



Eric Hazan. *A History of the Barricade*. London: Verso, 2015. 144 pp. \$17.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-78478-125-5.

Reviewed by Alex Zukas

Published on H-Socialisms (October, 2016)

Commissioned by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

In his book, Eric Hazan presents a brief and readable historical survey of a long-standing symbol of insurrectionary urban politics, the barricade. While there are moments of serious analysis, he takes a narrative approach to the historical phenomenon of the barricade in short, breezy chapters (ten to fifteen pages on average) and embeds his analysis in stories about the barricades from protagonists and antagonists. Besides some key secondary sources and documentary collections, the major source for his stories is the memoirs and writings of French public figures and authors such as Cardinal de Retz, François-René de Chateaubriand, Louis Blanc, Alexandre Dumas, Victor Hugo, Alexis de Tocqueville, Mikhail Bakunin, and Auguste Blanqui. The verve of Hazan's writing and that of his sources contribute to the feeling of being an eyewitness to unfolding events. This is his intent: "it is these heroes and heroines that I have tried to bring back to life from the anonymity into which official history has cast them" and to make this history "a source of inspiration for those unresigned to the perpetuation of the existing order" (p. x). It is a partisan but not an uncritical history in which the author spends a large part of each chapter on the battle tactics of the barricade builders and the armies that assailed them.

Hazan narrates the history of the barricade across three centuries. The chapter titles preview the rising and falling arc of the story Hazan tells, from early success to later failure: "The Barriers of the League: May 1588," "The Barricades of the Fronde: August 1648," "The Hunger Barricades: Prairial Year III," "Barricades and the End of the Bourbons: November 1827, July 1830," "The First Proletarian Barricades, Lyon, November 1831 and April 1834," "Barricades in the Age of Romanticism: June 1832," "The Last Victorious Barricades: Paris, February 1848," "The Barricade Exported to Europe: Spring 1848," "The Barricades of Despair, Paris, June 1848," "A Mythical Barricade: December 1851," and "The Barricades of the Commune: May 1871." Each chapter has excellent maps that allow the reader to see the positioning of barricades and to follow the ebbs and flows of battles. Hazan also provides helpful political and economic background to contextualize the causes of each insurrectionary event. He excludes a discussion of barricades in the twentieth century, which is a weakness of the book. It is to some extent a result of the understandably French, but especially Parisian, focus of the book since the barricade was "a Parisian invention" and "the common point of a majority of riots, insurrections and revolutions that punctuate the history of the city and

the country—with the sole exception of the French Revolution” (p. ix).

The reader learns many interesting things about barricades. The word first appeared in French in the early 1570s but its association with a makeshift street blockade first occurred during a popular uprising in 1588 against the introduction of troops into Paris that was the turning point of the Wars of Religion. The barricades were made of carts, cobblestones, furniture and, most significantly, barrels (*barriques*) filled with dirt. The prominent use of weighted barrels gave the construction the name “barricade.” The tactic used by residents in 1588 and after was to let soldiers pass, put up a barricade, trap soldiers between it and other barricades, and open fire. The result in 1588 was that the soldiers retreated and King Henri III left Paris. The large-scale and successful use of the barricade in 1588 fixed many of its features and its political significance for years to come.

Barricades next appeared in Paris three generations later in August 1648 at the start of the *Fronde*, a judicial and noble revolt against Louis XIV. The revolt sought the release of imprisoned judges and it succeeded. Hazan argues that the success of the barricades turned Louis XIV sour on Paris and his construction of Versailles was one consequence of the Paris barricades. He notes similarities between the barricades of 1588 and 1648: they were constructed from the same elements, they were put up with amazing speed, the entire population participated in their construction, they spread rapidly across Paris, and they were effective in trapping and defeating royal troops. Hazan observes that this was the last barricade erected in France before the French Revolution but he offers no explanation why violent confrontation with the old regime shifted away from cities to the countryside. When the barricade reappeared in the French Revolution, it was limited to one district and lasted only a few hours near the end of the revolution. Its historical signif-

icance is that it was the last uprising of the *sans-culottes*, who had powered the revolution in its early stages and fought against counterrevolution. Their lack of resolution and leadership doomed their efforts, the army crushed the insurgents, and “after this decisive defeat, the people of Paris did not play a political role for a long time to come” (p. 33).

Hazan argues that the reemergence of the barricade at the end of the 1820s marked the opening of a long history of insurrection in Paris as well as the rise and fall of the barricade as a political force in France and across Europe in the nineteenth century. The high point for the barricade as a political tool came in July 1830 with a massive popular revolt that caused the abdication of the last Bourbon king, Charles X. Used with maximum tactical effect, it cut off and immobilized army units as inhabitants fraternized with soldiers who refused to fire on civilians.

The main claim to fame of the brief pro-republican and anti-royalist protests and barricades of June 1832 in Paris is that, at one time or another, Chateaubriand, Balzac, Dumas, Hugo, Georges Sand, and Heinrich Heine experienced and wrote about them. No leader emerged to take charge of the spontaneous uprising and the outnumbered insurgents were steadily driven from their complex of barricades by the military over the course of two days. Artillery reduced the barricades and soldiers massacred defenders. A theme running through many chapters is that the mere sight of a barricade sent chills down the spines of authorities and the reprisals against those who built and staffed barricades were savage, disproportionate, and meant to overwhelm and terrify the civilian population psychologically.

In charting the course of the barricade, Hazan moves outside Paris and cross-class involvement and chronicles a first: purely proletarian class-based barricades. These arose in Lyon, France’s largest industrial town in the 1830s. The November 1831 uprising began as dispute over compen-

sation and when owners refused to raise piece rates, semi-proletarian masters, journeymen, and workers went on strike. Employers responded with a lockout and when National Guard members showed up on the streets with weapons, the workers armed themselves and put up barricades. Fraternalizing soldiers would not engage the insurgents, who soon had control of the city. Attempts to form a workers' government failed and leaders were arrested by the returning army but economic suffering continued, strikes occurred, and strike leaders were arrested in March 1834. Workers rose up to prevent their trial in April, erected barricades, and fought the troops. This time there was no fraternization and, in six days of fighting, the troops suppressed the uprising violently, killing insurgents as well as noncombatant women and children.

The Revolutions of 1848 form the apex of the book's narrative and the author devotes three chapters to them. The initial chapter is short since it deals with the February Revolution and makes the point that the barricades went up in the old insurrectionary areas of Paris and that the majority of the National Guard refused to attack the barricades. The revolution spread throughout the city and, unlike 1832, the House of Orleans was overthrown. Interestingly, barricades are barely mentioned in the chapter and there is little on the tactics and battles that animates earlier chapters. As the chapter title announces, this was the "last victorious barricade" in Paris.

The next chapter on the 1848 revolutions concerns the "export" of liberal revolution and the tactic of the barricade to the rest of continental Europe. Hazan explains that the movements were far from homogeneous but they shared common characteristics: hatred of absolutism and the European system established by the Congress of Vienna and the use of the barricade thanks to the return of political refugees from Paris to their home countries, bringing this insurrectionary symbol and tactic with them. Hazan focuses on

three springtime uprisings in this chapter: those in Berlin, Vienna, and Prague. Early success in each revolution, thanks in part to the barricade, was rolled back. Hazan attributes the defeats mainly to the fact that absolutist armies withdrew from the cities but, remaining intact, returned to restore absolutist order before the year was out.

The last chapter on the 1848 revolutions details the struggles involving the "June Days" of the 1848 revolution in Paris and chronicles the ineffectiveness of the barricade as an insurrectionary tactic. Hazan argues nevertheless that these June barricades were an unequalled moment in history due to the scale of the uprising (over a hundred thousand participants), its decentralized but cohesive character, and its significance as a purely proletarian event involving open class struggle. Hazan lays out a detailed account of the back-and-forth of the street fighting and the role of the barricade in helping workers gain control of half of Paris but the end sounds very familiar: resistance collapsed due to a lack of organized command to continue the offensive (also a critique by Blanqui at the time), barricades collapsed under artillery fire, and repression was ferocious and bloody. In addition, the author argues that authorities had learned the lessons of past blunders and no longer engaged troops in isolated skirmishes with protesters but now launched massive operations where fraternization would be impossible.

The denouement of the barricade comes in the final two chapters where it proved ineffective in December 1851 in preventing the coup d'état of Louis Napoleon and where it played a role only in the final week of the 1871 Paris Commune as a defense against the attacking French army and became elevated to a posthumous symbol of the Commune. Hazan goes over the many reasons for the defeat of the Commune and explains that most of the planned barricades were never built. Those that were built were overrun by troops in a week of close-quarter fighting and artillery fire.

The results of defeat meant the wholesale slaughter of insurgents by the victorious army.

In an epilogue, Hazan contends that barricades continued to appear in insurgent uprisings like Petrograd in 1917, Berlin in 1919, Barcelona in 1936, and Madrid in 1937 but “without ever regaining what had once given the device such a unique role” (p. 123). He asserts that, while the twentieth century had many insurrections and revolutions, the barricade was a marginal element in them for material rather than psychological reasons: cities widened and straightened their streets, armies modernized with artillery and tanks, and workplaces left communities, shifting the site of struggle from the neighborhood to the factory. While these reasons are entirely plausible, to make this case Hazan should have actually investigated these revolutions to see what the role of barricades actually were. For instance, recent research has confirmed that barricades were effectively used by the unemployed in local uprisings in the Ruhr region of Germany in the early 1930s where neighborhoods encircled factories and shared the same space.[1]

Hazan claims that writing this history was not easy given its temporal discontinuity. However, he highlights certain human and material elements that bring coherence to the story, particularly the banding together of young people, artisans, local residents, workers, and students to defend their neighborhoods and way of life against superior outside forces with the ready-to-hand materials of the barricade. Given this emphasis, he somewhat mystifyingly calls the erection of barricades a “symbolic form” (p. x), and he ends his study with an emphasis on the symbolic: the barricade acted as a theatrical stage from which to harangue soldiers or fraternize with them. These statements are mystifying because in his narration the barricade’s materiality, its ability to block physical movement and the physical encounters on and around it, is ever present while its purely symbolic nature is not prominent. Prac-

tice takes precedence over ideology in his account even if the barricade does eventually attain iconic status as a symbol of popular protest by the late nineteenth century. Even if one can easily grant that barricades formed a network across a city and united participants in a common cause in the absence of a leader and that barricades had powerful symbolic value, just the carnage documented by Hazan would lead one not to epitomize the barricade as a “symbolic form of insurrection” as he does (p. 123).

Despite these shortcomings, Hazan’s book is a sound survey of the barricade written with great *élan*. It is an enjoyable and informative read. Anyone seeking a more academic treatment of the barricade that argues for its greater geographic and temporal reach can read Marc Traugott, *The Insurgent Barricade* (2010). Traugott challenges the idea that the French Revolution was not crucial to the evolution of the barricade and that barricades were not important in twentieth-century popular struggles.

Note

[1]. Alex Zukas, “Explaining Unemployed Protest in the Ruhr at the End of the Weimar Republic,” *Unemployment and Protest: New Perspectives on Two Centuries of Contention*, ed. Matthias Reiss and Matt Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 137-174.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms>

Citation: Alex Zukas. Review of Hazan, Eric. *A History of the Barricade*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. October, 2016.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47722>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.