

ARTICLE

## From Mascot to Metaphor: Canine Combatants and the Performance of French Patriotism in the Great War

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### SUMMARY

Relying on examples taken from French literature and its visual culture, this article reveals how representations of dogs became part of a complex network of signification employed to inspire patriotism, justify sacrifice, and remind citizens of noble ideals as well as to speak to and for the common soldier. In Europe's theretofore most "bestial" war, dogs played a mediating role between the animality of trench warfare and the normalcy of French civilian life. Recognized writers such as Colette and Maurice Genevoix to less well-known authors of children's literature extolled the virtues of these "little soldiers" and anthropomorphized these protagonists with the full gamut of emotions from jealousy and grief to patriotism and joy. Postcards and magazine illustrations provided a visual rhetoric of these warrior dogs that operate to represent a "species aggregate" whereby the population as a whole is metonymically represented by a different but familiar other. As metaphors for the nation, its noble ideals, and its soldiers and citizens, the "humanity" of France's dogs adds an interesting and understudied dimension to post-humanities studies and to our understanding of World War I narratives.

KEYWORDS: Colette, post-humanities, World War I imagery, visual rhetoric, World War I narratives, illustrations

Dogs have played and continue to play important roles in Western military history, and stories of their exploits and character that circulate in the media often offer a carefully crafted perspective of war. Images and stories of dogs' usefulness, from their therapeutic value for soldiers with PTSD to detection of explosive devices, are also part of contemporary military narratives. *Paris Match* published such a story in February 2014 describing how a NATO dog named Colonel was captured by the Taliban and paraded as a POW. The article explained how useful dogs are against the Taliban: "Ils sont utilisés pour renifler des explosifs ou de la drogue et peuvent également être utilisés pour contrôler la foule," and there are hundreds of them (Verdot-Belaval). The Taliban had circulated a video of the captured "soldier" who had been missing in action since December. Colonel was tied up, tail between his legs, muzzle down, and clearly frightened (*effrayé*). These images were so disturbing to Western audiences—such powerful propaganda tools—that *Paris Match* had to take down the video due to public outcry. A canine POW struck a nerve with a public desensitized to human casualties, and it emphasizes the identificatory relation between citizens and dogs. However, the utilization of dogs for national and military propaganda is not a contemporary strategy, for they were exploited in World War I to great effect as an important signifier of various facets of French patriotism during the long conflict.

Representations of dogs became part of a complex network of signification employed to inspire patriotism, justify sacrifice, and remind citizens of noble ideals as well as to speak to and for the common soldier. In Europe's theretofore most "bestial" war, dogs played a mediating role between the animality of trench warfare and the normalcy of French civilian life. Whether locating wounded soldiers on the battlefield, dragging machine guns to the front, or faithfully waiting for their owners' return from the front, dogs were a popular symbol in both literary and graphic portrayals of France's response to the demands of war. The wide variety of depictions placed them in an unusual ontological space in which they both were pets and kin, soldiers and comrades, species and ideology. It is well established that "the human/pet relationship, while biologically derived and universal, serves also a particular psychopathological purpose" (Rynearson 263–68). Because of France's well-documented love for its dogs, they were particularly effective in resonating emotionally and psychically with a French populace. Much more than just a metaphor or theme in newspaper and magazine stories, illustrations, and other forms of cultural production, man's best friend was meant to convey to French citizens socially desired reactions to war, inspire a sense of patriotism, and bolster morale as the Great War stretched into years.

In short, this article briefly explores some of the ways that France's brave *toutous* became a useful propaganda tool to model and promote dominant political ideologies about the good French citizen and soldier. As we reconsider the history and lingering implications of the Great War and commemorate its victims, among its unsung heroes these valiant "soldiers" surely deserve academic attention. Despite numerous literary references to dogs in everything from soldiers' letters to novels, such as Maurice Genevoix's *Ceux de 14*, this article focuses primarily on selected wartime magazines, newspaper articles, and short stories written by Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (1873–1954). How might these illustrations, articles, and books dedicated to canine combatants be read as a transmission of French culture's transformative traditions and even its sustaining beliefs and assumptions? If we assume that a work always reveals some aspects of attitudes and ideologies of the cultural moment in which it is produced, what might these artistic and literary works reveal not just about the roles of these dogs of war but also about their metaphorical value (Stephens and McCallum xi)? This article is the beginning of a needed reassessment of postwar narratives that have over the decades erased the contribution of these forgotten canine comrades.

### **Dogs as Military Personnel**

In 1915, Charles Guyon wrote a short book entirely dedicated to the exploits of these marvelous four-legged military auxiliaries, which although aimed at a young readership, nevertheless provides insight into the cultural role of the dogs in World War I propaganda. In numerous articles, journals, and stories published about these military dogs, they are depicted as unfailingly brave and unflinchingly dutiful. As one supporter of these dogs of war argued, "Combien de malheureux blessés peuvent être sauvés par ces animaux?" (Guyon 20). This became a recurrent argument for the recruitment of more dogs into French military service, and author Guyon's work was dedicated precisely to relating stories about the versatile roles of these *toutous*. He begins his collection with an assertion that "les soldats aiment ces fidèles et braves compagnons, toujours contents, toujours prêts à suivre leurs maîtres, à leur être utile" (1). In the opening months of World War I, France experienced the greatest number of casualties in a two month period that it would experience during the entire prolonged conflict: 329,000 killed in the space of two months and a half million by the end of the year (Ferguson 78). French soldiers were dying at a dangerously disproportionate rate compared to German soldiers, and one French soldier

described his group's experience at the front in 1914 in these depressingly fatalistic terms: "all day they lie there, being decimated, getting themselves killed next to the bodies of those killed earlier" (78). By the beginning of 1915, the military dog begins to appear in magazines devoted to reporting the war, and the heroic significance of these "compagnons de guerre" begins to evolve.

In its April 1915 issue, the French weekly magazine *L'Image de la Guerre* offered a moving story that detailed the bravery and importance of these dogs of war without pedigree in France's effort to repel the invading Germans:

Atteint d'un éclat d'obus au bras, d'une balle dans la mâchoire et d'un coup de sabre qu'il l'avait quasi scalpé, un soldat des Marches de Bretagne, au soir de certaine bataille du début de septembre 1914 gisait, à moitié recouvert par les cadavres de ses camarades, et se considérait comme perdu, quand un souffle chaud lui passa sur le visage. C'était Tom, le chien du régiment qui lui léchait la figure. Malgré ses souffrances, le blessé réussit à se soulever. Il savait que Tom, chien trouvé, recueilli et sans race aucune, avait néanmoins été dressé à rapporter au campement le képi des égarés. (Coulin 11)

A short anecdote about Belgian shepherds guarding wounded French soldiers is but one of many in Guyon's book that extols the critical role of dogs in the defense of the homeland. The two Belgian shepherds came to detest the Germans, break their chains, and maul the German soldiers who came to a farmhouse to look for hidden wounded French soldiers. The author finishes the story with the admonition to take care of the nation's dogs because "ces récits vous prouvent . . . combien ces animaux sont capables de rendre service à l'homme" (40-43).

The importance of these unrecognized veterans was not lost on the Germans, who, according to the German paper *Schäferhund Zeitung* on the eve of World War I, had mobilized over 5,000 dogs to work as sentinels, couriers, attack dogs, and rescuers. At the end of the war, Germany had claimed more than 40,000 dogs trained in specialized centers for specific functions (Beaufort 25). French articles put the number at 4,000, but the salient point is the important military role afforded dogs and the amount of press they received. In one short story in *L'Image de la Guerre*, the author recounts how the Germans trained dogs to stay behind if they lost a relatively small amount of territory and to remain near the French troops. After sundown the dogs would begin to bark. This would allow German troops to locate better French military positions for surprise attacks and artillery bombing. How much of this is fantasy or truth is beside the point, because the central question is, how are the dogs functioning in the cultural imagination?

Stereotypes in the service of nationalism created a clear dichotomy in which French canines were glorified as heroic and German dogs were demonized as unfailingly vicious. This canine binary was another subtle instructive on French moral superiority that animated French patriotism and legitimized its participation in the war. Another recital in *Nos braves toutous* in which captured French soldiers attempted to escape a German prison painted German watchdogs (*molosses*) as tenaciously ferocious and efficient in the execution of their duties. The French soldiers, despite showing great ingenuity in plotting an escape, were more worried about the patrolling German shepherds than the German soldiers: "Ce sont de redoutables molosses, capables d'abattre un homme d'un seul croc. Avec cela, ils ont un flair admirable et ne perdent jamais une piste. Un ruisseau, une rivière peuvent seuls les mettre en défaut" (Guyon 36). This reverse hierarchization in soldiering attests to the respect afforded to dogs as military personnel.

In weekly military magazines as well as in other literary ephemera, four-legged military personnel were often discussed in terms as patriotically elegiac as any used for the *poilus* in which they are described as having fallen gloriously on the field of honor.<sup>1</sup> Well-known authors such as Colette also recount stories of the bravery of these dogs in equally admiring terms. Both Guyon and Colette are quick to anthropomorphize these protagonists with the full gamut of emotions from jealousy and grief to patriotism and joy. In Guyon's short story titled "Le chien du capitaine," Black, the canine protagonist, mourns the loss of his former owners' farm and develops a deep hatred of the Germans. He becomes a mascot for an army unit, and eventually, he alerts them to enemy troop movements that ruin a surprise attack (22). Colette pulls on heartstrings in her short article, "Le Refuge," wherein she describes Linda, a captain's dog, who has been left at a holding pen waiting for her soldier who will never return. Capturing the heartbreaking anxiety of those waiting, hoping, praying for the return of their loved ones, Linda refuses to look immediately at the door when the clock strikes: "Mais elle se garde de tourner les yeux tout de suite vers la porte parce qu'elle veut espérer, une seconde de plus, le miracle, le retour de celui qu'elle ne reverra plus" (513).

### **Canine Combatants and the Visual Rhetoric of World War I Iconography**

The importance of reading graphics and decoding visual images has been at the heart of cultural production and nation building for millennia. In this section, I will explore the visual rhetoric of some of the emblematic images of these warrior dogs. Although these pictures are not iconic in the sense that they represent an individuated aggregate, I would argue that they operate similarly in that they represent a "species aggregate" whereby the population as a whole is metonymically represented by a different but familiar other. Circulating illustrations, photographs, and other graphics "reflect social knowledge and dominant ideologies" that "shape and mediate understanding of specific events and periods (both at the time of their initial enactment and subsequently as they are recollected within a table of public memory)" (Lucaites and Hariman 37–38). Photographs and other visual images of these "frères inférieurs" circulated in regional and national newspapers, magazines, postcards, and amateur historians' collections (Baratay 7). Thus, the abundance of visual representations of dogs as part of the French war effort played on numerous levels: they often foregrounded their utilitarian services such as dragging machine guns to the front lines (see Illustration 1 below) or between trenches, serving as messengers, rescuers, or patrol dogs. In whatever their military capacity, these four-legged soldiers were lauded for their bravery and skill in French, English, Belgian, and American publications, and the accompanying visual portrayals were condensed ideograms of that literary praxis (Beaufort 9–12).





Illustration 1  
French military dogs pull a mitrailleuse

No domesticated animal was considered more part of the “family” than dogs in France, so their impressment into military service—often literally at the front line in the trenches—was also a political act that emblemized the breadth of the war effort in the name of patriotism. The visual message was that even dogs must play a part in the war, and the underlying meaning was that nothing can escape patriotism’s optic and “its ability to fabricate and reorder the world, converting it into standing reserve” (Johnson 362). All along the front lines, dogs were serving besides the *poilus*, and their utility was readily apparent in the imagery and photographs of dogs dragging mounted machine guns to the front lines. If liberty is at stake for the owners/caregivers, is it not also at stake for their dogs? Suddenly, French citizens and their dogs have a common enemy: “dogs are threatened, they can be enlisted, and they can be rendered part of us” (62).

Not only in Europe but also in the United States these dogs became the subject of literature as Walter Dyer wrote the fictionalized story of *Pierrot the Carabinier: Dog of Belgium*, which told the story of Pierrot, a Belgian shepherd, who was ripped from his family to drag machine guns to the front. The book, translated into French, had numerous accompanying illustrations that related Pierrot’s exploits. He represents numerous real dogs that were pressed into military service and harnessed to machine guns, turned around, and held in position by soldiers, while the hot iron of spent cartridges rained around them and enemy bullets whizzed by them. Many of these dogs were maimed or killed, and at best they suffered from frostbite and pneumonia. Weakened by hunger, fatigue, and exposure, many also had to be euthanized. Yet Pierrot continues to fight bravely, and eventually, limping from wounds, he returns home to his original family.

But these dogs were not only beasts of burden. Other images offered a more intimate depiction of dogs and soldiers as coequals in the fight against the Germans. For instance, Illustration 2 shows the sentinel dog that guards against attacks.



Illustration 2  
A French sentinel dog guards its soldier from attack

The image clearly foregrounds the soldier's rifle in sharp relief against the whiteness of the snow, his cap and cape covered in ice while the dog is poised to spring—ears up and eyes straight forward. The picture of the French soldier and his dog reassures the reader of the army's vigilance and conveys a sense of battle readiness while concomitantly illustrating the intimately symbiotic teamwork of this pair of sentinels. By framing both the soldier and the dog, the photograph again underscores the magnitude of the war effort in which even the animals play an active and central role. For citizens with war fatigue—tired of rations, deprivation, and loss—the message was clear: if these pets were “willing” to suffer, so too should France's citizens. The brutal conditions that *poilus* endured in trench warfare—everything from trench foot to frostbite to mustard gas attacks—their valiant dogs suffered alongside them. These sentries also worked as patrol dogs who sniffed out and pinpointed the location of enemy troops. They proved invaluable to the war effort, and one widely told story was of Kiki, a French mutt, who after having been wounded and evacuated following his discovery of an enemy patrol, was stitched up, bandaged, and back at his post within hours—just in time to detect another German patrol preparing a surprise attack on his unit.

A more comforting narrative of dogs at the front was that they were somehow surrogate caregivers who could find, save, and help heal wounded soldiers or that they were helping their soldiers communicate. Thus, numerous depictions of dogs as *chiens sanitaires* and intrepid messengers (see Illustrations 3, 4, and 5) saturated French depictions of the war. The efficacy of these circulating ideograms was buttressed by the printed commentary of military personnel who attested to the usefulness of these canine combatants. For instance, one general commented:

Il est certain . . . que si les brancardiers qui nous suivaient, n'avaient pas eu leur tâche facilitée par nos braves auxiliaires, ils n'auraient jamais pu retrouver les nombreux blessés tombés dans les épaisses forêts des Vosges. (Guyon 22)



Illustration 3  
A military dog serving in a medical capacity



Illustration 4  
A dog communicating a soldier's need for medical assistance



Illustration 5  
A *chien sanitaire* at the grave of one of its comrades



Postcards and illustrations of the *chiens sanitaires* that were distributed, such as the ones above, provide a patriotic lesson. If man's best friend—animals reputed for their judgment of character and affinity for humans—chooses the French soldier rather than the Germany enemy, it is because the French cause is worthier. Narratives of the feats of these military dogs became legendary and provided hopeful examples of French military skill and inventiveness.<sup>2</sup> While the rescue dogs saved French lives and safeguarded the country, they also recognized the abjectness of the Germans by literally pissing on the German Picklehaube helmet or even the German soldier. Having the moral high ground conjugated with meriting supreme war efforts from French citizens, and these diffused images reinforced that message throughout France.



Illustration 6

A messenger dog awaiting a message to carry from his master

Illustration 6 (above) is an example of the many photographs of messenger dogs that became so ubiquitous during the conflict. The dog appears to be attentively guarding the soldier as he writes a message that may have considerable consequences for the ordinary French soldier in the trenches and foxholes. News stories about the exploits of these brave messenger dogs were retold from one corner of France to the other and even overseas. One such example is the story of a brave little dog, Satan, recently retold by Maryvonne Ollivry in *Paris Match*, who became a national hero for having carried vital information in a message attached to his neck during the battle of Verdun. The German troops had encircled and laid siege to the Belgian village and fort of Thiaumont. The French soldiers had withstood heavy artillery bombardments, losses, and a lack of supplies; however, the fort remained a strategic location. Desperate to contact the soldiers in Thiaumont, the general staff wrote and confided a message to a little dog named Satan in which the high command exhorted the trapped soldiers to hold their position until the following day and promised an assault to liberate them. Satan made it through the German lines, despite being wounded in his paw, and successfully delivered the message. The French were successful in liberating the fort the following day. Such heroics by these *camarades canines* became part of the positive war narrative to motivate and invigorate French citizens in the war effort.

In addition to their use in wartime activities, dogs were considered and depicted as members of the family. In this way, dogs served another integral function in wartime iconography: they allowed those tending the home fires to identify with the soldiers at the front. These dogs, so often associated with home and hearth, functioned as imagined familial envoys and created a

psychological bridge to the fathers, sons, and husbands in the trenches. One of the most poignantly captivating is an image from the *Baïonette* in 1918 titled “*La Fièvre de l’attente*” [The Feverish Wait] (Illustration 7) in which the loyal dog rests his head longingly on his soldier’s bed with a caption that asks, “Will he return?” The illustration captures the angst of families that had loved ones fighting on the battlefields of the Great War as they waited for news from the front—and ultimately the safe return of the soldier. Because dogs are so associated with honorable and admirable attributes, they also operate as important moral guideposts. “Dogs figure as more than objects of care and concern. They can make us better—more fully human. Loving dogs, according to popular belief, indicates a caring, kind, human soul” (Johnston 362). The corollary is that people transcend their self-absorption and attain more virtue through contact and caring for their dog. Consequently, the dog in the image reminds those tending the home fires to remain faithful, hopeful, and selfless in their wait.



Illustration 7

The Feverish Wait: A loyal dog waits at the bedside of his soldier, asking, “Will he return?”

### Colette and Ventriloquizing Trauma

Even though dogs were an important component of the visual rhetoric of World War I iconography, literary production of all types was indispensable in promoting France’s ideals about patriotism, loyalty, and sacrifice through the anthropomorphizing of dogs. No French author of the period was more adept at discursive transcendence of the human/animal binary than Colette. She wrote numerous newspaper articles in which she described the heroics of these four-legged combatants and their “patriotism,” but none perhaps was as prescient and insightful as one of her later stories of a shepherd who fought in the trenches with her master and who suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome long before it was even a human psychological and physical diagnosis.

As a preamble to a discussion of “*Celle qui en revient*” (1917), it is worthwhile to note that it was not Colette’s only short story in which she used a dog to discuss the realities of war. In *Les*

*Heures longues*, the short story titled “Chiens sanitaires” describes the training of dogs to be used in the war to locate and aid fallen soldiers—this short story anticipates her description of the anguished shepherd who continues to relive her experiences in the trenches. Colette’s description is homage to soldiers’ furry comrades in arms that risk their lives at the front to save them:

Chiens, nos compagnons dans la guerre et dans la paix, chiens, de qui la confiance humaine exige et reçoit tout, chiens, c’est pour notre édification que je veux dire le beau destin de Pick, chien sanitaire fameux. Il servit son pays et ses frères soldats, et mourut glorieusement, le flanc percé d’une balle allemande. (518)

The dogs are anthropomorphized as fellow soldiers that form a band of brothers who are capable of heroics, patriotism, and even glorious deaths. As Colette ends the story, she describes a fox terrier that was part of Pick’s unit. The little terrier saved one hundred and fifty wounded soldiers at the battle of the Marne, but eventually got lost behind enemy lines. He returned wounded and was rehabilitated. Colette recounts the little terrier’s joy at returning to her brothers at the front in Les Vosges, emphasizing not only his bravery but also his unwavering loyalty to the French cause.

The heroics of these dogs impressed Colette and undoubtedly helped to inspire “Celle qui en revient,” the story of a shepherd dog that experiences repetitive nightmares about the front caused by her anxiety when her master is out of her sight. The dog, who cannot settle into the comfortable and safe routine of civilian life, illustrates that it was not just veterans who had difficulty reintegrating into post-war life or who had lasting psychological trauma—but that all kinds of survivors of war are forever psychologically scarred. Recently returned from the war, the shepherd is exceedingly anxious when she is not in the company of her master for fear that he has been killed or captured. If a door opens, she begins to tremble uncontrollably without even noticing it because she hopes that it is “lui,” her soldier, who is safely returning. The disconnect between civilian and military life is made clear during a discussion between the Mistress’s old cat and bulldog who explain to the dog what lies beyond the apartment door—a staircase, a lazy concierge, loud children, puddles of water. Unconvinced by this anodyne description, the shepherd asks them about the other things that lie beyond their door: the enemy, ambushes, bullets and gunfire, the terrible noise that stirs the air and the earth (62). For the house pets, these dangers are inconceivable, but they form the contours of a constant and frightening reality for the shepherd.

Although the protagonist is able to articulate her fears, she does not understand their effect on her body nor her psyche. The cat attributes the shepherd’s behavior to a state of hysteria or perpetual nervousness, descriptors for what was later labeled trauma. The animals’ discussion is followed by a long dream sequence that is the crux of the shepherd’s trauma—a flashback to a horrific battle scene in which the shepherd and her master are attacked by repeated waves of thousands of German soldiers. When her master’s gun fails, the shepherd kills the attacking soldiers by biting through the German soldiers’ jugular, but as each soldier falls several more spill into the trenches to take his place, and no reinforcements appear. In horror, she lunges at the next threatening soldier, but in her repetitive nightmare she is unable to prevent her beloved soldier from capture (63). Despite her heroics, she is eventually caught, tied up, and separated from him. She and her master are both brutalized and tortured, but even then she thinks only of dying with him. Her loud desolate and plaintive howls awaken her from the hellish images of the battlefield and leave the other animals terrified. When her soldier returns to the apartment the other house

pets are still trembling from the shepherd's chilling cries while she remains in a state of dizzying panic.

This type of recurrent nightmare is indicative of the traumatic reenactments in which war veterans not only relive the event but are overcome with a sense of helplessness: this cluster of symptoms was often termed shell shock (Talbot 342). By specifically marking this dream as a repetitive anxiety dream, Colette infuses the shepherd with the commonly thought of human symptom of post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). Other pets cannot understand what the shepherd has seen or what causes her bizarre behavior, but the soldier who has witnessed the same events can. He seems to understand the source of her nightmares, and he tells her comfortingly: "Là, là, là, Bergère. . . . Là, mon amie. . . . Qu'as-tu rêvé, Bergère? Tu sais bien que c'est fini, que c'est fini, Bergère" (Colette 64). The shepherd knows that the haunting anxiety enveloping her did not end with the Armistice: she understands that the resolution of trauma takes time and will not be erased with her master's kind words and his logic. When he tries to calm her with his logical reassurances she replies: "Ô mon Maître, pas encore. Je t'ai trop souvent perdu. Nous avons trop longtemps habité un pays où l'âme n'a pas de repos, et où le corps désespéré veille malgré lui quand défaut l'âme" (64). Her psychological scarring prevents her from reacting normally to life events and routines that had previously brought joy. In its place she is filled with an illogical sense of alarm, a rapidly beating heart, and a desire to release the frightened howls she smothered during their nervously exhausting hours at the front. Colette's unnamed shepherd offers a window into the post-war struggles of those returning from the front that had survived unspeakable horrors. Bound up in the patriotic stoicism that she exhibited during the war and had learned from her military father, Colette relies on those animals she cherished to articulate the grim realities of veterans haunted by the terror of warfare. Indeed, no other animal was more appropriate than man's best friend, who had shared that man-made hell with him.

## Conclusion

Animal studies scholars have argued that students of literature and culture can no longer ignore the relevance of animals in works of imagination. In light of what we have learned about animals and their unimagined capacities from fields such as cognitive ethology, we must reassess the "meanings and stakes of a novel or a film . . . especially after (at least some of) the animals treated in it undergo an ontological shift from things to, in some sense, persons" (Wolfe 567). In general, animals have remained peripheral in discussions of World War I despite the estimated fourteen million animals that were enlisted in the war effort—everything from donkeys, mules, and horses to carrier pigeons and dogs. By 1918 over one hundred thousand dogs are believed to have participated in military service (Baratay 10; Anastasia 1). Their exploits were held up as examples of extreme bravery, patriotism, and loyalty; authors such as Colette not only discussed their contributions to the war effort, but they also used them to discuss veteran's lives after the war. In particular, literary works of the imagination such as Colette's "Celle qui en revient" anticipated what a variety of animal studies scholars have theorized and proven: dogs possess rich emotional and cognitive lives that include elaborate and multiform communications. Their complex emotions may range from jealousy, grief, and anger to solicitude, concern, and love.

While it is important to remember canine contributions to the Great War, we must also take into account their place as part of a larger contemporary war narrative and the various other roles that dogs played during the conflict. As Libby Murphy points out in *The Art of Survival: France*

and the Great War Picaresque, animals were a modality of cultural production that allowed citizens and soldiers to imagine their survival through the stories of animals and their brave participation in the defense of the nation. France, as the only Republic among the European powers, was the only country who sent soldiers to war to defend a country to which they were citizens not subjects—“a nation of which they understood themselves to the very embodiment” (Murphy 8; Smith 241–60). As stakeholders, they were fighting for themselves and a nation’s existence in a way that fighting those for a monarchy could not be. Thus, these stories and depictions of the *poilus à quatre pattes* allowed France’s citizens and soldiers alike to mediate the brutalities of war and the bestialization of war that heightens man’s most animal instincts. Simultaneously, these dog narratives also represent animality at its most noble and comforting, which gestures to the potentiality of a return to the moral values and “Frenchness” associated with the hearth and home, where man’s best friend is a natural participant. Dog protagonists often embodied all of the “heroic qualities of the epic-mode *poilu*, such as courage, self-sacrifice, and devotion to la patrie” (Murphy 126).

French historian Eric Baratay, whose book *Bêtes des tranchées* explores the importance of various animals in World War I, has stated that veterans at first celebrated the animals, but:

[À] partir des années 1930, l’oubli a commencé. Il a été en partie renforcé par l’image que nous nous sommes forgée de ce conflit: celle de la première guerre industrielle. Avec les tanks, les mitrailleuses, les trains et les taxis de la Marne, l’animal a fini par apparaître comme secondaire, alors qu’il était en fait fondamental. (14–15)

In the dominant historical narratives of World War I, animals have often been relegated to the margins in discussing the casualties of the war, or even worse, they have been elided. So, as one author wrote about dogs in Belgium during World War I, “Il est donc parfaitement naturel que l’on ait, de tout temps, confondu en une commune admiration les soldats et les chiens qui aient partagé avec eux tous les dangers et toutes les souffrances” (Beaufort 17). While a patriotic memorial glorifying animals sent to war may be unnecessary, it is nonetheless our responsibility to ensure that they remain part of the remembered history of World War I. As an affective signifier of home, family, and loyalty, these animals were crucial to a propaganda machine that linked patriotism to sacrifice. Colette said it thus:

Chiens, nos compagnons dans la guerre et dans la paix, chiens de qui la confiance humaine exige et reçoit tout, chiens, c’est pour notre édification que je veux dire le beau destin de Pick, chien sanitaire fameux. Il servit son pays et ses frères soldats, et mourut glorieusement, le flanc percé d’une balle allemande. (518)

These *frères inférieurs* were important to the materiality of the war effort, but they were equally important as patriotic symbols that rallied French morale around their lives and their glorious deaths.



Illustrations

1. “Mitrailleur belge et son attelage,” 1915. [www.archives18.fr/article.php?laref=627](http://www.archives18.fr/article.php?laref=627).
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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> “En évaluant à sept ou huit milles les chiens utilisés par les belligérants, nous ne devons pas beaucoup nous écarter de la vérité et nombreux d’entre eux, hélas ! tels la célèbre Radette, et un des ses fils, sont tombés glorieusement sur le champ d’honneur.” *L’image de la guerre*, (4 January 1915) (N24, A1) p. 4. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k65087558/f3.image.r=l'image%20de%20la%20guerre%20chiens%20sanitaires>.

<sup>2</sup> For example, a French dog, Prusco, was credited with saving more than a hundred men, and after one battle allowed three soldiers in sequence to hold onto his collar while he dragged them to a depression where they could be safe from enemy fire.