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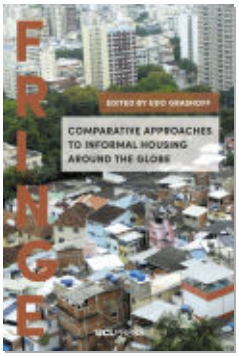

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9

Shanty settlements in nineteenth-century Europe: Lessons from comparison with Africa

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9.1 Introduction

From the beginning of the Industrial Revolution to the early twentieth century, urban centres in Europe faced housing shortages, slum conditions, informal settlements with shanty/shack dwellings and overcrowding.[1] These are very much like the conditions in most African cities today. Similarities between urban housing conditions in the two continents lend themselves to cross-century exploratory comparison. This chapter seeks to look across time and space, to draw lessons from the past and find solutions to some of the current challenges associated with informal urban housing globally.

The discussion of the severe housing problems that European cities experienced from the beginning of the Industrial Revolution to the early twentieth century focuses on self-built shanty dwellings and informal settlements at the urban margins of Berlin and Paris. These foreshadowed present-day housing conditions in African countries. As the comparison will show, the solutions to the housing crisis that was manifest through shanty settlements in Europe over a hundred years ago are largely similar to those currently applied in Africa. Interventions in Africa are, to a large extent, shaped by the modernist approach emerging from European countries. The following historical comparison across different periods explores similarities and differences, and raises some questions regarding current housing policies in Africa.

9.2 Berlin's history of shanty settlements

In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the population of Berlin grew at a high rate, increasing by around 57 per cent between 1860 and 1869. Around 20,000 people arrived in Berlin every year in the early 1870s to seize economic opportunities in the industrialising city.[2] This growth rate was then the fastest in Europe.[3] But the city was not only growing due to industrialisation: it was becoming international. Berlin went from having been the capital of Prussia since 1701 to becoming capital of the unified German States in 1871, with aspirations to achieve a level of 'global competitiveness' on a par with that of cities such as London and Paris.[4]

In view of massive rural–urban and international migration, new housing construction could not keep up with demand from the increasing number of migrants. At one instance during this period, around 15,000 people were recorded as homeless.[5] Dwelling in the unsanitary overcrowded tenements in the central parts of the city was a living nightmare. According to the 1867 census, city-dwellers often lived in cramped conditions; for example, over 20 people were found sharing a single room, and they had to alternate sleeping shifts.[6] There was insufficient decent housing, and what was available was unaffordable.[7] Poor Berlin residents were therefore forced to live in self-built settlements on the edge – outside the city's historic walls. The shanty towns at times referred to as *Barrackenstadt* or *Hüttendörfer*, were established on vacant publicly owned land towards Berlin's south – in areas that are today part of the Kreuzberg borough – and to the east in Frankfurter, Landsberger and Tempelhofer Feld.[8]

In 1872, in the Kreuzberg area, 163 families were living in a settlement of tents outside Kottbuser Tor.[9] In May of that year, another settlement contained 92 families living in 52 dwellings; but by late September 1872, it had grown to a population of nearly 2,000,[10] making it one of the largest shanty towns in Berlin. Built three decades later, in around 1903, the 'cascade village' provides another example. The small area contained shanties built and inhabited by construction workers who were mostly Italian and Polish immigrants.[11] The dwellings were constructed from scrap materials such as discarded wood and metal components, old furniture (see Figure 9.1) and even 'overturned rowboats, abandoned train cars, rafts, and omnibuses'.[12] This form of shelter was neither durable nor structurally stable enough to protect dwellers from inclement weather conditions in summer or winter. A local newspaper described the dwellings as 'shabby and miserably constructed wood huts'.[13]

Figure 9.1 Image from: Georg Koch, 'Die Baracken der Obdachlosen in Berlin', *Über Land und Meer* 46 (1872). © Wikipedia Commons.

Notwithstanding the physical inadequacies of dwellings in these settlements, they mirrored their environment in several respects. Shack-dwellers used local material, and they also reproduced the social and cultural norms of the country. Life in these settlements was 'traditional German family life – the productive, employed nuclear family living in a freestanding single-family house'.[14] The surroundings were surprisingly clean. A semblance of order seems to be apparent in the layout of the sprawling shanty towns. Each dwelling unit, with its yard, was neatly demarcated, separated by twine fences, rope lines or any other suitable material. Utilities such as a stove or water point were located outside the dwellings and shared (see Figure 9.1). Internal walls were decorated in bright paint and the windows with flower boxes. The curtilage (space around the dwellings) was cultivated as vegetable gardens by women. In what represents a demonstration of patriotism, German flags were flown above the shacks while the self-constructed streets bore nationally symbolic names.[15]

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, shanties were again prominent in Berlin thanks to its allotments. Indeed, the shanties were known as 'green slums', since fruits and vegetables were cultivated in the gardens (see Figure 9.2).[16] That is, spaces meant to serve as allotments were developed with unapproved, self-built dwellings – one of the

Figure 9.2 Shacks in the Marienthal allotment (now Mariengrund) on Südostallee, Treptow district, 1912. © Landesarchiv Berlin.

self-help actions taken to address housing problems in the city. They were under-serviced – water, which was sourced from wells, was inadequate, and connection to electricity was also partial. Outdoor toilets, with soakaways, made up for the absence of proper sewerage.

The history of allotment-type gardens in Germany dates back to the 1860s, when Moritz Schreber planted gardens on land leased by the city of Leipzig.[17] This practice spread to Berlin, where living in allotments started in around 1900. At its peak in the 1930s, after the First World War and the subsequent global economic crisis (1929–1933), allotments with shanties covered a total of approximately 6.200 hectares and accommodated around 120,000 persons (representing 2.8 per cent of Berlin's population), based on the 1933 census.[18] They provided housing for poor Berliners (working and retired) as well as Communists and Jews experiencing discrimination and persecution, particularly after Hitler's rise to power.

Although informally planned, the layout of the allotment shanties was patterned. Construction materials used for the allotment shanties were generally not dissimilar from those used in the nineteenth century for shanty towns located at the city's periphery, but they also incorporated new features. The allotment sites included, for example, old railway carriages extended to achieve larger homes (see Figure 9.3). Some accommodated home-based enterprises such as foodstores and bakeries operated by entrepreneurial residents.

Shanty settlements existed only temporarily in Berlin. In most cases, the state intervened rigorously. For instance, in the late summer of 1872, after existing for a few months, shacks within some settlements were

Figure 9.3 Railway car dwelling in Berlin, 1930. © Landesarchiv Berlin.

cleared and the residents forcefully removed under police supervision.[19] Soon, the periphery land they had occupied was taken up by the city's expansion beyond the former walls.[20] The Hobrecht Plan of 1862 set the framework for Berlin's urban development. Implementation of this plan influenced housing interventions during this period. Contemporaries criticised it as authoritarian, partly due to its policies of tearing down shacks and clearing the settlements.[21]

By contrast, the allotment shanties from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century were tolerated in the short term. In exceptional situations, *in situ* upgrading or incremental consolidation of allotment shanties were permitted in the 1930s. Individual households in the allotment shanties purchased the land, while 'the city lifted the building ban and established the area as a residential neighbourhood'.[22] This intervention approach had limited application and was discontinued after the Second World War.

Eventually, most of the allotment shanties were cleared, based on the prevailing school of thought that the 'formally planned city was the future, and self-built homes represented residues of undeveloped past'.[23] Modernist multi-storey housing blocks, including Walter Gropius' Gropiusstadt in Neukölln, replaced many of the shanties. From accommodating about 3 per cent of Berlin's population in the 1930s, only 0.2 per cent of the city's inhabitants lived in the allotment shanties by 1982.

9.3 Shanty towns in a growing Paris

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Paris grew rapidly as migrants poured in to seize opportunities in the booming industries.[24] The number of inhabitants increased by 510,000 between 1851 and 1892 alone, with migration responsible for over half of this growth.[25] By 1901, the population of the French capital had more than doubled compared to 1851. The new arrivals came in search of employment in the industries, and in the meantime survived through menial or odd jobs. Of note among the casual jobs was the 'ragpicking' trade.[26] One conservative estimate is that at least 9,000 individuals were working as ragpickers in Paris towards the end of the nineteenth century.[27]

The increasing population led to a housing crisis, which mostly affected the working poor and under-employed. The low-income class lived in the central part of the city, in overcrowded unsanitary, warren-like, old townhouses.[28] These were 'subdivided abandoned homes … [where] the rooms were continually divided; floors were sometimes added, creating six-foot ceilings. Stairs were often nothing more than ladders. Water was only available in the streets; few had cesspools'.[29] Poorer families were pushed out to the city's periphery, particularly towards the north and close to industrial sites beyond the 1844 city wall fortifications.[30]

According to one contemporary writer, they searched for vast open land on the edge of Paris and 'as soon as one discovered a home or a site available for rent, all the others came to visit and quickly formed a settlement, a clan, a family'.[31] Historian Alain Faure tells how 'owners of vacant sites would divide the area into lots on which the tenants constructed their homes' (see Figure 9.4), 'leading to unusual urban landscapes that featured stark geometric constructions assembled from disparate elements forming curious combinations'.[32] During this period, up to 269 shanty-like settlements were counted in Paris.[33] *La Zone*, located on land extending 250 metres beyond the historic city wall fortifications, was a popular settlement on the periphery (see Figure 9.5).[34] *Cité Dorée* is another example. It was colonised by a group of ragpickers in 1849 and, just two years later, had 270 inhabitants.[35]

Dwellings in the shanty settlements were fashioned from materials such as planks, tar paper, tree trunks and thatch roofs.[36] The outdoor areas of neighbourhoods inhabited by ragpickers were, at times, filled with the sorted or soon-to-be-sorted proceeds of daily scavenging (see Figure 9.6). Order was largely absent, and reports of knife fights, drunkenness, robbery and mob justice were rife. The settlements lacked water,[37] and the sanitary and social conditions were a source of concern.

Figure 9.4 Shanty town awaiting redevelopment, Rue de la Champlain, late 1850s. © Wikipedia Commons.

Figure 9.5 View of *La Zone* near Saint-Ouen. From bottom to top, one sees the trench of the fortifications, the barren land of the zone and the shanty towns pushed up against the city limits. © Wikipedia Commons.

Urban historian Spiro Kostof described the settlements as 'squalid belts of privately owned shanties'.[38] In 1867, Edwin Chadwick, a leading hygienist, claimed that air pollution associated with these living conditions over time had killed more people than the sword in the whole of Paris.[39]

Figure 9.6 The Zone, Porte d'Ivry, *chiffonier* (ragpicker), 1912, Gallica. Original photograph by Eugène Atget. © Wikipedia Commons.

Under the autocratic regime of Napoleon III as Emperor, the modern city concept for Paris developed by the *Musée Social* reformers (which notably included Baron Haussmann) proposed the elimination of these settlements. As a result, the shanty settlements began to decline. From the 1880s, they were demolished and gradually replaced with new housing, roads and public spaces for recreation and leisure activities. For instance, as part of the official campaign by the *Musée Social*'s new 'Section on Urban and Rural Hygiene', it was proposed that shanty towns of *La Zone* be replaced with a ring of public parks and playing fields by 1908.[40] In 1879, photographer Charles-François Marville (1813–1879) depicts the gradual replacement and (re)development process in the city, noting 'a shanty town, and in the distance is new Paris … [an] evocative presentation of the emergence of two cities: bourgeois Paris and the poor *banlieue*'.[41]

By the 1930s, up to 40,000 new modern housing units had replaced some of the shanty settlements.[42] Between 1923 and 1933, no fewer than 120,000 units of social housing (*habitation bon marché*) had been built by local authorities in Paris.[43] This, however, did not mark the end of informal settlements in Paris. After the Second World War, migrant squatting again became prominent. Housing scarcity led migrants to establish settlements on the outskirts of Paris and other French cities.[44] More recently, Roma migrants have set up shanty settlements in Paris, taking up vacant land and spaces (such as buffer zone for bridges, motorways and train lines) for flimsy self-built dwellings.

9.4 Informal settlements in Nairobi

A high rate of urbanisation, skewed land distribution, urban inequality and a legacy of racial segregation in the colonial and post-colonial era all led to the emergence of informal settlements in Kenyan cities.[45] While informal housing was a marginal phenomenon in Europe, it is a key feature of many African cities. About 2.5 million people, approximately half the population, are estimated to live in over 100 areas regarded as slums in Nairobi, Kenya's capital city.[46] These informal neighbourhoods are dense. The combined area amounts to only about 6 per cent of the city's land. Over 50 per cent of buildings in the informal settlements occupy less than 103 m^2, at an average density of 39 buildings per hectare.[47]

Kenya's iconic informal settlement *Kibera* is Nairobi's largest. In 2009, it was home to 178,264 persons living in around 13 'villages' located on 110 hectares of land.[48] Kibera is characterised by bungalows and rows of overcrowded single-storey rooms made of wattle, daub and corrugated iron sheets, along narrow paths serving as drainage channels (see Figure 9.7). In some cases, the dwellings are made from concrete, while some walls are plastered with mortar. It is underserviced – access to water, sanitation, electricity, waste collection and social amenities is absent or inadequate – and the residents live in extreme poverty.[49]

Improving poor conditions within this and other settlements has been of interest to different stakeholders. A summary of notable measures taken in the past, mainly by the state, to improve Kibera (from the pre-independence era to recent times) is presented in Figure 9.8. The trajectory of partial and/or comprehensive intervention in Kibera is based on the *eliminate* (through eviction and clearance) + *redevelop approach*. Across different phases through the 1970s, new housing (such as the Fort Jesus Scheme, the Olympic Estate and the Eyang Estate) was developed on cleared Kibera land. In 2011, around 1,200 households from Soweto-East in Kibera were relocated to two-bedroom units in blocks of flats located in the Langata area of the settlement (see again Figure 9.7). More recently, 822 housing units in 21 blocks of four-storey buildings with 245 market stalls, costing 2.9 billion Kenyan shillings, have also been completed in Soweto. The Kenyan government plans to develop over 3,500 additional units on cleared parts of Kibera over the next few years.[50]

The 'elimination of slums' in Nairobi is driven by a modernist agenda and an urban competitiveness vision 'to be a world class business setting, recognised nationally, regionally and globally', as expressed in the Ministry of Nairobi 2008 Metropolitan Development Plan. To support the country's long-term development (the premise of Kenya Vision 2030),

Figure 9.7 View of Kibera settlement showing the shanty dwellings and recently developed housing units in the background. © Olumuviwa Adegun, 2012.

1930s–1940s	• Attempts by the colonial government to relocate the growing settlement failed. The residents were averse to relocation
1950s	• Plans by the national government to formalise Kibera (implementing municipal ordinances) were objected to by the Nairobi City Council
1960s	• National government built 5 model houses in 1961, 52 in 1966 and 36 in 1967
1970s	• Fort Jesus Scheme was constructed in 1970;New Kibera Village in 1972; Olympic Estate in 1973 and Ayang Housing Estate (1977 to 1981)
1990s	• Phase I and II of high-rise flats were constructed in 1991 and 1994
2000	• First comprehensive initiative announced; involved partnership between national government and UN-Habitat
October 2004	• Launch of Kibera-Soweto housing construction
2009	• Completion and relocation of 5,000 residents to Langata Decanting site (600 housing units)
July 2016	• Approx. 700 residents relocated to the 822 Kibera-Soweto housing units completed earlier in 2015

Figure 9.8 Notable milestones of intervention in Kibera settlement. © Olumuviwa Adegun.

the government is attempting to implement slum prevention nationally and aspires to the 'production of 200,000 housing units annually'.[51]

9.5 Informal settlements in Johannesburg

Informal settlements are just one of the features evidencing the urban inequality and housing crisis in South Africa – problems attributable to apartheid and increasing poverty in the post-apartheid era. Statistics from South Africa's Household Survey show that 13.9 per cent of households, nationally, lived in informal dwellings as at 2016.[52] In Johannesburg, South Africa's largest urban agglomeration, there are informal settlements providing accommodation for 109,949 low-income households, approximately 10 per cent of the city's total households.[53] These settlements are established in urban or peri-urban locations without official approval and are often named after symbolic national/international events or political actors. They are generally characterised by poor access to basic services and social amenities, uncontrolled population densities, inadequate infrastructure and lack of effective administration by the municipality.

State-led housing intervention for people living in informal settlements involves the relocation of qualifying households to new subsidised houses on a serviced plot in newly established areas, often referred to as townships. This is a product-driven approach that first emerged in 1994 as part of the post-apartheid housing policy. It was initially construed as a means to redress the historical disadvantage that poor households living in urban and peri-urban informal settlements experienced during apartheid. Available statistics show that over 2.7 million households, mostly from informal settlements, are currently living in such post-1994 subsidised houses.[54]

9.6 From Europe to Africa: Similarities, differences and emerging questions in the realm of informal settlements

This chapter has illustrated some of the inherent similarities and differences between settlements in different historical periods in Paris, Berlin, Johannesburg and Nairobi.

A most striking example of similarity is that of the materials used to construct the dwellings across the four contexts. The self-constructed shacks are generally made from recycled scrap materials, discarded furniture, waste components and disused vehicles (such as old, non-working caravans) often sourced from the formal and well-off areas of the city. Given the kind of materials used, the construction methods are rudimentary. Contrasts prevail between order and disorder in the layout of the settlements across all four of the contexts examined here, as this appears to be peculiar to individual settlements. Berlin settlements were largely orderly, while Paris settlements were not. Within Johannesburg, some settlements or parts of it are well laid-out, while others are not. This dualism, though subject to specific circumstances, is common to most informal settlements in African cities.

The use of local materials is not the only thing indicating that these settlements are 'home-grown'. Though these sites are regarded as unlawful and informal, life within the shanty towns is reflective; they are influenced by, and instrumental to, the expression of national customs and mentality. For instance, signs of an intrinsic nationalism can be observed in different shanty settlements, such as flags on dwellings, street names in Berlin and politically significant names in South Africa. Another similarity of informal settlements in Europe and Africa is the general practice of a communal lifestyle, reflected in the sharing of utilities between households.

Significant differences also exist. Although there was a similarly high rate of urbanisation in nineteenth-century European cities and present-day Africa, the completely different scale and size of the informal settlements within the growing cities make a world of difference. In Berlin or Paris in the nineteenth century, there is no evidence that any single settlement had more than 5,000 residents. The shanty settlements that existed in European cities were relatively small. By contrast, most major shanty settlements in Nairobi, Johannesburg and many other African countries contain thousands of residents. Nairobi's Kibera settlement contains over 178,264 persons, Johannesburg's Kya Sands settlement accommodates over 16,000 persons and Cape Town's Joe Slovo had a population of over 20,000. The figures are similar for other cities in Africa.

There are also differences in terms of temporality and broader contexts. It seems that shanty settlements did appear, on and off, in European cities, but they were dismantled quite quickly. Interventions were made to eradicate the informal settlements, remove the dwellings and discourage squatting. Shanty settlements in Africa, by contrast, are more permanent. They often emerge through land invasion for temporary accommodation,

but, given the slow pace of formalisation, *in situ* upgrading and formal housing delivery, these informal modes of housing persist for so long that they become permanent. The macro-economic environments in the two contexts also differ. The nineteenth-century European situation was that of rapid urbanisation marked by industrialisation, which led to economic growth and rising standards of living. In Africa, the high rate of urbanisation has not been accompanied by comparable industrialisation, economic growth or, more importantly, equitable distribution of wealth. This might be one explanation for the relative permanence of shanty settlements in African cities.

Despite important differences, African cities' responses and patterns of intervention in informal settlements are strongly influenced by, or even modelled on, Europe's trajectory of intervention. Colonisation played a strong role in the transfer of European urban planning and informal-settlement intervention ideas to Africa. Scholars have consistently argued that 'current international policies addressing the African city are situated in a longer history going back to the colonial period', imbued with an assertion of European civilising supremacy in terms of a modern developmental approach.[55]

Modernist city planning, which emerged in response to negative corollaries of urbanisation and industrialisation in Paris and Berlin from the late nineteenth century, involved the eradication of informal settlements and massive development of multiple housing units. The same policy is implemented in Africa, as the examples from Nairobi and Johannesburg show. Informal settlements are being demolished, at times through violent forced evictions, by governments in pursuit of modernist city visions emerging from European urban planning traditions. This approach also gained traction in response to initiatives such as 'Cities without Slums' led by Cities Alliance, set up by a coalition of World Bank and UN-Habitat. Echoing criticisms of this approach, Vanessa Watson described these visions as 'urban fantasies' that often attempt to 'sweep the poor away' from the city.[56]

With an eye to the differences between the two contexts – Europe then and Africa now – the comparison raises questions about the transfer of modernist housing solutions for informal settlements. These differences serve as a basis for argument against a transfer of the modernist paradigm. How appropriate is it, given that realities in the African context are so different from those in Europe? How plausible are historical European solutions, in the light of complex socio-economic and environmental problems experienced in the twenty-first century? The differences in terms of the physical scale of the settlements alone require

policies to be adjusted. A small, peripheral settlement can be removed easily, while a settlement on a massive scale that has persisted over time should be treated differently. In view of that, it is time for African countries to *unlearn* – to develop home-grown, incremental settlement interventions that offer alternatives to the modernist mass-housing projects. It might also be time to reverse the learning process, by generating lessons for Europe and the global North from approaches developed in Africa.

Notes

1. This chapter considers informal (or shanty) settlements as self-built forms of shelter that are unregistered, unregulated and created without official approval within cities. It uses both terms interchangeably.
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3. Elizabeth Denby, *Europe Re-Housed* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938).
4. According to Catherine Davies, 'Berlin wird Weltstadt' was coined and promoted by popular playwright David Kalisch. See Catherine Davies, 'Berlin, 1873: A New Imperial Center and a Transatlantic Financial Crisis', *Global Urban History*, 25 January 2016, last accessed 10 October 2019, https://globalurbanhistory.com/2016/01/25/berlin-1873-a-new-imperial-center-and-a-transatlantic-financial-crisis/.
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6. Marion W. Gray, 'Urban Sewage and Green Meadows: Berlin's Expansion to the South 1870–1920', *Central European History* 47, no. 2 (2014): 275.
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10. Kristin Poling, 'Shantytowns and Pioneers beyond the City Wall: Berlin's Urban Frontier in the Nineteenth Century', *Central European History* 47, no. 2 (2014): 245.
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12. Kristin Poling, 'Shantytowns and Pioneers beyond the City Wall: Berlin's Urban Frontier in the Nineteenth Century', *Central European History* 47, no. 2 (2014): 274.
13. This was reported in *Volksstaat,* a local German newspaper, in August 1872.
14. Kristin Poling, 'Shantytowns and Pioneers beyond the City Wall: Berlin's Urban Frontier in the Nineteenth Century', *Central European History* 47, no. 2 (2014): 263.
15. Kristin Poling, 'Shantytowns and Pioneers beyond the City Wall: Berlin's Urban Frontier in the Nineteenth Century', *Central European History* 47, no. 2 (2014): 274.
16. Florian Urban, 'The Hut on the Garden Plot: Informal Architecture in Twentieth-Century Berlin', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 72, no. 2 (2013):, 221.
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18. Florian Urban, 'The Hut on the Garden Plot: Informal Architecture in Twentieth-Century Berlin', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 72, no. 2 (2013): 221.
19. Kristin Poling, 'Shantytowns and Pioneers beyond the City Wall: Berlin's Urban Frontier in the Nineteenth Century', *Central European History* 47, no. 2 (2014): 274.

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25. David H. Pinkney, 'Migrations to Paris during the Second Empire', *Journal of Modern History* 25, no. 1 (1953): 12.
26. Ragpickers were also referred to, in French, as *ramaseurs* (gatherers), *chiffonniers*, *gadouilleurs*, *coureurs* or *placiers*.
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31. Alex Privat d'Anglomont, *Paris Anecdote* (Paris: A. Delahays, 1860).
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34. Peter S. Soppelsa, 'The Fragility of Modernity: Infrastructure and Everyday Life in Paris, 1870–1914' (PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 2009), 369.
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