



European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire

ISSN: 1350-7486 (Print) 1469-8293 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cerh20>

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To cite this article: Hilda Kean (2015) The Dog and Cat Massacre of September 1939 and the People's War, European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire, 22:5, 741-756

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13507486.2015.1070125>



Published online: 03 Nov 2015.



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The Dog and Cat Massacre of September 1939 and the People's War

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(Received 15 February 2015; accepted 13 June 2015)

During the first week of the Second World War around 400,000 companion animals in London alone were killed at their owner's behest. This was not a state directive. Little is known of this event although details of what was called at the time the pet 'Holocaust' or 'Cat and Dog Massacre' were not suppressed. Far from the Home Front of the Second World War in Britain being a 'People's War', as popularly described, in different ways the animal–human relationship was prominent. The massacre – and subsequent animal–human relationships – tends to undermine the notion of both a positive and exclusively human 'People's War'.

Keywords: massacre; animals; dogs; Home Front; Second World War

Introduction

At the outbreak of the Second World War, thousands of children were evacuated.¹ The popular press urged parents to write to their offspring reassuring them of the fate of their animals:

If they have left pets behind them, write to them and tell them what you have done with them, whether they have been sent to friends in the country, or sent away to places of safety. Many children feel a great responsibility towards their animals and they may be worrying about them.²

And parents did write such letters. A poignant letter to a child evacuated later in the war on the Benares ship to Canada was but one example. The letter intended to reach Beryl on her arrival was 'signed' by Chummy with his paw mark: but the little girl never received this cheery greeting, the ship had been torpedoed and the child was lost at sea.³

Stories of evacuated children concerned about their pets sat in stark contrast with the press reports of the German Ambassador who, together with his staff, quit their Embassy premises in London on the outbreak of war abandoning Baerchen, the Chow dog of Ribbentrop. The paper gave words to the dog accusing his master of cruelty: '... his was a smell of hatred and cruelty. It sent to my mind something that made me cringe...'⁴ The treatment of this dog typified, according to the front-page story in the *Daily Mirror*, the cause of the war: 'That's what Britain is fighting – the inherent brutality of Nazi-ism, that has no justice or human feeling – even for its pets.'⁵ As if to exemplify this supposed national differentiation, some 200 people purportedly competed for the honour of taking in Baerchen.⁶

In the same week as the press portrayed the British as benign animal lovers, approximately 400,000 dogs and cats – a figure later corroborated both by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and Brigadier Clabby, the author of the official history of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps – were killed at their

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owner's behest in London alone.⁷ A figure of 400,000 seemed to represent around 26% of cats and dogs in London alone.⁸ This animal death toll was more than six times the number of civilian deaths on the Home Front caused by enemy bombing during the entire war in the whole country.⁹ So shocking was this to animal-loving individuals and charities that, amongst others, the National Canine Defence League (now Dogs Trust) (NCDL) referred to the killing as 'the September Holocaust'.¹⁰

Throughout Europe, and beyond, the impact of the 1939–45 war upon animals – as well as humans – has been widely noted. The plethora of examples include the slaughter of millions of Denmark's cows, pigs and laying hens due to lack of imported fodder¹¹ to the sounds of the lowing of cattle, abandoned by human refugees passing from the countryside, heard in Paris as the Germans entered on 14 June 1940¹², to the actions of Foxel, a small frightened terrier in Berlin, licking the hand of a woman, sheltering, like him, from the Allies' bombardment.¹³

What makes the treatment of non-human animals on the Home Front in Britain interesting is the context of the mythologising of the 1939–45 war. It has been often called the 'People's War'¹⁴ and has embodied features that show British people in a favourable light. The words 'People's War' also emphasise by their omission that the war was about humans (not animals) although dogs (and other companion animals) played a large part in the events on the Home Front. Irrespective of dogs' actual role in providing emotional support as companions to humans or their 'professional' skills such as sniffing out human and non-human animals buried in rubble after air raids they were initially employed as representations for propaganda purposes. In his recent work Richard Overy has elaborated the idea of the 1939–45 war as, at least in Britain, a time of total war. Such a totality, I suggest, included human and non-human animals. This is particularly relevant when considering the dog and cat massacre in September 1939. In her illuminating theoretical exploration of the role of pets, Animal Studies scholar Erica Fudge has explored the contradictions in humans' relationships with companion animals. Noting the disposability of such animals – for every four healthy companion animals one is destined to be killed unnecessarily – she asks: 'How can we so easily kill the things we apparently love?'¹⁵ Such a comment evokes the taboos, complexities and contradictions inherent in pet-owning cultures. The decision to kill a pet is, though it is not always openly admitted, an essential feature of pet-owning cultures: studying the ways in which pet-killing is discussed and 'executed' in past cultures and historical periods provides a means of illuminating wider socio-cultural historical contexts and changes in animal–human relationships.¹⁶ To date scant work within Animal Studies has focused on the re-interpreting of historical moments, such as warfare or industrialisation, through an animal lens.¹⁷ Instead there has been an understandable tendency to focus on animal-centred issues previously not the subject of historical inquiry, such as vivisection or zoos.¹⁸ Popular histories such as those written by Jilly Cooper and Juliet Gardiner on war while purporting to focus on animals instead tend towards human reactions.¹⁹ Although various scholars have explored the role of companion animals²⁰ however, apart from the recent work of, say, Philip Howell on 'The Dog Fancy at War' on the First World War or Robert Kirk's research on the nature of the training of dogs in warfare, the topic of dogs in warfare has remained relatively unexplored.²¹

My historical reading of the September animal slaughter draws on specifically animal-focused material such as that of animal charities but also on diaries and surveys in which animals feature as an integral – but often subsequently unacknowledged – part. This essay has three themes as a focus. The first is the background to the massacre and the ways in which companion animals had been previously disposed of primarily in the 1914–18 war

and the Munich Crisis. The second is the different contemporary responses towards the killing at the start of the war. The third theme considers both retrospective reflections on the massacre during the war and an emerging different canine–human relationship.

The September Cat and Dog Massacre of 1939

What happened during the Cat and Dog Massacre of September 1939? It is important to understand that at this point no bombs had actually fallen and none would fall on London – or Britain – until April 1940.²² Nor had the British government issued a diktat or emergency measures requiring animals to be killed: ‘pet’ owners themselves took the decision to kill their animals. This figure of 400,000 dead pets is less than early rumours of 750,000.²³ But it was still more than three times the number of pets killed routinely in a whole year by animal charities in London. The routine killing of thousands of companion animals would include very ill animals as well as those who had become unwanted.²⁴ Quite remarkably, this massacre had happened in just a few days.

On 7 September 1939, the *Times* reported that thousands of cats and dogs had been destroyed and that centres run by animal welfare societies were ‘filled with the bodies of animals and thousands more are being brought in every day’.²⁵ To meet the demand of animal owners seeking to kill their companions the RSPCA had doubled staff at its London clinics, employed night staff at its London HQ and trebled facilities for euthanasia.²⁶ The RSPCA magazine *Animal World* accurately stressed that ‘the clinics of other animal welfare societies were employed in the same way and so the work of destroying animals was continued, day and night, during the first week of the war’.²⁷ The People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) claimed it was ‘almost overwhelmed’ by the thousands of animals brought for destruction. Although the PDSA had the policy that animals should not be needlessly destroyed many hundreds of people insisted that their animals should be killed long before the threat of bombing materialised. The day before war was declared the PDSA received information that ‘all destructors in London were working to full capacity’.²⁸ The small Wood Green Animal Shelter in north London witnessed a queue nearly half a mile long of people waiting to hand over their cats and dogs. On Sunday 3 and Monday 4 September the shelter killed 536 pets.²⁹

Several corporations, animal societies and vets were unable to cope with the burial of so many carcasses so the PDSA offered the use of a meadow in the grounds of a sanatorium where, the charity reported, half a million animals were buried.³⁰ Battersea Dogs’ Home also killed animals at this time. However the charity itself estimated that the Home had killed fewer animals in comparison with ‘what one heard were destroyed in some places’. This was attributed, according to the annual report, to the work of the secretary Mr Healey Tutt in persuading pet owners to take animals home again and referred to ‘the number of grateful letters we have received from some of those who took his advice’.³¹ The NCDL said that so extensive was the slaughter that supplies of chloroform had been exhausted.³²

Background to the Cat and Dog Massacre: was this killing unprecedented?

Aside from the routine killing of unwanted cats and dogs³³, the mass killing in September 1939 was not unprecedented. Of course, no cat, dog, rabbit or canary alive in London in the summer of 1939 would have experienced the First World War some 20 years before. That is, a decision to kill a particular animal was not based on human recollection of the ‘current’ animal’s specific behaviour at that time. Perhaps, however, some people remembered the mood of Parliament when some MPs vented their spleen against pets of

all sorts. As Philip Howell has recently analysed in the context of the First World War: '[D]ogs were uniquely vulnerable to the revocation of their privileged status as human companions.'³⁴ In 1916 Ernest Pretyman, Conservative MP for Chelmsford had declared of dogs: 'Their usefulness varies greatly, and it is certainly desirable to reduce their numbers in urban districts, where many of them serve no useful purpose.'³⁵ Echoing such sentiments Sir Philip Magnus, a prominent promoter of vivisection, had encouraged unsuccessfully at that time a dog ban in cities since these animals both consumed food and left London pavements unhygienic. 'The undesirable', that is, stray dogs and mongrels rather than established breeds he declared, 'could be suppressed altogether'.³⁶ Despite provocative and threatening calls for a massacre of companion animals on the floor of the House of Commons, no mass killing ensued. Statements by charities and letters to the *Times*, while defending the reputation of companion animals, conveyed the ways in which animal owners had carried on living with their dogs and cats. The NCDL had retorted: 'Dog haters are not punctuated by patriotism nor by the desire to safeguard the food of the people; they are attempting to take advantage of the country's position in order to attain their own selfish and vindictive ends.'³⁷ Resisting the vilification of canines, dog owner John Sandeman had explained that, apart from biscuits, his dog only ate waste gristle and skin that would otherwise go in the kitchen fire: 'I feel that to sacrifice him would be a cruel injustice worthy of every resistance. The people who do not keep dogs are those who are raising the question but their cry is founded on ignorance ...'³⁸ Another correspondent had protested that his dog was fed on fish trimmings and lights with 'a bit of carrot, parsnip and potato' from his own garden.³⁹ Clearly people had made special efforts to feed their animals with what was available during the 1914–18 war. Animal killings, though not on the same scale as that of September 1939, had also happened during the Munich Crisis in September 1938 when animal charities had acted promptly seeking to prevent the killing of animals. Within the space of 48 hours 3000 people had appealed to the RPSCA headquarters for aid.⁴⁰ The NCDL experienced a similar demand. Many people had brought their dogs to be killed, but the League had refused to do this, urging dog owners to wait to see the outcome of the Chamberlain/Hitler talks and established a register of places for the evacuation of animals outside London.⁴¹ At the Battersea Dogs' Home, 'the storm blew over for the time being.'⁴² However at the Our Dumb Friends League (ODFL, now Blue Cross): 'Many having given way to a feeling of desperation, or panic, wished to have their pets put to sleep there and then, and so reduce at least some part of their [that is human] anxieties.' The League had urged people 'not to be stampeded into premature action, but often without success'.⁴³ The unqualified popular vet, Lloyd-Jones⁴⁴, also remembered the effect of the Munich Crisis on animals:

Nice friendly people who I knew to be devoted to their pets panicked and brought them in to be destroyed. I pleaded with them, argued with them, lost my temper but they insisted. Some I managed to find new homes for, but even that was becoming almost impossible. So many had to be put to sleep.⁴⁵

Because of the needless killing during the Munich Crisis there was discussion at government level, in the veterinary profession and in animal charities about arrangements for animals in the event of the, almost inevitable, war.

Thus, as the crisis deepened, in January 1939 the PDSA had contacted the Home Office arguing that attention needed to be given to the management of companion animals in war, perhaps even evacuation procedures. By March the Commissioner of Metropolitan Police, Commander Pulling, was also urging action on the Home Office including 'the establishment in rural parts of homes for the voluntary accommodation of cats and dogs.'⁴⁶ A month later he also urged action on the Home Office writing that:

One is well aware of Animal Societies' internecine politics, but I have been assured by the Secretaries of most of these Societies that they are anxious to offer their full resources and services with no charge on public funds . . . at a risk of being indiscreet, I may tell you that most of them are feeling considerably hurt that their offers made many months ago to the Home Office have, as yet, received little more than bare acknowledgement.⁴⁷

In the month before the massacre, The National Air Raid Precautions Animals Committee (NARPAC) was finally established under the aegis of the Home Office in August 1939 'to advise on all problems affecting animals in wartime'.⁴⁸ However, the Home Office declined to establish evacuation facilities for animals. Nor were companion animals going to be accepted in communal air-raid shelters. This lack of intervention was in many respects consistent with the framework of legislation towards animals established from the early decades of the nineteenth century.⁴⁹ But the state was wary of legislative intervention although apparently 'a good many people', according to the NARPAC 1939 pamphlet, 'have the idea that if air raids come, official steps will be taken to send all animals out of the danger area. This is quite untrue.'⁵⁰ That is, some people were almost thinking of their animals at this time as children whose safety was to be protected by the government. NARPAC encouraged people to take animals with them if they were moving to the country: it argued explicitly against the routine killing of animals:

Those who are staying at home should not have their animals destroyed. Animals are in no greater danger than human beings, and the NARPAC plans . . . will ensure that if your animal is hurt it will be quickly treated, or put out of its pain if it is too badly hurt to be cured. Another very strong point against destroying animals is that they play an extremely important part in keeping down rats and mice in our cities.⁵¹

The latter point was quickly proved correct: by the middle of September 1939 the authorities were 'begging people to keep their pets, if possible' because of the threat of 'vermin'.⁵² Such was this shift in official thinking about the importance of animals that by spring 1942 the BBC was defining 'cats doing work of national importance'.⁵³ It had been made known that dogs would not be permitted in communal shelters, probably because of concerns about hygiene⁵⁴, but this does not seem to have been an explicit factor in the decision by people to kill pets. Small dogs' shelters (and even gas masks) were commercially available at the time of the massacre.⁵⁵ People could also shelter with their companion animals, in their own Anderson shelters in their back gardens.⁵⁶ Moreover, as the *Animals' Defender*, the journal of the National Anti-Vivisection Society (NAVS), would report in October 1940: 'Dogs are still not officially admitted to public shelters, though a humane-minded marshal will employ his blind eye.'⁵⁷

Panic might be considered to explain the massacre. There had been a widespread and bleak view that modern war meant total war including systematic aerial bombardment of civilian communities.⁵⁸ Indeed, the idea of panic was embedded in press coverage of the cat and dog massacre. For instance, when the *Times* first reported the animal massacre it said there was a 'widespread and persistent rumour' that it was now compulsory to get rid of domestic animals while reassuring readers that 'there is no truth whatever in this rumour.'⁵⁹ Psychologists and psychiatrists had been employed to advise on measures to prevent panic and to improve morale in the event of war. Leading psychological experts believed that civilians, unlike trained soldiers, would be unable to picture realistically what air raids meant and would suffer 'forced passivity without any means of escape or retaliation' which might result in directing emotions not towards the unseen enemy but towards 'his own side'.⁶⁰ One solution proposed to counter 'isolationist individualism', particularly in London, was to create tasks to combat feelings of helplessness.⁶¹ Attention to 'panic' might have been bolstered, in part, by official thinking in the years leading up to

the outbreak of the Second World War. In 1937 the Committee of Imperial Defence had forecast 1.8 million casualties in the first two months, of which one third would die. By the following year the Cabinet committee predicted 3500 bombs on London on the first day of the war.⁶² These apocalyptic prophesies were not borne out by the reality of life on the Home Front.

In the years following the outbreak of the Second World War, there was no such mass human death on the Home Front, or a mass psychological collapse in human mental health.⁶³ There was in fact little panic. A voluntary committee had been established in London to consider what wartime emergency mental services would be needed, concluding by 1941 that ‘there has been no outbreak of war neuroses in the civilian population.’⁶⁴ Wilfred Bion, the future psychoanalyst, who worked at the Tavistock Clinic during the war, had noted it was important for people not just to feel involved at work but also at home. Here the ‘head of a unit’ needed to act the most responsibly.⁶⁵ Putting up blackout curtains, sending away children, actions dealing with the ‘normal’ home life, and, of course, killing a family pet was to some extent about creating some control over human (and animal) lives in a situation in which ordinary people had no control at all – and, of course, privileging humans over animals.

Individual stories

I am suggesting that ‘panic’ or ‘being kind’ are too simple explanations for what occurred. It might be helpful to explore some individual examples since such accounts seem to suggest that what determined whether dogs were killed (or evacuated formally or informally) depended less on the nature of the dog or the circumstances of the human than on the pre-existing relationship between the two of them. At the same time as some animal owners were queuing up to have their animals killed, others were seeking more benign solutions such as evacuation of some sort. By looking at individual stories we might start to unpack some of the more generalised explanations. One example is the story of Angus, a black retriever dog living with a shy doctor, who had been called up for military service at the end of August. The doctor’s family was not fond of dogs and the doctor was reluctant to leave until he could find a place where Angus would be well looked after.⁶⁶ Angus was lucky to be helped by Nina, Duchess of Hamilton and Brandon, a leading figure in the Animal Defence and Anti-Vivisection Society (ADAVS), who, recalling the Munich Crisis when thousands of people had panicked, leaving London in their cars and only stopping to leave their pets with animal welfare charities to be killed⁶⁷, determined this should not happen again. In August 1939 Nina had broadcast on the radio that animals should be brought to Animal Defence House in St James off Piccadilly in central London and they would then be taken to the sanctuary created at her country home at Ferne near Salisbury.⁶⁸ Some dogs were also tied to the railings of her house in St John’s Wood where she set up temporary kennels. They too would be successfully evacuated alongside Angus with his label, like those worn by evacuated children, declaring ‘I am Angus.’ He was not an anonymised, generic, canine but an individual being like an evacuated child. And like a child he needed a label in case he got lost. Aside from commercial kennels such as those at Hackbridge (previously used for training dogs in the 1914–18 war) that advertised to take dogs ‘for the duration’, there were other charitable operations.⁶⁹ Buster Lloyd-Jones took in many animals including cats, dogs, monkeys, goats, two donkeys and a horse.⁷⁰ He also noted that not all evacuated animals were wanted back at the end of the war: they were now five years older or their breed had become unfashionable. ‘Owners had lost interest in the Labradors, the Dalmatians, the Alsatians that had once been the centre of their lives.’

He remarked, however, that about 10 Dachshunds were collected by owners who looked, 'a bit sheepish ... Dachshunds were small enough to be fashionable again.'⁷¹

The killing of Prince, a Labrador, in a narrative told by art critic and well-known dog lover Brian Sewell, illustrates a different canine–human relationship. In different places he has written about his first relationship with Prince. In the first volume of his autobiography Sewell has described how his stepfather Robert killed Prince as the family evacuated from Whitstable on the outbreak of war:

Robert shot him and left his body on the beach for the tide to sweep away. Packed among the suitcases in the car I saw Prince led toward the sea and heard the shot. I did not cry, as I would now, but a cold, hard, vengeful aversion lodged in my memory.⁷²

It was Brian, rather than Robert, who had a close relationship with the dog and his adult sentiments combined with those of the child. The stepfather was not being called up to fight, and no evacuation of this coastal town was planned at this time. It was not external material factors that determined the canine death but the ones within the human–animal family.

Geography as such did not provide a rational explanation for the killing of animals. Those living in the suburbs, who would have had little reason to panic about a possible mass bombardment of London, also killed their pets. In her contemporaneous diary Daphne Pennfather, then an 18-year-old living in Surrey, covered the short life of the family dog. Arriving by train as a puppy in May – a practice criticised at the time by animal charities – the dog was killed by the autumn. This was recorded as an activity preparing for war alongside making black-out curtains, destroying the rose bed to make a vegetable patch and hosting tea for evacuated children.⁷³

Gwen Brown, then a teenager living in suburban Chiswick in west London, remembers that the neighbour killed his two Borzoi dogs:

I think they were the first Borzois I'd seen ... They were beautiful. I thought they were lovely ... We were shocked, the whole road was shocked. They'd all got cats and dogs and things, and nothing had happened at that stage. The air raid siren went almost the moment that war was declared, which was just a mistake, and everyone was riveted by this hideous sound ... The war broke out on Sunday and I think he'd had it done by Tuesday or Wednesday, maybe even Monday, I don't know, very very soon, anyway, and the entire road was agog.

Her own family kept their Irish setter dog, Spady, who would continue to live with them until his death in 1943. Refuting the idea of a contagious panic Gwen continues:

Dogs used to sit outside at the gate or wander around on their own. Some of them might have been evacuated, but I didn't hear of any others being killed locally, which is why we were so shocked about the Borzois.⁷⁴

This is an unusual account for various reasons. It is a recently told story and it is not only about the family's dog but that of the neighbours'. Transmitted 'family stories' have often been told by those who were too young at the time to be aware of circumstances outside the home. Thus stories are often of family pets rather than those living with neighbours. Here the rareness of the breed seems to have played a factor in the memory of the then teenager. Although children were seemingly often shielded from the killing within the family this was a distinctive story of a dog-loving family witnessing needless deaths within the street – from which the young woman was not protected.

Reflecting back and subsequent shifts in the canine–human relationship

Many who had killed animals soon regretted it. This was publicly acknowledged in a radio talk promoting the work of NARPAC:

Do not have your pet destroyed . . . At the beginning of the war a certain number of people did this; they have regretted it ever since. To destroy a faithful friend when there is not need to do so, is yet another way of letting war creep into your home.⁷⁵

From 1941 Mass Observation conducted various interviews to ascertain the relationship between humans and their dogs. Although owners were never explicitly asked about their attitude towards the September massacre this is implicit in many of the responses. Thus a 60-year-old man in Neasden in northwest London explained that many people who had kept their dogs during the war were doing this as a form of self-sacrifice showing the depth of their own emotion: 'I think people who go on keeping dogs now are really proving how fond they are of them. The people who really couldn't be bothered gave them up as soon as it became a little expensive or a little more difficult to keep them.'⁷⁶ Another interviewee in Cricklewood in August 1941 explained: 'I know a lot of people who did get rid of them and now they wish they had them back.'⁷⁷ (Yet in the same year the NCDL noted that there were 'a considerable number of people who regard dogs as un-necessary'.⁷⁸)

The overview essay of the Mass Observation survey on *Dogs in Wartime* in 1941 concluded that although almost three quarters of those interviewed said they would not get another dog during the war if the current one died: 'It appears that men and women of all classes most certainly do not want to lose their dogs, and that if they were made to, would be very upset.'⁷⁹ One 40-year old female shop worker in Euston told a narrative of a shifting canine-human relationship. Bonny, a little dog had originally been taken in, albeit reluctantly, as she did not want a customer killing him:

I haven't had this dog long. I didn't really want to have him in the first place because I didn't think dogs are right in London, but he had no home. A customer of mine kept talking about him. She had to go away because of her health, and one day she came into the shop and showed him to me and he was such a dear thing I couldn't think of him being killed (she said she'd have to do that) so I said I'd take care [sic] of him.

'Although', she continued, 'he was rather a nuisance at first because he cried so much but then he settled down and he's never been any trouble. He's so sweet! I wouldn't be without him now, he carries my papers and any little thing I ask him to about [sic] don't you Bonny?' Her empathy had been interpreted as being rewarded by the engaging behaviour of the dog.⁸⁰ Such an account is not simply about the dog (or the human) but the way in which they have both related to each other. In so doing a particular relationship had been constructed that had affected both of them. As Erica Fudge has explored in discussing the role of the dog in creating the home of the human, the human herself is also being changed.⁸¹

The behaviour of humans and animals alike were changed by the circumstances of war. And these were circumstances they shared physically. Cats and dogs sheltered together with their keepers. People went to the shelters in their back gardens speedily due to the acute hearing of animals. As one Londoner described it: 'The dog's ears used to go up and it used to run and was in the dug-out before us.'⁸² The material circumstances of war ensured that people became more aware of their animals' physical presence.⁸³ Both dogs and humans – depending on individual personalities – suffered from stress due to aerial bombardment. Animal charities also gave advice on dealing with anxiety in animals: anxiety in humans was often ameliorated by an animal presence.⁸⁴

When interviewing dealers in dog food, Mass Observation noted there was none unable to supply their customers.⁸⁵ Despite the Waste of Food Order 1940 that obliged animal keepers to act 'reasonably', albeit stressing that pets could still be fed⁸⁶, sharing of the same food between humans and animals became widespread. Rationing of food for humans (and restrictions on some of the ingredients of dog biscuits) might suggest

a sharper differentiation between human and canine eating practices, but the opposite occurred. Officials at the Ministry of Agriculture and Food concluded that if they further restricted materials for manufacturers of dog biscuits 'people would probably substitute for them other forms of human food'.⁸⁷ Apparently dogs were consuming around 280,000 tons of food per annum, practically the whole of which was defined as 'human' food which should not have been wasted or food that might have been better used by more 'economically useful' animals.⁸⁸ However pragmatically it was concluded that:

To depict the ravages of dogs into our food supplies will create exasperation amongst the non-dog owners against dog owners, and resentment in dog owners who will deny that their own pets do more than eat a few scraps unfit for human consumption.⁸⁹

That is, there seemed to be less of a distinction between dog and human forms of eating because of the joint war experiences. The restrictions affected both of them: a response was to share more expansively what did exist, whether this was legally permitted or not.⁹⁰

There is much material in official records to also indicate that a positive animal–human relationship would not be willingly breached by any state directive. Thus in 1940 when the Home Office was preparing plans for mass evacuation from the southern coast in the event of invasion it first issued advice to turn off the gas, electricity and water supplies at the main 'and make provision for your animals and birds'. It stated that no cats or dogs would be allowed to accompany humans compulsorily evacuated by train and various plans were made for their killing.⁹¹ But it was subsequently realised that people *would* go to stations with their cats and dogs. Initially plans were laid for reception centres at stations where animals could be housed prior to being 'finally disposed of'.⁹² By 1941 it was noted that neither was there anything in law to prevent evacuees taking animals with them nor would it be desirable to prevent this forcibly: 'Although a certain amount of inconvenience to other passengers would result, the police would not be expected to take forcible action to prevent people from bringing small lapdogs with them.' Realising this might cause problems in reception areas it was nevertheless felt preferable to 'allow them to bring their pets with them if they are sufficiently small, rather than that forcible measures should be taken'.⁹³ This suggests that both animal owners and the state *had* reflected critically on the September 1939 events.

Conclusion

The mass killing at the start of the war *had* been criticised at the time by animal charities and individual animal supporters. It was neither seen as an inevitable consequence of war nor construed as an example of the wartime propaganda of 'Britain can take it.' At the time it was portrayed, as broadcaster Christopher Stone put it, as 'letting war creep into your home'.⁹⁴ Thus Major Mitford Bruce, a dog breeder and writer on dogs – though no animal rights advocate – criticised people killing their dogs. In the *Times* in November 1939 he wrote:

There is daily evidence that large numbers of pet dogs are still being destroyed for no better reason than that it is inconvenient to keep them alive – which, of course, is no reason at all, but merely shows an owner's inability to appreciate his obligations towards his animal.

He rebuffed arguments about lack of food or shelter: horseflesh was available; gas-proof kennels were on the market and kennels existed in safety zones where pets could be evacuated.⁹⁵

Although some (the minority of animal owners it must be remembered), had companion animals killed, the majority did not. Thus Nina Duchess of Hamilton described animals she evacuated, who were 'infinitely precious to their owners, who are in very poor circumstances; sometimes it is their only friend, and whether they have children or not of

their own, these animals are like children to them'. This positive attitude towards those who made arrangements for their pets contrasted with her comment on the thousands of cats and dogs killed in one slaughter-house [sic] with three truck-loads of dead bodies going out from 'a certain animal clinic in London'.⁹⁶ She declared: 'We should be horrified if this had happened abroad. How can we explain such a thing to our foreign friends in this so-called animal-loving England.'⁹⁷

In his 1970s work, *Living through the Blitz*, which drew on Mass Observation reports, Tom Harrison argued that: 'A significant section of Britons, by the way, thought *first* [original emphasis] of their pets ...'⁹⁸ This, of course, is a story we *want* to remember. The mass killing of pets, however, is forgotten and is not part of popular memory: it is not even an explicit part of the recent 'Animals in War' memorial in London's Park Lane. This memorial dedicated to the animal lives lost in war does not acknowledge the killing of pets on the Home Front outlined and discussed in this essay. The memorial depicts warfare happening in places outside the home or even – given the type of animals portrayed – outside Britain itself. In Ilford, on the eastern outskirts of London in the PDSA animal cemetery, Heritage Lottery Funding has restored the headstones of individual animals who had been awarded the Dickin medal for assisting humans in war: the carcasses of the thousands of pets buried in the same site during the first week of the war have not been given such a status.⁹⁹

But perhaps this suggestion – that the deaths inflicted on companion dogs and cats at the start of the war should be remembered in some way – is misguided. For in many ways the killing was *not* part of a war moment but rather part of normative human behaviour towards animals otherwise seen as companions. Because of their simultaneous status of 'family member' and 'other', differentiated animal–human interests led to companion animal deaths.

However, subsequent shared material circumstances throughout the war tended to blur the animal and human divide showing, in different ways, the fragility of this differentiation. Some of the material gathered for this work has been derived from people's family stories: animals have indeed been remembered within personal histories. But far too often they have been forgotten in the construction of broader cultural histories. Such new material and understanding cannot simply be incorporated into existing grand narratives of war.¹⁰⁰ The Dog and Cat Massacre potentially challenges a culture's perception of itself during the war on the Home Front and how we see ourselves and our past today. It also challenges the notion of what it was to be human/animal through an inter-species experience of bombardment – and survival.¹⁰¹

Acknowledgements

Thanks to: the Battersea Dogs' Home and RSPCA for allowing me access to their records; helpful archivists at BBC sound archives, Bishopsgate Institute, Imperial War Museum, Mass Observation; Gwen Brown, Steve Mills, Neil Pemberton, Alison Skipper and Julie-Marie Strange.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. In an important wartime study of the experience of evacuated children, many stated that what they missed were their pets, eliding the animals with their sense of home. The survey of children evacuated from Islington and Tottenham to Cambridge noted that the third most mentioned "miss" for girls was pets, and for boys the eighth; Isaacs, *Cambridge Evacuation*, 68, 70.

2. "Safe . . .," *Daily Mirror*, 4 September 1939, 6.
3. Copy of letter to Miss Beryl Myatt, 21 September 1940, Imperial War Museum, 05/56/12.
4. "By the dog that Ribbentrop deserted!," *Daily Mirror*, 7 September 1939, 10.
5. *Daily Mirror*, 8 September 1939, 1.
6. Turner, *Phoney War*, 114.
7. Kirby and Moss, *Animals were There*, 18–19; Clabby, *A History*, 41.
8. *Times*, 7 September 1939, 3. The *Veterinary Record* had estimated that in London the number of "small animals alone is stupendous." See British Veterinary Association, "ARPs for Animals," 789. The *Veterinary Record* had estimated that in Greater London alone there were 73,000 horses, cattle, sheep and pigs and 2,000,000 dogs and cats. See British Veterinary Association, "Animals and ARPs," 1011.
9. Gilbert gives 60,595 as the total number of "civilian deaths by bombing;" Gilbert, *Second World War*, 746. This figure is corroborated by Overy, *Bombing War*, 194.
10. NCDL, "September Holocaust," 2. Same term used in Zeigler, *London at War*, 74; Calder, *People's War*, 34; Cox, *Diary*, 15 September 1939.
11. Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 19 April 1940, 319.
12. Jackson, *Fall of France*, 174–82. Thanks to Steve Mills for this reference.
13. Anon., *A Woman in Berlin*, 54.
14. See, in particular, Calder, *People's War*.
15. Fudge, *Pets*, 109.
16. Thanks to Neil Pemberton for his comments.
17. Kean "Challenges."
18. See, for example, The Animal Studies Group, *Killing Animals*.
19. Cooper, *Animals in War*; Gardiner, *The Animals' War*.
20. See, for example, Grier, *Pets*; Kete, *The Beast*; Ritvo, *Animal Estate*.
21. Howell, "The Dog Fancy;" Kirk, "In Dogs We Trust?;" Lemish, *War Dogs*.
22. Gilbert, *Second World War*, 17.
23. The figure of 750,000 was given by Sir Robert Gower, president of the RSPCA (British Veterinary Association, "RSPCA annual general meeting"). The RSPCA's own commemorative post-war book *Animals were There*, gave the figure of 400,000 pet animals killed in the first four days of the war, in Greater London. (Kirby and Moss, *Animals were There*, 18–19).
24. It is difficult to calculate the routine figure for pet slaughter since not all charities provided them. Suffice it to say that killing of companion animals was a routine practice. During 1937 the RSPCA killed 61,179 cats and dogs at its headquarters and 43,505 at its branch clinics, some 104,684 in total. Police in London took stray dogs (and cats) to the Battersea Dogs home (and its branch in Bow). If they were not retrieved after a few days they would be killed. In 1937, 3125 dogs and 2034 cats were brought in by their owners for killing at Battersea and 435 dogs and 229 cats in Bow. In the same year 11,166 stray dogs and 881 stray cats were killed at Battersea and 6222 stray dogs and 103 stray cats at Bow. To this total overall figure of 116,499 (Battersea and RSPCA combined) of animals killed by their owners need to be added the strays, who were often animals dumped by owners, of 18,371. However, there is no specific way of telling why the animals were killed so the figures will include elderly or very sick animals. In addition the NCDL, ODFL, Mayhew Home, PDSA and the Wood Green Animal Shelter provided facilities for killing pets at cheap rates. (Battersea Dogs Home, 77th Annual Report; 78th Annual Report; 79th Annual Report; RSPCA, 114th Annual Report; 115th Annual Report.)
25. *Times*, 7 September 1939, 3.
26. The RSPCA had been asked to keep its clinics open 24 hours by the police in order to kill the numbers of animals brought in by owners. See, RSPCA, "Euthanasia," 185. The RSPCA had many London clinics including those in Camberwell, Willesden, Eltham, Fulham, Islington, North Kensington, Poplar, Kilburn and Southwark. See RSPCA, 115th Annual Report, 127–8.
27. RSPCA, "Euthanasia," 185.
28. PDSA, *Annual Report*. 4.
29. BUAV, "Appeal from Wood Green Shelter," 122.

30. Forty tons of lime and additional labour and transport were needed to carry out this task. See PDSA, *Annual Report*, 4. This is now the site of the Ilford PDSA animal cemetery, restored with Heritage Lottery Funding in 2007.
31. [Battersea Dogs Home](#), 79th *Annual Report*, 24.
32. As a result dogs were then electrocuted. See NCDL, "September Holocaust," 2.
33. See n. 24.
34. [Howell](#), "The Dog Fancy," 564.
35. *Hansard*, 29 November 1916 vol. 88 cc 344–5.
36. *Times*, 29 April 1918, 11. *Hansard*, 14 December 1916 vol 88, cc 831–8. Although the Kennel Club had advocated measures to restrict the breeding of non-pedigree dogs in 1914–18 this was not pursued in the Second World War. [Feeding Stuff for Dogs](#), MAF 84/61.
37. NCDL, *Annual Report*, 1916, 15.
38. *Times*, 28 April 1917, 8.
39. F.W. Norris, Letter, *Times*, 3 May 1918, 9.
40. RSPCA, 115th *Annual Report*, 235.
41. NCDL, *The Dogs' Bulletin*, 109, 6. The NCDL also facilitated the evacuation of dogs through advertising offers of accommodation. (*Annual Report* 1939, 11).
42. [Battersea Dogs Home](#), 78th *Annual Report*, 22.
43. [ODFL](#), 18th *Annual Report*, 9.
44. He undertook animal treatment (which was legally permitted albeit criticised extensively by the veterinary profession). [Kean](#), "Vets, and Pets;" [Gardiner](#), "The Dangerous Women of Animal Welfare."
45. [Lloyd-Jones](#), *Animals*, 54.
46. C. R. D. Pulling, New Scotland Yard, 24 March 1939, *War: Defence Regulations*, HO 144/21418.
47. Pulling, New Scotland Yard to Col. Vince, 14 April 1939, *Animals: Protection and Treatment* HO 186/1417.
48. [Report of enquiry into the affairs of NARPAC](#), 1940, 1. *Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food: Livestock and Dairying Correspondence*, MAF 52/18.
49. The first legislation in Britain to protect animals covered "farm" animals: significant powers to protect animals within a familial setting did not start to be developed until the second decade of the twentieth century. [Kean](#), *Animal Rights*, 31–2, 144; <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo5/1-2/27>
50. NARPAC, *Wartime Aid*, 5.
51. *Ibid.*
52. Cox, Diary, 15 September 1939. This was also emphasised in a radio broadcast of Christopher Stone on 19 November 1939. *Animals: Protection and Treatment*, HO 186/1417.
53. [Partridge](#), *A Pacifist's War*, 13 March 1942, 128.
54. The state, having decided not to provide washing facilities, anticipated concerns about body vermin and problems of emptying "closets." There were fewer infestations than had been expected. [O'Brien](#), *Civil Defence*, 517–36.
55. Professional opinion varied on whether such items were useful or not. Image of gas-proof shelter available from the PDSA, *The Daily Mirror*, 9 September 1939, 8. The RSPCA cautioned against gas shelters for animals on the grounds that if humans were killed in a raid rescuers would not necessarily realise an animal was in the rumble and would be overlooked and possibly starve. (*RSPCA Animals*, 2). The NCDL recommended that pets *shared* an owner's gas-proof shelter or other shelter. ([NCDL](#), *Air Raid Precautions*). See also [Woon](#), *Hell Came*, 52.
56. Over half of London's population would never use communal shelters and only 4% used Tubes regularly for shelter ([Kirkham](#), "Beauty and Duty," 123). Even in central London during November 1940, after a month in which there had been aerial bombardment every night, only 9% of people went to public and 27% to private shelters, while 64% stayed in their homes or were on duty. [Addison](#), "National Identity," 226; *The Official Story of the Civil Defence of Britain* (1942), 68 as quoted in [Schmideberg](#), "Some Observations," 147.
57. [NAVS](#), Editorial, *Animals' Defender* (October 1940), 45.
58. [Mackay](#), *Half the Battle*, 9, 18, 31; [Bourke](#), *Fear*, 222–54; [Trotter](#), *Panic*, 192.
59. *Times*, 7 September 1939, 3.
60. [Spillane](#), "A Survey of the Literature of Neuroses," 3.

61. Bion, "The War," 183, 190–5. As Lees-Milne described fire watching at the National Trust office: "I am far better in raids when I have something to do, especially when others lose their heads. Fear then seems driven away by farce"; Lees-Milne, *Prophesying Peace*, 22. A similar concern had been recognised by Mass Observation in their analysis of morale in the months before the war. Passivity was seen negatively; a sense of helplessness was expressed by half of their interviewees. Madge and Harrisson, *Britain by Mass Observation*, 48–50.
62. Mackay, *Half the Battle*, 20.
63. Bourke, *Fear*, 228.
64. Glover, "Notes," 133.
65. Bion, "The War," 190.
66. Transcript of BBC radio broadcast, "The World Goes By," 27 March 1940, BBC sound archives.
67. Douglas, *Chronicles*, 17 and ODFL, 18th Annual Report, 1938, 9.
68. Douglas, *Chronicles*, 17.
69. By November 1940 Hackbridge kennels were taken over by NARPAC: Minutes NARPAC F & GP committee 7 November 1940, HO 186/1418; PDSA statement 12 May 1939 re. compiling register of accommodation HO 186/1417. Pulling, New Scotland Yard to Vince Home Office 14 April 1939 stated animal-welfare societies "are willing to undertake work of registering, collecting, labelling, conveyance and arranging for accommodation out of London for animals in good condition." HO 186/1417.
70. Lloyd-Jones, *Animals*, 89.
71. Lloyd-Jones, *Animals*, 109, 110.
72. Sewell, *Outsider*, 25.
73. Meryon, Diary, May 12; May 13; 2 September; 4 September; 23 October 1939.
74. I am extremely grateful to both Gwen Brown who took time to respond to my queries and to her daughter Alison Skipper who transcribed her mother's account.
75. Script of Christopher Stone radio broadcast on NARPAC, 19 November 1939, HO 186/1417.
76. M 60 C 14 JS, 27 August 1941, Survey of non-dog owners, *Dogs in Wartime*, TC 79/1/E.
77. M 45 D no 30, 27 August 1941, *Dogs in Wartime*, TC 79/1/E.
78. NCDL, "Repeat Report" (13 February 1941) in *Dogs in Wartime*, TC 79/1/A.
79. Analysis sheet, *Dogs in Wartime*, TC 79 / 1/ D, 23 July 1941.
80. F 40E Euston, 11–14 July 1941, Pilot survey, *Dogs in Wartime*, TC 79 1/B.
81. Fudge, *Pets*, 27.
82. Croucher, in Hostettler, *The Island at War*, 31.
83. See Kean, "The Home Front."
84. RSPCA, *Animals and Air Raids*, 3–4; CPL "Wartime Problems 3: Sedatives," *The Cat* (September 1940), 138–9; NCDL, *Air Raid Precautions for Dogs*. See also Kean, "Nervous Dogs."
85. Report on questions to dealers (30 July 1941), *Dogs in Wartime* TC79/1/C, Mass Observation.
86. RSPCA, *Annual Report*, 117th, 1940. NARPAC and animal charities suggested ways in which foods such as mashed butter beans and rice with water from stewed stinging nettles, dandelions, swede or turnip tops could be made palatable for dogs. The NCDL reminded people that offal, horse flesh and bones from the butcher could be used for canine feeding. NARPAC, *Wartime*, 14; RSPCA, *Animals and Air Raids*, 5; NCDL, *Breadless Diets for Dogs* NCDL leaflet no 492 nd (1942).
87. 20 February 1942, Burt to Minister Sir John Bodinnar, *Feeding Stuff for Dogs*, MAF 84/61.
88. Of which around 170,000 tons were carbohydrates and the remainder proteins, Minute 94, 29 July 1942, *Feeding Stuff for Dogs*, MAF 84/61.
89. 4 August 1942, Minister's Secretary, Mr Broadley's response to Burt's proposals. *Feeding Stuff for Dogs*, MAF 84/61.
90. Similarly plans to limit people to the ownership of one dog per person through forms of licensing were rejected both because it would be difficult to implement and because it was understood that people would employ evasive action to ensure that their dogs were not removed. (Minute 94, 29 July 1942, *Feeding Stuff for Dogs* MAF 84/61.)
91. Letter to principal officers at Cambridge and Tunbridge Wells from D. J. Lidbury, Ministry of Home Security, 20 June 1940; Letter to Mr Snelling 24 June 1940 from A. Johnston, Home Office, "Correspondence regarding evacuation 1940," *Animals: National ARP Animals Committee: Disposal of Animals* HO 186/1419.

92. Letter from Colonel Stordy of NARPAC to chief constables 13 July 1940; "Correspondence regarding evacuation," *Animals: National ARP Animals Committee: Disposal of Animals* HO 186/1419.
93. File note of meeting with A.W. Moss of RSPCA, 22 November 1941; Note from Snelling to Sir Gordon Johnson, 12 October 1942, "Correspondence regarding evacuation," *Animals: National ARP Animals Committee: Disposal of Animals*, HO 186/1419.
94. Script of Christopher Stone radio broadcast 19 November 1939, *Animals: Protection and Treatment*, HO 186/1417.
95. *Times*, 16 November 1939, 6.
96. Douglas, *Chronicles*, 19.
97. *Ibid.*
98. *Harrison, Living through the Blitz*, 51.
99. *Parker*, "The Dickin Medal;" *Kean*, "Animals and War Memorials."
100. *Kean*, "Challenges," 57–72.
101. This argument is further developed in my book on the massacre and the animal–human relationship during the war to be published by University of Chicago Press.

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