

A Massacre for profit: The Annihilation of El Oufia Tribe by French Colonial Forces in April 1832 as seen by the Perpetrators

Abdelhadi Radjai Salmi¹

¹ Algiers 2 University, abdelhadi_radjai.salmi@univ-alger2.dz

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Abstract:

This paper examines the 1832 massacre of the El Oufia tribe by French colonial forces near Algiers. While official French history often describes the event as a "punishment" for a robbery, this research reveals a much darker motive: the French State's plunder of the wealth of Algerians. Led by the Duc de Rovigo, the French military carried out a *razzia* that resulted in the near-total destruction of the tribe, including women and children. By using the personal diaries of German soldiers in the Foreign Legion and the reports of some French officials, the paper demonstrates that the tribe was a peaceful, "wealthy prey." The paper also documents the tragic execution of Cheikh El Rabia, who was killed to cover up the military's crimes. Ultimately, the massacre failed to terrorize the population and instead helped unite Algerians in their resistance against colonial rule.

Keywords: French Colonization; Algeria; war crime; El Oufia Tribe; La Légion étrangère.

Corresponding author: Abdelhadi Radjai Salmi
Email: abdelhadi_radjai.salmi@univ-alger2.dz

ملخص:

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية مجزرة قبيلة العوفية سنة 1832م على يد القوات الاستعمارية الفرنسية قرب مدينة الجزائر. وبينما غالبًا ما تصف المصادر الفرنسية الرسمية الحادثة بأنها → عقاب → على سرقة، يكشف هذا البحث عن دافع أشدّ ظلمة: نهب الدولة الفرنسية لثروات الجزائريين. نفّذ الجيش الفرنسي، بقيادة الدوق دي روفيجو، غارة أسفرت عن إبادة شبه كاملة لقبيلة العوفية، بما في ذلك النساء والأطفال. وبالاعتماد على المذكرات الشخصية للجنود الألمان المجندين في الفيلق الأجنبي وتقارير بعض المسؤولين الفرنسيين، تُبيّن الورقة أن القبيلة كانت مسالمة و → فريسة غنية → في نفس الوقت. كما توثّق الورقة الإعدام المأساوي للشيخ الربيع، الذي قُتل للتغطية على جرائم الاستعمار. في نهاية المطاف، فشلت المذبحة في بثّ الرعب في نفوس السكان، بل ساهمت في توحيد الجزائريين في مقاومتهم للاحتلال الفرنسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستعمار الفرنسي؛ الجزائر؛ جريمة حرب؛ قبيلة العوفية؛ الفيلق الأجنبي.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the French army first set foot on Algerian soil, the country has been immersed in a sea of blood and tragedy. French colonial policy knew only the language of oppression and destruction. Beyond just military control, colonial France planned to eliminate an entire people and even attempted to strip them of their national identity to realize its colonial project.

One of the most horrific examples of this policy was the massacre of the El Oufia tribe. This event was not just a blunder of war; it was a calculated crime driven by the desire to seize wealth and resources.

The perpetrators of this atrocious crime against humanity existed at many levels. From the top down, there were many people involved, ranging from superior officers who masterminded the massacre to simple soldiers who carried it out. At the helm of this hierarchy lies the primary architect of the massacre: Anne Jean Marie René Savary, Duc de Rovigo, the general-in-chief of French forces in Africa and the former Minister of Police for Napoleon Bonaparte. He was described as

A Massacre for profit: The Annihilation of El Oufia Tribe by French Colonial Forces in April 1832 as seen by its Perpetrators

“More commendable for his boundless devotion to Napoleon than for his ability, a man of execution rather than advice, shaped by arbitrary habits, he was always ready to put his will before the law.”¹

Another writer, Amédée Desjobert adds:

“He brought imperial habits to Algiers, which his age no longer permitted him to modify. The direction of his administration was harsh. Several impolitic measures had already alienated the Arabs from us.”²

Until late 1831, the general-in-chief had been the sole authority. A royal decree on December 1, 1831, separated civil and military authority by creating a civil intendant independent of the general-in-chief. The Duke of Rovigo remained the general-in-chief, and Baron Pichon was named civil intendant.

According to some sources, Pichon was highly regarded by his colleagues. His contemporaries described him as an enlightened, honorable, meticulous, and a law-abiding administrator.³ He was seen as the voice of reason in the French administration of newly conquered Algiers — a counterweight to de Rovigo to balance the authority of the army in Algiers.

Yet, the combination of two such opposing personalities often produced bitter clashes over how colonial affairs should be managed. As Arsène Berteuil later wrote:

“Certainly, it would have been difficult to make a worse choice, to juxtapose more unfortunately, to contribute to the same goal, two men of more opposing opinions and tendencies.”⁴

Further down the chain of command, testimonies from non-French soldiers of *la Légion étrangère* provide invaluable

insights into the massacre. German recruits such as Hermann Hauber and August Jäger were among those who participated. Shockingly, they recorded in detail the atrocities they had committed against unarmed civilians — accounts that were conveniently ignored in French chronicles. Another German, Wilhelm Schimper, a traveler in Algeria between 1831 and 1832, left behind a book with valuable observations, including testimonies from soldiers involved in the bloodbath.

In between the top and the base of this pyramid of responsibility, we find officers who, though not directly involved in the massacre, left useful testimonies. One of the most prominent was E. Pellissier de Reynaud, who had taken part in the invasion of Algiers as a staff officer. In September 1830, he was promoted to captain and became aide-de-camp to General Voirol.

Another figure is General Grisot, later charged in 1837 with training new recruits for *La Légion étrangère* in Algeria. In his book on the Legion's exploits, he briefly — and apologetically — mentioned the El Oufia massacre.

By looking at the testimonies of those who were there—especially the soldiers who carried it out—it becomes clear that the "punishment" of the tribe was actually a state-sponsored robbery. This paper will show how the need to fill the military's treasury led to the total destruction of a peaceful tribe.

2. THE PRETEXT OF THE MASSACRE

Immediately after his appointment, the general-in-chief de Rovigo took security measures to protect the French foothold in

A Massacre for profit: The Annihilation of El Oufia Tribe by French Colonial Forces in April 1832 as seen by its Perpetrators

Algiers which hitherto was confined to the walls of the newly conquered city. He first made sure to secure a buffer zone around the Algiers by establishing several small permanent camps. This zone was bordered by a line of blockhouses which stretched from the summit of *Bouzaréa* mountain west of Algiers all the way to the mouth of the *El-Harrach* river on the east, passing through *Dely-Ibrahim*, *Kadous*, *Tikesrain*, *Oued-el-Kerma*, *La Ferme-Modele*, *Gue de Constantine*, and *La Maison-Carrée*. This buffer zone was the core of French colonial project, where the first '*pieds noir*' from Europe were encouraged to establish settlements on land taken from Algerians.⁵

In April 5, 1832, a delegation from *Cheikh Farhat Ben Saïd*, a chieftain from the southeast of Algeria, arrived in Algiers proposing to de Rovigo an alliance against *Ahmed bey* of Constantine, a common adversary to both. The emissaries were well received and given precious gifts at their departure. However, no guaranties were given for joint action against *Ahmed Bey*. On their way back on April 6, the envoys were ambushed and robbed by marauders near *La Maison-Carrée* (*El El-Harrach*), where the third battalion of the Foreign Legion was stationed. The incident took place in the territory of El Oufia tribe, providing Savary with a convenient pretext to initiate his brutal and merciless policy he had intended to use against Algerians.

Without even investigating the incident,⁶ and in what contemporary observers described as an unjustifiable decision,⁷ Savary sent orders to the garrison of *La Maison-Carrée* to prepare for a *razzia* on El Oufia, the tribe that hitherto lived in

harmony with the French under the protection of La Maison-Carrée.

Besides punishing El Oufia for the purported robbing of the emissaries, the raid was meant to stop the tribe from supposedly encouraging French soldiers to desert. Hermann Hauber, the German recruit in La Maison-Carrée wrote:

“There was a troubling suspicion that a somewhat powerful and warlike Arab tribe camped in the middle of the great plain near Maison-Carrée...had deliberately encouraged these desertions. It was repeatedly reported that some soldiers had not fled from a distance, nor while on patrol or fetching water, but had been directly enticed by Bedouins under promises while still under the trees near the house.”⁸

The *razzias* of the early decades of French colonization in Algeria were no longer aimed solely at conquest. Instead, they became tools of mass destruction within a broad strategy designed to ruin, displace, and terrorize the Algerian people.⁹

3. THE MASSACRE AND WAR CRIMES

On the night of April 6, 1832, orders were set in motion. A column composed of several companies of infantry and squadrons of African Chasseurs, supported by field cannons, marched out of Algiers. Their mission was to join the third battalion of the Foreign Legion at Maison-Carrée and carry out what was chillingly described as a “Rovigo-style punishment,”¹⁰ in other words, the extermination of defenseless people.

A Massacre for profit: The Annihilation of El Oufia Tribe by French Colonial Forces in April 1832 as seen by its Perpetrators

Secrecy was essential. To conceal the destination of the expedition and prevent any warning from reaching El Oufia, the soldiers were deliberately left uninformed. They were told nothing of their mission until departure, and strict orders were given to maintain silence throughout the march.

The detour was long and arduous. Swamps and marshes forced the troops onto difficult terrain, prolonging the journey to nearly four hours. By dawn on April 7, the French forces arrived on the edge of the unsuspecting El Oufia encampment. Before them lay a sleeping tribe, unaware that annihilation was only moments away.

The first shots came from the cannons. Explosive blasts tore through the camp, sending tents, possessions, and bodies into chaos. The African Chasseurs circled around the left flank to complete the encirclement, while on the right a swamp cut off any chance of escape.

Panic gripped the camp. Women, children, and the elderly fled from their burning tents, wailing in terror. Some men managed to seize weapons, others leapt onto horses to seek help from neighboring tribes. However, most were helpless. As confusion spread, the infantry advanced in disciplined platoon fire, while the cavalry pressed in to cut off the fleeing.

According to eyewitness testimonies, French soldiers showed no mercy; no quarter was given to El Oufia members. They were trapped on three sides, and the swamp obstructed the fourth. Desperate men, women, and children waded into the mud and reeds, seeking shelter. Musket fire cut them down as they struggled in the water. Some sank and suffocated; others were

shot where they stood. Those who remained in the camp were cut down with sabers and bayonets.¹¹

Through continuous fire, many were killed. The troops then entered the tents and committed many atrocities. Schimper, the German traveler and botanist, describes one of the war crimes committed against a child:

*"One of these murderers (soldiers) told me... 'I have massacred many; a boy stood at the back of a tent. I shouted to him: Get out, you scoundrel, or I'll put a bullet through your brain. The beast didn't obey. I pulled the trigger, and half of his head hung in the tent canvas.'"*¹²

Schimper further notes that the frightened boy did not understand the order because it was given in a foreign language. Yet, the soldier killed him mercilessly. He adds that children were murdered in their mothers' arms, and then the mothers themselves were killed. A 'chasseur' pierced a mother with a lance and then *"laughingly impaled the infant on the blood-soaked spear."*¹³

The cavalry was largely blamed for these crimes. Soldiers reportedly hung bloody heads from their saddles and rode proudly to Algiers. An infantryman who could not remove a silver clasp from a woman's arm simply used his saber to sever her hand.¹⁴ Pellissier noted: *"Everything living was condemned to death... no distinction was made of age or sex."*¹⁵

It is worth noting that in the early decades of the French occupation of Algerian territory, such crimes were not misdeeds committed in the heat of battle or discreetly by low-ranking

A Massacre for profit: The Annihilation of El Oufia Tribe by French Colonial Forces in April 1832 as seen by its Perpetrators

soldiers acting out of revenge in isolation. They were common practices, known to all and practiced from the top to the bottom of the military hierarchy. They were encouraged because the French military considered them useful to the conflict waged against Algerian tribes.¹⁶

The women and children who survived were taken as captives. To avoid being raped by the French soldiers, the women smeared their bodies with filth and cow dung to make themselves look repulsive. Hermann Hauber states that:

“The women smeared their faces and bodies with filth in order not to please us. Our commander had the one he considered the most beautiful washed by two soldiers and wanted to keep her as a companion or perhaps cook.”¹⁷

August Jäger Affirms with admiration: *“The women were so loyal to their fallen or escaped husbands that they tried to disfigure their appearance in every possible way to avoid attracting attention and desire. For this purpose, they even resorted to the most repulsive means; many had smeared their faces and arms with cow dung.”¹⁸* Fortunately, orders arrived a few days later to set these prisoners free.

After the massacre, the soldiers plundered everything, and what little of the belongings found that could not be taken was destroyed. A few soldiers reportedly managed to loot gold and silver from the victims. The tribe's large herd of cattle was stolen. This included nearly 4,000 sheep, 800 head of cattle, 50 horses and mules, and 26 camels. This booty was sold to suppliers, and the soldiers of the Legion received a share amounted to 10,000 Francs.¹⁹ August Jäger described the massacre as a *“glorious victory over poorly armed, ambushed*

savages, ”²⁰ which demonstrates the complete indifference of Europeans to the suffering of non-whites.

Even though French sources attempted to downplay the casualty toll by speaking of only 80-100 deaths,²¹ the testimonies of the very soldiers who carried out the bloodbath tell another story. August Jäger himself, a participant, admitted that the survivors did not return to their tribe. Instead, they wandered broken and scattered among foreign tribes.²² His words reveal a grim truth — Loufia had been wiped out so thoroughly that it ceased to exist as a community.²³

4. THE EXECUTION OF *CHEIKH EL RABIA*: A FUTHER CRIME

The chieftain of El Oufia *Cheikh El Rabia* was among those taken captives. De Rovigo immediately ordered a war council to convene in order to judge him for treason against France. Despite the efforts of Baron Pichon to convince de Rovigo of releasing *El Rabia*, and despite requests for clemency presented by deputations of various tribes, supported by the *Aga Mahieddin* and seconded by the chief of the general staff, de Rovigo stubbornly insisted on trying him! Additionally, it became known before the trial that El Oufia was indeed innocent and the culprits were members of another tribe, and even the stolen items were restored down to the last item. Yet, *Cheikh El Rabia* and one of his notables were never acquitted and eventually sentenced to death in April 19.²⁴

Contemporaries condemned the execution. Pichon Deplored the indifference of the French press that was completely silent on

A Massacre for profit: The Annihilation of El Oufia Tribe by French Colonial Forces in April 1832 as seen by its Perpetrators

the massacre. He even published the letters he exchanged with de Rovigo, in which he strongly urged him to release the innocent *Cheikh*, drawing attention to the colossal force used against the tribe which was disproportionate to the crime it was accused of. He reminded the general in chief that it was proven that the real culprits took refuge in another distant tribe, and it was in the interest of France to serve justice in this affair.²⁵

E. Pélissier explaining why de Rovigo was adamant to execute the *Cheikh*, wrote: “*But to acquit the chief was to declare the people innocent and to morally condemn the one who had ordered the massacre; to avoid this logical conclusion, Rabbia was therefore condemned.*”²⁶ Apparently, de Rovigo was trying to cover up his crime against El Oufia, even if it meant wrongly sending innocent people to the gallows!

The Duc was no stranger to unjust trials and the unlawful execution of innocents. In 1804, when he was the head of French Elite Gendarmery, reports say that Napoleon Bonaparte ordered him to represent him in the military trial of the Duke d’Enghien, the last descendant of the House of Condé, after the latter was illegally kidnapped by French Dragoons from the German territory, following suspicions that he was involved in a conspiracy to topple Napoleon. De Rovigo, the loyal and obedient servitor of the emperor, reportedly pressured the judges to give the Duke d’Enghien the death penalty, even though the defendant categorically denied that he had a role in the alleged plot to assassinate Napoleon and no conclusive evidence was presented.

5. THE REAL MOTIVE OF THE MASSACRE

Since the beginning, the whole affair of El Oufia was embroiled in controversy. Why would De Rovig go to the extent of exterminating a whole tribe and executing its leaders as a punishment for the petty crime of robbery, especially after it was unequivocally proven that it had no hand in the incident? Is possible that the Duc had ulterior motives prompted him to order such a heinous carnage?

To answer these questions, we need to go back to the very testimonies of contemporaries. El Oufia was described by pillissier as “*a small nomadic tribe camped a short distance from the Maison-Carrée.*”²⁷ Pichon concurs, calling it a friendly tribe which had come to place itself, since the French Occupation of Algiers, under the protection of La Maison-Carrée, suppling it with small provisions, and receiving its officers and soldiers daily.²⁸ Schimper adds that the tribe had since then lived in peace with the French.²⁹

If El Oufia was indeed small, friendly, living under the protection of the French blockhouse, and even supplying provisions to its garrison, then it was neither hostile nor a threat to colonial authority. Quite the contrary, it had every interest in maintaining good relations with the French. Robbing their guests would make no sense. On the other hand, this also meant El Oufia was an easy—and wealthy—prey.

Sources also indicate that brigandry was rampant around the blockhouses, particularly around La Maison-Carrée, where both legionnaires and El Oufia were stationed. But this does not necessarily mean that El Oufia members were guilty. French

A Massacre for profit: The Annihilation of El Oufia Tribe by French Colonial Forces in April 1832 as seen by its Perpetrators

legionnaires themselves were often accused of such acts. Wilhelm Schimper, in an attempt to exonerate El Oufia, maintains that the many assassinations that occurred in that area were not always committed by the Bedouins, but partly by French soldiers.³⁰ Schimper then recounts how he “*often went out alone far beyond the outposts and several times encountered ... soldiers of the Foreign Legion, who were out for a walk without weapons but had banded together to rob the Bedouins, who were returning from the market with some money...,*” Adding: “*This is not an idle speculation on my part; rather, these people themselves told me of their plans quite carelessly.*”³¹

The German botanist further claims that he personally was the victim of a robbery attempt by two legionnaires, and that another French soldier proposed to him to assassinate anyone he wants for money.³²

It is therefore possible, even likely, that French soldiers were behind the robbery. Yet de Rovigo, conveniently, ordered an immediate attack on El Oufia—almost as if he had been waiting for such an excuse. He did not bother investigating who the true culprits were.

Baron Pichon’s testimony suggests that de Rovigo may have even anticipated the aggression against *Ben Saïd*’s emissaries—or at least expected it. The civil intendant later stated: “*We were almost certain, on the day of the emissaries’ departure, that they would be assaulted. The Duke had spoken to me in this sense on the 5th, the day of their departure.*”³³ However, the punishment de Rovigo initially had in mind was different. Pichon explained reproachfully:

“He had still informed in advance of the measures he would take if this happened: they were very different from those that were taken: it was only a matter of arresting all the El-Ouffias that were found in the markets until restitution. I was going out early in the morning, on the 6th, to confer with Mr. de Rovigo about my apprehensions, when Captain Le-blanc, arriving very worried, came to tell me: “What the general had foreseen has happened!”³⁴

The civil intendant then asks a damning question:

“With this forecast, could not the emissaries have been escorted by the lieutenant of the Aga?”³⁵ In other words: if de Rovigo knew the emissaries would be robbed, why didn't he protect them?

To recap, de Rovigo loaded the emissaries with gifts, made a spectacle of their departure, according to E. Péllissier,³⁶ and then sent them unescorted through territories he already suspected were dangerous. This suggests that he may have orchestrated the robbery—or at the very least, waited for such an incident in order to create a pretext to annihilate El Oufia. But why would he go so far as to exterminate the entire tribe? Surely, a simple demand for reparations or a punitive fine would have sufficed.

The answer is simple; he wanted to put his hands on El Oufia's riches. The tribe possessed Thousands of livestock that could enrich his treasury. Affirming this theory, Hermann Hauber exposes the hidden motive of the massacre: *“in my opinion, not one of the least important motives [of the massacre was] to supply the city and army with cattle, in which that tribe*

A Massacre for profit: The Annihilation of El Oufia Tribe by French Colonial Forces in April 1832 as seen by its Perpetrators

was known to be very rich, and to supply its indebted coffers with money.”³⁷

The evidence supports Hauber’s claim. Baron Pichon listed the booty as: 1,500 to 2,000 sheep, 6 to 700 oxen, 25 to 30 camels, not including the horses and other cattle that soldiers kept for themselves at Maison-Carrée.

Pichon explained that this loot was sold at absurdly low prices: 5 francs per sheep, 20 francs per ox, and 100 francs per camel.³⁸ In today’s money, one French franc of the 1830s is equivalent to about 54 U.S. dollars. By this conversion, El Oufia’s livestock alone was worth nearly a million dollars in modern terms, and that is a conservative estimate.

Additionally, what might prove that de Rovigo wanted El Oufia fortune is the fact that a few days after the massacre, a deputation of some tribes came to Algiers to reclaim part of the livestock stolen by the French, arguing that El Oufia had merely been its guardians, and that they are the real legitimate owners. De Rovigo categorically refused to restore anything, insisting on keeping all stolen animals.

Another unexplained act by de Rovigo that may support this theory is the selling of the cattle amicably to the Danish consul without organizing the much-expected auction, which many merchants from France came to attend in hopes of bidding. These traders were frustrated by de Rovigo’s strange decision, so much so that they even reached out to the civil intendant to intervene. However, once again de Rovigo demonstrated his stubbornness by refusing to reconsider his decision.³⁹

Taken together, these facts strongly suggest that the El Oufia massacre was not about justice, security, or even revenge. It was

about wealth. De Rovigo had his eyes on the tribe's fortune and seized upon a convenient pretext to wipe them out and take it. However, it should be noted that his theory is based on the available testimonies. Further research is required to historically ascertain it.

6. THE REACTION TO THE MASSACRE IN FRANCE

In France, no one seemed to care about the slaughter of Algerians. There was no outrage in the seemingly liberal press and the authorities never condemned it. As a result, the massacre of El Oufia was swallowed by apathy. Instead of reprimand, the French Crown responded with a gesture that amounted to an endorsement. On May 12, 1832, barely a month after the massacre, King Louis-Philippe issued a new order that stripped Le Baron Pichon of any real authority and placed the civil intendant under the direct orders of the general-in-chief.⁴⁰ Pichon resigned as he no longer had any meaningful authority, leaving the Duke of Rovigo with unchecked power in Algiers.⁴¹

This was not an accident. It was a signal that the King had chosen the path of brutality. De Rovigo was now free to accelerate his merciless policy, opening the door to a dark chapter in Algerian history — one marked by fire, blood, and mass killings.

7. CONCLUSION

The massacre of the El Oufia stands as a testament to the structural violence inherent in the French colonial project in Algeria. Far from being a spontaneous military blunder, the

A Massacre for profit: The Annihilation of El Oufia Tribe by French Colonial Forces in April 1832 as seen by its Perpetrators

evidence suggests a confluence of predatory economic motives and a desperate need for the military administration to exert its rule through terror. The subsequent execution of *Cheikh El Rabia*, despite clear evidence of his tribe's innocence, underscores a judicial system subordinated to the ego and political survival of the general-in-chief.

The economic dimension of the carnage—specifically the seizure and irregular sale of livestock—provides a compelling materialist explanation for the expedition. This "wealthy prey" theory, corroborated by the testimonies of the soldiers who participated in the plunder, challenges the official narrative of a "punitive" mission and reclassifies the event as a state-sponsored robbery.

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² 31

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A Massacre for profit: The Annihilation of El Oufia Tribe by French Colonial Forces in April 1832 as seen by its Perpetrators

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²³ بوعلام نجادي، الاستعمار الفرنسي في الجزائر زمن المجازر حقبة التحريق، ترجمة: مباركة بن فرحات، موفم للنشر، الجزائر، 2023، ص 223.

²⁴ Le Baron Pichon, op. cit., p. 133.

²⁵ Ibid, pp. 396-406

²⁶ E. Pélissier de Reynaud, p. 247.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Le Baron Pichon, op. Cit., p. 131.

²⁹ Wilhelm Schimper, op. Cit., p. 185.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 187.

³¹ Ibid, p.186.

³² Ibid.

³³ Le Baron Pichon, p. 135

³⁴ Ibid, p. 136

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ E. Péllissier de Reynaud, op. cit., p. 247

³⁷ Hermann Hauber, op. cit., p. 195

³⁸ Le Baron Pichon, op. Cit., pp. 134-135

³⁹ Ibid, p. 135

⁴⁰ Le Moniteur Algérien Journal Officiel de la Colonie, N 20, 19 Juin 1832, p. 1

⁴¹ Amédée Desjobert, op. cit., p. 32