

WellBeing International

WBI Studies Repository

11-17-2011

Was Hitler a Vegetarian? The Nazi Animal Protection Movement

Harold Herzog

Western Carolina University

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.wellbeingintludiesrepository.org/sc_herzog_diet

Recommended Citation

Herzog, Harold, 2011. Was Hitler a Vegetarian? 'Animals and Us,' Psychology Today, 17 November. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/animals-and-us/201111/was-hitler-vegetarian-the-nazi-animal-protection-movement>

This material is brought to you for free and open access by WellBeing International. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.



Was Hitler a Vegetarian? The Nazi Animal Protection Movement

What can we learn from Hitler's love of animals?

Posted Nov 17, 2011

"He was too!"

"He was not!"

"Yes, he was!"

"No, he wasn't!"

My colleague Laura Wright and I were standing in front of an English class arguing about whether Adolf Hitler was a vegetarian. We were guest speakers in a course on film and literature. The students had watched the documentary *Food, Inc.*, and their teacher asked us to discuss our perspectives on meat. Laura and I are good friends but we have different perspectives on the consumption of animals. She does not eat them. I do.

The class was fun and the students seemed engaged. Laura showed a video clip of Lisa Simpson's conversion to vegetarianism and I read a section from [my book](#) comparing the relative cruelty of cockfights versus Chicken McNugget Happy Meals. Things were going well until Adolf Hitler's name came up.

The Nazi Animal Protection Movement

It was my fault. I used the Nazi animal protection movement to illustrate how a culture can twist human moral values in weird and tragic ways. I first became aware of the extent that Third Reich leaders were concerned with animal suffering when I read [an article](#) by Arnold Arluke and Boria Sax.

Remarkably, as soon as the Nazi Party came to power in 1933, they began to enact scores of animal protection laws, some of which are still operative in Germany. (See [here](#) for the 1933 legislation.)

For example, in Nazi Germany, people who mistreated their [pets](#) could be sentenced to two years in jail. The Nazis banned the production of foie gras and docking the ears and tails of dogs without anesthesia, and they severely restricted invasive animal research. The Nazi Party established the first laws ensuring that animals used in films were not mistreated and also mandated humane slaughter procedures for food animals and for the euthanasia of terminally ill pets. (The Nazis were particularly concerned with the suffering of lobsters in restaurants). In addition, the German government established nature preserves, a school curriculum for the humane treatment of animals, and they hosted one of the first international conferences on animal protection.

While concern for animal suffering was not universal among the Nazi hierarchy, Arluke and Sax convincingly argue that pro-animal sentiment was widespread. In 1933, Hermann [Göring](#) announced he would "commit to [concentration](#) camps those who still think they can treat animals as property." The feared Heinrich Himmler once asked his doctor, who was a hunter, "How can you find pleasure, Herr Kerstein, in shooting from behind at poor creatures browsing on the edge of a wood...It is really murder." Sax chronicles many other examples in his fascinating book [Animals In the Third Reich: Pets, Scapegoats, and the Holocaust](#).

Perhaps the most chilling episode in the bizarre annals of Nazi animal protectionism was a 1942 law banning pet-keeping by Jews. As a result, dogs and cats owned by Jews were rounded up and humanely euthanized according to the German regulations pertaining to pets. But unlike their companion animals, Jews themselves were not covered under the humane slaughter legislation.

Was Hitler a Vegetarian? Does It Matter?

Back to my argument with Laura: There is no doubt that Adolf Hitler claimed to be an animal lover. In his 1938 autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, he describes how, when food was scarce, he would share his meager meals with mice. Hitler had a particular fondness for ravens, wolves, and dogs. He abhorred

hunting and horse-racing and referred to them as "the last remnants of a dead feudal world."

Was he a vegetarian? Arluke and Sax think so. Hitler once told a female companion who ordered sausage while they were on a date, "I didn't think you wanted to devour a dead corpse...the flesh of dead animals. Cadavers!" Hitler claimed that meat-eating was a major factor in the decline of civilization and that vegetarianism could rejuvenate society. His henchman Goebbels wrote in his diary, "The Fuhrer is a convinced vegetarian, on principle. His arguments cannot be refuted on any series basis. They are totally unanswerable."

The extent of Hitler's vegetarianism, however, is a matter of dispute. Laura, for example, tells me that Hitler occasionally ate sausages. (See Rynn Berry's [Hitler: Neither Vegetarian Nor Animal Lover](#).) I suspect that she is right and that Hitler was an inconsistent vegetarian. But so are most modern American "vegetarians," 70 percent of whom sometimes eat meat. ([See this PT blog post](#).) More importantly, she and I agree that whether Adolf Hitler ate no meat, a little meat, or a lot of meat is completely unrelated to the arguments against eating animals. Simply because Hitler was (mostly) vegetarian in his dietary habits does not undermine the case for animal rights.

The Moral Significance of Nazi Animal Protection

There are, however, a few things we can learn from the Nazis' stated concern for animal welfare. The first is that human-animal interactions are fraught with paradox and inconsistency. The existence of a culture in which the leaders obsessed over the suffering of lobsters in Berlin restaurants while they were gassing people in concentration camps with rat poison represents a moral inversion of incomprehensible proportions.

Second, the Nazi animal protectionists represent examples of fundamentally bad people doing good things for animals. I suspect this pattern of behavior is rare. However, the converse — fundamentally good people who treat animals badly — is common. In the United States, for instance, over 150 million animals are killed or wounded each year for the enjoyment of recreational hunters. Similarly, most [childhood](#) animal cruelty is perpetrated by children who will grow up to be perfectly normal adults. (The widespread belief that most school shooters and serial killers were early animal abusers is a myth.) Then there are the 10 billion animals slaughtered each year in the United States by what the philosopher Tom Regan calls "the tyranny of the fork."

Our Vegan Dinner

There is no tyranny of the fork at [Plant](#) — that's the new restaurant in Asheville that Laura's husband Jason Sellers (a vegan chef) and his partners opened a couple of months ago to rave reviews.

A week after our argument about Nazis, my wife and I met Laura there for dinner. It was first my meal at a vegan restaurant. My entrée, peppercorn crusted seitan with truffled cauliflower puree, was fabulous. But the stand-out was desert — a scoop of bacon maple ice cream. (The "bacon" — which tasted like bacon — was actually made of shitake mushrooms, olive oil, and salt). Who knew vegetables could be so good? And there was no talk over dinner about Adolf Hitler, animal lover.

For Laura's side of our argument, see [The Vegan Body Project](#). Hal Herzog is the author of [Some We Love, Some We Hate, Some We Eat: Why It's So Hard To Think Straight About Animals](#).