

arts and humanities

Zoopoetics, zooethics, biopolitics:

Animals in Great War Literature

Márcia Seabra Neves^{a/b},Paulo Alexandre Pereira^a, Ana Paiva Morais^b,

aDepartment of Languages and Cultures, CLLC, University of Aveiro

bFaculty of Social and Human Sciences, IELT, New University of Lisboa

Abstract

Even though man has up to recently assumed the role of protagonist in First World War narratives, it is undeniable that animals have also played a leading role in trench warfare. The key contribution of these non-human troops appears, nevertheless, to have been relegated to the backstage of the apocalyptic theatre of war up until the late 20th century when a drastic revolution, concerning the western intellectual tradition on animal condition and its relationship with the human, was set in motion. In this respect, the growing philosophical interest in animal condition and the ensuing ethical and scientific reappraisal of animals have paved the way for a renewed perspective – no longer specist nor anthropocentric – on the military intervention of these marginalized heroes and on their relationship with the human soldiers with whom they experienced hell on earth in the trenches.

By arguing for a renegotiation of the human-animal cartography from the alternative standpoint of anthropological decentering, pervasive contemporary discourses on animality have indeed allowed for a re-evaluation of the presence of animals in the Great War, repeatedly acknowledged and celebrated by soldiers in their memoirs, which make up a relevant section of the vast corpus of war testimonial literature.

During the First World War, hundreds of millions of animals have been mobilized and exterminated. In Portugal alone, it is estimated that more than 11 000 horses were sent to accompany the CEP (the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps) to the Front, not to mention the carrier pigeons used by the Engineering and Communications Services.

With a ubiquitous presence in all battlefronts, animals have played a crucial role in the theatre of war, where they were called upon to perform a whole array of tasks: they could be used as information agents or be responsible for transport, fact-finding, surveillance or first-aid missions or, more simply, they provided affectionate companionship.



Fig 1 / Military column on horseback. (PT/AHM/FE/CAVE/AG/A11/0011)



Fig 2 / Carrier pigeons (peace message). (PT/AHM/FE/CAVE/AG/A11/0250)

While sharing with their human counterparts the same scenario of physical hardship and psychological horror, as well as the same ill fate, animals necessarily became invaluable partners in such hard times, filling up the soldiers' affective void which the departure from civilian life made even more unbearable.

In Portuguese literature, numerous war testimonies pertaining to the relationship between soldiers and their non-human partners can be found. These accounts shed some light on the ties of mutual cooperation, unrelenting friendship and deep emotional communication binding them. These texts bear witness to the humanization of the animal, thereby transformed into a friend, a partner, a relative, i.e., a surrogate other which could replace the human being without nonetheless being deprived of its animal ontology. Displaced in a horrific context where human capacities have been taken to unsuspected monstrous extremes, the soldier was dispossessed of his human identity and subject to an irreversible process of bestialization.

In the trenches, where soldiers were confronted with a situation of radical effacement of human nature, man was progressively deprived of his humanity and forced to revert to the zero level of his own nature. Forced to live as beasts, soldiers metamorphosed into beasts, in a dialectic process of animal becoming. This deterritorialization of the human to the realm of animality was so extreme that soldiers could even take on physical features which signaled this metamorphosis or fusion with the non-human, to the point that they were often portrayed in terms of animal analogy. It is the case of the Portuguese Expeditionary Corps, whose troops were metaphorically referred to as "Sheep of Portuguese Export" or "Portuguese Lambs Exported for Slaughter".

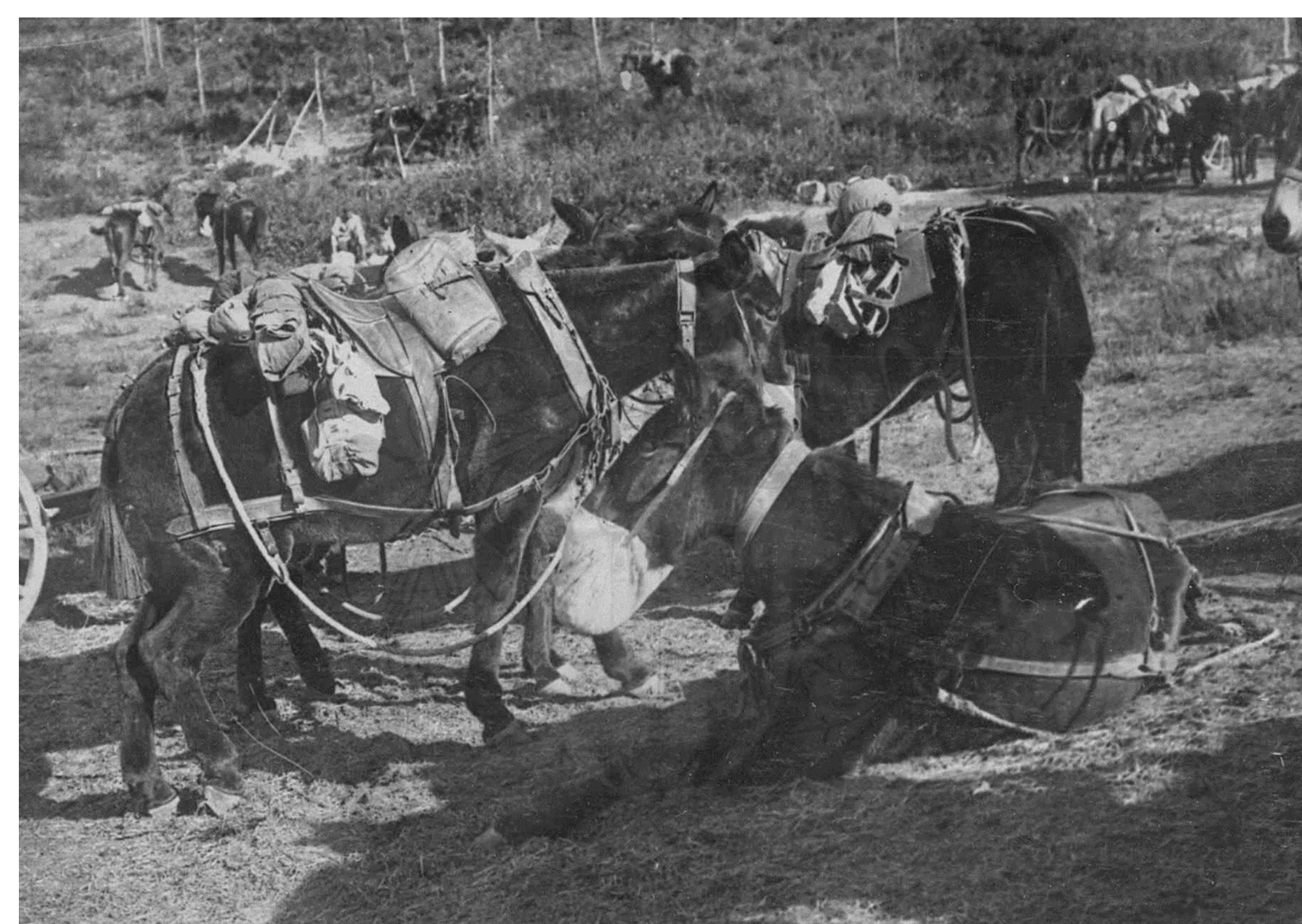


Fig 3 / Animals at rest. (PT/AHM/FE/CAVE/GG/A1/0101)



Fig 4 / Portuguese soldiers at the front. (PT/AHM/FE/CAVE/GG/A1/0101)



Fig 5 / In the trenches. Hunting rats. (BnF, EI – 13 (2565))

Conclusion

The relationship between man and animal in the trenches of the Great War encompasses a complex network of mutual exchanges and acts of becoming which ultimately accounts for the fuzziness of ontological boundaries and, as a consequence, for the pervasive phenomenon of humanization of animals and bestialization of men documented in war memoirs.