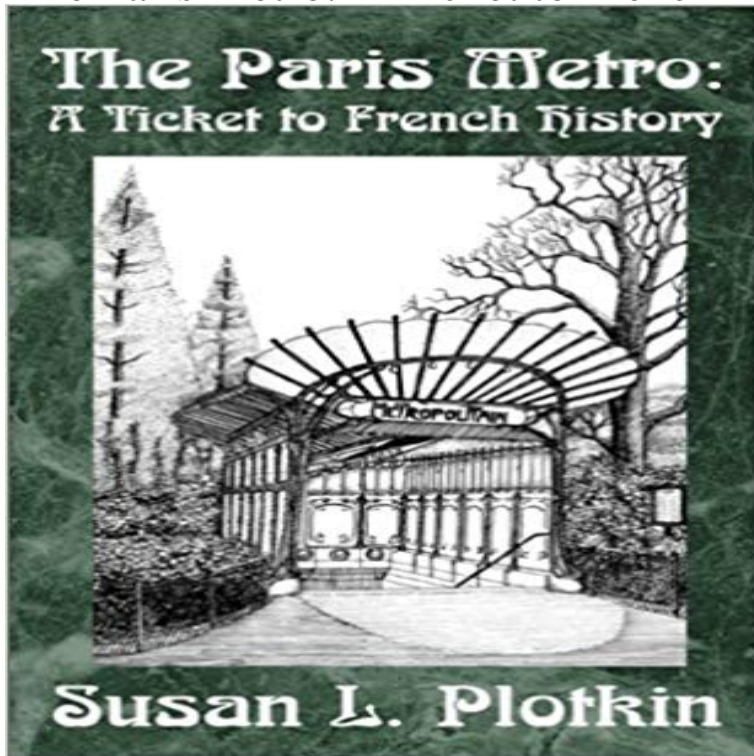


The Paris Metro: A Ticket to French History



The metro may be a mere hundred years old but it tells a tale of France twenty times as long. The story begins in the fifth century BC when wild Celtic tribes roamed the countryside of Gaul. Then Julius Caesar imposed a Roman rule that lasted five hundred years and forced the Celts to settle down. All that seems like only yesterday to a Frenchman because those Celts and Romans are close friends to every reader of the French comic book series Asterix. Asterix and his fellow Celts live quite happily in a small, fortified enclave in Brittany in northwestern France.

Their idyllic, primitive existence is occasionally intruded upon by those nasty Roman conquerors, but the Celts always manage to get the best of the Romans despite great odds. Alesia - (Metro Line 4). The Battle of Alesia (52 BC) is the oldest event commemorated in the Paris Metro. The Celtic warrior Vercingetorix managed to unite competing tribes against the Romans in one last attempt to save Gallic independence. It was not an easy task. It was difficult to live with, let alone lead, these autonomous, quarrelsome groups. Vercingetorix planned to wage hit-and-run guerrilla warfare - to starve the Romans into defeat by destroying the crops in their path as they penetrated deeper into Gaul in pursuit of the pesky Celts. In the town of Bourges the local population refused to allow the destruction of their wheat - a fatal mistake. Caesar descended on the town and confiscated it for his hungry troops. With renewed energy the Romans gave chase. The Celts retreated to a high plateau called Alesia, where they were quickly surrounded by Caesar's forces. The table was now turned. Caesar built a fortification around Alesia, twelve and a half miles in circumference. It consisted of a double row of spikes, one facing inward and the other outward, which prevented both escape and the re-provisioning of the rebels. The Celts had only a month's

worth of provisions but somehow they held out for two by which time the men were famished and exhausted. Vercingetorix surrendered. Few lives had been lost in battle but countless numbers died of starvation. Vercingetorix was imprisoned in Rome where six years later when he was all but forgotten Caesar had him strangled to death. Both the Celts who lost and the Romans who won have contributed much to French culture, so it's a tricky thing for the French to say whether Alesia was a victory or a defeat. One thing is clear: in real life, the Celts did not always win. In the end, it was most likely the mountains of horse manure that gave birth to the Paris Metro. During the last quarter of the 19th century, Paris did not lack the means of transport. What it patently lacked was a transportation system. There were competing omnibus lines, trams, trains and private conveyances, all overlapping, most taking roundabout routes throughout the city, hindering one another and certainly hindering business. Forty lines of horse-drawn omnibuses traversed Paris in 1870 and ten thousand horses were required to pull them. The maintenance of the horses ate up fifty percent of the entire company budget. Each omnibus held about 20 passengers, half of them riding on top of the carriage. By the turn of the century the omnibuses carried as many as forty people each, still with many sitting on the carriage roof. The roads were made of cobblestones or wood planks or sometimes just hardened mud; there were no shock absorbers on the carriages; and the stench from the horse manure was overwhelming. One hundred million passengers used the omnibuses that year, probably half of them holding perfumed handkerchiefs to their noses to ward off the stench.

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