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GLOBAL ENVIRON MENT

A Journal of Transdisciplinary History

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Editors in chief Mauro Agnoletti and Gabriella Corona

Deserts in Environmental History

**Special issue by the Rachel Carson Center for
Environment and Society**
**edited by Andrew C. Isenberg, Katherine G. Morrissey
and Louis S. Warren**



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Contents

Deserts in Environmental History

Andrew C. Isenberg, Katherine G. Morrissey and Louis S. Warren

Abstracts 4

Introduction

Imperial Deserts – Andrew C. Isenberg, Katherine G. Morrissey and Louis S. Warren 8

Research articles

Greeks and Romans in the Sahara Desert: Ideology and Experience – Gary Reger 22

From the Divine to the Desertified: The Foundational Case of Deserts in the Middle East – Diana K. Davis 56

'A land of hardship and distress': Camels, North American Deserts and the Limits of Conquest – Andrew C. Isenberg 84

Global Imaginary of Arid Lands: Early Twentieth-Century United States Botanists in Africa – Katherine G. Morrissey and Marcus A. Burtner 102

Deserts, Capital and 'Civilisation': The Politics of Environmental Naming in Eastern Morocco, 1925–1939 – Adam Guerin 134

Cultivating Arid Soils in Libya and Brazil during World War Two: The Two-fold War between Colonial and Neo-colonial Experiences – Roberta Biasillo and Claiton Marcio da Silva 154

Dams in the Desert: An Environmental and Agricultural History of Water in Sonora, Mexico – Sterling Evans 182

From Desiccation to Global Climate Change: A History of the Desertification Narrative in the West African Sahel, 1900–2018 – Tor A. Benjaminsen and Pierre Hiernaux 206

Special feature

'Fezzan is the Siberia of Africa': Desert and Society in the Prison Memoir of Pavel Shatev (1882–1951), An Anarchist from Ottoman Macedonia – Aleksandar Shopov 237

‘Fezzan is the Siberia of Africa’: Desert and Society in the Prison Memoir of Pavel Shatev (1882– 1951), An Anarchist from Ottoman Macedonia

Aleksandar Shopov

In 1906, the 24-year-old Ottoman anarchist Pavel Shatev was moving across the Libyan Sahara, his legs in chains. Together with fifty other prisoners from Ottoman Macedonia, his caravan set out from Tripoli on 28 June, in the midst of the summer heat. It took them more than thirty days to reach the desert town of Murzuq, located near the present-day borders of Libya with Chad and Niger, where Pavel had been sentenced to spend the rest of his life. Pavel had blown up the

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French ship *Guadalquivir* in the harbour of Selanik – a major city in the Ottoman Balkans, also known as Salonica, or Solun as Pavel called it in his native language.¹ The bombing was one of a string of deadly attacks launched against the Ottoman authorities and foreign capital between 28 April and 1 May 1903 by Pavel's group of ten anarchists, who called themselves 'Gemijii' or sailors. Among the group's other targets were the Selanik branch of the Ottoman bank, which had been established by a consortium of banks from Britain and France in 1856; the postal office, where they attempted to kill the Ottoman governor; the rail tracks connecting Selanik with Istanbul; and the city's gas and water supplies. Life in Selanik was paralysed and panic ensued. Initial encouragement for the attacks had come from Russian socialists and communists living in exile in Switzerland, while funds for the dynamite were procured by members of the Macedonian liberation movement.

Born in 1882 in the mining town of Kratovo, north-western Macedonia, to a wealthy merchant family, Pavel Shatev would become one of the best-known revolutionaries from the Balkans. His prison memoir, based on the journal he kept while in Libya, was published in 1910 in Sofia, two years after his release following the general amnesty issued by the Young Turks, who in 1908 marched on Istanbul and restored the constitution. Pavel continued his revolutionary activities, and over time his politics became more socialist than anarchist.²

¹ Present-day Thessaloniki.

² In his 1934 recollections of the bombings in which he had participated, Pavel describes an argument with Manjukov, wherein Pavel claimed to have always been a socialist rather than an anarchist and said that 'anarchists were leading a wild politics', resulting in a physical fight between him and Manjukov. See Pavel Shatev, *V Makedoniia pod robstvo; Solunskoto suzakliatie (1903 g.), podgotovka i izpulnenie* (Sofia: Pechatnitsa P. Glushkov, 1934), pp. 60–61. After studying at the Law Faculty at the Université Libre in Brussels, Pavel settled just before the outbreak of World War One in Bulgaria, where, as a prominent Macedonian émigré, he helped form the VMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation) United. He collaborated with the Communist International (Cominform) and during the 1920s and 1930s lived in Vienna, Berlin and Istanbul. He also worked for the intelligence service of the Soviet Union, for which he organised an underground communication centre in Sofia during World War Two. In 1927 he had

Much has been written about Pavel's early anarchist activities and his later political and revolutionary career, particularly in Macedonia and Bulgaria, where he has been painted as a national figure or hero in competing nationalisms.³ Yet his memoir of the two years he spent in Libya has been treated as curiosity, a mere appendix to the attack in Selanik in 1903. Even outside national historiographies, Ottoman anarchists and socialists are rarely discussed in terms of their intellectual and literary worlds; they are seen more as organisers and less as thinkers or authors. Revolutionary groups such as Pavel's indeed organised numerous daring attacks against the Ottoman state and international capital in order to attract international attention and intervene in national struggles. Two well-known examples are the occupation of the Ottoman Bank in Istanbul in 1896 and the attempt to kill the Ottoman sultan in 1905 by the Armenian Revolutionary Organisation.⁴ Only cursory attention has been paid to the theoretic-

gone to Moscow to participate enthusiastically in the ten-year anniversary of the October revolution, on the invitation of the Soviet government. (Mile Mijalkov, 'Pavel Shatev i Sovetskiot razuznuvachki Centar vo Sofija vo 1940–1941 godina', in *Pavel Shatev: Vreme-Zivot-Delo (1882–1951) Prilozi od Nauchniot Sobir Odrzan vo Kratovo na 15 i 16 Mart 1992 godina vo Kratovo* (Skopje: Institut za Nacionalna Istorija – Skopje, 1996), pp. 103–11.) Captured by the fascist Bulgarian police in 1942 and put on trial, Pavel narrowly escaped the death sentence and was sentenced only to 15 years in prison. With Bulgaria capitulating before the victorious Red Army, Pavel was released in 1944 and after almost 30 years away, returned to Macedonia to participate in the formation of the country's new Socialist Republic, part of Federal Yugoslavia. However, with the split between Yugoslavia and the Comintern in 1948, Pavel once again fell foul of the authorities. Sacked in 1948 from his position as minister of justice for his support of the Soviet Union, he was forcefully relocated to the city Bitola where he died in 1951.

³ A recent book by Ilham Khuri-Makdisi notes that radical history of the Arab speaking provinces has also been incorporated into a nationalist historiographical framework. See Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism 1860–1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 8. For a critique on the study of socialism and anarchism along ethnic lines see Axel B. Çorlu, 'Anarchist and Anarchism in the Ottoman Empire 1850–1917', in Selim Karahasanoğlu and Deniz Cenk Demir (eds), *History from Below – A Tribute in Memory of Donald Quataert* (Istanbul: Bilgi University Press, 2016), pp. 553–84.

⁴ Such attacks were part of a longer chain of anarchist actions around the world that included the bombing of the police officers at Haymarket in Chicago (1886),

cal foundations upon which these groups founded their political actions.⁵ Ottoman revolutionaries are represented in a very generic sense as being moulded by western European or Russian counterparts, and certainly not as creators of their own corpus of literature, except for the publishing of journals. The neglect of Pavel's prison memoir is particularly striking since his imprisonment in Libya seems to have been a crucial, formative episode in his life; those who knew him in Bitola in the last year of his life claimed that he avoided talking about recent events and instead spoke 'most frequently ... about the past times, about his imprisonment in North Africa, in Fezzan'.⁶

This paper examines Pavel's prison memoir as a political text, in which the desert appears as a mirror of global struggles. I will argue that Pavel used the notes from his journey and imprisonment in Libya to discuss political ideas at a time when he could not make explicit references to anarchism and socialism. Indeed, the memoir's publication in 1910 followed Bulgaria's signing in 1904 of the Anti-anarchist protocol in St Petersburg.⁷ In 1907, Bulgaria also passed laws that curbed propaganda by deed (*par le fait*) such as the very acts that Pavel and his group had committed. In so doing it became one of a number of European states to prescribe heavy penalties for any act of violence undertaken by anarchists.⁸ The memoir Pavel wrote between 1908 and 1910 thus had to navigate within these new political realities across Europe and the Balkans, in which anarchists were identified as the most dangerous political element that threatened the global order.

the stabbings of the French president Carnot (1894) and of the Empress of Austria Elizabeth (1898), the assassination of the US president McKinley (1901), etc.

⁵ Fikret Adanir, 'The National Question and the Genesis and Development of Socialism in the Ottoman Empire: the Case of Macedonia', in Mete Tunçay and Erik J. Zürcher (eds), *Socialism and Nationalism in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1923* (London: British Academic Press, 1994), pp. 27–48.

⁶ Panche Mihajlov, *Pavel Shatev: Život i Delo* (Skopje: Nova Makedonija, 1991), p. 158.

⁷ Richard Bach Bensen, 'The International Campaign against Anarchist Terrorism 1880–1930s', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21 (2009): 97.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

When Pavel arrived in Bulgaria just before World War One, he seems to have been received less as an anarchist than as a national hero who had helped to bring down the Ottoman state. His prison memoir was published by the publishing house of Petar Glushkov, which had also printed various texts on the Macedonian liberation movement.⁹ Yet Pavel's observations on climate, people, economy, animals and plants in the Libyan Sahara drew from a complex worldview and conveyed political ideas beyond simply a criticism of the authoritarian Ottoman regime. The memoir contains commentaries on class oppression, animal rights and imperialism; and it engaged, albeit indirectly, with anarchist and socialist literature of the time. In an interview he gave in 1908, Pavel claimed that he had read some of the major works of anarchist literature before blowing up the French ship in the harbour of Selanik. These included Sergei Stepniak's *Underground Russia*, which details the lives of a number of Russian revolutionaries, including Peter Kropotkin, whom it describes as 'even in his writings ... still the agitator' – a description that Pavel clearly sought to embody.¹⁰ Other works that informed Pavel and his anarchist group were Kropotkin's own *The Conquest of Bread*, Jean Grave's *La société mourante et l'anarchie* and Pyotr Lavrov's *Historical Letters*.¹¹ Pavel was also almost certainly familiar with *In Russian and French Prisons*, in which Kropotkin discussed his experiences in prison in the context of a more general study of prisons as a social phenomenon. Pavel dedicates several pages in the prison memoir, particularly during his discussion of the prisons in Tripoli and Murzuq and their spatial and architectural organisation, to the mechanisms of control over the prisoners and the corruption

⁹ Pavel Shatev, *Zatochenieto v Sahara Fezan* (Sofia: Pechatnica P. Glushkov, 1910).

¹⁰ S. Stepniak, *Underground Russia: Revolutionaries Profiles and Sketches from Life* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1883), p. 91.

¹¹ Pavel had read these books as a high-school student in Selanik, as he notes in the 1908 interview. They had been sent from Switzerland, in both French and Russian, by Bulgarian immigrant comrades; see Pavel Shatev, *Solunskiiat atentat i zatochenitsite v Fezan; po spomeni na Pavle P.Shatev*, edited by Ljubomir Miletich (Sofia: Pechatnitsa P. Glushkov, 1927), p. 27.

of the authorities.¹² His general view of modern prisons is also put forth in a passage where he describes them as places where ‘criminals are made’.¹³ European anarchists and socialists had been writing about imprisonment and criticising prisons since the late nineteenth century. Pavel was already taking notes during his imprisonment in Libya,¹⁴ most likely with the intention to contribute to the literary canon of revolutionary thought.

The prison memoir is composed of two parts. The first, written in the first-person plural, describes the journey from Selanik to Murzuq, the imprisonment in this oasis town and the return voyage after the amnesty in 1908. The second treats the flora and fauna of Fezzan, the desert region surrounding Murzuq, and gives ethnographical information about the local people. This might seem like an unusual undertaking for a revolutionary. However, anarchists like Kropotnik and Reclus had written on the theory of evolution, on geography and on the relationship between humans and animals.¹⁵ Anarchists in the Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean were aware of this literature.¹⁶

While the first part is based exclusively on the notes Pavel made during his imprisonment, for the second he also made use of available scholarship on Libya. This included the works of the French writer and diplomat Gabriel Charmes, the German explorer Eduard Vogel, Heinrich Barth, Valerijan V. Lunkevič and others. Pavel occasionally references these writers in the first part as well. Strikingly, a 1927 edition published in Sofia would eliminate the second part on ethnography, botany and animal life in Fezzan. The later edition

¹² Shatev, *Zatochenieto v Sahara Fezan*, pp. 23–29, 83, 93–94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

¹⁴ Shatev, *Solunskiiat atentat i zatochenitsite v Fezan*, p. 8.

¹⁵ See for example Piotr Alexeievich Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (New York: McClure, Philips & Co., 1902); Élisée Reclus, *The Earth and Its Inhabitants, South America* (New York: D. Appleton, 1894–1895); and Élisée Reclus, ‘On Vegetarianism’ (1901), in John P. Clark and Camille Martin (eds), *Anarchy, Geography, Modernity: The Radical Social Thought of Elisée Reclus* (Lanham/Oxford: Lexington Books, 2004).

¹⁶ For a study on the intellectual exchanges between Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria of anarchist and socialist literature, see Makdisi, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism*.

would also omit all footnotes and references to nineteenth-century European writers, the illustrations of plants and animals and the photographs of the prisoners in Murzuq taken between 1906 and 1908, which had been reproduced in the original 1910 edition. Lyubomir Miletich, the editor of the 1927 edition, who had conducted the interview with Pavel in 1908 following his release, studied and interviewed numerous members of the Macedonian liberation movement. The omission of the second part thus seems to have been intended to confine Pavel's prison memoir to a more specific nationalistic framework, during a period of competing nationalisms claiming the region of Macedonia, which, during the Balkan wars in 1912–13, was divided between Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece. The only translation of Pavel's memoirs, which was published in Macedonian in 1994, also cut the second part as well as the illustrations and photographs.¹⁷ In the introduction, the translator emphasises that such an omission is necessary because the discussion 'of the flora, fauna, the ethnography, and some tribes does not have any immediate relevance to the experience of the imprisoned'.¹⁸ Yet such discussions are found in the first part of the memoir as well and work to illuminate Pavel's political worldview. The desert, its nature and its inhabitants function as far more than a background.

The second part contains some of Pavel's most direct discussions of imperialism and colonialism. Its last chapter reviews the western European scholars who had travelled in and written about the Sahara in the nineteenth century. Pavel characterises these intellectual efforts as inescapably entwined with the physical conquest of Africa and indeed indispensable to these colonial projects.¹⁹ In this, Pavel may have been influenced by Lavro's *Historical Letter*, which he mentions having read in the 1908 interview, and in which Lavro argues that the formation of sociological knowledge is determined by the scholars' ideologies. More generally, in the first part of the memoir too,

¹⁷ Pavel Shatev, *Zatochenieto vo Sahara-Fezan*, trans. from Bulgarian by Panche Mihajlov (Skopje: Matica makedonska, 1994).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁹ Shatev, *Zatochenieto v Sahara Fezan* (1910), pp. 88–89, 227–30.

Pavel sees the conditions in the Ottoman Libyan desert not as natural but as the product of imperialism. For instance, in his discussion of the province of Fezzan, Pavel claims that the deteriorating economy there was the fault of the recent conquest by France and England of Tunisia, western Africa and Sudan, which had redirected the flow of trade and transformed the once thriving province into Sahara's backwater. As a result, Murzuq's trade was now only an eighth of what it had been. (Here Pavel remarks that the Ottoman state should have conquered the region Tibesti south of Murzuq in order to secure the trade routes.)²⁰ Pavel also acknowledges the internal class divisions of Ottoman Libya. He describes the hardships of Libyan farmers and the poor treatment of Arab prisoners in Tripoli. He details the work conditions and wages of labourers in Murzuq and recounts a protest that broke out among Ottoman soldiers there against the withholding of their salaries.²¹ In other words, he characterises the desert and the oasis towns as sites of both class and colonial struggle.

The journey began on 28 June 1906 and lasted for 31 days. Temperatures that summer reached as high as 48 degrees, Pavel informs us. On the journey between Tripoli and Murzuq, he says, the officer and guards leading the prisoners through the desert 'wanted us dead'.²² Pavel details random beatings and acts of violence, and the withholding of food, water and available blankets during the cold desert nights.²³ He recounts the death of a fellow prisoner named Nikola who suffered from sun stroke and was forced to follow the caravan for several days, bound with ropes to prevent him from falling. On the night he died, Nikola screamed in agony, which was an excuse for the guards to beat him. Pavel moves swiftly in his narrative from the torture of prisoners to that of animals, intertwining the human and non-human worlds, both of which are under tyrannical rule. In a long paragraph, he describes an intriguing episode involving camels. While their caravan was passing through the valley of

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 89–90.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 85, 104.

²² Ibid., p. 42.

²³ Ibid., p. 41.

Sawfajjin, they saw a number of camel skeletons scattered around.²⁴ According to Pavel, as the camels passed the skeletons they seemed to recognise the bones of their own species, like ‘hieroglyphs through which they were reading their destiny’. Pavel adds, ‘we were in the hands of the tyrant, and only tyranny we experienced in this hot land, but at the same time we were tyrants ourselves’. Pavel characterises the use of the camels’ labour as a form of oppression comparable to his own imprisonment: ‘What an irony, what a twistedness by the verbal animal-human, the crown of the animal kingdom’, he concludes. Pavel’s love of animals is also attested in a passage in which he describes the delight he and his comrades took from observing the mice in their cells: ‘for hours, they were the subjects of our discussions and joy’.²⁵

Anarchists of the time were already discussing the relationship between human and non-human actors. Élisée Reclus (d. 1905), who was a proponent of vegetarianism, noted that ‘people’s diet corresponds to their morality’ and that violence towards animals was an expression of the violence in contemporary society.²⁶ Whereas Reclus’s critique is focused on killing animals for consumption, Pavel’s focuses more squarely on the forceful extraction of animals’ labour.²⁷ Whether Pavel’s ideas about animal rights were to some extent inspired by Reclus is difficult to establish and would require further exploration of Pavel’s personal library. However, one should not discard the possibility that the emerging ecological anarchism at the end of the nineteenth century may have had an offshoot in the

²⁴ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

²⁶ Peter Ryley, ‘The Rise of Ecological Anarchism: Élisée Reclus and Patrick Geddes’, in *Making Another World Possible: Anarchism, Anti-Capitalism and Ecology in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Britain* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 165–66.

²⁷ Indeed, throughout his prison memoir, one aspect of his imprisonment about which Pavel does not complain was lack of meat in the food he and his fellow prisoners were given. During both the journey through the desert and his imprisonment in Murzuq he describes a diet consisting of bread, salt, pepper, onions, tomatoes, dates and other vegetables.

Balkans as well. Justice, according to Pavel, was impossible without a change in the relationship between humans and animals to one not based on exploitation. Such ideas are reminiscent of Kropotkin's 1902 book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, which discusses at length the social lives of mammals. Some of the examples Kropotkin cites were drawn from his own observations in Siberia and Manchuria. Though Pavel did not aim, as Kropotkin did, to contribute specifically to the field of evolutionary biology, his ambition to write about animals, plants and geology places him within a broader anarchist discourse.

Pavel characterises the Libyan desert as an environment degraded by human activity, which had the potential to be revived not through colonial effort but through social change. In the valley of Sawfajjin, he claims, it would be possible to dig artesian wells and to grow rice.²⁸ When describing the valleys of Sharkiyya and Garbi, Pavel blames the decline of agricultural production on the Ottoman state: government official had robbed the farmers and forced them to abandon the fruits of their labours and their undertakings in the fields: 'The sand is advancing in the gardens', he laments.²⁹ The desert is, for him, a potentially liveable space that is made unbearable by the state. Elsewhere, Pavel's descriptions of the desert landscape take on a decidedly melancholic tone:

On the fifth day, we travelled through a valley enclosed on both sides with high hills covered with pebbles. Some of the hills had peaks that were flat with sharp edges and from the distance they looked like fortresses. After we crossed this spacious valley a flat plain appeared to us with its dry grass, and in the distant horizon we saw green. That was the Fezzan region, the gardens and meadows around the city of Sawqnah. The many palm trees that surround it from afar look like a wonderful picture, but when a human gets close these trees with a form of umbrella appear dispersed throughout the sand, separated from one another without a significant vegetation around them and they lose the initial appearance when seen from afar. The human falls into melancholy, is engulfed with sorrow. This tropical plant shows the vanity of human life and it tells us that he (the human) is not different from the palm tree. The human

²⁸ Shatev, *Zatochenieto v Sahara Fezan* (1910), p. 36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

rules everywhere in the world just like the palm rules in the warm lands. Human life looks like it is very beautiful, but the more one looks at it, the more it loses its beauty, just like the palm tree.

Pavel's descriptions of the flat-peaked hills that look 'like fortresses' and the lonely palm trees divided from each other like humans who 'rule everywhere' evoke the alienated world under capitalism that Pavel and his comrades sought to change.

One thing Pavel does not see, in the desert, is a particular mentality that impedes progress. This separates him from the long tradition of orientalists who connected the desert climate with the supposed backwardness of Arabs and other ethnic groups. Rather, Pavel seeks to understand the inhabitants of the desert comparatively, as belonging to a class also found elsewhere in the world including in his native Macedonia. The Macedonian peasants are invoked in the memoir during Pavel's discussions of the inhabitants of the towns he passed through in the Sahara. Pavel notes that locals in Zegen, near the oasis of Sabha in central Libya, used medicine to treat scorpion bites, unlike the Macedonian peasants who treated them following the advice of witchdoctors.³⁰ Indeed, in 1901–1902 Pavel had secured an appointment as a teacher in the village of Lesnovo, in north-eastern Macedonia near his hometown of Kratovo, where he was able to closely observe the life and labour of Macedonian peasants. Like earlier Russian revolutionary anarchists and socialists such as Kropotkin and Pyotr Lavrov – who had discussed the necessity of integrating the rural populations in any future attempts at socialist revolution – Pavel understood peasants as a global class that he tried to study.

Pavel praises the superb craftsmanship he observed among the peasants in the oasis town of Murzuq between 1906 and 1908.³¹ According to him, some of these skills had been passed down from earlier prisoners – sixty people who had been transported there from Akka in Palestine in the last decade of the nineteenth century, following an Ottoman policy set in 1887 to send convicts, especially those

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 91–92.

involved in illegal political activities, to the southernmost Libyan desert. According to Pavel, these prisoners had spent eight years in Murzuq, during which they had taught the residents to grow grains in more efficient ways as well as various crafts. Pavel marvels at the continuing echoes of these Palestinian prisoners in the local culture. He also emphasises that he and his comrades also made their own contribution to the desert environment, when a more permissive new warden – perhaps a supporter of the Young Turks – allowed them to work to fill a swamp near Murzuq, whose vapours, Pavel claimed, were making people sick.³² Pavel and his fellow prisoners mounted resistance against particularly cruel treatment, for instance when a harsh judge was appointed interim warden and, in addition to a list of injustices (the denial of medical care and water, the destruction or withholding of prisoners' letters), ordered the baker to make the prisoners' bread salty and dense. The prisoners responded by refusing to eat and physically blocking guards from closing the doors to their cells, ultimately creating a rift between the judge and the administrator of the prison; their protest drew the attention of the governor.³³ At another point, Pavel says, the prisoners successfully convinced the authorities to allow them to bake their own bread. Using hand mills to process the flour, they improved the quality of the bread they ate and even began to sell some on the market.³⁴ Pavel characterises political prisoners as potential agents of social and environmental change who were capable of transforming the desert, a metaphor for their ability to transform the world. Indeed, in a striking passage on the harsh conditions of his imprisonment, Pavel places the Sahara onto a global map of revolutionary struggle:

Fezzan is the Siberia of Africa. The big cold and deep snow here are replaced by unbearable heat and deep sand. The bad climate corrupts the strongest human organism. The fevers that rage as a result of the quick change of the temperature and the evaporations from the swampy locations in the surrounding [of Murzuq] take the life forces of a human and leave their mark on the

³² Ibid., p. 103.

³³ Ibid., p. 97–98.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 103

face of everyone who lived here even if it was a short time ... Besides the everyday struggle, there is the torture of the authorities. The autocratic and rude behaviour of the governmental bureaucrats and their institutions make prisoners fall into deepest despair. Only the few can survive the physical and psychological torture.³⁵

Without mentioning names, Pavel obliquely refers to the socialists and anarchists in Russia who were sent to Siberia, thereby associating his time in Murzuq not with the Macedonian national struggle, but with the international revolutionary movement.

Since the late nineteenth century, prison diaries and other recollections of exile had played an important role in spreading anarchist and socialist ideas. A crucial example was Kropotkin's *In Russian and French Prisons* (1887). North American revolutionaries participated in this literary project as well. In 1912, Alexander Berkman published his 'Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist' after fourteen years spent in prison for attempting in 1892 to kill the industrialist Henry Clay Frick, a powerful enemy of trade unions. Thus, in the very act of writing a prison memoir, Pavel placed himself within a much broader literary discourse arising from the global anarchist and socialist movements that would culminate in 1917 in the October Revolution.

Pavel continues the comparison to Siberia by noting bitterly that while prisoners there have the advantage of being able to work for a wage, most of his own fellow prisoners were denied even this:

The Siberian prisoner has the advantage compared to the one in Fezzan that there are places where he can use his physical strength and earn his daily food ration. In Fezzan, there are no companies for the building of roads or buildings, no mines nor forests to be exploited. Here [Fezzan] the imprisoned cannot find even the lowest paid physical job, he is doomed to live in misery.³⁶

Pavel offers a brief history of the two-decade-long role of the Libyan desert as the 'Siberia' of the Ottoman State. Among those previously imprisoned there, he notes, were group of rebels from

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 90–91.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 91.

Figure 1. Prisoners from the Ottoman prison in Murzuq with Young Turks in 1908.

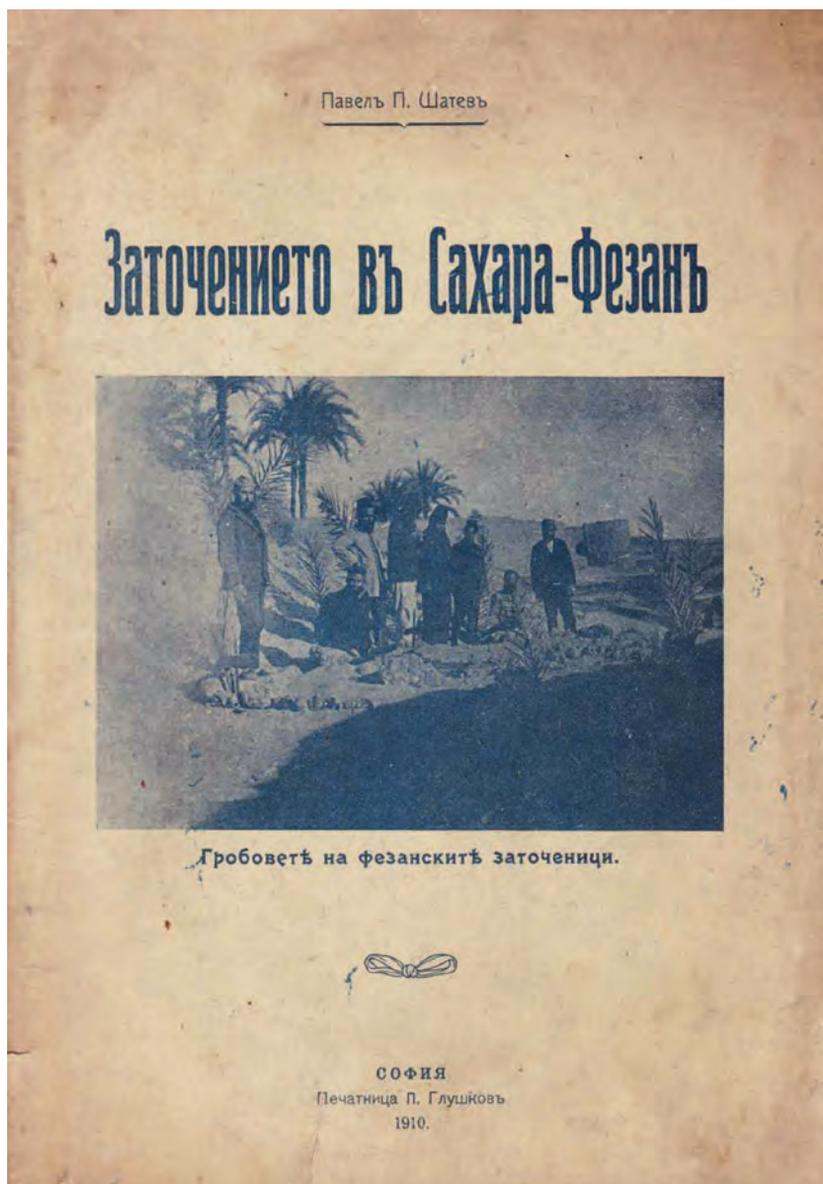


Source: Pavel Shatev, *Zatochenieto v Sahara Fezan* (Sofia: Pechatnitsa P. Glushkov, 1910), p. 143.

Crete, a member of the Armenian social democratic party Hunchakian and officers belonging to the Young Turks movement. Just as in Siberia, in the Sahara a whole spectrum of political prisoners was placed together. Pavel dedicates a long passage to the escape of one of the Young Turks, Sami Bey, which occurred during his imprisonment. Sami Bey had been able to cross the Saharan desert and, after passing through Niger and West Africa, to return to Istanbul, where Young Turks had in the meantime taken power.³⁷ Upon arriving in Istanbul, Sami Bey became known as the ‘one who crossed the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 107–11.

Figure 2. Cover photo of Pavel Shatev's prison memoir (Sofia, 1910) showing prisoners standing by the graves of their fallen comrades buried on the outskirts of Murzuq.



desert'.³⁸ Pavel claims that after Sami Bey's escape, the treatment of himself and his fellow prisoners worsened, because the prisoners from Ottoman Macedonia had been friendly with Sami Bey and his group. He evokes the solidarity between different revolutionary groups despite religious or ethnic belonging, placing his experiences within a global movement.

A photograph reproduced in the first (1910) edition of the memoir further illustrates this notion of Sahara as the 'Siberia of Africa'. It shows prisoners and members of the Young Turk movement following the issue of amnesty in 1908 and before the prisoners departed to Istanbul and thence to their respective regions. The men, 36 in all, are posed in a date palm orchard in or near Murzuq.³⁹ The 26-year-old Pavel is most likely the young-looking man seated on the far left whose right hand is slung over what appears to be a dog, a fitting gesture for the animal-lover. A man sitting in the centre holds what may have been the proclamation for the Ottoman Empire issued by the Young Turks after seizing power, which called for the return of the constitution, the establishment of voting rights for all citizens, the right to assemble in political parties and free education. A large date palm tree embraces the group from behind, its trunk falling right down the centre where the man holding the proclamation sits – as if the tree has its seed in the proclamation. In the photo, the desert is not the alien landscape evoked in Pavel's earlier description of the palm trees – isolated from each other with barren space between – but has become, through political action, a lush garden of solidarity and progress.

³⁸ Ali Fahri Ağababa, *Şeref kurbanları: II. Abdülhamit döneminde bir sürgünün hikâyesi* (İstanbul: Çatı Yayıncılık, 2007), pp. 173–74.

³⁹ Shatev, *Zatochenieto v Sahara Fezan* (1910), p. 143.

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