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

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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 smugglers’ dogs paws, a ‘bloody trophy’ that would entitle the bearer to a reward.[[1]](#endnote-1) 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 them an advantage in confrontations with customs dogs (figure 1).[[2]](#endnote-2) 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 as 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’.[[3]](#endnote-3) 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 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[[4]](#endnote-4).

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 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.[[5]](#endnote-5) 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 – underscore 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’.[[6]](#endnote-6) As part of the state’s security apparatus, and as creatures imbued with emotional significance, dog 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’.[[7]](#endnote-7)

**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 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.[[8]](#endnote-8) Research on borderlands instead positions them as ambiguous spaces in which different polities, cultures, languages, religions and economies mingle, and in which complex communities and identities form and transcend national boundaries. Nations are imagined, national communities defined (to the exclusion of certain social groups) and states formed on the nation’s periphery, often in conflict with local and regional identities.[[9]](#endnote-9)

The creation of borders is a process that attempts to restrict mobility and create boundaries between peoples and territories. They are spaces of exclusion that seek to create order and distinct identities. In doing so, bordering creates difference and otherness.[[10]](#endnote-10) When seeking to establish borders and control unstable borderlands through projects ranging from conquest to canal building, state authorities have encountered sometimes hostile non-state actors. These unequal yet reciprocal exchanges and confrontations have transformed political and social structures, cultures, economies and environments. Significantly, state authority in these zones has often remained incomplete and contested even after the official establishment of national boundaries.[[11]](#endnote-11) As transnational, environmental and borderlands historians have shown, frontiers are as much about the fragmentation and dissolution of state power as its reinforcement, as people, ideas, pollution, consumer goods and technologies flow across national boundaries. Nation-states have introduced immigration laws, fortified borders and established customs and security services to try to monitor, control or prevent these flows, as well as to extract revenue from the movement of goods.[[12]](#endnote-12)

Borders emerge through thoroughly politicalized spatial processes. Geographers have emphasised the spatiality of borders and borderlands, and the spatial dimensions of establishing and managing borders through detention centres, maps, biometric passports and other sites and technologies. And like other scholars, they have identified the constructed and contested character of borders that produce, rather than simply reflect, differences, identities and unequal power relations.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The process of spatial separation and differentiation produced by the border has a more-than-human dimension. Scholars have already identified borders and borderlands as spaces of human encounter and cultural hybridity. They have now begun to explore their enmeshed human-animal histories and geographies, and to treat borders as hybrid human-nonhuman spaces. Borders and borderlands are sites where competing uses for animals, and different attitudes towards them, clash, as well as places that raise questions and anxieties about wildness, domestication and biosecurity.[[14]](#endnote-14) From silkworms to sparrows, animals have traversed national boundaries with or without human companions, as well as enabling colonialists to settle and domesticate colonial frontiers.[[15]](#endnote-15) While animals introduced by humans for agricultural, commercial and other purposes have been depicted as essential adjuncts to progress, ecologists and others have treated unwelcome species as invaders due to their impact on national ecosystems. These animals are seen to transgress nature and nation.[[16]](#endnote-16) Contested borders can also become new habitats. Twentieth-century geopolitics has created liminal sites free of human populations that have inadvertently become wildlife refuges. The Korean Demilitarized Zone is perhaps the most striking example.[[17]](#endnote-17)

In addition to transgressing and remaking national boundaries, certain animals, in particular dogs, have been mobilized to shore up border defences, or at least give the impression that the state takes border control seriously. In Soviet and post-Soviet Russia, books and films celebrated border guards and their dogs as heroic defenders of the feminized motherland against racialized and savage foreign aggressors. One celebrated dog, Ingus, even appeared with his master on Soviet currency from the late 1930s until 1947.[[18]](#endnote-18) More generally, border guard dogs and explosives and drug detection dogs at airports, train stations, ports and border crossings are contemporary and commonplace examples of the incorporation of canine agents into the policing of borders.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Animals’ mobility, liveliness and adaptability have made them active agents in the establishment and disintegration of borders. Building on insights from the burgeoning scholarly literature on animal agencies, smuggling and customs dogs on the Franco-Belgian border can be considered bordering agents in at least two main ways. Firstly, they were agents in the sense suggested by Actor Network Theory (ANT): beings with the potential to shape history unintentionally in relationship with other human and nonhuman agents by enabling or blocking plans and activities. Building on the insights of Bruno Latour and others, we might frame customs dogs as unintentional agents who formed networks or assemblages with human customs officials and other animals, things, humans and environments on the border, including tobacco, panniers, smugglers, rivers, checkpoints, roads, maps and customs houses: they were actors in engaged in the co-production of the border.[[20]](#endnote-20) And, secondly, they could be accorded the status of agent as creatures who acted in capable ways with, at times, a degree of intentionality. Like ANT-style agents, their agency would be relational and depend, in part, on their ability to form effective alliances with other agents.[[21]](#endnote-21) These types of agency are not mutually exclusive: a customs dog could be an agent by making a difference to bordering through acting in skilful and/or unintentional ways. Both conceptualisations of agency also undermine human exceptionalism by decentring humans as the sole history-makers and geography-shapers.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Geographers, sociologists, historians and others have convincingly shown how animals act as agents by making a difference and/or acting skilfully and intentionally. Despite the insights and contributions of the “material turn” in animal studies, there is the risk that it will obscure the symbolic and political functions of animal agents. The desire to decentre humans and move beyond social constructivism means that insufficient attention has been paid to how human actors have understood and mobilized nonhuman agency for political purposes, as well as the cultural stakes of attributing agency to animals in different times and places.

In light of these concerns, this article considers how customs officials and others harnessed and presented dogs as skilful creatures who could make a significant contribution to shoring up the border. These representations of capable customs dogs were not free-floating, as they emerged in relationship with customs officials’ experience of living and working with dogs. These hybrid human-canine customs partnerships performed important symbolic work in the bordering process. Portrayals of their exploits helped produce the Franco-Belgian frontier as a surveyed and secured space at a time when the Third Republic sought to integrate marginal regions and cultures into the nation and create a unified sense of Republican national identity in the face of clerical, regionalist and right-wing opposition.[[23]](#endnote-23) Alongside territorial modernization and the development of the nation’s schools and army, customs dogs were seen to buttress nation building and state formation, as well as protect state revenues.[[24]](#endnote-24)

As the state strove to reinforce external borders, the boundaries between humans and animals came under pressure from evolutionary theory and comparative psychology. Assertions and denials of animal intelligence have a long history in France, with followers of Descartes and Montaigne in turn advocating and refuting the notion of animal-machines. Evolutionary theory marked this debate in the nineteenth century, as Darwin and his followers emphasised the cognitive continuities between humans and animals, leading to the emergence of comparative psychology. The first French chair in experimental and comparative psychology was established at the Collège de France in 1888 and the Institut Général Psychologique created a group devoted to animal psychology.[[25]](#endnote-25) Director of the Institute of Zoological Psychology Pierre Hachet-Souplet produced numerous books on animal intelligence, and advised the Parisian police force on the training of its river rescue dogs.[[26]](#endnote-26) Although their ideas were heterogeneous and subjected to sustained critic by biologist Yves Delage and others, comparative psychologists’ claims of animal intelligence chimed with popular understandings of dogs as intelligent creatures dedicated to serving humanity. Popular accounts of canine abilities, alongside their own experience of working and living with dogs, were probably a greater influence on customs men than psychological studies. But the new scientific understandings of canine intelligence helped create an intellectual atmosphere in which dogs could be treated as skilled and socially-useful creatures whose agency could be enhanced and channelled through training.

Emboldened by this reimagining of dogs, French officials began to consider how dogs’ intelligence, strength, mobility, sensory awareness and trainability might be harnessed to state objectives. According to dogs’ advocates, canine intelligence and the bond between dogs and humans would lead to more effective army, police and customs work, heralding a new, necessary and rational step in the domestication of the dog and the strengthening of state power. Unlike pets and stray dogs, highly trained working dogs would, it seemed, effectively serve state and society.[[27]](#endnote-27) Although contemporaries did not use the term agency, they depicted dogs as intelligent creatures capable of shaping the world around them. Such thinking formed the foundation and legitimization of deploying customs dogs on the permeable Franco-Belgian border, a frontier that smugglers seemingly traversed with ease.

**SMUGGLING ON THE FRANCO-BELGIAN BORDER**

Recent research into borderlands and peripheries in France has taken its cue from Peter Sahlins’ influential study of nation-state formation in the eastern Pyrenean Cerdanya valley.[[28]](#endnote-28) Studies on regional and national identity formation in Brittany, the Midi and elsewhere have sought to decentre Paris and the *l’hexagone* as the primary focus of analysis, as has more recent work on colonial borders.[[29]](#endnote-29) For the period from 1871 to 1940 most attention has been paid to Alsace and Lorraine as problematic sites of nation building and regionalism involving local and national elites, the clergy, military officers, artists, writers, feminists and teachers.[[30]](#endnote-30) After losing Alsace and part of Lorraine in the wake of defeat to Germany in 1871, nationalists portrayed the newly demarcated border with Germany as a harshly and unjustly imposed line of separation that amputated French territory. They represented the border as a traumatic site infused with the blood of French soldiers, but also a temporary one to be challenged and redrawn. From the perspective of French military planners, meanwhile, the Franco-German border was worryingly vulnerable to German attack and they undertook its fortification through forts and forests and, eventually, the Maginot Line.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Border making during the Third Republic also operated on a more cultural level. French frontiers came under greater scrutiny as the promotion of geographical knowledge in France was treated as integral to the nation’s security. The Franco-Prussian war (1870-1871) had exposed French army officers’ poor geographical awareness, and in its aftermath the army strove to improve military geography and cartography. At the same time, teachers in the Third Republic’s new schools instructed children on the nation’s history and geography to nurture interest in French territory.[[32]](#endnote-32) Popular books, such as G. Bruno’s (Augustine Fouillée) *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants* (1877), and the Tour de France cycle race, launched in 1903, further helped foster geographical knowledge of, and emotional investment in, the nation’s borders.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Customs dogs became part of the project of strengthening France’s borders in a particularly permeable area: French Flanders. Densely populated, agriculturally rich and industrially developed, especially around Lille, this was an economically important region known for smuggling. Stretching from the coast of La Manche/the English Channel to the hills of the Ardennes along the northern edge of the Nord *département*, this section of the Franco-Belgian border lay across the flat Flanders plain that seemingly lacked any meaningful natural barriers besides the Lys River. According to Hippolyte Verly, a prominent French Flanders author, writing in 1903, the absence of natural barriers made the work of customs officials and their dogs in this region especially important.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Customs work and smuggling shaped this region. After numerous shifts during the medieval period, the border between France and the Austrian Netherlands gained relative stability following the treaty of Utrecht in 1713. To pay for the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1792-1815), the French state revived the *ancien régime*’s fiscal-military state. It introduced taxes on consumer goods, such as alcoholic drinks (1804), and established ‘an increasingly aggressive customs regime’, including the creation of thirty-six customs courts on the border.[[35]](#endnote-35) The 1820 treaty of Courtrai paved the way for prefects and governors to establish the line of what would become the Franco-Belgium border. This somewhat arbitrary boundary separated communities with similar religious beliefs (Catholicism), language (Flemish) and economies. As a flat, densely populated, industrially- and agriculturally-developed region, the movement of people and goods across the border was commonplace and facilitated by extensive road, water and rail transportation networks. Following the war of 1870-1871, the migration of Belgian agricultural and industrial labourers across the border in search of higher wages and better job opportunities intensified. This migration was largely uncontrolled until the introduction of the *carte de travail* in 1929. Such were the close ties between the communities that policemen sometimes made arrests across the border up until the twentieth century. Yet this was not a free trade zone. The French state sought to maintain its revenues through customs treaties and increasingly protectionist measures, such as the Méline tariff (1892). The duties placed on goods, such as textiles, alcohol and tobacco, crossing the border sustained an alternative and underground smuggling economy, an activity enmeshed in everyday interactions and solidarities between communities on either side of the border.[[36]](#endnote-36) In border towns like Halluin smuggling provided a means to supplement low salaries and formed a ‘parallel system of economic exchanges’ to the official economy. Smugglers exploited the porous border, hiding goods on their persons as they crossed the border, often hidden within the daily commuting crowds.[[37]](#endnote-37)

For establishment figures in the Nord *département* smuggling was a flagrant and dangerous affront to state authority and public safety. Verly’s 1898 novel *Les socialistes au pouvoir* imagined societal collapse after a socialist takeover of France, leading to a German invasion. The route of one of Germany’s armies passed through the ‘socialist belly of Belgium’.[[38]](#endnote-38) This fearful association of socialism and foreign invasion informed his perception of smuggling, which thrived in leftwing towns along the border. He likened the struggle between customs officials and smugglers – the ‘plague of the frontier’ – to a necessary war needed to secure the border region. He replaced the romantic figure of the solitary smuggler with depictions of unscrupulous smuggling gangs who made parts of French Flanders crime-ridden and ‘almost uninhabitable’ places. Reportedly raping women in their homes and leaving workers for dead on the roadside, the smugglers represented a ‘social danger’ as they imposed a reign of ‘terror’ over the region.[[39]](#endnote-39) Verly implicitly positioned the smugglers as the rural counterparts of the ‘Apache’ gangs that terrorized the Parisian bourgeoisie. Both were deemed to lurk on the margins of society and undermine the state’s ability to defend its law-abiding citizens, thereby fostering an atmosphere of insecurity and exposing the state’s incomplete control over its territory.[[40]](#endnote-40) Securing the frontier against smugglers was not just a matter of defending state revenues. It entailed maintaining order and became an issue of social defence, legitimating state-condoned violence against smuggling dogs.

Smuggling dogs were seen to challenge the state’s authority on the border. Smugglers harnessed canine strength and navigational abilities to carry contraband.[[41]](#endnote-41) Often taking part in nocturnal cross-border sorties across farmland, dogs became part of the widespread practice of smuggling on France’s most northern border. Eyewitness accounts described how their training and refined senses allowed them to successfully evade customs officials and carry large amounts of contraband across the border, while postcards visualized their illegal labour (figure 2).[[42]](#endnote-42) Smugglers did not leave any written traces of their mobilization of dogs, but we can capture some elements of this history through a critical reading of newspaper and customs service accounts. The number of dogs involved in smuggling is impossible to determine accurately. One 1842 estimate gave the figure of eight thousand working on the Franco-Belgian border, which was undoubtedly an over estimation.[[43]](#endnote-43) According to an official customs publication smugglers relied mainly on greyhounds, German or Belgian shepherd dogs, and Bouviers des Flandres. Above all they favoured dogs with discreet coats and markings who would blend into the nocturnal environment.[[44]](#endnote-44)

It is impossible to know for sure how smugglers trained their dogs, given that they did not record their techniques. But contemporary, and unsympathetic, observers claimed some insight into the process. They depicted the smugglers’ deployment of dogs as a corruption of the latter’s intelligence and true calling: the serving of humanity in the interests of the common good. For professor of agricultural engineering and animal protectionist Albert Larbalétrier, smugglers’ appropriation of dogs’ ‘intelligence’, ‘strength’ and refined senses of smell and hearing had turned them into opponents of ‘authority’ and ‘institutions’. Rather than be trained to do ‘good’, these canine ‘accomplices’ received a ‘very special education’. According to Larbalétrier’s account, smugglers trained them to travel at night between a location in Belgium and one in France, all the while avoiding major roads, paths, customs officials and gendarmes. Allegedly starved for several days, the dog would be led along out-of-the-way paths from Belgium to France where it would eventually find its master and receive food. After a while, it would be able to follow the route alone whilst carrying contraband goods. Their smuggler owner, meanwhile, would take a more direct route across the border travelling as an ‘honest business man or farmer’ and retrieve their dog and goods at the designated *rendez-vous*. The smugglers instilled a ‘profound terror’ of customs men and gendarmes into their dogs by ambushing them on the route disguised as these authority figures and hitting them with sticks or stones or even firing bullets at them. According to Larbalétrier, this cruel and unusual training not only increased the smugglers’ profits but changed the dogs, making them ‘half-savage’ and aggressive towards anyone other than their master: they had been known to attack women and children, as well as livestock.[[45]](#endnote-45) Larbalétrier’s account was undoubtedly exaggerated and designed to discredit smugglers, whose malicious intent had even succeed in corrupting dogs, an animal that was often treated as representing the pinnacle of human domestication of nature. Larbalétrier depicted smuggling dogs as dangerous and contradictory mixtures of skill, intelligence and savagery who not only transgressed the border but spread terror and lawlessness across the region. Canine agency in this instance was treated as malignant and in need of containment.

Depicting the dogs as savage positioned them as other – and a threat – to civilisation. They constituted a rural counterpart to ‘Apache-dogs’ (*chiens-apaches*) who Apache gang members in Paris had allegedly trained to bring down solitary walkers in Parisian suburbs and disable them until gang members arrived to relieve them of their possessions.[[46]](#endnote-46) Smuggling and Apache-dogs stood in stark contrast to the pure breed dogs promoted by trainers, breeders and the French kennel club, the Central Society for the Improvement of Dog Breeds in France (Société centrale pour l’amélioration des races de chiens en France), established in 1882.[[47]](#endnote-47) Yet despite their supposedly savage nature, a grudging respect for the smugglers’ dogs was also apparent. *L’écho de la gendarmerie nationale* noted their ‘highly developed intelligence’, with some of the most gifted smugglers’ dogs apparently able to guide other dogs across the border.[[48]](#endnote-48) Packs of between thirty to forty dogs travelling independently were said to traverse the border, although they had reportedly disappeared by the late 1920s.[[49]](#endnote-49) Such accounts strengthened the perception of smugglers’ dogs as intelligent and skilled opponents who enhanced the smugglers’ already elusive and frustrating mobility.

Like their human counterparts, notable smuggling dogs became infamous for their cunning. They included Malin, a dog from Maubeuge, who allowed his once-impoverished master to become rich by smuggling lace across the Belgian border. Larbalétrier reported that the dog, like his master, lived up to his name and displayed much cunning. At times he disguised himself as a sheep or walked underneath a carriage to avoid detection. Customs officials eventually shot him, reportedly recovering fifteen thousand francs worth of rare lace.[[50]](#endnote-50) Larbalétrier’s account of the wily Malin was more myth than reality, and rehashed an existing story. Educational writer Clarisse Juranville had already recounted it in 1884 as a morality tale that warned against ‘reprehensible’ tax avoidance. This time the dog was a poodle called Canichon who was shaved by his owner and covered in lace, which was in turn covered by another dog’s coat. This ruse allowed the owner to become rich until customs officials shot Canichon, discovering fifteen thousand francs worth of lace on him. Distraught at the loss of his dog, the smuggler finally realized ‘that it is not good to wander from the straight and narrow’.[[51]](#endnote-51) In both tellings, the combined shrewdness, skill and strength of these human-canine accomplices had allowed them to smuggle more effectively but in doing so they had sunk morally. Unlike popular nineteenth-century tales of suicidal dogs, pets who could not bear life without their departed owners so took their own, there was nothing heroic or meaningful about the death of a smuggling dog.[[52]](#endnote-52) Instead, their death was mourned only by their corrupted, if sometimes repentant, master.

The portrayal of smuggling dogs as wily border-transgressing enemies of the state served to legitimate their destruction. In 1791 the French customs service, the Régie des douanes nationales (commonly known as les Douanes and referred to here as the customs service), replaced the widely detested Ferme Générale, the *ancien régime* customs, excise and indirect tax collecting organization. The customs service began to clamp down on smugglers’ dogs in 1817-1818, offering three francs to any of its agents who succeeded in capturing one.[[53]](#endnote-53) This practice was formalized in a customs service circular of 7 December 1836 which deplored smugglers’ deployment of ‘large dogs’ (*chiens de forte race*) on France’s northern frontier. Customs men were encouraged to capture these dogs and kill them for a three franc reward, which could be claimed on receipt of the seized goods and the dog’s left paw. The reward applied to dogs who carried contraband and those trained as guard and attack dogs. A decree of 15 July 1844 gave an alternative to slaughter: if the smuggling dog showed potential it could be retrained as a customs dog (although on at least one occasion customs officials reportedly shot one of their own dogs who had been turned into a smuggling dog).[[54]](#endnote-54) The customs service also tried to prevent the movement of large dogs across the long section of the frontier between Dunkirk and Rousses (near Lake Geneva) by imposing a five franc exit tax on all dogs measuring more than 325 millimetres at the middle of the spine (regulation of 4 December 1836 and law of 6 May 1841). It also ordered the capture and destruction of all untaxed dogs, and considered all large dogs in the vicinity of the frontier to be suspect and therefore killable with minimal paperwork.[[55]](#endnote-55)

However, despite the government paying 120,000 francs for the ‘canicide’ of smuggling dogs in the early 1840s, a sum that implies that customs officials killed forty thousand dogs, the *Journal d’agriculture pratique, de jardinage et d’économie domestique* observed that the slaughter had made no difference. The border still played host to ‘packs of [smuggling] dogs more numerous than the ones found in the kennels at Versailles or Chantilly’.[[56]](#endnote-56) Flaws in the suppression of smuggling dogs were evident in the late nineteenth century. The gendarmerie estimated in 1899 that only one in a hundred smugglers’ dogs were ever caught.[[57]](#endnote-57) Nonetheless, the violent, if ineffective, repression of smuggling dogs continued into the twentieth century with small modifications. By 1907 customs officials were required to bury the dogs they killed, possibly to alleviate hygienic concerns about rotting corpses strewn across the countryside.[[58]](#endnote-58)

The practice of cutting off the paw of the captured dog attracted the attention of the Parisian press in the interwar period leading customs officials to admit that some ‘sensitive souls’ might baulk at the slaughter of dogs who were ‘victim[s] of a reprehensible industry’.[[59]](#endnote-59) But they defended their attacks on smuggling dogs by highlighting the threat posed by these large and aggressive animals. They had become ‘nuisance animals’ (*animaux nuisables*) to be categorized alongside boars, wolves, foxes and other wild creatures as threats to national and economic interests. According to the customs service, they deserved eradication and the presentation of a severed paw for a reward was in line with the practice for hunting and killing ‘nuisance’ animals: the bloody paw provided ‘tangible proof’ that the animal had been destroyed (even if there was no guarantee that the paw came from a smuggling dog).[[60]](#endnote-60) The killing also represented an extension of the violence bound up in the French state’s repression of smuggling, which was now directed lethally against nonhumans.[[61]](#endnote-61) Like the stray dogs who municipal police rounded up and destroyed in French cities, smugglers’ dogs were represented as semi-savage animals whose persecution and destruction were deemed legitimate and necessary to safeguard society.[[62]](#endnote-62) As threats to state authority, the official economy, and national borders, their existence was intolerable. However, postcards sanitized the violence of capture for public consumption (figure 3).[[63]](#endnote-63)

**CREATING THE CUSTOMS DOG**

In addition to hunting down and destroying smuggling dogs, customs men pressed their own dogs into service. Observers portrayed customs dogs as capable and skilled creatures who would help protect state revenues and secure the border. This narrative was advanced before the Third Republic. Former First Empire army officer, essayist and elder brother of Victor Hugo, Abel Hugo, praised the actions of customs dogs in the Aisne *département* in 1836, positioning them as evidence of canine intelligence.[[64]](#endnote-64) Although the hierarchically organized customs service expected its men to follow closely its rules and regulations, which were often enforced through harsh disciplinary measures in line with its quasi-militarized character, the deployment of customs dogs was an initiative that came from rank and file customs men.[[65]](#endnote-65) The customs hierarchy eventually gave approval, and some financial encouragement, to the deployment of customs dogs from the mid nineteenth century onwards, including offering compensation to customs men who lost their dogs in action.[[66]](#endnote-66)

The official, if limited, encouragement of customs dogs foreshadowed, and eventually dovetailed with, the use of army and police dogs in France. At the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth, trainers, breeders, officials and canophile journalists heralded these dogs as effective and inexpensive ways of protecting society from smugglers, criminals and foreign invaders. The harnessing of canine intelligence, movement, strength and sense of smell through dogs’ trainability became part of the broader project of social and national defence, designed to alleviate anxieties over national degeneration, foreign competition and rising criminality.[[67]](#endnote-67) On the battlefield, border or boulevard, dogs would, in theory, help state authorities protect society. Customs dogs joined the ranks of animals deemed useful. This perspective infiltrated everyday life in France’s emerging consumer society. For instance, the Poulain chocolate company included customs dogs in its series of collectors’ cards entitled ‘Animals used by man [sic]’.[[68]](#endnote-68)

A close collaboration emerged between customs and police dog trainers, who along with gamekeepers, formed a joint society in 1908 – the Police, Game-Keeper and Customs Dog Club (Club du Chien de Police, de Garde-Chasse et de Douanier) – and held dog shows together. Its committee of patrons reinforced the club’s links with the French political and social establishment and included the minister of the interior and such luminaries as Henri de Rothschild.[[69]](#endnote-69) Less elite connections between police and customs officials were also encouraged. Jacques Lussigny, writing in *La Presse* in 1907, recommended that municipal police forces ask the customs service to supply them with dogs.[[70]](#endnote-70) And like police dogs, customs dogs would, many observers hoped, be an inexpensive way of improving the performance and morale of under-resourced and over-stretched state officials.[[71]](#endnote-71)

Due to their dispersed and ad hoc genesis, there was no designated breed for customs dogs. Some reports suggest that customs officials used the same breeds as smugglers: shepherd dogs or bouviers des Flandres crossed with Picardy hunting dogs to create fast, robust and powerful dogs with superb sensory abilities.[[72]](#endnote-72) Diversity was very much apparent. One customs inspector from the Nord noted in the early twentieth century that customs men used dogs of ‘all races, all sizes, and very different faculties’. Customs dogs were varied, but they all needed to have certain characteristics and respond well to training. He recommended the use of bull dogs and mastiff or spaniel crosses. Poodles were also a sound choice, due to their intelligence, loyalty and hardiness. However, he warned specifically against certain dogs, such as Great Danes or greyhounds (‘not very intelligent… very lazy and not faithful’).[[73]](#endnote-73) Such assessments were necessarily subjective but nonetheless underscore how dogs had become creatures whose abilities were to be observed and ranked.

As well as needing to possess intelligence and other useful qualities, as defined and assessed by humans, the inspector stressed that customs dogs needed certain physical attributes. In particular, they required a dark coat to blend into the nocturnal environment. Once carefully selected, the dog should only work with one master and be fed a restricted diet so as not to impair their sense of smell. The trainer should then seek to nurture a dog who could work in ‘absolute silence’. If the dog barked the trainer should whip it. But echoing the advice of police and army dog trainers the inspector stressed that on balance ‘kindness’ would achieve ‘better results’ than violence. The training process should also alter the dog’s way of being in the world. Even when sleeping it must be directed towards customs work: it should be given a long basket orientated towards the wind so that it would learn to sleep with its head resting on its forward-facing legs so as to be always alert to smells. Once the dog had learnt to keep silent and sleep in this way it could be taken out into the countryside in the evening and trained to be alert to sounds. More specifically, it should softly growl once it heard the trainer’s accomplice mimicking the sounds of a smuggler. Training should then include flushing out smugglers from hiding places and restraining them, as well as tracking down concealed tobacco and coffee. With patience and kindness the customs dog would become a useful companion after two or three years of training. The customs man-dog partnership was treated as a unit defined by the qualities of each component and the affective relationship between them. The trained dog’s qualities would reflect those of its trainer so a ‘good dog would denote a good customs man’.[[74]](#endnote-74) Both seemed poised to enhance each other’s agency.

But there is no firm evidence that customs men followed these training instructions, even if the service provided greater financial subsidies for those dogs who had reached a certain level of training.[[75]](#endnote-75) The instructions nonetheless suggest the perceived extent to which customs dogs needed to be moulded in certain ways to fulfil the aim of securing the border. The customs dog’s hybrid agency was seen to emerge from the refinement and reshaping of the dog’s physicality, emotions and senses, which were to be developed and maintained in relationship to the trainer. Like the police dog who made up for the sensory and physical deficiencies of its human companion, the customs dog would, in theory, enhance the capabilities and agency of customs men who would be better protected and better able to survey their environment.

Yet the deployment of dogs to defend France’s borders was not universally welcomed. In 1867 Société Protectrice des Animaux (Animal Protection Society) vice-president, public hygienist and philanthropist Dr Henry Blatin had lamented custom men’s use of dogs. He saw it as evidence of the treachery and cruelty of humans who ‘perverted the dog’s best instincts’ by transforming them into a ‘ferocious animal’ intent on killing other creatures and humans. To demonstrate the horrific consequences of this human betrayal of dogs, he recounted the story of one customs officer who attached a smuggling dog to a tree and then set his own dog upon it.[[76]](#endnote-76) For animal protectionists such as Blatin, concerns over cruelty towards animals, the debasement of human morality and the regrettable spread of violence through society outweighed any benefits customs dogs might bring towards the defence of the border.[[77]](#endnote-77) According to this perspective, there was little to separate customs and smuggling dogs.

Overall, however, press reports portrayed customs dogs as loyal and indispensable companions for the determined, if under-resourced and demoralized, customs man. Verly depicted the customs officials’ life as rustic and austere. Often comprised of poorly-paid army veterans who patrolled the northern frontier day and night in pairs for weeks at a time ‘under clear skies or in freezing rain’, customs men spent countless hours lying in wait to ambush smugglers. ‘Brave’, ‘solid’ and well-trained dogs played an essential role in surveying and controlling the territory, helping to track down smugglers and expecting only food and caresses from their masters in return. According to Verly, the dogs’ ‘subtle senses’ and ‘extraordinary intelligence’ were crucial. As the customs men slept in their sleeping bags the dogs stayed alert for unusual sounds and smells (figure 4). On hearing a sound or smelling contraband coffee or tobacco their intelligence prevented them from barking. Instead, they nuzzled their human companion awake and the pursuit of the smuggler could begin, a chase that often ended in a violent confrontation. Verly portrayed the dogs as making a difference on the frontier, which, despite its industrial and cultivated landscape, he likened to a wild and uncivilized place: the customs dog was as focussed on their task ‘as a savage lying in wait for game’.[[78]](#endnote-78)

Customs men unsurprisingly gave glowing reports on their dogs’ performance. They praised how their canine companions’ acute sense of smell extended their surveillance of the frontier at night-time: dogs could sense smugglers up to six hundred metres away in contrast to ten metres or so that human eyesight was capable of in nocturnal conditions.[[79]](#endnote-79) And echoing accounts of smuggling dogs, the agency of customs dogs became legendary. *La Presse* recounted the exploits and achievements of such dogs, including Baron who had killed eighty four smugglers’ dogs and captured a further forty, and Alfred who had killed thirty-one.[[80]](#endnote-80) The official customs publication revelled in how such dogs had become the ‘terror of smugglers’.[[81]](#endnote-81) Pride in the dogs’ abilities was also personal and familial. Louis Chotteau, a former customs official from Maulde, a town to the south east of Lille, recalled the exploits of his grandfather’s dog Brutal, a feisty animal who a Roma (Gypsy) family had abandoned as a puppy in the late 1870s. Adopted by Chotteau’s grandfather, an experienced customs man, Brutal lived up to his name, both in training fights with other customs dogs and in his first night time sortie during which he reportedly killed three smuggling dogs. Brutal soon became the scourge of smugglers who eventually succeeded in trapping and poisoning him. Chotteau’s grandfather nursed the irrepressible Brutal back to health and the two of them continued their battle against the smugglers. With his ‘wolverine instinct’ Brutal avoided the smugglers’ subsequent attempts to kill him and succeeded in disabling thirty two smugglers’ dogs in one month. He finally retired from active service at the age of eight.[[82]](#endnote-82) The veracity of Chotteau’s tale needs to be questioned as his account of Brutal’s exploits is undoubtedly exaggerated. Nonetheless, it indicates that animal aggression, strength and wildness, alongside intelligence, were treated as vital to the defence of the border. Furthermore, the transmission of Brutal’s story shows how accounts of robust and dedicated customs dogs performed important cultural work in allowing customs men to portray themselves and their dogs as hardy intergenerational defenders of the border.

As well as being mobilized to construct customs men’s self-identity, dogs played an important role as living symbols of state authority, helping to construct the border as a safe and monitored space. Postcards represented them as vital auxiliaries in the repression of smugglers’ nefarious activities, incorporating human-canine customs partnerships into the visual culture of *belle époque* France (figure 5). Although clearly staged, the postcards contributed to the image of dogs determinedly defending national interests, reinforcing a growing public perception of customs men as defenders of France’s post-1871 frontiers rather than merely the enemy of smugglers.[[83]](#endnote-83) As a cheap and convenient medium, in terms of writing, posting and collecting, the postcards integrated the border into the everyday lives of an increasingly literate French population that was increasingly coming to conceive of the nation in geographical terms. Alongside maps, which Paul Vidal de la Blache and other geographers encouraged the French to study so as to understand better the nation spatially, these postcards helped make the border real and imaginable.[[84]](#endnote-84)

Customs men and dogs are invariably shown as working closely together, with one postcard labelling them ‘inseparable friends’ (figure 4) and another ‘two good servants’.[[85]](#endnote-85) Alongside postcards of soldiers training in France’s new military bases, such as Mailly Camp in the Aube département, the postcards of customs men and dogs suggested that the state was actively defending French territory from external threats. Furthermore, the postcards presented the repression of smuggling as a dynamic and physical process. Customs officials and dogs lying in ambush (figure 5) or chasing smugglers (figure 6) were common themes.[[86]](#endnote-86) Overlooking the often mundane life of customs officials, as well as the lethal repression of smuggling dogs, the postcards present the border as an adventurous site requiring heightened sensory awareness. Even when resting the dogs seem attentive. One postcard entitled ‘A friend of customs men’ shows a dog sitting alertly, as if poised for action.[[87]](#endnote-87) In the absence of natural barriers, images of human-canine customs partnerships actively constructed the border as an adventurous yet ultimately state-secured place. The senders and recipients of the postcards did not have to agree with the customs service’s mission of suppressing contraband goods to become aware of how human-canine customs partnerships worked to define and defend the border.

The postcards also portray the border as a site of masculine vigour, in contrast to the feminization of Alsace and Lorraine. Between 1871 and 1918 postcards often represented the lost provinces as adolescent girls, which, as Laird Boswell argues, fitted ‘with cultural stereotypes that represented France as feminine in opposition to a more masculine Germany. To the French public Alsace and Lorraine became best known as feminine, sometimes adolescent, figures whose complex imagery embodied faithfulness, courage, resignation, determination and patriotism’.[[88]](#endnote-88) One 1915 postcard, entitled ‘L’Asacienne et la Lorraine à la frontière’ shows two young women dressed in traditional regional clothing posing with the French flag on the contested Franco-German border. They stand forlorn and passive. As part of a wartime propaganda campaign intended to encourage French soldiers to fight to reclaim Alsace and Lorraine, the caption promises these ‘Frenchwomen’ that their brothers will soon come to their aid.[[89]](#endnote-89) With their depiction of muscular and energetic human-canine partnerships, the customs dog postcards still reinforced the sense that the defence of the border rested on the shoulders of French males. But as if to allay fears that French masculinity was degenerating, they actually showed French men, aided by dogs, physically defending the border and attacking smugglers (figure 7).[[90]](#endnote-90) As such, they echoed and reinforced the ‘culture of force’ that sought to strengthen French masculinity so as to combat individual and national degeneration.[[91]](#endnote-91)

However, alongside the impact of World War One, when the militarized environment of the Western Front subsumed the Franco-Belgian border and made the customs dog obsolete for the duration of the war, the customs service’s lukewarm support placed the human-canine customs partnerships under pressure in the interwar period. [[92]](#endnote-92) In 1925 *Le Petit Journal* noted that the well-trained dog was a vital ‘companion, collaborator and friend’ of the customs man but that the customs service’s allowance only covered one tenth of the cost of maintaining a canine auxiliary. As a consequence, and despite a recent rise in their salaries, customs men were struggling to pay for their dogs’ upkeep, especially as their large dogs had substantial appetites and the customs service only began to contribute towards maintenance costs once the dog reached the age of one. *Le Petit Journal illustré* argued that the customs service’s ‘skimping’ on the dogs was costing the treasury money as customs men were unable to provide a ‘perfect service’.[[93]](#endnote-93)

Despite its limited financial support, the customs service belatedly tried to impose greater uniformity on customs dogs. In 1938 it issued detailed instructions on the keeping and training of customs dogs in an attempt to increase their number and standardize the types of dogs used (it recommended shepherd dogs, mastiffs and Newfoundlands). Whilst claiming to respect the knowledge of dogs that customs men had built up over the years, it stressed that contrary to some entrenched beliefs the role of the dog was not to ‘replace’ customs men’s patrolling of the border. Instead, dogs should ‘extend the field of surveillance’, as well as track down smugglers, locate hidden contraband and attack smugglers’ dogs. Only a ‘rational’ training method, as laid out by the customs service, would allow dogs to fulfil all these functions and become ‘precious auxiliaries’ in securing the frontier. Furthermore, dogs would now be subject to greater regulation and only allowed to serve if they were at least eight months old, darkly coloured and of a certain height, as well as showing an aptitude for customs work during a four month-long probationary period. After this time they had to successfully perform a series of tasks in front of a commission to become certified customs dogs.[[94]](#endnote-94)

Events ultimately overtook this attempt to enhance custom dogs’ agency through the imposition of uniformity on semi-official practices. The use of motorized vehicles to smuggle contraband led to a steady demise in the use of smuggling dogs and state suppression of them. The outbreak of the Second World War led to the almost complete disappearance of customs dogs to survey the border and attack smugglers and their dogs. The customs service revived the deployment of customs patrol dogs in the 1950s, creating new kennels and issuing updated training instructions, before overseeing their transformation into drug and explosive detection dogs in the 1970s.[[95]](#endnote-95) The customs dog became a specialist trained for its olfactory skills rather than being prized for its multiple skills and the varied detection, protection and companionship roles they once fulfilled.

**CONCLUSION**

Customs officials struggled to contain theillegal and elusive mobility of human-canine smuggling partnerships that challenged their control of Franco-Belgian border. To tackle these adversaries, they turned to lethal measures, underscoring how the definition and maintenance of the border rested on the violent policing of nonhumans. Along with police and army dogs, customs dogs became enmeshed in national and social defence during the Third Republic, a development some heralded as a new step in human-canine relations. At a time of heightened focus on France’s borders, the deployment of customs dogs gave the impression that the border was a state-controlled space. They offered an engaging way to publicize the customs service’s work, as well as challenging popular understandings of smuggling as a legitimate form of political activism and popular revolt.

Canine agency on the border was multi-faceted. Dogs’ physical attributes, such as sensory awareness, aggression and mobility, made a difference to smuggling and customs work. The companionship and protection they offered to smugglers and customs men shaped life on the frontier. But rather than focus on the physical dimensions of canine agency, this article has concentrated on how it mattered culturally and politically, which has been somewhat obscured in scholarly accounts of physical nonhuman agency. Depictions of customs dogs’ abilities helped to construct the Franco-Belgian border as an adventurous, yet ultimately secure and surveyed place. As living symbols of state authority they transformed a porous border lacking in natural defences into a tangible site for readers of newspaper articles and the senders and recipients of postcards. Dogs and the border were refashioned in tandem as the broader reimagining of animal intelligence fed into the various portrayals of customs dogs as skilled and useful agents. As well as highlighting the intricate relationship between developments in the history of psychology and French politics, the questioning of the borders between humans and animals helped reinforce the boundaries between two nation-states.

As borderlands research demonstrates, borders are ambiguous and hard-to-categorize spaces in which peoples, identities and economies mingle and mutate. As this article has argued, they are also sites of human-nonhuman entanglements. Along with smuggling dogs, customs dogs underscore the varied roles that animal agents have played in the construction and contestation of national borders, suggesting that more scholarly attention might fruitfully be paid to the hybrid histories and geographies of borderlands and the more-than-human process of bordering.

1. **NOTES**

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51. C. Juranville, *Au pays des caniches ou histoire des chiens célèbres*, Lille and Paris, 1884, 139-41. The story also appears in H. de Varigny, *Histoire et moeurs des animaux*, vol. 1, Paris, 1904, 734; and Corps d’élite. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
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62. N. Fétu, *Requête à mes concitoyens pour l’extinction de la race canine à Dijon*, Dijon, 1866; *Bulletin des lois de la République française*, no. 1992, Lois sur le Code rural du 21 juin 1898, www.ghzh.fr/index.php/ressources-documentaires/category/8-xixe-siecle, accessed 12 September 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
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