)*, tome IX, ed. Jean Jaurès (Paris : Publications Jules Rouff et Cie., 1906).

³ Social historians generally agreed with the class conflict interpretation of the June Days, but they criticized Marx's characterization of Mobile Guards who fought against the insurgency as the *lumpenproletariat*. Tilly and Lees agree with Pierre Caspard's conclusion that they instead "came especially from the least privileged (and most unemployed) members of the privileged trades. Charles Tilly and Lynn H Lees, "The People of June, 1848," in *Revolution and Reaction: 1848 and the Second French Republic*, ed. Roger Price (London: C. Helm; New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1975), 201, 198.

⁴ Ibid, 177.

⁵ Roger Price, *The French Second Republic: A Social History* (London: B. T. Batsford Ltd, 1972), 157.

⁶ Maurice Agulhon, *The Republican Experiment, 1848-1852*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 53, 57.

⁷ Mark Traugott, *Armies of the Poor: Determinants of Working-Class Participation in the Parisian Insurrection of June 1848*, 2nd edition (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 146.

⁸ The government appears to have been incorrect in assuming the banquet was a conspiracy. As Peter Amann has noted, leading Socialists intervened to push the banquet backward and sap it of momentum precisely because they did not want the banquet to turn into a revolt. Peter Amann, "Prelude to Insurrection: The Banquet of the People," *French Historical Studies* 1, no. 4 (Autumn 1960): 436-444, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/286141>.

⁹ Maxime du Camp, *Souvenirs de l'année 1848 : La révolution de février, le 15 mai, l'insurrection de juin* (Genève : Slatkine Reprints, 1979), 229-234.

¹⁰ Assemblée Nationale, *Compte rendu des séances de l'Assemblée nationale*, tome I (Paris : Panckoucke, 1848), 884.

¹¹ Ibid, 885.

¹² Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport de la commission d'enquête sur l'insurrection qui a éclaté dans la journée du 23 juin et sur les événements du 14 mai*, tome II (Paris : Imprimerie de l'Assemblée Nationale, 1848), 229, 227.

¹³ Ibid, 206.

¹⁴ Ibid, 185.

¹⁵ Ibid, 193.

¹⁶ Frederick A. de Luna, *The French Republic Under Cavaignac, 1848* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 131-136.

¹⁷ Agulhon, *The Republican Experiment*, 52-53.

¹⁸ Camp, *Souvenirs de l'année 1848*, 235.

¹⁹ Duveau, *1848*, 146.

²⁰ Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport de la commission d'enquête*, tome II, 186-188.

²¹ Camp, *Souvenirs de l'année 1848*, 212.

²² *Le Tocsin des Travailleurs*, 1 Juin 1848, 1.

²³ Assemblée Nationale, *Rapport de la commission d'enquête*, tome II, 212-213.

²⁴ Georges Duveau, *1848* (Paris : Editions Gallimard, 1965), 146 and Donald Cope McKay, *The National Workshops: A Study in the French Revolution of 1848* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933), 137-138.