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Animals and War: Studies of Europe and North America edited by Ryan Hediger

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Animals and War: Symbol and Subjectivity

Animals and War: Studies of Europe and North America Edited by RYAN HEDIGER Brill, 2013 \$125.00

Reviewed by **REBECCA RAGLON**

War is hell, and whether anything more needs to be said about the topic is both the theme and the occasion of this book. Can an extreme situation like warfare in fact illuminate something about humans and animals that is not already apparent to us? Can we learn something more, or different, about ourselves and our relationship to nonhuman others, something worthwhile, by viewing the relationships that emerge from unnatural, cruel, and devastating actions? Or, should we see our everyday treatment of animals as something that mirrors our treatment of them in war? Can society and war be viewed as parallel systems when it comes to understanding a human and animal divide?

This book, one in Brill's Human-Animal Studies series, begins to answer such questions by informing readers of the surprising variety of animals used in various modern wars: camels, mules, dogs, dolphins, elephants, birds, and even insects have been used in human warfare. So many horses died along the Western Front in the First World War that they loom like a "ghost presence" throughout the conflict. The use of animals in warfare for some authors seems to represent just another example of human domination, but, as the editor points out, it "also indicates human limitations and human reliance upon other species." A dog named

Cairo accompanied the US Navy Seals on the raid on Osama Bin Laden's compound, because "he or she could do things no human, and not even any human-made machine, could do." Not only does this reliance on other species reveal a situation where human relationships with other species are intensified but, paradoxically, it complicates the study of modern warfare itself and its subtext of hierarchy and dominance over the rest of the world.

While there are numerous scholarly and popular works on specific animals used in warfare, there are fewer works dealing with the subject as a whole. To facilitate a range of interdisciplinary approaches to the theme, the editor of *Animals and War* includes essays on "actual animals" in the first section, reserving the second half of the book for the symbolic uses of animals in wartime. The division is not entirely effective, however. There is much overlap as authors puzzle over the roles that "actual animals" played in various conflicts. The chapter on the use of the Finnhorse, for example, found in the first section of the book, demonstrates how the horse became a national symbol. In a similar vein, Boria Sax's excellent chapter in the second section, deals with an actual raven named Jackie, but also reflects on the historical foundations of myth and commerce. It seems that actual animals and their symbolic roles are more intertwined than not, and this in fact might be an important if unspoken subtext of the entire volume.

The first section of the book includes chapters on dogs, horses, and rats, as well as on weaponizing bees and the plight of zoo animals during

war. The chapter on “The Ecology of Exterminism” deals with the “rat projects” of the 1950s that sought to discover the secret of how rats survived in a radioactive environment following a nuclear test. It suggests that, while humans and animals became “co-constituted in the cold war period according to a logic defined by a political culture centered on war,” those same kinds of inferences also gave rise to ecological understanding, and a compelling alternative to cold war logic which suggested that nuclear war might be both possible and survivable.

Paul Huebener begins the second section of the book with a chapter entitled “Recognizing and Resisting Animal Subjectivity in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars*.” Huebener suggests that Findley uses the violence of war as a parallel to the “everyday insanity of the denial of subjectivity to animals” to the point where the word “military” is a synonym for “society.” However, while the point is well made that war is always a “brutal equalizer” of human and animal bodies, the problem of whether or not an author can effectively convey animal subjectivity remains a vexing one. Huebener concludes his analysis of *The Wars* by pointing out that the novel “is not simply a calling out of social injustice, but a reflection of deep cultural discomfort over the notion of animal personhood, and an acknowledgment of the high stakes involved in the radical rethinking of subjectivity.” This call for a rethinking of subjectivity underscores most of the articles in this thoughtful and interesting book, and is perhaps the most important theme which emerges from it.

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