

**Book Review**

Éric Baratay

**Bêtes des tranchées. Des vécus oubliés**

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**Abstract**

Millions of animals have been involved in the First World War. Used as warfare tools, they carried out their roles following their own behaviours. They often had a name and they sacrificed themselves to save their humans. Apart from these military animals, there were a large number of others affected by the war: domestic and farm animals abandoned by the fleeing civilians, animals that were butchered to feed the troops and wild animals. Even though some historians dealt with the issue of animals at war, their research concentrated above all on the humans who owned them. Compared to the existing literature, this book offers a different perspective. Reading history from the ethological point of view, the author places the life of the animals at the centre of his research.

Keywords: war animals; history; ethology; human-animal relationship.

**Resumen**

Millones de animales han estado involucrados en la Primera Guerra Mundial. Utilizados como herramientas militares, desempeñaron sus funciones siguiendo sus propios comportamientos. A menudo tenían un nombre y se sacrificaban para salvar a sus humanos. Aparte de estos animales soldados, hubo un gran número de otros afectados por la guerra: animales domésticos y de granja abandonados por los civiles que huían, animales que fueron matados para alimentar a las tropas, animales salvajes. Aunque algunos historiadores trataron el tema de los animales en guerra, su investigación se concentró sobre todo en los humanos que los poseían. Comparado con la literatura existente, este libro marca un cambio en la perspectiva habitual. Al leer la historia desde el punto de vista etológico, el autor sitúa la vida de los animales en el centro de su investigación.

Palabras clave: animales de guerra; historia; etología; relación humano-animal.

The centenary of the First World War (1914-1918) was celebrated in many countries. Books, conventions and exhibitions reminded the public of those terrible years, during which Europe was the theatre of atrocities, destruction and death. Together with the soldiers and the civilians, there were also other living beings influenced by the horror: animals. Used in conflicts ever since Antiquity, animals often had a fundamental role in military strategy and logistics<sup>1</sup>. Their presence was massive even during World War I, when the conflict expanded and a series of adverse situations made the use of the technologies of the time unserviceable. Horses, mules, donkeys, dogs, pigeons, canaries and cats turned out to be useful for transport, surveillance, communications, espionage and gas detection. Bovines, poultry, rabbits and pork were essential to feed the troops. Even wild fauna got involved in the conflict. There has not been much written about the fate of these animals<sup>2</sup>. The authors who have spoken about them, have done so from a human perspective, even when they admitted the importance of the animals to which they were sentimentally attached<sup>3</sup>.

A book published in 2013 represents a change from this anthropocentric view. Written by Éric Baratay, professor of contemporary history of the University of Lyon 3 and expert in animal history<sup>4</sup>, this book relates the life of the animals overcome by the war and then forgotten.

The research methodology is interesting, even though some criticisms have been voiced about it<sup>5</sup>. The author hints that military historians have spoken about animals, above all equine, for their military use, describing their technical aspects on the same level as that of war tool. Since military archives concentrate above all on the human protagonists of the wars, the author has used other sources to have news on the animals, such as veterinary reports, letters, diaries, novels and photographs. However, even these testimonials are influenced by the attitude that the humans of the time had towards animals. It must be also kept in consideration that many soldiers have preferred to forget the horrors of the war, even when these regarded animals. The originality of the author lies in having read these sources from an ethological perspective. It should also be noted that, during the post First World War decades, science has made huge progress in terms of discoveries on the lives of animals. This knowledge allowed him to describe the individual and collective behaviour of animals, making them the main characters of the events. In other words, ethology combined with history, allowed the author to represent the experience of these animals, without the risk of giving them a human aspect.

When explaining his approach, the author reveals that the tendency of historians has been that of forgetting the animals involved in the First World War. Even though various soldiers and veterans have given tribute to their unlucky companions, from 1930 onwards, official historic records obscured their memory. Historians began dealing with these animals since the 1970s, during the same period when the debate on animal matters starting taking hold in the western world. Even in the studies on war animals, it is interesting to note that the Anglo-Saxons produced about two-thirds of the existing literature, followed by the Italians. In any case, the rare historians who have dealt with this topic have done so maintaining an anthropological approach. In other words, they described the use of animals for military purposes, the function of veterinary services by the armies and also the sentimental bond between soldiers and animals, even though always subordinating the latter to the needs of man. Thanks to the increasing interest towards animals in the civil society, events have also been organised for the public (e.g. exhibitions on animals on the battle front, conferences etc.), created specific internet sites and published educational books even for a younger public. However, as the author points out, even this praiseworthy initiative deals with the condition of the animals through human eyes<sup>6</sup>.

Taking into consideration that history does not belong only to humans, the author provides a new reading of events: animals, from military tools, become living beings that have experienced negative

<sup>1</sup> See generally, PÖPPINGHEGE, R., (Hg.), *Tiere im Krieg. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Paderborn 2009); MONESTIER, M., *Les animaux-soldats. Histoire militaire des animaux des origines à nos jours* (Paris 1996)

<sup>2</sup> See generally, HEDIGER, R., (dir.), *Animals and War. Studies of Europe and North America* (Boston 2012); BALDIN, D., (dir.), *La guerre des animaux 1914-1918* (Paris 2007); BUCCIOL, E., *Animali al fronte. Protagonisti oscuri della Grande Guerra* (Portogruaro 2003); GARDINER, J., *The Animal's War: Animals in wartime from the First World War to the present day* (London 2006); FABI, L., *Guerra bestiale: uomini e animali nella Grande Guerra* (Cremona 2004); COOPER, J., *Animals in War* (London 1983)

<sup>3</sup> See generally, QUILICI, F., *Umili eroi: storia degli animali nella Grande Guerra* (Milano 2016); DEREK, J.M., *Héros oubliés: les animaux dans la Grande Guerre* (Villers-sur-Mer 2014); BULANDA, S., *Soldiers in fur and feathers. The animals that served in World War I – Allied Forces* (Crawford 2013); FABI, G., *Il bravo soldato mulo. Storie di uomini e animali nella Grande Guerra* (Milano 2012)

<sup>4</sup> See generally, BARATAY, E., *Biographies animales. Des vies retrouvées* (Paris 2017); *Le point de vue animal. Une autre version de l'histoire* (Paris 2012)

<sup>5</sup> BARATAY, E., *Bêtes des tranchées. Des vécus oubliés* (Paris 2013), rev. PEARSON, C., in *H-France Review*, 14/167 (2014) 1-3

<sup>6</sup> BARATAY, E., *Bêtes des tranchées. Des vécus oubliés* (Paris 2013) 9 ss.

emotions (e.g. hunger, cold, endeavours, abuse massacres, etc.) and positive feelings (e.g. the affective bond towards the humans with whom these animals shared their daily life). These living beings have shown individual behaviours, the nature of which was not yet known at the time of events, but that science revealed decades later. Thanks to this it is possible to change the way we narrate history<sup>7</sup>.

The number of animals involved in the First World War is difficult to calculate. Armies mobilised millions of horses, dogs and messenger pigeons. To these add the myriad of dogs, cats and farm animals abandoned by fleeing civilians, animals butchered to feed the troops, birds attracted into the no man's lands, mice and insects trapped in the trenches and other wild animals.

The author describes the condition of the horses<sup>8</sup>, considered war animals par excellence in the collective imagery. Before being recruited, the horses were examined in conditions that often did not take into account their wellbeing. Contrary to the horses used for transportation, in the mines and in the industry, the farmers' and privates' horses suffered a greater stress, as they were not used to working in groups and with riders that changed continuously. Many horses were imported from America and underwent the stress of the trip and adaptation to a different environment. Many got ill and were euthanized. Once on the front, their work was very hard. They pulled canons and ambulances, transported ammunitions and camp equipment working till they dropped to the ground out of exhaustion. They also showed their own behaviours<sup>9</sup> (e.g. as at times they had to be separated from other horses for incompatibility). Other times they were used for battles without any previous training and had to endure the stress of them: noises, explosions, dust, intense light that caused them eye pain. They had to endure forced marches in harsh weather and move over rugged terrains. Tired, wounded and hungry, they were medicated with whatever means were available. Even harder was the destiny of mules and donkeys, always considered to be burden-carrying beasts due to their more docile character and being accustomed to fatigue.

After the horses, dogs were much used by the armies in the camps<sup>10</sup>. Their services gave different results, which depended on the characteristics of the dog and on the quality of the training they had received. Used mainly on the alpine front, these dogs transported medical material, sacks and blankets on their backs. They also had the task of searching for the wounded who, after the battle, lay on the vast fields. This service become useless after the introduction of new military techniques, by which the wounded would be found close to the trenches. The dogs who previously found them lost their job in a certain way, and became pets or strays. Others were used to drag the stretchers with the wounded and their destiny depended on the congeniality or dislike of the nursing staff. The guard dogs had, on the other hand, more success, thanks to their hearing and smelling senses. Still, however, they were not welcomed and treated as should have been for various reasons, among which the soldier change on the front lines and the fact that many of them were not used to having empathic relations with the dogs, as in civil life of the time. These dogs were exposed to great stress for having to adapt in making new relations with humans who left them soon enough, for death, wounds or transfers. The stress increased if the dog passed from a loving human to a cold human who was not inclined to consider its needs. After the bombardments destroyed the normal communication ways, dogs turned out to be useful to transfer messages from different places. Lighter and faster than humans, they rallied through the front lines with a great capability of adaptation which brought them to dominate once again the new environment in which they were, to cross arduous lands, barbed wire fences, forests and destroyed villages and to dodge random shots or fired by the enemy who had every interest to shoot them down.

Other animals used in large numbers were pigeons<sup>11</sup>. These birds were very popular as messengers and revealed to be useful in circumstances in which men and dogs could not transmit messages because other communication ways were destroyed due to the battles and bombardments. The author describes the way in which they were manipulated and the stressful conditions they had to endure. Many suffered the cold and the rain. Others suffocated in the gasses or fell in the no man's lands where they would be killed to avoid that their messages fell in the hands of the enemy. In any case, they carried out extraordinary services. Many of them, such as Vaillant, had a name and matriculation number.

This book is also a fresco of the woes<sup>12</sup> and suffering<sup>13</sup> of the animals involved in the war, those on the front as well as those belonging to civilians. Apart from dogs and cats, there were uncountable abandoned pets, locked in farms or let free in nature. Many died hit by bullets or burnt alive in the stables.

<sup>7</sup> Also see, BARATAY, E., Pour une histoire éthologique et une éthologie historique, in *Etudes rurales*, 189 (2012) 91-106

<sup>8</sup> BARATAY, E., *Bêtes des tranchées. Des vécus oubliés* (Paris 2013) 21 ss.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 103 ss.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 83 ss.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 83 ss.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 119 ss.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 165 ss.

The fate of these animals was particularly harsh, because they were not used to roam without food, water or shelter, stressed by the loud noises of the fighters and the uproar of battles. Some soldiers, who had been farmers in their civil life, sometimes milked the cows to ease their pain and to feed on their milk.

There were animals who tried to unite with men, but who were sent away or killed for necessity or cruelty. The soldiers often shot animals to avoid them making noises. Other times they shot them for fun, between a truce and another, being used to killing other living beings. Even though it was prohibited to pillage, some soldiers caught yard animals (poultry, rabbits, etc.) and killed them to eat them.

During the war there was an increase of meat consumption among the troops. The soldiers ate a large quantity of meat far greater than that available during their civil life. The British used above all canned meat, whereas the French and Italians preferred fresh meat. The Germans also followed this example due to the crisis in the food industry. To make sure that fresh meat was available, entire herds were sent to the front that had been bought elsewhere. Far from their environment and similar, those animals travelled in stressful conditions, packed in overpopulated trucks, with low ceilings, trampled over, sick, subject to aggressions and infections. Their trip ended at the front, where they would be slaughtered with a blow in the head or their throat slit<sup>14</sup>.

Although its research is limited to the Western Front, Baratay's book is innovative, well written and documented. The ethological approach of historical issues related to animals is an excellent way to place them, with their emotions, at the centre of war events side by side with humans. By describing the lives of animals, the author did not forget about the soldiers who sacrificed their lives: the book is dedicated to them too. Those who wish to read the history of animals during the first world conflict, explained in another manner, should read this publication.

Furthermore, this book could also be interesting for law researchers, because animals continue to be involved in wars, especially the wild animals. However, international humanitarian law ignores them, having mainly an anthropocentric vision. The authors who have written about the theme of war animals and law are rare<sup>15</sup>. Thus the development of research<sup>16</sup>, even in this niche, is a worthy initiative.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 119 ss.

<sup>15</sup> See generally, NOWROT, K., Animals at war: the status of "animal soldiers" under international humanitarian law, in *Historical Social Research* 40/4 (2015) 128-150; HEMPTINNE, J. de, The Protection of Animals during Warfare, in *AJIL*, 111 (2017) 272-276, <https://doi.org/10.1017/aju.2017.69>

<sup>16</sup> See, <http://www.mpil.de/en/pub/research/areas/public-international-law/global-animal-law.cfm>