

While conducting research on coal miners in the archives of Hérault in Southern France, historian Pierre Schill came across a box which contained the papers of Deputy Paul Vigne d'Oton. Inside were old photographs which were both nameless and undated. It was clear that they had been taken not in the South of France, but in Northern Africa during the Colonial Wars. Indeed, the images were so impressive that they stayed in Schill's mind for a long time. For this reason, he chose to accept the challenge of investigating and interpreting those sources. In so doing, he was able to reawaken and enliven the archives.

He was able to discover the name of the man who created the images was one Gaston Chereau. He was a writer for a newspaper that was popular during the Belle Époque, called *Le Matin*. Chereau had been sent at the behest of the Italian government to cover the story of an anti-Italian insurrection that was taking place in Sciara Sciat. *Le Matin* needed a second reporter on assignment in Africa because of the danger that threatened the equilibrium of Europe which subsequently led to the Balkan Wars.

Chereau arrived in Tripoli on November 26, 1911, and joined a group of French journalists. His photographs and reports of public executions were published in his own column called *The Italian-Turkish War*, which focused mainly on the need to maintain order on the Italian side. Pictures, such as those of the mutilated and even crucified corpses of Italians who had been killed by Arabs, were a clear denouncement of the rebel cause. Such images must have served as justification for Italian reprisals. Particularly shocking were the photographs entitled *Arab-Turkish Atrocities*, which focused particularly on the Italian soldiers who'd been killed by the rebels.

Chereau's report relied heavily on the rhetoric used by colonizers. The Italians are routinely depicted as bearers of civilization; freeing the backward local populations from the heavy yoke of the Turks. Such backwardness was depicted in photos of local children dressed in rags and suffering from illnesses such as cholera. Italian generosity was on display in images taken during the Arab Easter, when a gift of five hundred sheep was made to each Tripolitan family.

Such magnanimity shown to the locals did not mean that there would be forgiveness for those who committed the atrocities. Indeed, five days after the Easter gifts were distributed, those responsible for the insurrection were executed publicly. Their corpses were then put on display long enough to let it be known that justice had been served. Other images focused on the public hangings which took place in the Place du Marche. Such hangings occurred often enough that Schill referred to them as "the terror routine". His photographs made special effort to capture not only the faces of the condemned terrorists, but also those

of the children gathered to witness the hangings.

It is interesting to compare his published articles with his private correspondence, in which he shows himself to be much less of an ardent Italophile. In a letter to his wife, written on December 6th 1911, he wrote concerning the collective hanging of fourteen prisoners. He later described them to her, as “useless killings that the invader will pay for, sooner or later”. In another letter that was written shortly before his departure, he spoke clearly of the dissonance between the good image that the Italian government wanted to project even if, according himself, “everything is evil”. In another letter to his wife, he described the actions of Italian soldiers as “the exaggerations of these Italian operetta warriors who were also terrible executioners”. Clearly, his thoughts expressed privately to his wife, were able to pass the barrier of censorship that constrained the words he wrote as a journalist. In this way, it is clear how he truly felt about the executions. This part of the account concludes in January of 1912, when he left the Italian colony after the authorities refused him permission to enter visit Cyrenaica.

The second part of the book was the basis for an exhibition held at the Photographic Centre of Ile de France in 2015, entitled “To Cleave the Hardest Heart”. The exhibition took its name from a line written by Cherau to his wife while visiting the Libyan Front. He told her that he had witnessed things that would “cleave the hardest of hearts”.

This part of the book proceeds eclectically, as he relies on an interdisciplinary collection of experts who collaborated with him on the project. They gave life to an exhibition that combined the presentation of the war correspondent's archive of photographs, letters, and newspaper articles, with the works of modern performing artists, writers and visual artists. The project was conceived around the sharing of the historical primary sources between contemporary researchers and artists spanning multiple disciplines. Among the contributors were writers Jerome Ferrari and Oliver Rohe, sculptor Agnes Geoffroy and dancer-choreographer Emmanuel Eggermont. In this way, the interdisciplinary exhibition to highlight the atrocity of wars was accomplished.

What makes this book extraordinarily intriguing is the comparison between the patriotic rhetoric that permeates the articles and the private correspondences of the photographer. Schill unquestionably brought the archives to a new life, which can now awaken and enliven the conscience of any person who is willing to know more.

Share this:

- [Share](#)