

“There, in the depth of any valley, on top of any mountain in the Lebanon Mountains, there are husbands, women, children, who love each other, who enjoy life and who will be massacred tomorrow, because Lord Palmerston, while travelling on the train from London to Southampton, will have said to himself: ‘Syria must rise, I need an uprising in Syria, if Syria does not rise, I am a fool.’”

François Guizot, ambassador of France in London, 1840.

A Short History

The 1841 and 1860 massacres in Mount Lebanon are forgotten chapters of the Eastern Question, a term used to describe a series of crises that swept Serbia, Greece, Egypt, Syria, Crimea and other regions of the deteriorating Ottoman Empire; also known as the ‘Sick man of Europe.’

Following a severely violent round of conflicts between the Maronites and the Druzes in 1841, Mount Lebanon was divided into two districts known as the *Qaimaqamiyyatein* “قائمقاميتين”: a northern district ruled by a Christian deputy governor and a southern district ruled by a Druze deputy governor. These districts were separated along the Beirut-Damascus road, which unsurprisingly delineated the 1975-1990 Green Line separating East and West Beirut. In 1860, a new round of violence featuring acts of ethnic cleansing occasioned a French ‘humanitarian’ military intervention.

Much ink has been spilled in attempts to explain the convoluted circumstances surrounding the 19th century rounds of civil strife in Mount Lebanon and their effects on contemporary Lebanese wars and politics. In *The Culture of Sectarianism* (2000), Usama Makdisi

relates these massacres to major changes that destabilized Mount Lebanon's relatively small 19th century society. Sectarianism, Makdisi contends, was the result of a colonially-propelled modernization of the Ottoman Empire. Makdisi states:

Long neglected by Ottoman officials as a backwater of the imperial domains, Mount Lebanon's biblical landscape appealed to foreign missionaries while its similarity to the Highlands moved British (especially Scottish) travelers, and its allegedly counterrevolutionary spirituality attracted those refugees fleeing from the secularization of France. Perceived by European powers as a mountain refuge in which they had a historical, religious, and increasingly strategic stake, nineteenth-century Mount Lebanon became the location for a host of competing armies and ideologies and for totally contradictory interpretations of the meaning of reform. This context of flux created the conditions for sectarianism to arise not as a coherent force but as a reflection of fractured identities, pulled hither and thither by the enticements and coercions of Ottoman and European power. Mount Lebanon at mid-century was a peripheral region drawn toward multiple metropolises. The European powers promoted their Christianity as a method of access to the indigenous people, while the Ottoman

state relied on the tenuous bonds of loyalty (or such that theoretically existed) of a marginal population that inhabited the fringes of the imperial imagination. In recognition of their sudden elevation to a matter of international concern, the people of Mount Lebanon actively participated in the struggle over modernity. They were as transformed as their surroundings. They took advantage of the presence of the various imperial powers by declaring themselves to be both European protégés and loyal Ottoman subjects.

In the aftermath of the 1860 massacres, a special agreement (*Règlement Organique*) between the Ottoman Empire and the European protégés of various local sects (Austria, Great Britain, France, Prussia and Russia) gave Mount Lebanon a form of autonomy by establishing the district of the *Mutasarrifate* "متصرفية" ruled by a Christian governor. Following the downfall of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, the French combined the *Mutasarrifate* with neighboring regions to create the Grand Republic of Lebanon in 1920.

Notes on the Incorporated Images

"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."

L. P. Hartley

The preceding paragraphs tell a story about the past which is familiar to Lebanese students who learn about the 19th century conflicts in their sanitized history textbooks. The archival documents reproduced in this 'documentary painting' reveal unfamiliar details about these conflicts which were omitted from the Official Lebanese history and neglected by the contemporary collective memories.

To my knowledge, few – if any – Lebanese non-specialists know about the 1860 French intervention. Coming across Jean-Adolphe Beaucé's painting while browsing the internet was quite a surprise. I tried to identify each of the painting's historical and symbolic figures, yet few things did not make sense. The depiction of a Maronite Patriarch and a Muslim Imam at the ground level, for instance, sharply contrasts with an iconic photograph in which a succeeding Patriarch and an Imam are seated on each side of the French High Commissioner Henri Gouraud during the declaration of the Grand Republic of Lebanon in 1920. Upon further research,

however, it became clear that both representations were actually faithful to the French view of religious figures during their respective time of production. The contrast between the images confirms Makdisi's argument about the 19th century colonially-propelled politicization of religious identities in Mount Lebanon. By 1920, the religious leaders become key political figures, or so the photograph suggests.

The news reports of *Le Monde Illustré* also reveal information about unfamiliar events that took place in Mount Lebanon in the summer of 1860. The pages describing Deir-el-Kamar's massacre highlight the little known role of the American missionary which presumably provided a safe haven for terrified villagers. In contrast, the derogatory language marking Édouard Lockroy's report on the French Landing in Beirut reflects the popularity of racist ideologies in Europe during that period. Nevertheless, Lockroy's note about the Christians' bafflement upon seeing Muslim (Spahi) troops among the French armed forces unveils the two-way nature of stereotyping.

Positioned side by side, *Le Monde Illustré's* reports seem like an orchestrated mobilization campaign in which news and images of

atrocities prepare the masses for a following 'humanitarian' intervention. Photography scholars such as Ariella Azoulay and Sharon Sliwinski have suggested that the circulation of atrocity images affects the civil imagination of distant spectators by raising their interest in human rights; however, the relative speed of the 1860 French intervention makes it hard for anyone to explain it as a reaction to such reports and images. The opinions of the art critic John Berger sound more plausible here. In 1972, he opined that newspaper images of atrocity "arrest" the public from questioning their governments about wars carried in their name. Apparently, regarding the pain of others is never void of political interests.

The only photographs integrated into this painting compose a panoramic view of Beirut during the late 19th century. These images were taken by Felix Bonfils, who joined the 1860 French Expedition before he became a known photographer. Yet, even in these photographs Beirut appears unfamiliar. It belongs to a past neglected by history and abandoned by memory. It belongs to a foreign country; however, they *don't* seem to do things differently there.