NAPOLÉON III - GRANDEUR TO DOWNFALL

Money, trains, and Le Débacle

L'Argent

Émile Zola

"Above all things, [Aristide Saccard] longed to make a rapid fortune. When he was building his castles in the air, they would rise in his mind as if by magic; he would become possessed of tons of gold in one night. These visions agreed with his indolence, as he never troubled himself about the means, considering those the best which were the most expeditious."

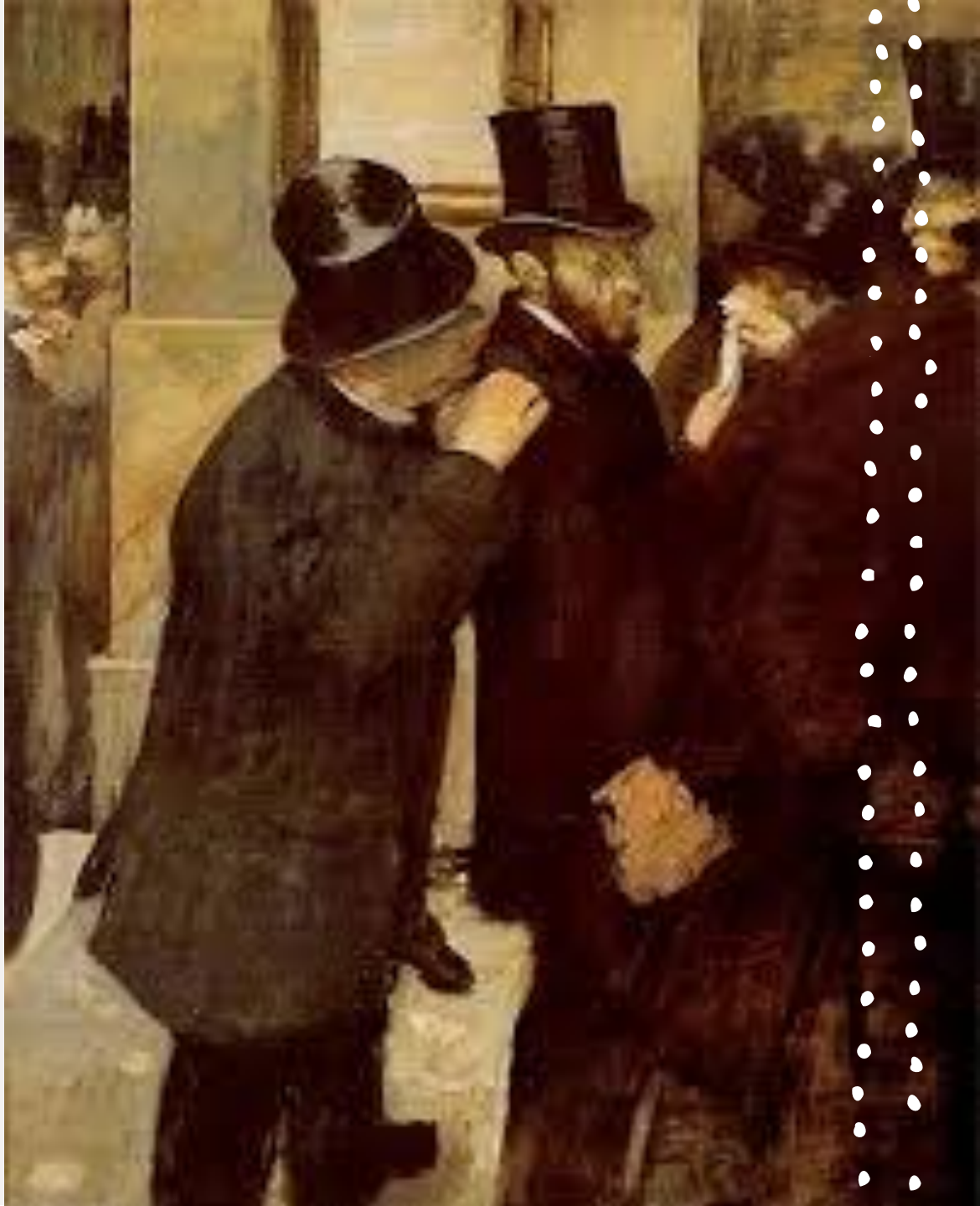
Upon arrival, on the day after Napoleon III's coup d'état, Aristide describes his ambition to "take" Paris, to violate and possess it, just as the city itself was being brought to submission by Baron Haussmann and Napoleon III's plans to modernize and control it by eliminating the windy streets that had been so easy to cut off during the revolutionary period of the Communes in 1848. Angèle, who in her meekness and devotion bore her name well, wasn't part of the plan, though, a tragic reality that was in evidence from their very arrival in the city:

> On his very first night in Paris, while Angèle unpacked their trunks, he felt a keen need to explore the city, to be out in his backwoods boots pounding the burning pavement from which he hoped to extract millions of francs. He took possession of the town – nothing less. He walked for the sake of walking, patrolling the sidewalks as if in conquered territory. He had a very clear vision of the battle he had come to wake and did not shrink from comparing himself to a skilled lock picker who is about to help himself to a portion of the common wealth that has hitherto been denied him out of spite.

Zola was famous for the research he undertook on the subjects about which he wrote, but he had an even taller task for this novel because not only did he know nothing about the stock market, he didn't even have a bank account, relying instead on his editor, Fesquelle, who acted as a kind of private banker on his behalf. His principle sources of information for the novel, in evidence through the notes he took, were from Feydeau's *Mémoire d'un coulissier*, Mirecourt's *La Bourse* and Aycard's study of *Le Crédit mobilier*. He also visited the stock market himself on April 17th, 1890, after which he said to a journalist: "Cette visite m'a suffi. En une heure on peut examiner, comprendre tout ce qui s'y passe." Henri Mitterand, ed., "Zola à la bourse," *Carnets d'enquetes: Une ethographie inedited de la France*, par Émile Zola, Paris, Plon, 1986, 47.

the story of the Banque Universelle drew from events surrounding the Union Générale, set up in 1878 in light of financial activities initiated by the French government to pay off its war indemnity. Established in June of 1878 with a capital of 25,000,000 francs, the stock was made to grow by 600% to 150,000,000 by November of 1881, the result of unscrupulous purchases of its own shares made by the directors with the company's funds and credit, and by fictitious subscriptions to the stock. Just two months later, when the Union Générale stock seemed to be at the very pinnacle of its success, it collapsed, and within four days the Union Générale was judicially declared insolvent, leading to a judgment by the Tribunal Correctionnel de la Seine dated December 20th, 1882 that called for the imprisonment of M. M. Bontoux, its director and M. Feder, its president. Bontoux' apology for his actions served as an important source for Zola as he worked out the plot of his novel.

Although primarily a financial institution, Credit Générale actively supported royalist and papal causes by attempting to supplant the Jewish financiers who dominated the French financial sector. Driven by nationalist and speculative mania of “good Catholics,” with the benediction of Pope Leo XII (who had himself confided 120,000 francs to Bontoux), and the active support of Duke Decazes, the Marquis de Biencourt and the Marquis de Ploeuc, Credit Générale produced an aggregate value of associated ventures that exceeded a billion francs, spread out over a huge range of financial circles.



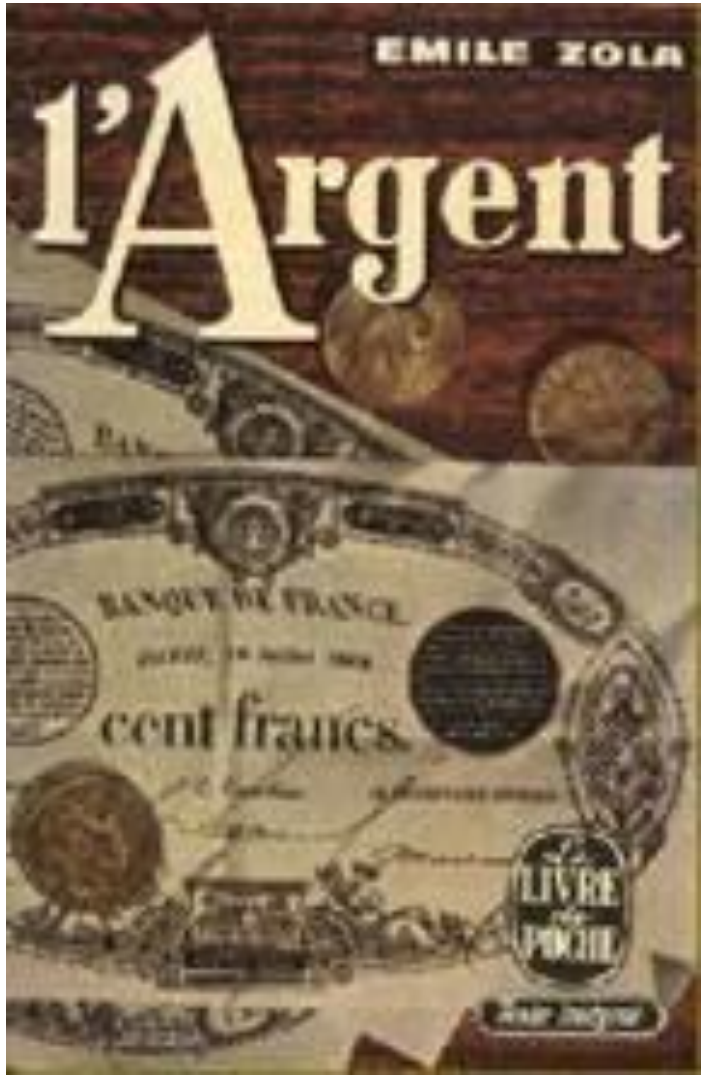
Socéte Générale (1884-)

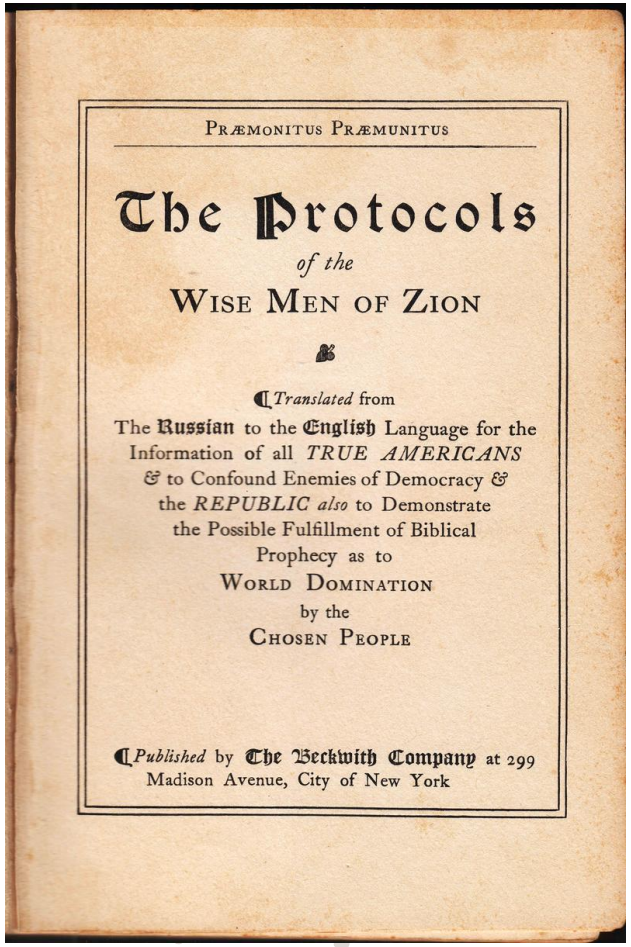
Zola followed French novels from the early 19th Century that discussed financial transactions and fluctuations, notably Balzac's *Le baron Nucingen* and *César Birotteau,* and a host of English novels of finance by writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Dickens, Thomas de Quincey and Anthony Trollope. He also anticipated American works in this vein by Theodore Dreiser, William Howells and Frank Norris, and several Brazilian novels on international markets and financial upheavals, by Lima Barreto, Julia Lopes de Almeida, and Alfonso de Taunay. What sets Zola's *Argent* apart, though, is that it carefully documents events under Napoleon III's Second Empire, and, moreover, that it does so within the naturalist framework that downplayed the possibility of individual freedom of action and emphasized instead the role of underlying inherited and learned traits in determining individual behavior.

Appealing to Catholics and seeking the protection of the Vatican, Bontoux and Feder had justified their efforts as being part of a nationalist and religious quest to break the stranglehold that Rothschild and other Jewish financiers had upon the French economy, and they blamed its failure on "Jewish finance" and its ally "governmental freemasonry." The fictional Saccard and Hamelin appeal to the same sentiment, and likewise the obstacle to their success is the Rothschildian figure of Gundermann, "the banker king, the master of the bourse and of the world …the man who knew [all] secrets, who made the markets rise and fall at his pleasure as god makes the thunder … the king of gold."

Edouard Drumont, in his wildly popular and influential anti-Semitic book *Jewish France* (1886), suggested that the "God Rothschild," was the real "master" of France (18) and, in a stroke of astonishing perversion, argued that Union Générale had itself been established by the Jews to rob Catholics of their savings. Catholics, "candid like always," had been led into a trap by Rothschild, with the complicity of their own government and perhaps Feder as well (who, says Drumont, is given away in part by his "absolutely Jewish name"[!]). For Drumont, Bontoux was an innocent victim ("Bontoux, cependant, paraît avoir été relativement de bonne foi ») while, he notes, Feder went on to become on of the « principle Bankers of Berlin ».

There are many hair-raising statements put into the mouth of Aristide Saccard who, either out of political astuteness and financial acumen, or out of personal conviction, finds justification in vehement anti-Semitism: "Ah! The Jew! Against the Jew he harboured all the old racial resentment, to be found especially in the South of France; and it was something like a revolt of his very flesh, a repugnance of the skin, which, at the idea of the slightest contact, filled him with disgust and anger, a sensation which no reasoning could allay, which he was quite unable to overcome." The basis for this hatred is hereby deemed to be rooted in habit of the mind and irrational urges, rather than in any kind of legitimate gripe, which sets up a critical distance between Saccard and the author that is reinforced in the next sentence: "And the singular thing was that he, Saccard, the terrible company promoter, the spendthrift with unclean hands, lost all self-consciousness as soon as the Jew was in question, and spoke of him with the harshness, the revengeful indignation who lives by the labour of his arms, unstained by any usurious dealings."





PRÆMONITUS PRÆMUNITUS

The Protocols
of the
WISE MEN OF ZION

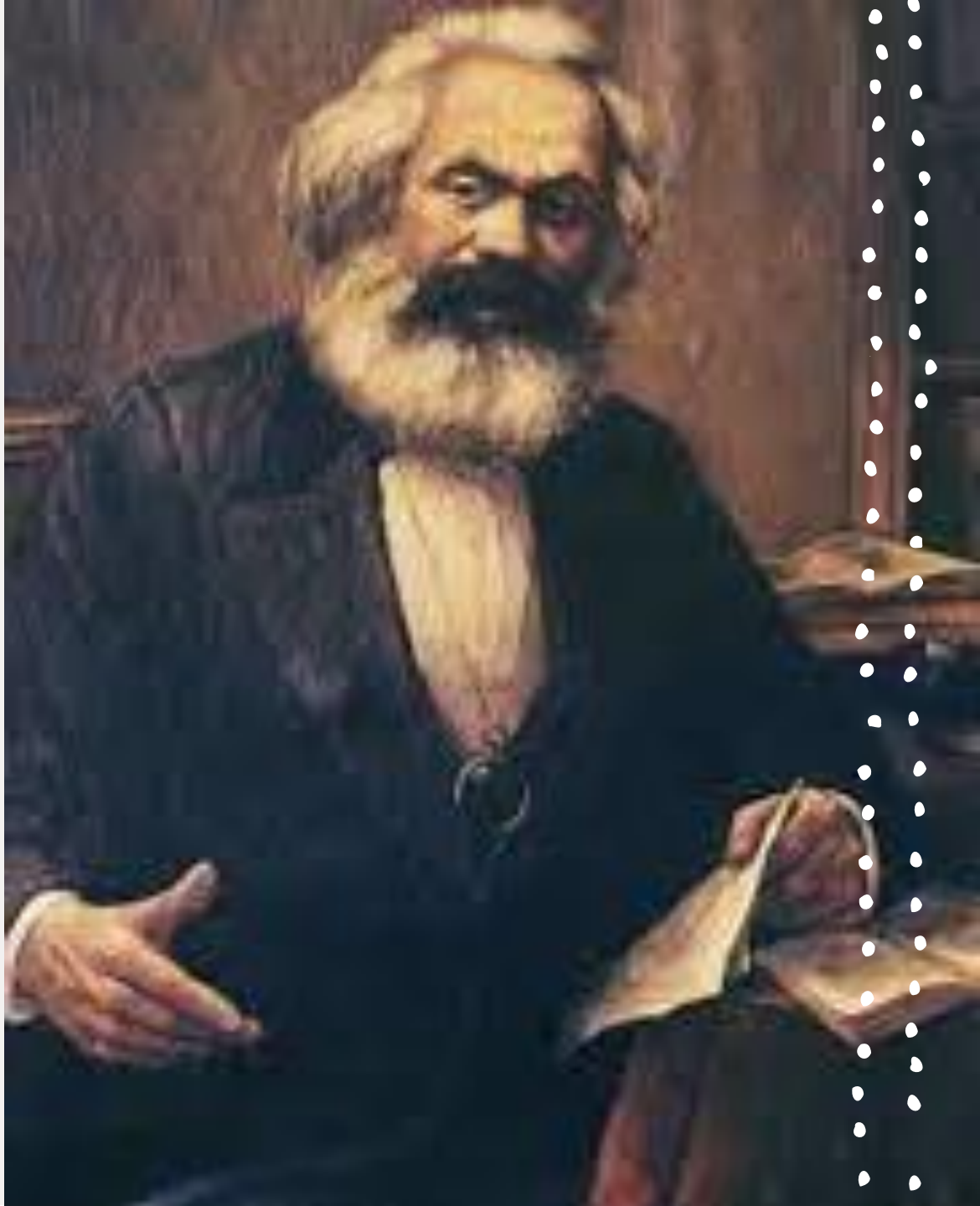
Translated from
The Russian to the English Language for the
Information of all *TRUE AMERICANS*
& to Confound Enemies of Democracy &
the *REPUBLIC also* to Demonstrate
the Possible Fulfillment of Biblical
Prophecy as to
WORLD DOMINATION
by the
CHOSEN PEOPLE

Published by The Beckwith Company at 299
Madison Avenue, City of New York

Saccard bears those characteristics that he condemns in the Jews, and indeed the indictment of the next sentence is a prescient indicator of the crimes for which he will at the end of the novel face justice: "He indicted the whole Hebrew race, the cursed race without a country, without a prince, which lives as a parasite upon the nations, pretending to recognize their laws, but in reality only obeying its Jehovah – its God of robbery, blood and wrath; and he pointed to it fulfilling on all sides the mission of ferocious conquest which this God has assigned to it, establishing itself among every people, like a spider in the centre of its web, in order to watch its prey, to suck the blood of one and all, to fatten itself by devouring others".

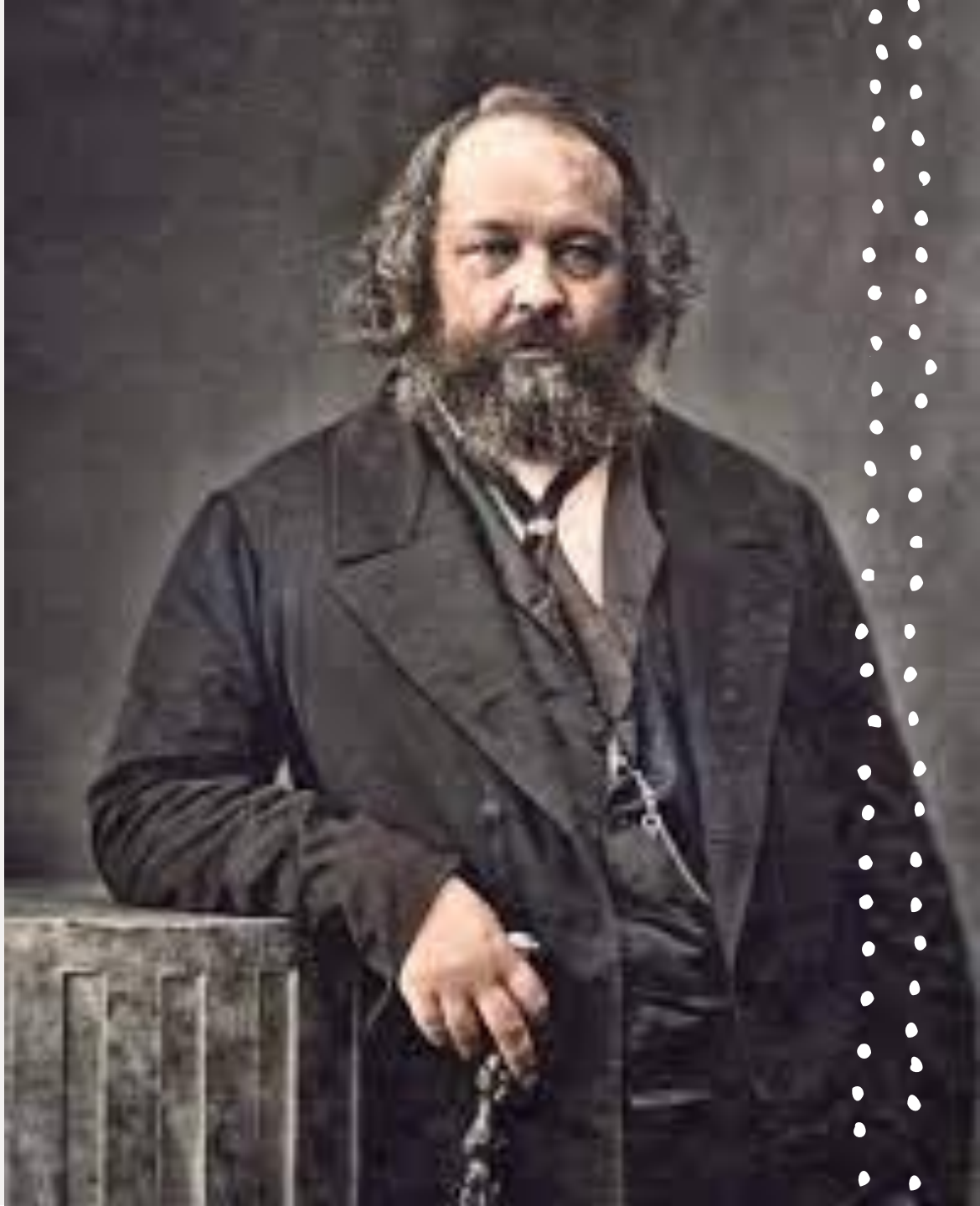
Sigismond Busch was educated in the German universities and, a cosmopolitan figure who spoke German, English and Russian, he had met Marx himself at Cologne in 1849 and become thereafter a distinguished contributor to the *New Rhenish Gazette*:

> From that moment his religion had been fixed; he professed Socialism with an ardent faith, giving his entire being to the idea of an approaching social renovation, which would assure the happiness of the poor and the humble. Since his master, banished from Germany, and forced to leave Paris after the days of June, had been living in London, writing and trying to organize the party, Sigismond, on his side, had vegetated in his dreams, so careless as to his material life that he would surely have perished of hunger had his brother not taken him to life with him in the Rue Feydeau, near the Bourse, with the idea that he might utilize his knowledge of languages as a professional translator.

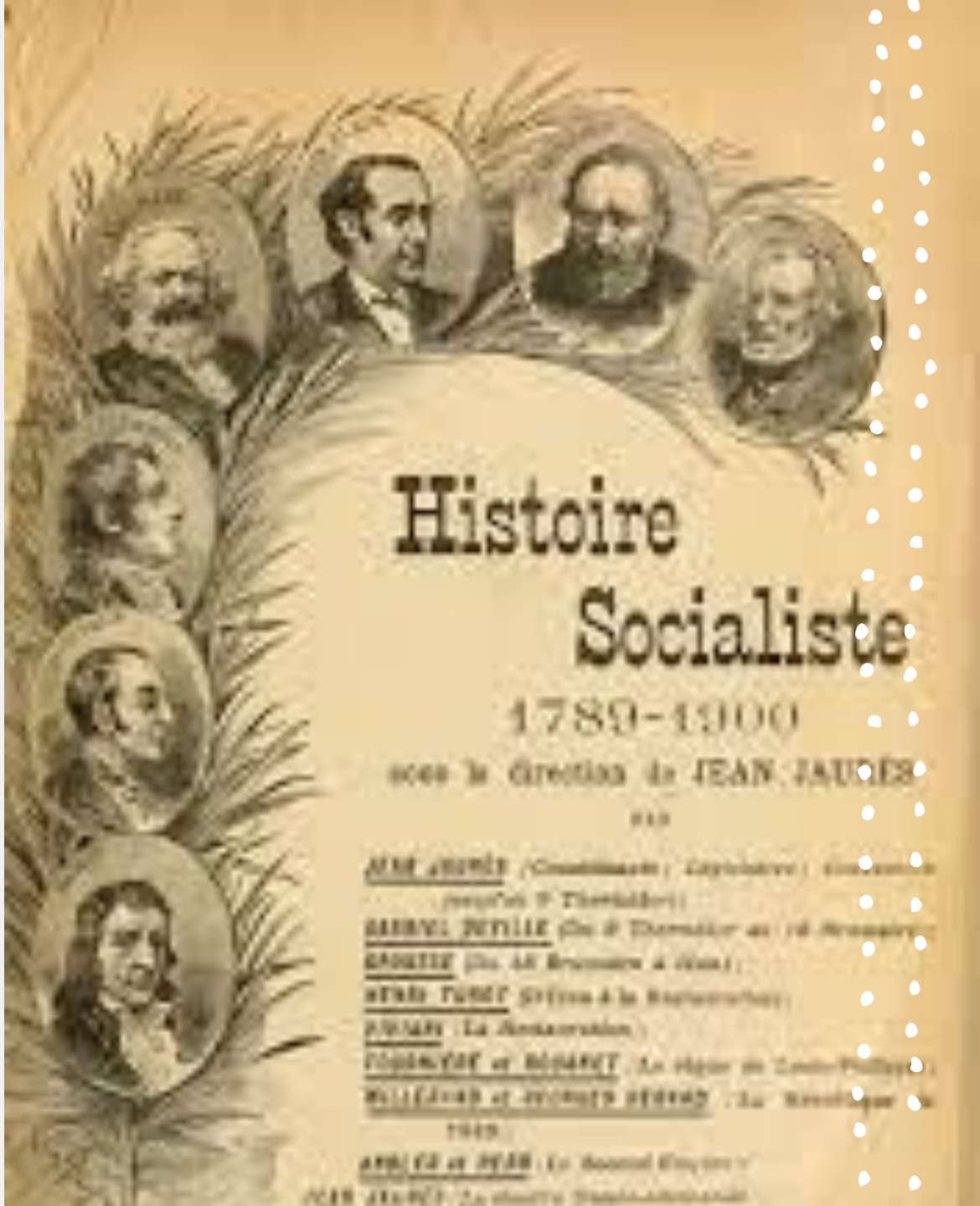


The passages describing Sigismond's Marxism provide valuable occasion to both vaunt Marxism as an alternative, and critique it for its inadequacies:

> Imagine a society in which the instruments of production will be the property of all, in which everybody will work according to his intelligence and strength, and in which the products of this social co-operation will be distributed to each in proportion to his effort! There can be nothing more simple, eh? Common production in the factories, yards, and workshops of the nation! Then an exchange, a payment in kind! If there should be overproduction, the surplus will be lodged in public warehouses, from which it will be taken to fill up any deficits that may arise. One will have to strike a balance. And this, like one blow of an axe, will fell the rotten tree.



“The existing social system certainly owes its centuries of prosperity to the individualist principle, which emulation and personal interest endow with a fertility of production that is ever being renewed. Will collectivism ever attain to such fertility, and by what means are we to stimulate he productive functions of the workman when the idea of profit shall have been destroyed? There, to my mind, lies the doubt, the anguish, the weak point over which we must fight, if we wish the victory of Socialism to be some day won.”



Trains!

PUBLIE
LA BÊTE HUMAINE
GRAND
ROMAN INÉDIT
15c LE No

JEAN
GABIN
SIMONE
SIMON
dans
un Film de
JEAN RENOIR
LA BÊTE HUMAINE
d'après l'oeuvre
Avec
Fernand LEDOUX

LA BÊTE HUMAINE

When the Republic replaced the monarchy in 1848, 2000 miles of track were in operation but the situation was highly unsatisfactory. Three dozen companies were in operation, most of them with incomplete lines that sharply limited traffic. Financially, most were in great distress. Moving passengers are freight from one plane to another was quite difficult, and everyone called for radical reforms but no legislation was passed.

The expectation that the government would eventually nationalize the rail system formed another important element in French railway legislation. The original agreement of 1842 leased the railway lines to railway companies for only 36 years. Napoleon III extended these leases to 99 years soon after he came to power. That the rail companies only operated on leases paved the way for the nationalization of the French rail lines under the socialist government of the 1930s.

Napoleon III amalgamated all the companies along specific routes; by 1857 the consolidation was complete, and the government was no longer operating any lines. All the trunk lines were interconnected. The original plan of using Paris as a hub was continued, so that long-distance travel from one place to another necessitated connecting to another line in Paris. The original vision from 1842 of a grant national network was largely realized. The system was virtually complete by 1870,

Napoleon III placed great emphasis on economic growth and modernization, with special attention to infrastructure and construction of railways, as well as coal and iron establishments He also stimulated French banking, completion of the telegraph system and subsidization of steamship lines. Railways were given priority over canals and local roads.

The state built most of the railway system and invited private companies to operate the lines under leases of up to 99 years. They were publicly owned but privately operated. The state guaranteed the dividends of the railway operating companies, and in exchange took two-thirds of any greater profits. The financing involved stretched the private banking sector to its limit, and was greatly augmented by the introduction of the 300 franc bond, which enabled large numbers of middle-class Frenchmen to invest easily in the economic expansion.

M. Claude Monet has the most distinctive personality of the [Impressionists]. He has exhibited this year some superb interiors of the railway station. One can hear the roaring of the trains which are swallowed up in the overflowing smoke, rolling under the vast hangars. . . . Our artists ought to find poetry in the stations as their fathers found it in the forests and fields.

E. Zola, "Une exposition: les peintres impressionistes," April 1877.

In his novel *La Bete Humaine*, Zola moves the train from the sphere of the familiar and mundane to something very close to that of the supernatural and heroic. He does this partly through the use of a technique borrowed from the Impressionists and specifically from Monet: a series of sketches of the railway -- the engines, the station, the switching yards -- where the time of day and the perspective shift subtly but significantly.

Zola uses the sketches as much more germane to the plot and to the theme of his novel. Furthermore, Zola begins with a series of naturalistic sketches of the railway, moves to some studies midway through his novel of the engine in snow that are both bizarre and haunting, and concludes with a portrait of an engine careening across the countryside that is radically different in tone and technique from the earlier sketches which owe much to Monet. In the later ones, Zola, "like his friend Cezanne," goes beyond "the liberating conquest of impressionism".

Zola's involvement in the art world is well-known: his boyhood friendship with Cezanne in Aix-en-Provence and later in Paris; his membership in the Cafe Guerbois crowd that included at one time or another Manet, Monet, Degas, Renoir; his art criticism -- his Salon critiques, his articles on Manet and Courbet, his early support of Manet and the Impressionists; his novel *L'Oeuvre* on art and artists that was partly responsible for the rupture in his and Cezanne's friendship. Zola was, as he himself liked to point out, one of the first to recognize the genius of Manet before they had ever met. He was an early admirer of Monet, and his use of techniques borrowed from his artist friends and col? leagues is less discussed, partly, of course, because of the suspect nature of any criticism that attempts to parallel literary with painting styles and of the inherent dangers in such terms as Naturalism and Impressionism. Zola himself, however, boasted that he had not only supported the Impressionists, he had translated them into literature.

Although Zola's interest in the railway predates the Gare St. Lazare paintings, Monet's series may have been a catalyst for Zola to write his train novel. In1877, the year Monet exhibited the first four Gare St. Lazare paintings, Zola said he meant to write a novel on "a network of the railway." That year he moved to Medan where he watched and photographed trains from his window, as Monet did later at Giverny.

Zola's father, an Italian emigre, was an engineer and from 1821 to 1824 had been involved in the construction of the first railway line in continental Europe, that between Linz and Gmunden in Austria, three years before the first French line opened. Zola from boyhood had been fascinated with trains, and he told Paul Alexis in 1882 that railways were one of the two projects that he particularly held in his heart. He said that he wished to "render vividly and concretely the perpetual movement of a great line between two colossal gares, with intermediary stations, rising tracks, and descending tracks. And I wish to make all the unique population of the railways come alive."

A drawing of Bismarck conversing with Napoleon III after the latter's capture in the Battle of Sedan on September 2, 1870.

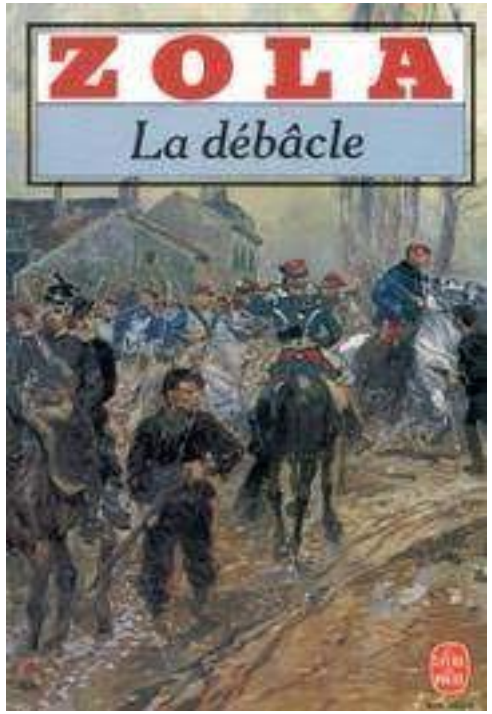
In 1870, on the tenuous pretext of opposing a Hohenzollern appointment to the throne of Spain, the French Empire declared war on Prussia, beginning the Franco-Prussian War.

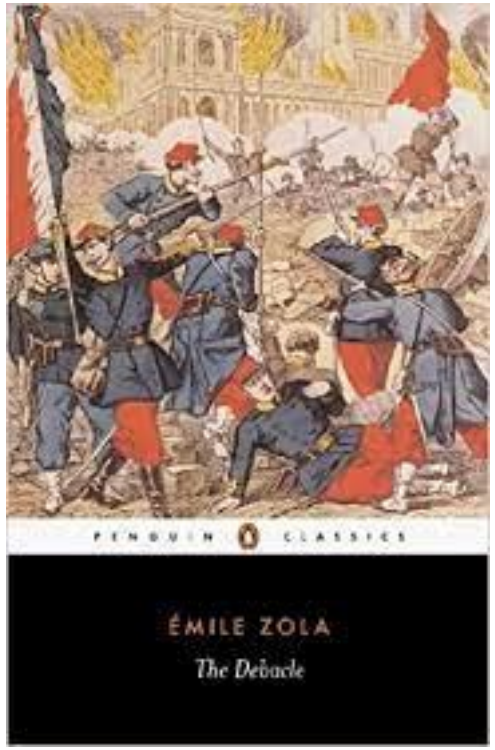
Throughout the 1860s, Prussia had built a modern, mobile army under the steady leadership of von Moltke and Albrecht von Roon, and whatever challenges remained in its development were solved during the war with Austria four years earlier. Now, the Prussians and their German allies stormed into France at the head of a remarkably modern military. The French suffered a staggering series of defeats until, on September 2, 1870, the French army was routed at the Battle of Sedan, and Napoleon III himself was captured. Two days later, the French parliament deposed him and declared the Third Republic.

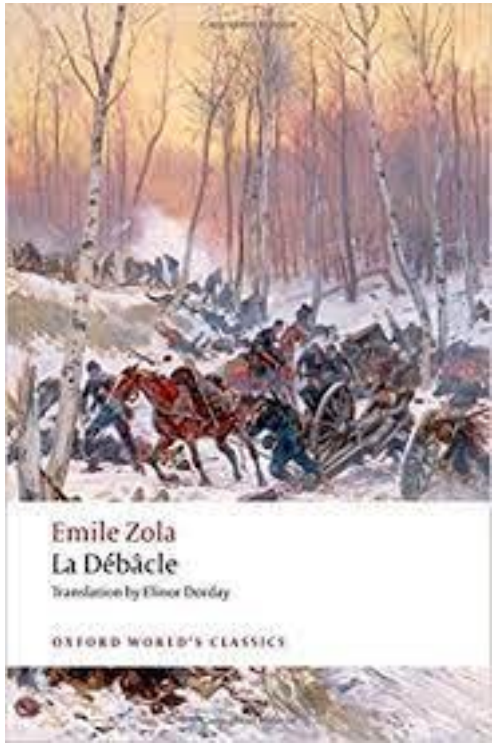
Siege of Paris (1870-1871)

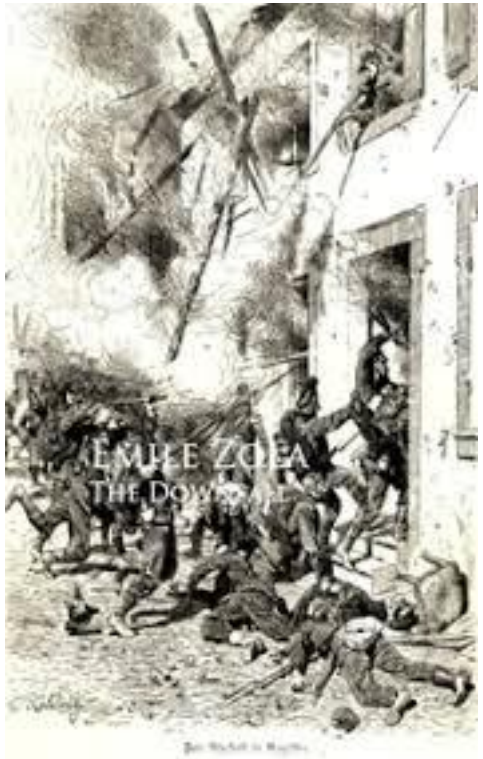
After Sedan, Paris held out under siege for several months, leading to many more deaths and a great deal of destruction. The treaty that finally ended the war awarded Prussia the French provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. Using the prevailing German nationalist feelings to his advantage, Bismarck formalized the establishment of the German Empire, which was officially declared in the occupied Palace of Versailles, further diminishing France as the Continent's leading military power.

Defeated and deposed, and having led his country to ruin, Napoleon III went into exile in Britain. He died there on January 9, 1873. He is buried in Saint Michael's Abbey, in Farnborough, Hampshire, England, along with his wife, and his son who died while serving with the British Army in the Boer War.


ZOLA
La débâcle


PENGUIN CLASSICS
ÉMILE ZOLA
The Debacle


Emile Zola
La Débâcle
Translation by Elinor Dorday
OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS


EMILE ZOLA