

1789-1871

Revolutions!

1789: the French Revolution is an intense and monumental moment during which women transform the streets into spaces of activism. On 5 and 6 October 1789, thousands of women head towards Versailles and demand that the King move to the capital. This event is crucial as women radically change the course of political life with their public actions. This era is revolutionary because many women participate in revolts, marches, and street blockades. Protests addressing major social challenges – especially those related to subsistence – are also political and directed at governments. These women fight for their rights and raise essential issues: is there a “universal” suffrage when women are not a part of it? Can women’s voices matter as much as men’s? These women intend to make their voices – individual and collective – heard even though attempts are made to silence them. They have specific demands and bring about new ways of engaging with public affairs. For them, taking to the streets means proclaiming their legitimacy, which has always been contested. Men in power, and men in general, presume that women belong with domestic tasks, in the household, while men keep the political sphere to themselves. Back then, the word “feminist” did not exist. Still, from the French Revolution to the Paris Commune, through the popular revolts of 1830 and 1848, we hear women’s voices rising to claim: “Men’s rights are also ours”.

The French Revolution

Several marches mark the revolutionary era. Many women protest in the streets. They bring social and political concerns into the public sphere: the issue of subsistence and citizen claims. Some come to proclaim: “The Rights of Man are also those of Woman”. Riots, gatherings, roadblocks, forced taxation, and the distribution of goods taken directly from convoys: all these actions show why women take to the streets in the name of rights and freedom, but also to change everyday life.

Echoes and references to the French Revolution

Women who take to the streets during the French Revolution show their strength and their defiance, challenging norms. They are not allegories. However, that is how the revolutionary era will be remembered for decades: with metaphors (the Marianne), symbols (the tricolour flag) and metonymies (the Phrygian cap). This primary event is so important that many women claim this revolutionary legacy through social movements and popular uprisings.

1830, July Revolution

During the “July Revolution”, which takes place on 27, 28 and 29 July 1830, women actively participate in the revolution that overthrows King Charles X. Some not only look after the injured: they help by setting up barricades. Sometimes, they even take up arms. Of course, the lithographs of that time cannot fully convey the intensity of the fight. It is violent though, as shown by the workers’ uprisings that break out in the following years, especially in Lyons, where women play a significant role.

The barricades of 1848

The Revolutions of 1848! In Paris and many big cities, street blockades engulf the streets again. The February Revolution of 1848 is part of a large European movement. But this time, it provokes a definitive overthrow of monarchy and the establishment of the Republic. Although women’s participation in the struggles is a minority, many of them fight with rifles. Some of them end up wounded and several lose their lives. Nevertheless, they fail to be considered as citizens with rights.

Long live the Commune!

“Are you going to shoot your brothers?”

On 18 March 1871, in the streets of Montmartre, some women face the troops of the Versailles government and shout at them. In so doing, they play a decisive role: soldiers bow to their demands. The event leads to a popular revolution, which erupts in different cities all over the country. These women multiply initiatives in the public sphere and they make projects, they found circles, societies and cooperatives. We find them on the barricades – and a lot of them die during the crushing of the Paris Commune.

Echoes and references to the Paris Commune

“The Commune is not dead!” Its memory resurfaces periodically, like a ghost. Whether it is the organisation of labour liberated from capital, an emancipatory school system, a shared art, or the struggle for women’s rights, the Paris Commune is still inspiring. It stands as a symbol of transmission across generations. In protest marches, its vivid references appear on banners and signs. Louise Michel remains its major figure.