Murray-Miller on Schill, 'Réveiller l'archive d'une guerre coloniale. Gaston Chérau, correspondant de guerre, 1911-1912'

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Reviewed by Gavin Murray-Miller (Cardiff University) Published on H-Empire (June, 2021) Commissioned by Gemma Masson (University of Birmingham)

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When historians approach an archive, they typically have a general idea of what they are searching for among the mass of dossiers and scattered papers that make up the raw substance of history. Yet every so often, serendipity plays a role in our rediscovery of the past. Such was the case for the French historian Pierre Schill, whose latest book, Réveiller l'Archives d'une Guerre Coloniale, offers an intimate perspective on colonial warfare as well as an interesting reflection on the sources which mediate the past. In 2008, Schill was carrying out research in the departmental archive of Hérault examining coal miner strikes in the Occitanie region. His work led him to the personal papers of Paul Vigné d'Octon, a French deputy who waged a public campaign in favor of striking workers in the early twentieth century. Sifting through Vigné's papers, Schiller accidentally uncovered a series of photos showing Arab men being sent to the gallows and bodies left to rot in the sun. These photographs dating from the Italo-Turk War of 1911-12 in Libya had made up part of an anticolonial campaign waged by Vigné on the eve of the First World War, one which had intended to lay bare the horrors of colonialism. They had been taken by Gaston Chérau, a novelist who served as a war correspondent for the popular daily Le Matin during the Libyan conflict. Schill was immediately captivated by the photos, believing that these images of an obscure colonial war fought in North Africa a century earlier contained “the fragile traces of human lives” lost to history (p. 13). Over the coming years, Schill found himself returning to the photos again and again, the images of Italian soldiers and Arab combatants becoming a haunting idée fixe.

The Italo-Turk War marked a decisive turning point for the Ottoman Empire just as much as the history of European colonialism. In 1911, Italy invaded Ottoman Libya, contravening international law in its quest to carve out a colonial empire in North Africa. The military conflict generated a swell of Pan-Islamic support for the Ottoman Empire across the Muslim world and disrupted the precarious balance of power in the Mediterranean. Despite these important repercussions, the conflict was overshadowed by larger events occurring in its immediate wake, namely the Balkan Wars and the First World War. In revisiting the Libyan conflict in Réveiller l'Archive, Schill does not seek to recapitulate the history of the Italo-Turk struggle. Nor does he claim to offer a new interpretation of these events. His book is focused on the writing and photographs of Gaston Chérau, presenting a detailed and personal account of the event through the eyes of a war correspondent. In doing so,
Schill aims to raise question on the ethics of journalism, the role of the correspondent in shaping perceptions of militarized conflicts, and the ways in which modern media construct representations of the past.

Gaston Chérau was a French writer of some repute, although he never managed to attain the coveted status of a great man of letters. In 1911, his book *Le Prison de Verre* was under consideration for the renowned Prix de Goncourt. When asked that same year whether he would be willing to travel to Tripolitania to cover the Italo-Turk War for *Le Matin*, Chérau willingly accepted, hoping that his articles would popularize his name among the public and influence the jury of the académie. The gambit never worked out. Chérau’s literary undertakings would always pale in comparison to his work as a journalist and war correspondent, which continued throughout the First World War. During the Libyan crisis, Chérau produced a number of articles that would be featured in *Le Matin* as well as other French newspapers and magazines of the day. Moreover, he documented his experience through the medium of photography, sending back photos that would accompany his stories in the French press. In revisiting the career of Chérau, Schill has drawn upon the author’s numerous writings and prints from the period in order to shed light on the diverse and interdisciplinary contexts that inform understandings of modern warfare and human atrocity.

*Réveiller l’Archive d’une Guerre Coloniale* is divided into five parts, each of which offers a different lens through which to examine the Italo-Turk conflict. In the first part, Schill has collected Chérau’s articles drafted for *Le Matin*, providing a portrait of the war correspondent in action. In addition to the restored texts produced by Chérau, the book contains facsimiles of the original columns that appeared in *Le Matin*. The second part includes over 200 photographs taken by Chérau and his colleagues between November 1911 and January 1912. In his commentary, Schill meticulously details the photographs documenting battle scenes, the punishment meted out by the Italians to natives, the impact of cholera, military operations, and scenes from Tripoli. The third section contains the letters Chérau sent back home to his wife while covering the conflict. These correspondences aim to show the “intimate register” of the war, as Schill puts it (p. 291). In the fourth section, we are given a literary *récit* written by Chérau in 1926 reflecting on his experiences. The final section propels us a century ahead to focus on an art retrospective staged in France in 2015-16 that incorporated many of Chérau’s wartime photographs and texts into the exhibition.

Chérau’s wartime journalism was, as Schill is well aware, intended to serve as propaganda for the Italian government. Chérau was largely compliant and would provide detailed accounts of the Italian soldiers he was embedded with as well as the rationale for Italian hangings and punishments against the native Arab population. In many of his reports, there is a literary quality that captures the horror and adrenaline-fueled atmosphere of a war zone. “I don’t know how anyone can live here,” he wrote in December 1912, “but I certainly know how one dies here” (p. 251). Certain articles blend aspects of reportage with aspects of travel writing popular during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some of his articles possess the flair of preeminent colonial travel writers like Flaubert or Pierre Loti, alluding to North Africa’s “dead civilization” and remarking on the “frightful dreams” that war invokes (p. 263-64). Chérau’s article and letters reflect the sensibilities of the literary Belle Époque, and his writing makes plain that Chérau was not immune to the many colonial and racial stereotypes held by Europeans in the period (p. 315). Schill makes note of the materials Chérau used in his personal correspondence, which encompassed handwritten letters as well as short accounts scribbled on postcards. The use of postcards showing scenic views of North Africa seemingly put the war at a
distance. Yet one only need flip the postcard over and read the stories of bloodshed and death to understand the “impossibility” of dissociating oneself entirely from such an environment (p. 295).

While Schill presents Chérau’s writing in an unexpurgated form, he is not uncritical when discussing his journalistic and epistolary works. In various sections he explores themes such as the construction of narrative through photography and the agency of the war correspondent who, as Schill notes, is often “left in the shadow” of the events and victims on which they report (p. 17). Throughout, it is evident that Chérau was clearly concerned with the ethics and functions of the journalist. In one letter he states, “I want to be only an impartial spectator.... I speak only for things I’ve seen and heard” (p. 261). Despite his claims to simply “record” and present objective truth, Schill notes that Chérau was encamped with the Italians and the Italian Ministry expected him to corroborate its accounts of Ottoman savagery and brutality. In fact, the Italians made use of his photographs to prove this point. Ironically, Paul Vigné would use these very same photos to demonstrate the contrary and would go so far as publishing images of mutilated Italian bodies and identifying them as Libyan victims of colonial aggression (pp. 381-86). Photographs could be manipulated and words twisted to fit specific political agendas, and this truism prompts Schill to speculate whether a war correspondent can assume a neutral and objective stance. As Schill makes clear, Chérau remained caught between his expressed journalistic ethics and the meanings imposed by Italian censors and later anticolonial campaigners.

The final section of the book takes the reader away from the war zone to examine the interdisciplinary uses of Chérau’s personal archive. After 2008, Schill entrusted the photos and writings to a team of artists, hoping these artifacts could be subject to a “nuanced, polyvocal, and refined” examination (p. 413). The result was an exhibition over the course of 2015-16 at the Frac Alsace and Centre Photographique d’Île de France entitled “À Fendre le Coeur le plus dur [Shattering the Impassible Heart].” The exhibition featured works by the choreographer Emmanuel Eggermont, who incorporated the photos into a dance performance entitled “Strange Fruit,” while Agnès Geoffray used Chérau’s photographs in an art installation intended to draw attention to the victims of colonialism by removing them from their colonial setting. These reconstructions of the Chérau archive presented the objects in multiple settings and attempted to transform history into a new lived experience. More broadly, the various works aimed to inscribe the victimization and afflictions of the Libyan war within a new discursive context, overcoming the spatial and temporal distances that too often mitigate compassion and suffering.

Réveiller l’Archive d’une Guerre Coloniale provides readers with a complete set of sources on the Italo-Turk conflict that will certainly be of interest to scholars working on colonialism or cultural histories of war. Schill’s critical insights also address issues of how sources are interpreted and reinterpreted within differing contexts raging from the political to the artistic. The result is an interesting and creative assessment of the war and the role of the war correspondent that takes us from the events of 1911-12 up to the contemporary period. While Schill eschews a sweeping narrative of the Libyan war, his focus on Chérau’s work does offer a very intimate picture of the events that roiled North Africa in the early twentieth century, giving readers a unique perspective that blends personal experience, reportage, and critical analysis in equal measure.

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