

Translated excerpt

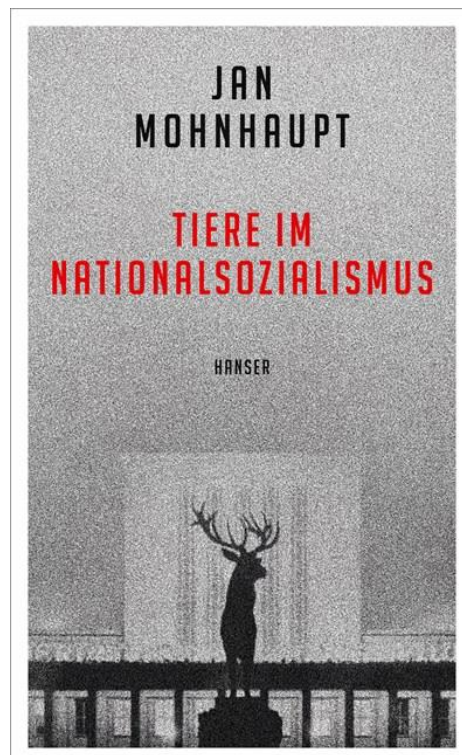
Jan Mohnhaupt
Tiere im Nationalsozialismus

Hanser Berlin Verlag, Berlin 2020
ISBN 978-3-446-26404-5

pp. 9-20

Jan Mohnhaupt
Animals under National Socialism

Translated by Shelley Frisch



Prologue

The World Behind the Wire

What an astonishing hierarchy among the animals!

Man regards them according to the traits he has
swiped from them.

Elias Canetti, The Human Province

In Central Germany, on the northern slope of a mountain, in the shadow of beech and oak trees, there was once a zoo. It was only a very small one, to be sure, but it not only had a goldfish pond, monkeys, and aviaries for birds, but it even featured a bear pit, which measured about thirty-five by fifty feet. All around were benches for the men who spent their lunch break here. Some of them taunted the monkeys, others gazed over toward the brown bears that stood up on their hind legs as they attempted to use their raised front paws to push their way through the enclosure. Karl Koch set up the little zoo, as he explained in an official document, in order to offer his staff “diversion and entertainment” and to showcase “animals in all their beauty and distinctive nature,

animals that they would scarcely have the opportunity to observe and get to know in the wild.”¹

The men who constructed the zoo were right next door, “behind the wire,” “wire” being Koch’s word for an electric fence that was close to ten feet high and almost two miles long. Behind it was a steeply sloping expanse. In the summer this expanse was dry and dusty, and in the winter, icy winds swept across it. Endless rows of wooden barracks were packed up against one another.

The “Buchenwald Zoological Garden,” as the little animal park was officially called, and the concentration camp, also called Buchenwald, were situated less than a stone’s throw apart. The crematorium was just steps away from the bear pit—ten, perhaps, or certainly no more than fifteen. The “wire” between them once formed the boundary between the Buchenwald of the inmates and that of the guards, wardens, and civilian workers. It constituted the dividing line between human beings and animals on the one side, and people labeled “subhuman” on the other. The “wire” ensured that they stayed worlds apart.

Today there is little to remind us of the zoo that the SS arranged to have constructed in 1938 as a “recreational area” directly adjacent to the camp. In 1993, the Buchenwald Memorial began to unearth the vestiges of this area. Some of the foundation walls had remained intact, among them the bear pit, which had escaped destruction over the years amid the underbrush and leaves. Rikola-Gunnar Lüttgenau, the spokesman for the

¹ BwA [Archive of the Buchenwald Memorial] NS 4 Bu 33, Film 3.

Memorial, says, “We wanted to make the zoo visible again.” He explains that their reasons for doing so were chiefly didactic: “It is disconcerting to picture the Nazis visiting the zoo with their children and looking at the animals while people were dying right next to them. It makes you realize that a part of your own normality, such as a zoo, can also be part of a world to which you feel you most decidedly don’t belong.”

Anyone who visits the vestiges of the enclosures and walks around the low brick wall and whatever is left of the climbing rocks can still gain an impression of the close proximity of this place, which was once an idyll, to the Buchenwald concentration camp. The zoo evidently served as a kind of “folding screen,” in the sense that it did not really conceal anything, but did shield the wardens’ area from the camp where the inmates were housed. “The SS made a nice set-up for themselves,” Lüttgenau says.

Research on the subject of the concentration camp zoo has been quite scanty to date, but nevertheless this place continues to resurface in both historical accounts and newspaper articles, as well as in records kept by former inmates.² It was also the inspiration behind author Jens Raschke’s 2014 stage play for children, which bore the title: “What the Rhinoceros Saw When He Looked Over to the Other Side of the Fence.” Raschke drew on an anecdote that he found in a report by a contemporary witness.³ According to this anecdote, a rhinoceros was said to have lived in the Buchenwald zoo for a least a brief

² Eugen Kogon, *Der SS-Staat. Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager* (Stockholm, Frankfurt am Main 1947), p. 303; Daniel A. Hackett, ed. *Der Buchenwald-Report. Bericht über das Konzentrationslager Buchenwald bei Weimar* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2002), p. 164; picture book by Kurt Dittmar: “Bärenjagd in Buchenwald” (BwA Sign. 9-96-2). For newspaper articles, see “Den Tieren geht es gut” in *Jungle World*, April 16, 2015, and “Zwischen Idylle und Hölle” in *Nordkurier*, March 12, 2018.

³ Record kept by Leopold Reitter, a concentration camp survivor (BwA Sign. 31/98).

period of time. Sabine Stein, the director of the Memorial archive, knows of this story, but also knows that it cannot be substantiated: “Whenever survivors come to visit us here for commemorative ceremonies, I have asked them about that again and again,” Stein says. “But no one has remembered seeing a rhinoceros.”

While the rhinoceros is probably a legend, the Buchenwald zoo itself was real, and, moreover, not the only one of its kind. Even in the Treblinka extermination camp there was a dovecote, along with cages for foxes and other wildlife, to serve as a pleasant diversion for the guards.⁴

The inmates were forced to build the Buchenwald zoo. The animals, most of which came from the Leipzig Zoo, were acquired with the paltry wages the prisoners received for their forced labor in the neighboring factories, plants, and quarries.⁵ If animals sustained injuries, the blame frequently fell on the inmates. If one of the animals died, the inmates also had to pay for a replacement, in the form of a “voluntary assessment.”⁶

Jobs as animal keepers were highly sought-after, particularly at the bear pit, because anyone who was brought in to work there had constant access to meat and honey. Once an inmate had worked there, he had no desire to hand this job over to someone else. Hans Bergmann, like other inmates, was willing to assume great risk in asking to be kept on. In October 1939, Bergmann, a Jewish inmate, wrote a letter to the First Camp Leader and “respectfully” requested permission to work with the bears once again, since the current

⁴ For pictures of the concentration camp zoo, see: www.photos.yadvashem.org.

⁵ The archive of the Leipzig Zoo has a record of the delivery of a female brown bear to the Weimar-Buchenwald concentration camp on October 5, 1938 (personal communication with Jana Ludewig, archive of the Leipzig Zoo, April 2, 2019).

⁶ BwA Sign. 31/1065 97.

keeper was in no position to deal with the four animals – which included the pregnant female “Betty” – all alone, but everything possible needed to be done to pull through her cubs. Besides, he noted, “I am quite attached to the animals and am absolutely convinced that in several weeks I, along with the Gypsy, will be able to see to every possible need of the four bears as we raise the cubs.”⁷

The guards had a pronounced preference for using Sinti and Roma to work with the bears, as spokesman Lüttgenau confirms. The “Gypsies” – according to the racist cliché that was prevalent then– hired themselves out as show people and traveling entertainers, and it was not uncommon for them to put dancing bears on display as well. “This is why the SS evidently assumed that they were ‘by nature’ exceptionally good at handling these animals,” Lüttgenau says.

The camp leader passed along Bergmann’s letter to his superior, Karl Koch. Koch was the commandant of the Buchenwald concentration camp. He lived on the southern slope of the mountain, on the sunny side, where he also ordered “SS Falkenhof” to be built, with cages for owls, eagles, and ravens as well as preserves for wolves, deer, and wild boars. While the zoo next to the camp fence was reserved exclusively for the guards and civilian workers of Buchenwald, the residents of Weimar were allowed to visit the Falkenhof on the weekends. They were also familiar with the zoo, however, because the

⁷ BwA Sign. NS 4 Bu 102, Film 8.

SS distributed postcards in the city that were illustrated with pictures of the brown bears of Buchenwald at play, with “Buchenwald Zoo” written next to them.⁸

Ilse Koch, the wife of the camp commandant, also took frequent walks through the small animal park with her children, and her path always led her along the “wire.” Even though it was normally strictly forbidden to take photographs there, there are pictures in the family album showing Karl Koch with his son Artwin, feeding and petting the animals.⁹ A few years later, Ilse Koch would stand before an American military court and claim not to have noticed either the fence or the camp behind it.¹⁰

Karl Koch was intent on ensuring that the animals were not bothered, and issued a commandant’s order prohibiting “any feeding or taunting.”¹¹ Anyone who nevertheless did harm to the animals, anyone who scaled the wall to get to the bears’ climbing rock or even just leaned against one of the cages, or something else of that sort, could count on being punished, even if they were members of the Auxiliary SS. It was important, after all, that the animals stayed in good shape. The request by inmate Bergmann, then, evidently struck him as plausible, and so he approved Bergmann’s request to work with the bears. But next to his signature, he jotted down the following note: “If a cub dies, mete out a harsh punishment.”¹²

⁸ Personal communication with Lüttgenau, February 2019.

⁹ National Archives, Washington (BwA Sign. 018.094).

¹⁰ Lüttgenau 1993: 15–16.

¹¹ BwA NS 4 Bu 33, Film 3.

¹² BwA NS 4 Bu 102, Film 8.

Of “Master Animals” and “Human Animals”

It would be far too easy to brush aside Karl Koch’s concern for the well-being of his zoo animals as a disturbing but ultimately uninformative anecdote, if it were not part and parcel of a systematic shifting of the boundaries that raised select animals to the status of “master animals” and peremptorily degraded certain groups of human beings to the position of “human animals” or “subhumans.” For leading National Socialists, their protection of animals and their crimes against humanity were not a contradiction in terms; on the contrary, they even felt as though these stances made them part of a “moral elite.” As Heinrich Himmler boasted in his 1943 speech in Posen: “Whether or not 10,000 Russian women collapse with exhaustion while digging an anti-tank ditch concerns me only insofar as the anti-tank ditch is being dug for Germany. We will never be brutal and callous unless it is necessary: that is obvious. We Germans, who alone on this earth have a decent attitude to animals, will of course adopt a decent attitude to these human animals.”¹³

Rudolf Höss, the camp commandant of Auschwitz, felt similarly obliged to emphasize the special bond he had enjoyed with animals since his childhood. He was especially fond

¹³ Quoted in Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 309.

of horses.¹⁴ During his time in Auschwitz he generally sought out their comforting company whenever he was no longer able to rationalize the daily killing by reminding himself that he was carrying out his duties and being obedient: “I had to keep on carrying out, keep on experiencing, keep on looking on at the process of destruction, the mass murder, remaining cold, even in the face of what was most profoundly disturbing,” he wrote in his memoirs, which he composed after the war while incarcerated in Poland. “When some procedure upset me deeply, it was not possible for me to go home to my family. I would then get onto my horse and ride to chase away the gruesome images, or I often went to the horse stables at night and there found peace among my darlings.”¹⁵

While Himmler used the subject of animals in order to demonstrate the moral superiority of the National Socialist regime, Höss endeavored to present his affection for horses as proof of his sensitive, compassionate character. Most of all, though, he appears to have pitied himself for having to “look on at” all the things he witnessed.

The stories of Koch’s concern for the zoo animals, of Höss’s escapes to the horses, and Hitler’s frequently mentioned affection for German shepherds were also part of the Nazi legend of modern animal protection and nature conservation, a legend that has survived to some degree to this very day. Even now, people continue to point out that Hitler enacted a new animal protection law during his first year in office, which was regarded as progressive throughout the world and remained in force in the Federal Republic, largely unchanged, until 1972. This law stipulated for the first time in the German Empire

¹⁴ Martin Broszat, editor. *Kommandant in Auschwitz. Autobiografische Aufzeichnungen des Rudolf Höß* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2006), p. 32.

¹⁵ Broszat, pp. 199–201.

animals were to be protected “for their own sake.” The animal protection law even earned the self-proclaimed animal lover Hitler an award from the United States.¹⁶ Hermann Göring, in his capacity as the Prussian prime minister, had railed against any form of animal experiments earlier on, and threatened “vivisectionists” with placement in a concentration camp— and incidentally, this was one of the first public references to concentration camps. In this particular case, however, the declaration did not go beyond empty threats.¹⁷

All this is only seemingly contradictory; animal protection was actually closely linked to the fundamental convictions of Nazi ideology. Maren Möhring is one of the few historians to date who has tackled the subject of animals in the Nazi era. In an essay, she provides a detailed investigation of how the human-animal relationship was fundamentally altered in National Socialist Germany. Möhring tells us that the Nazi notion of animal protection, which might appear paradoxical at first glance, can neither be explained as a pure instrument of propaganda that was ultimately not intended to be taken seriously nor as a positive aspect that stood apart from the rest of the Nazi set of ideas. Instead, it was an “integral component of the restructuring of society on a

¹⁶ For information on the Reich Animal Protection Act, see: RGBl. I 1933, p. 987. [Deutsches Reichsgesetzblatt (RGBl.): Alex. Historical texts pertaining to justice and laws online. Edited by the Austrian National Library; retrievable at: http://alex.onb.ac.at/tab_dra.htm]

¹⁷ Hitler did state, however: “We cannot go so far as to place animals in a better position than humans.” See Edeltraud Klüeting, “Die gesetzlichen Regelungen der nationalsozialistischen Reichsregierung für den Tierschutz, den Naturschutz und den Umweltschutz,” in: *Naturschutz und Nationalsozialismus*, edited by Joachim Radkau and Frank Uekötter (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus Verlag, 2003), pp. 77–105, esp. pp. 83-85; this quotation appears on p. 85.

chauvinistic and racist basis.”¹⁸ Or to put it another way: An ideology that measures the worth of a life by the “use” it provides to its own community does not distinguish between “human” and “animal,” but between life that is “useful” and life that is “unworthy of living.” It consequently arose from the same ideological spirit that afforded some animals special protection while declaring some people “parasites” in turn, and systematically exterminating them.

Once again, Buchenwald offers an especially blatant instance of this shift: Commandant Karl Koch, who was so invested in the well-being of the zoo animals, had inmates thrown into the bear pit for his own entertainment in order to watch them be mauled by the animals.¹⁹ Leopold Reitter, a survivor of Buchenwald, recorded his recollections after the liberation of the concentration camp: “In 1944, at a time of great famine in the camp, the birds of prey, bears, and primates were still fed their daily portions of meat, which was, of course, taken from the inmates’ kitchen and was thus taken away from the food that would have gone to the inmates.”²⁰

There are a great many reports of this sort. Aside from the reports from concentration camps, the subject of animals comes up in numerous diaries, memoirs, letters, and

¹⁸ Maren Möhring, “‘Herrentiere’ und ‘Untermenschen’. Zu den Transformationen des Mensch-Tier-Verhältnisses im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland.” In: *Historische Anthropologie. Tierische (Ge)Fährten*. Edited by Gesine Krüger and Aline Steinbrecher (vol. 19, no. 2, 2011), pp. 229–244, esp. p. 230.

¹⁹ According to Kogon 1947, p. 303, it gave him a “Neronian pleasure.”

²⁰ BwA Sign. 31/98.

documents pertaining to daily life. Even so, in the research on National Socialism to date, animals have been treated at best as bit players. Even though historians have been engaged in *Alltagsgeschichte* (“everyday history,” a form of microhistory that became especially popular in Germany a few decades ago) since the 1980s, examining countless areas that range from fashion to sports to nutrition, crafts, and drug consumption in the Nazi period, there has thus far been little attention paid to animals during National Socialism.

The reasons for this lack of attention are obvious, as is confirmed by the investigations conducted by Mieke Roscher, a professor at the University of Kassel, where she holds Germany’s only professorship for Human-Animal Studies. Research on the Nazi period, particularly German research in this arena, is still afraid to touch this subject, “for fear that the focus on animals would result in a de-emphasis of the human victims.”²¹ But it is precisely because the seemingly “innocuous” history of the animals was so closely intertwined with both the everyday life and the ideology of National Socialism that it becomes highly relevant, since it demonstrates how profoundly dangerous viewpoints can be embedded in even ideologically untainted realms of life and, in the process, can shape society. Anyone who takes a closer look at how people lived with cats kept as house pets in the 1930s and ’40s gets a glimpse into German living rooms – and at the same time is starkly confronted with a chauvinistic and racist world view that penetrated deep into everyday life. Anyone conducting research on insects in the National Socialism era winds

²¹ Interview with Mieke Roscher, June 28, 2019.

up, sooner or later, in the classrooms of German schools— and cannot avoid tackling issues pertaining to “poisonous pedagogy” and Social Darwinism. And anyone wishing to find out about the role of pigs kept as farm animals during this period comes across advertising posters from the food industry and early forms of the recycling economy, along with outlandish excesses of Nazi ideology. The stories of the animals offer quirky approaches to many well-known topics in research on National Socialism, and accordingly often open up different, largely new, but never trivializing perspectives on life under that regime.

Tracking Down the Animals

The terror was not in equally plain view throughout the country. In many places, everyday life under the Nazis, which was strongly associated with the color brown, was more like gray-on-gray. Even so, in every aspect of life, animals were of great importance, as the following chapters will demonstrate. Each of these chapters advances our understanding of a different facet of National Socialism by focusing in on a different type of animal. A study of the role of the dog and its wild ancestor, the wolf, will afford us a look at racial theory and highlight the close interweaving of everyday life and ideology, politics, and “scholarship.” By examining the role of pigs kept as farm animals we gain more than just a sense of the importance of livestock in the Nazi period; the role of these animals as the key supplier of fat and meat for *Volksernährung* (public nutrition)

was also central to National Socialist efforts to create a state that would be totally independent of any foreign countries and attest to the Germans' own "ancient Aryan culture." The cat is a prime example of the ambivalent feelings prompted by house pets. For some a cat was a "Jewish animal" that was incapable of being domesticated; others praised cats as mouse catchers and "hygienic aids to the health of the nation." In this chapter we will meet various cat owners, such as the philologist Victor Klemperer, who lived in Dresden with his wife. At first the Klemperers feared for the life of their tomcat, Mujel, but they would soon fear for their own lives.

Animals also played a formative role in the pedagogy and educational curricula of the 1930s and '40s. The examples of silkworms and potato beetles show us how even the youngest children were groomed for war and battles. Insects, as we learn from the school textbooks and children's literature of the day, were also used to explain to the children what—and above all who—in the National Socialist way of seeing things, was a "pest," a "parasite," or a "leech."

It bears mentioning that there was not just one uniform National Socialist ideology. The arbitrary manner in which ideological aspects were combined, sometimes in one way, and other times quite differently, is shown in exemplary fashion by the Nazi attitude toward hunting. While Hitler ridiculed hunters by dubbing them "green Freemasons," it is common knowledge that Hermann Göring, who sported the title Reich Master of the Hunt, could not get enough of trophy hunting. The focal point of the chapter on hunting is Raufbold the Red Deer, whose statue graces the cover of this book. Raufbold, having

fallen victim to Göring's craving for trophies, stood the test of time and outlasted the twelve years of the "Thousand-Year Reich" as a figure cast in bronze— just as the ideological legacy of Göring has shaped the community of hunters until this day.

And there is one other area that cannot be overlooked in exploring the role of animals in National Socialism, namely an examination of how World War II, and the Eastern Campaign in particular, would not have been possible without millions of horses. In the final chapter we accompany Siegfried, the Trakehner horse, who was on the scene with his horseman in the summer of 1941 at the invasion of the Soviet Union and as the troops moved farther east, when motors and machines had long since given up the ghost in the frigid Russian winter. This chapter demonstrates how complex the symbolic significance of the horse was for the National Socialist world view – and the length of the shadow that this symbol continues to cast even now in the Federal Republic of Germany.

Drawing Boundaries

In his *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, a collection of aphorisms and short essays, Theodor W. Adorno wrote that "indignation over cruelty" diminishes "in proportion as the victims are less like normal readers," which led him to this conclusion: "Perhaps the social schematization of perception in anti-Semites is such that they do not see Jews as human beings at all. The constantly encountered assertion that savages,

blacks, Japanese are like animals, monkeys, for example, is key to the pogrom. The possibility of pogroms is decided in the moment when the gaze of a fatally wounded animal falls on a human being. The defiance with which he repels this gaze—‘after all, it’s only an animal’—reappears irresistibly in cruelties done to human beings, the perpetrators having again and again to reassure themselves that it is ‘only an animal,’ because they could never believe this fully even of animals.’²²

For Adorno, people’s relationships to themselves are also reflected in the way they handle animals. In this sense, the history and the stories of the animals in the Nazi era function as more than just documents of their era. They also shed light on the view of mankind and of the world that this era engendered, and in the final analysis these animals therefore figure as far more than mere nonspeaking bit players.

²² Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, translated by E. F. N. Jephcott (London/New York: Verso, 2006), p. 105.