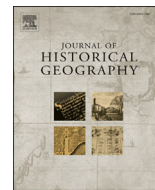




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# Canines and contraband: dogs, nonhuman agency and the making of the Franco-Belgian border during the French Third Republic



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## ABSTRACT

To deepen understandings of the relationship between animal agents and borders, this article explores the history of smuggling and customs dogs on the Franco-Belgian border between 1871 and 1940. Both kinds of dogs became enmeshed in the bordering process. Smuggling dogs were seen to undermine the Third Republic's efforts to secure its territory during a period of anxiety about the porosity of the nation's borders. In response, customs officials, journalists and others mobilized customs dogs to defend borders and state revenues, portraying them as intelligent, skilled and loyal animals. This article situates the history of smuggling and customs dogs within border studies and animal studies literatures, arguing that animals are significant, if neglected, agents in the construction and contestation of borders. It focuses in particular on human understandings and mobilizations of nonhuman agency that helped the French imagine their borders. In addition, the mobilization of customs dogs reflected and reinforced the reinvention of the dog in Western societies as auxiliaries in defending state control of territory.

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In 1856 *L'Illustration* described the Franco-Belgian frontier as a 'vast battlefield' on which smugglers 'skirmished' against customs men. Both sides mobilized dogs. Although their loyalty was dependent on the food they received ('voilà their moral and political doctrine'), 'estimable quadrupeds' helped customs men defend French territory against smugglers who deployed their own dogs in 'ingenious' ways to carry contraband and attack customs dogs. According to *L'Illustration*, experienced customs dogs expertly disabled their canine adversaries until their master arrived on the scene to cut off one of the smuggling dog's paws, a 'bloody trophy' that would entitle the bearer to a reward.<sup>1</sup> The image of France's northern frontier as a violent place in which human-canine partnerships battled for control continued into the twentieth century. With the French becoming avid consumers of sensationalist crime stories, a 1902 image in *Le Petit Journal* depicted two smugglers attaching contraband to their dog as they lurked in a moonlit forest. The dog wears a spiky collar designed to give it an advantage in confrontations with customs dogs (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> These representations of the skirmishes between human and canine actors hint at the intricate

relationship between animals, national territory and the state. Dogs enabled customs officials to portray themselves as effective protectors of the French nation at a time when its borders became the focus of much attention, anxiety and redefinition. As the Third Republic sought to establish its political legitimacy and create a unified sense of republican national identity after the disastrous defeat to Prussia and its allies in 1871, press and other representations of customs dogs helped construct France as a bounded and unified nation-state whose territory was under state control.

This article investigates how representations of skilled canine agents were politicized and enrolled in the production of the Franco-Belgian border. Postcards and newspaper accounts of accomplished customs dogs helped the French reimagine the porous border as a protected space, just as accounts of crafty, violent and elusive smuggling dogs portrayed it as a lawless space. The image of canine-enhanced state authority was at least as significant as the role of customs dogs on the ground. As Peter Andreas argues, combatting smuggling has 'often proved politically popular for [its] symbolic value in projecting an image of government authority and resolve'.<sup>3</sup> Customs dogs served as emotive counter-images to those that romanticized smuggling or promoted free trade, combating the narratives of writers who brought the legendary exploits of the

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<sup>1</sup> H. Bruneel, Dounaniers et contrebandiers sur la frontier du Nord, *L'Illustration, journal universel*, 12 April 1856.

<sup>2</sup> *Le Petit Journal, Supplement illustré*, 1 June 1902; D. Kalifa, *Crime et culture au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> P. Andreas, *Smuggler Nation: How Illicit Trade Made America*, New York, 2013, 8.



Fig. 1. Smugglers and their dogs at night. Source: *Le Petit Journal, Supplément illustré*, 1 June 1902. © Musée national des douanes, France.

eighteenth-century smuggler Louis Mandrin to a mass audience in *fin-de-siècle* France, as well as liberal thinkers who attacked the state's protectionist customs laws.<sup>4</sup>

Examining French depictions of the Franco-Belgian border during the Third Republic, this article situates the history of smuggling and customs dogs within scholarship on nonhuman agency and historical and geographical research on borderlands. It also extends accounts of the French border between the two military defeats of 1871 and 1940, which have tended to focus on the militarization of France's shifting border with Germany, and military, rather than fiscal, defence. Furthermore, the representations of customs dogs' agency not only constructed the border as a more secure place, but also fed into a wider reconfiguration of human-canine relationships. French customs dogs were part of a broader nineteenth-century reimagining of the role of dogs in Western countries and their colonies.<sup>5</sup> As pet dogs became more pampered

and protected, and stray dogs increasingly contained and culled, police, army and customs dogs emerged as trainable and loyal animals whose capabilities could be harnessed by state officials in the pursuit of national objectives, whether it be military defence, fighting crime or protecting state revenues and the frontier.

After discussing conceptual approaches to borders and nonhuman agency, I explore often hostile accounts of smugglers' dogs, before analysing the more positive portrayals of customs dogs. I draw on published sources, such as newspaper articles, postcards, dog-related books and customs publications. These sources do not represent objective accounts of smuggling and customs dogs, and nor do they provide much firm evidence of the effectiveness of customs dogs in tackling smuggling. But they do show how smuggling and customs dogs became embedded within the political culture of the Third Republic, peppering the often anxious discussions of France's borders between 1871 and 1940. The emotional tone of many of these sources – sensationalist newspaper articles or postcards sent to friends and family – underscores how customs dogs were mobilized to connect French citizens with their country's borders and assert state control of *l'hexagone*. Anssi Paasi has highlighted the overlapping emotional and technical dimensions of borders, arguing that 'these two overlapping landscapes link abstract ideas of border to society and show the site of borders in discourses/practices that are exploited to both mobilize and fix territoriality, security, identities, emotions, social memories, the past-present-future-axis, and national socialization. These landscapes ultimately operate in the same direction: to strengthen state space as a "bounded unit", however porous it is'.<sup>6</sup> As part of the state's security apparatus, and as creatures imbued with emotional significance, dogs embodied both landscapes.

Paasi's use of the term 'landscape' indicates that geographers and others have succeeded in thinking spatially about borders and borderlands. Yet the role of animals within the construction and contestation of borders remains under-researched. By bringing together insights from border studies and animal studies, this article begins to elaborate the relationships between animals and what David Newman has termed the 'bordering process'.<sup>7</sup>

### Borders and canine agency

The relationship between animals and borders is complex. Animals have variously unsettled and reinforced human attempts to delineate the earth's surface into distinct national territories. This was the case with smuggling and customs dogs as the Third Republic sought to strengthen France's indistinct border with Belgium, and collect revenue from tobacco and other goods.

Recent decades have witnessed renewed scholarly interest in borders and borderlands. One of the aims of this research is to challenge the unreflective adoption of the nation-state as the primary focus of historical and geographical analysis. From the French revolution onwards, borders have demarcated the nation-state's territory and sovereignty, with nationalists seeking to naturalize borders to legitimate territorial expansion and assert national unity.<sup>8</sup> Research on borderlands instead positions them as ambiguous spaces in which different polities, cultures, languages,

<sup>4</sup> M. Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground*, Cambridge, MA, 2014, 11, 352–353. For the history of the modern French customs service, see J. Clinquart, *La Douane et les Douaniers de l'Ancien Régime au Marché Commun*, Paris, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> A. Herald Skabelund, *Empire of Dogs: Canines, Japan, and the Making of the Modern Imperial World*, Ithaca, 2011; P. Howell, *At Home and Astray: The Domestic Dog in Victorian Britain*, Charlottesville, 2015; K. Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, Berkeley, 1994; S. Swart and L. van Sittert (Eds), *Canis africanus: A Dog History of Southern Africa*, Leiden, 2008; N. Pemberton, Bloodhounds as detectives: dogs, slum stench and late-Victorian murder investigation, *Cultural and Social History* 10 (2013) 69–91.

<sup>6</sup> A. Paasi, Borders, theory and the challenge of relational thinking, in C. Johnson, R. Jones, A. Paasi, L. Amoore, A. Mountz, M. Salter and C. Rumford, Interventions on rethinking 'the border' in border studies, *Political Geography* 30 (2011) 63.

<sup>7</sup> D. Newman, On borders and power: a theoretical framework, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 18 (2003) 15.

<sup>8</sup> P. Sahllins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees*, Berkeley, 1989, 7; P. Sahllins, Natural frontiers revisited: France's boundaries since the seventeenth century, *American Historical Review* 95 (1990) 1423–1451.

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