

## Book Review Section

BORIA SAX, *Animals in the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats and the Holocaust*. New York: Continuum Books, 2000.

An intriguing fact quoted in this excellent study of animals other than human and Nazism notes that veterinarians as a whole had the highest level of Nazi party membership of any professional group in Germany. This fact becomes less surprising as one follows Sax's demonstration of the degree to which Nazi philosophy and practices were deeply bound up with a contradictory complex of myths, categorizations, laws, dietary habits, and racist biology around the figure of the animal. At the end of the book, there are two revealing appendices. One sets out the clauses of an extensive Law on Animal Protection passed in May 1938, which includes provisions on vivisection, cruelty, the treatment of animals in filmmaking, tail docking, and castration. The second is a chronology of selected legislation—32 items—on animals and nature from April 1933 to February 1942, which begins with a law on the slaughter of animals and ends with a decree prohibiting Jews from keeping pets.

It is to his great credit that Sax describes this history in such a thoughtful manner—despite the often dramatic nature of the subject matter—and gives such a broad and accessible account of a culture whose inhumane attitude toward human life often was in complete contrast to a humane or celebratory attitude toward the animal.

Sax identifies two important strands in the Nazi view toward animals and nature. The first is specific to Nazism and concerns the militarization of nature; the second looks to the biblical roots of animal taboo, ritual, and sacrifice that he sees as underpinning Western attitudes toward animals. Sax writes, “the Nazis did not simply anthropomorphize the biotic community; they also militarised it. Nature became a sort of grand battlefield” (p. 109). This militarization is reflected in a variety of attitudes toward animals such as the celebration of predator animals such as the wolf.

In 1934, Germany became the first nation in modern times to place the wolf under protection. Sax points out that as there were no wolves in Germany, this was merely a symbolic gesture but also had to do with the casting of eyes toward those countries such as Poland that still had wolves.

Furthermore, there was an anti-Semitic implication. According to Mosaic law, wolves were unclean, the enemies of flocks and shepherds, and the Jewish people were frequently identified with sheep (p. 75). The influence of eugenics and Social Darwinism is a further indication of this militarized mind-set and was used to justify the exclusion and annihilation of certain categories of human being.

Sax makes an important point in relation to this when he claims that the Nazi outlook, strictly speaking, was not anthropocentric. Laws to protect animals were not formulated for human interests but for the sake of the animals themselves. This was part of a more general re-ordering of living beings. In the hierarchies conceived for their ideal of the Germanic nation, these “might include certain animals and exclude many citizens” (p. 42). This also meant excluding “inferior citizens” such as Gypsies and, later, Jews from owning dogs. In fact, Jews were banned from keeping all types of pet and were forbidden to hunt. Thus, the superiority of certain animals over certain humans was enshrined in legislation.

The second important strand relates to notions of ritual and sacrifice. Several of Sax’s chapters begin with quotations from the Old Testament, and he frequently refers to Biblical attitudes toward animals and their impact on later thinking. To some extent, this perspective also derives from Sax’s longstanding interest in animal mythology as seen in his books such as *The Serpent and the Swan: The Animal Bride in Folklore and Literature* (1998) and *The Mythical Zoo* (2001). For Sax, Nazi ideas of hygiene (taboo) and slaughter (sacrifice) are seen as extensions or, in relation to Judaism, inversions of more archaic practices. Examples of this include the contrasting Nazi and Jewish attitudes toward pork; slaughter practices; the disputes around kosher slaughter; and divergent attitudes to blood, whereby the Jewish avoidance of blood was different from the manner in which the Nazis celebrated its mystical significance. These elements all retain a religious quality in even the most modern of slaughter practices: “as the Nazi state placed itself at the centre of religious life, the divide between bureaucratic regulation and religious ritual became indistinct” (p. 157). This does not mean that the Nazis were in any sense consistent in their treatment of animals. Despite Hitler’s affections for his dogs or Himmler’s dislike of hunting, Sax notes all sorts of discrepancies between the spirit of animal protection and the enforcement of laws, which he describes as, at best, “erratic.”

There is no doubt that Sax’s book requires us to look beyond this particular case study to wider issues that still confront us concerning the relationships between modernity and slaughter and the pathological traits that are commonplace in human-animal relationships. But it also represents an important and much needed step toward more historical studies on animals in the twentieth century, an area currently less well

served than the nineteenth century or the early modern period. Although Sax's main concern is with linking Nazism to a long cultural trajectory mainly going back to the Bible, he also includes important material on the late nineteenth century background, particularly relating to debates about Jewish slaughter practices. This indicates a number of questions specifically centering on European attitudes toward the animal in the context of modernization and technology in the early twentieth century. Furthermore it highlights an intriguing, historical issue centered on the idea of animal protection and political ideology. There is a parallel ambivalence manifest in the mixed attitude of veneration and contempt that Sax notes in the logic of sacrifice and its more secular expression in the example of Nazism—particularly in the oscillation between extremes of humane and inhumane behavior. What is most disconcerting about this ambivalence is that it does not always apply. There are features of the treatment of animals that are unambiguously humane. But if this might be true at a local level, the broader picture is much darker and suggests, as the word “erratic” indicates above, a principle of arbitrariness that drives this ambivalence. If this book is indeed a moral exemplar from which we still have things to learn concerning our treatment of animals, then for me the arbitrariness of human cruelty may be its most disturbing lesson.

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### **Note**

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