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Agents of the Air: Pigeons in the Political and Social Networks of Habsburg and Post-Habsburg Hungary

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This paper explores human-pigeon relations in Habsburg and post-Habsburg Hungary. During the First World War, pigeons functioned as both a symbol of peace and a tool of warfare used for communication. Moreover, the birds had their role in post-war irredentist and modernist politics. The paper also foregrounds the social aspects of pigeon breeding, ranging from the elite circles of competitive shooting, to organised animal protection and the intimate domestic bonds in households.

▪ **Keywords**: more-than-human history, carrier pigeons, animal welfare, pigeon shooting, pigeon racing, Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, First World War

Članek raziskuje odnose med ljudmi in golobi v habsburški Ogrski in posthabsburški Madžarski. Med prvo svetovno vojno so golobi služili kot simbol miru in hkrati kot vojaško komunikacijsko sredstvo. Ptice so imele svojo vlogo tudi v povojni iredentistični in modernistični politiki. Članek izpostavlja tudi družbene vidike gojenja golobov, ki segajo od elitnih krogov tekmovalnega strelstva do organiziranega varstva živali ter intimnih vezi v gospodinjstvih.

▪ **Ključne besede**: več kot človeška zgodovina, golobi pismonoše, dobrobit živali, streljanje golobov, golobje dirke, Avstro-Ogrska monarhija, prva svetovna vojna

Introduction

Fifteen years prior to writing this paper, my friend and then housemate, who was to become a social scientist, Lidis Garbovan, saved a pigeon during a cold period of the winter of 2010 in Budapest. On day one, the bird looked hopelessly sick tilting its head and sitting like hurt birds do, yet recovered in the warm flat, began to eat seeds and simply flew away through the open window after just a couple of days. My friend's decision to bring the pigeon upstairs, the resilience of the bird and the ease and calmness with which it adapted to the flat with us being around surprised me. At that time, I did not suspect the long and deep history behind what had transpired. As Tamm and Simon (2025) have recently argued, more-than-human history is not only a new trend in historiography. Bringing species other than humans into historical analysis goes beyond the current boundaries of the discipline of history. Tamm and Simon make their arguments based on Éric Baratay's demand for not only telling the human history of animals, but pushing ourselves into a non-anthropocentric point of view in historical narrative, and on Ewa Domańska's and Anne Tsing's position on seeing politics, society, economy, culture as a web of life that involves many species (Tsing, 2015; Domańska, 2017; Baratay, 2022). While in theory it may be tempting to

dismiss these bold claims by stressing the enormous gap between human and animal minds, in research practice the bridges between human and other species are many (e.g. Barcz, 2018; Nemes, 2024; Kaucká, 2025).

This paper joins the line of research that is interested in relating the history of social and political realms to non-human beings. It argues that the history of the presence of pigeons in society and in human settlements of various type is one of those bridges. Theoretically, the aspects of the history of humans-pigeons to be presented here confirm Latour's idea that animals are non-human actors in networks resulting in social and political transformations at the descriptive and interpretive levels (Latour, 2004, 2017).

As Johnston (2000) shows, while pigeon meat had been part of human diet since the end of the Ice Age, its importance declined by the mid-19th century even compared to early modern times in Europe. A number of studies have pointed out pigeons as salient species interacting with social and cultural change and influencing scientific and political developments in contemporary life worlds (Janiga, Johnston, 1995; Dobeic et al., 2011; Jerolmack, 2013; Scarf et al., 2016; Soh et al., 2020; Dunn et al., 2022). Popular science journals have addressed the contradiction between associating pigeons with danger, the damage their excrements cause to the urban built environment, and the historically rich relationship between humans and pigeons who have the possibility and feasibility of co-habitation at their core (Portugal, 2022; Thompson 2025). Maria Martelli has recently emphasised that cities are multi-species spaces, of which pigeons are constituent (Martelli, 2022). However, there are just few historical studies that take pigeons as their subject, and these exclusively relate to military history (Szikora 1983; McCafferty, 2002; Snyders, 2015; Corera, 2018; Macalaster, 2020). These works include many areas and countries such as Australia, New Guinea, the USA, and France.

Looking at some relatively widely known episodes from the entangled past of pigeons and humans is a way to identify historical research questions in the context of Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as post-Habsburg Hungary. The pigeon, as a symbol of love and war, had already appeared in ancient Akkadian culture. In the version of the great flood story that was canonized to become part of the Bible, a white dove was a messenger notifying Noah about the new peace with God that meant the end of the catastrophic flood. The image of the pigeon as the symbol of peace became part of the medieval world as well. Notably, the capacity of one of the key figures of religious reform, St. Francis, to communicate with pigeons in the woods was yet another sign that the animals convey divine messages. Yet, when it comes to historical memory of pigeons during the 20th century, war related stories outnumber those about transcendent peace. Among the stories that ask for contextualisation, the wartime deeds of the birds named Cher Amie and Paddy are among the best-known. In the last weeks of the First World War in France, Cher Amie played a key role in saving a nearly 200-strong unit of USA infantry from friendly fire. The bird managed to get through artillery fire, reaching the army command with a note tied to one of its

legs – the one that was not damaged. Decades later, the pigeon Paddy carried the first news about developments during D Day in June 1944 back to England from the coast of Normandy. Notably, these birds served the Western alliance. Swedish artist Eva Marie Lindahl recently emphasised that as opposed to anthropocentric understandings, the birds' life was ruined by what was termed heroism (Lindahl, 2014). Were there pigeons used by armies of Germany and Austria-Hungary during the First World War? How much did publics in the homefront know about this? Were the bird-soldier celebrities forgotten or were their actions undisclosed in Austria-Hungary? Another context for the stories of Cher Amie and Paddy is the way their behaviour was understood as a skill to be trained.

Another tragic episode of pigeon-human history, the extinction of the passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*), likewise happened during the First World War. This species was a migratory bird that spent winters in the Caribbean while returning to the eastern part of North America in spring. It was so well adapted to feeding on fruits and invertebrates of deciduous forests that it made up a large proportion of all birds of North America, and perhaps its number reached the order of billions much before *Homo sapiens*. Some of the Native American nations relied on hunting pigeons to a certain extent, but large-scale hunting threatening the population of pigeons began when squab meat was turned into a cheap bulk commodity with the arrival of railway traffic across the continent (Schorger, 1972; Greenberg, 2014). Moreover, hunting passenger pigeon became a socially prevalent form of sport around the same time, in the 1860s. In four decades, the species went extinct in its natural habitat and then in zoos as well. Contemporaries took notice of the event and were scandalized by it when it was already too late. This episode gives a broader context for pigeon hunting associations and the debate about it in Hungary around the turn of the 19th and 20th century, showing the background for North Americans' interest in taking part in pigeon shooting competitions. The extinction of two other pigeon species also occurring in the 1900s points out that pigeon species were present and important to native diets in many regions of the globe, and also that the quick and tragic erasure of these animals was not limited to an extreme example. The introduction of domestic dogs and cats was the indirect consequence of colonialism that caused irreparable ecological damage to pigeon populations in a number of islands known as the Solomon Islands east of New Guinea. Among the colourful ground pigeon species of the region, those known in taxonomy as *Microguora meeki* and *Gallicolumba salamonis* died out due to the arrival of feral cats and dogs in the mid-19th century with European explorers and collectors (Mayr, Diamond, 2001: 32; Walker, 2007).

The third well known episode that reveals much about the historical context of pigeon-human relations is the publication of Charles Darwin's version of the theory of evolution in 1859. Darwin was in the middle of writing a comprehensive study of the natural history of pigeon breeds and of orchids, when he was informed that a fellow scientist, Alfred Russel Wallace, was also developing a theory of natural selection (Slotten,

2004: 121–122). As a self-conscious natural philosopher, Darwin put his work aside and wrote *On the Origin of Species* using his results about pigeons as examples in his argument. His detailed research results on pigeon variation were eventually published in Darwin's book titled *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication*, published in 1868. For Darwin, working on his theory of evolution, the hundreds of variants bred from the species provided a database for studying variation in traits. As explains Katrina van Grouw, a museum curator specialised in ornithology, the challenge for him was to show why and how the growth in diversity can occur while selection also takes place (Grouw, 2018).

Darwin drew on the experience of breeders fascinated with certain excessively expressed physical features as inherited traits, and the breeding experience of pigeon racers regarding the skills of orientation and speed of carrier pigeons. Darwin concluded that instead of a number of extinct pigeon species, the ancestor of all the pigeon breeds was a single species that is still around, the rock pigeon. He also traced the cultural history of the domestication of pigeons to ancient Egypt. Darwin's science brings attention to the widespread presence of pigeons in households across Europe as well as to the emerging networks and social life among their breeders. This is the context for the second section of this paper that focuses on the social roles of pigeon breeding in Austria-Hungary. We will also step into the realm of households and see how pigeon-human relations worked on a one-to-one basis and at the level of the family. The afterlife of Darwin's experiments with pigeons is also a reason to focus on the social and political meanings of pigeon breeding specifically in Hungary. Recent genetic studies found that the Pannonian Basin features exceptional genetic diversity; thus, it is likely to be one of the regions of Eurasia where pigeon breeding has had the longest history (Balog et al., 2025).

Carrier and homing pigeons are the key breeds when it comes to the wartime roles and the post-imperial political importance of pigeon-human histories. Pigeons, because of their special orientation skills, were used as messengers and as agents carrying secret insights across borders as well as displaying the extent of total mobilisation and military capabilities. The mid-19th century was the time of a pigeon related sport, the pigeon races that involved hundreds of pigeons navigating across hundreds of kilometres motivated to return to their mates and home base. These activities were of interest for the armies especially after 1870, when pigeons were dropped from balloons operated across enemy lines during the war between Germany and France (*Pesti Hírlap*, 1928). The close relationship between the pigeon and its human breeder-owner, as well as the special orientation skills of pigeons made pigeon race events worthy of the attention of the military. The importance of pigeon races for the military is illustrated by the fact that Lajos Dirner, a doctor from Budapest and president of the Columbia Association, was awarded the Knight's Cross of the Order of Franz Joseph for his achievements in the field of racing and training homing and carrier pigeons (*Budapesti Hírlap*, 1906).

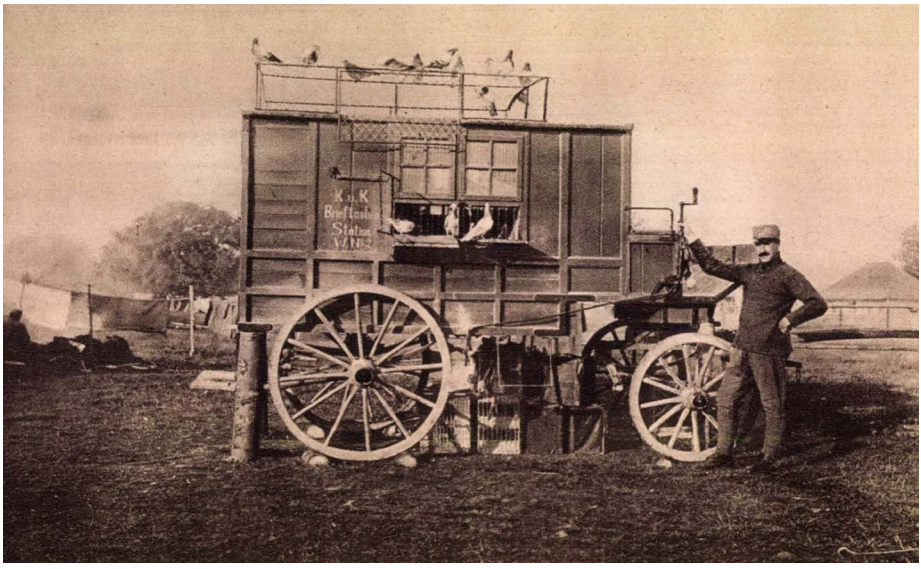

Figure 1: Pigeon wagon photographed for a Hungarian media outlet by Zsigmond Vas, 1918. Source: Az Érdekes Újság 1918. no. 4. 112.

Figure 2: A soldier of the Austro-Hungarian Army holding pigeons, 1917. Source: Fortepan/Österreichische Nationalbibliothek.

The fortitude of pigeons also drew the attention of scientists wishing to understand the workings of muscles, such as Albert Szent-Györgyi, a Nobel Prize winning Hungarian researcher (Kiss, Vajda, 2012: 28). Besides their muscles, behaviour was also a key question: why do pigeons return at any cost? In the 21st century, GPS-based studies revealed that pigeons have specific individual roles within a small flock manoeuvring together (Yomosa et al., 2015). Although scientific works did not address this issue in the early 20th century, participants in pigeon races knew it from experience: the pigeon cove is a safe source of food and, perhaps more importantly, the place where reuniting of pigeon pairs was possible. If the male and female can see and touch one another through their cages, it will become a strong motivation for them to return. Recent research has revealed that male pigeons do not react to stress as much as female pigeons do. Males follow routine behaviour in dangerous environments, while females adapt to increasing risks and pass on modified genes to their offspring (Calisi et al., 2018).

Building on the already considerable literature on the role of pigeons in frontline operations, the next section foregrounds the symbolic appearance of pigeons in interwar politics of irredentism, and in expressions of fear of a new war as well as the ways veterinary science came to be applied in the service of battlefield operations involving pigeons. Visual imprints taken from contemporary newspapers as well as from contemporary photographs likely taken for demonstration and propaganda help us a great deal in addressing these aspects.

Tools of war, symbols of peace: Pigeons in imperial and post-imperial history

A 1926 article in the *Budapesti Hírlap* newspaper tried to capture the impact of the war: "The terrible struggles of the World War taught us that what we had only known from poetic descriptions of the pigeon's wings was a sad reality, and that the pigeon, the sacred bird of peace, was one of the instruments of destruction, because apart from the courier, the postman, the telephone, the telegraph, the radio, it was one of the most important messengers [...] That is why the breeding of carrier pigeons has flourished in every country" (*Budapesti Hírlap*, 1926: 8).

It is possible to piece together some episodes that show how the integration of pigeons into the military complex was building up in the decade before the war. In October 1908, *Pesti Hírlap* published an article on pigeons being used to take aerial photos for military purposes, stating that "The pigeon, the tame pigeon is no longer the symbol of peace, but rather that of war: it does not hold the olive branch but carries the confidential correspondence of armies at war" (*Pesti Hírlap*, 1908).

This link was reinforced by anecdotal news, even if the action was set in a remote area, such as one about the winged spies. We read that "Jules Verne has a novel with a Hungarian theme, *Mátyás Sándor*, in which Hungarian overlords plot against Austrian

absolutism in Trieste. In the book, the conspirators use a homing and carrier pigeon to convey their news, and this becomes their traitor. Perhaps the idea that the police in Trieste banned the keeping and sale of homing pigeons in its territory came from this fantastic novel. A few weeks ago, a merchant from [the town] Isola, who was engaged in small-scale pigeon breeding, was subjected to extremely unpleasant investigations by the authorities, night searches, because he had bought several pigeons to a fair which were later identified as homing pigeons" (*Budapesti Hírlap*, 1908).

The veterinary laboratories in Budapest also played an important role in "mobilising" the pigeons' abilities for use in the field. Because of the military implications of pigeon keeping, experiments focused on the pigeon's brain, and more specifically the link between brain damage and the ability to fly. The experiments at the medical university of Budapest included a purpose-built apparatus to measure the force exerted by the animal's head and wing movements, and a padded resting place to protect the birds undergoing the experiments. The results showed that the pigeons' motion relies so heavily on reflexes that it was even possible to remove a significant part of the brain if necessary. The brain areas left intact took over the functions needed for eating and flight within weeks. In other words, the pigeon proved to be a good case for neuroplasticity, especially when cared for (Reusz, 1905).

On the face of it, photographs presented to the public during the war tell that the army of Austria-Hungary had a refined system for applying pigeons in the front line and also that they wanted the public to know about it. Since pigeons need to have their artificial nests stationed where they can return from some distance, using pigeons as messengers makes most sense in situations when dramatic breakthroughs or failing attempts to break through along relatively long-held positions are to be expected. Hence, it is not surprising that the photos and the news concerning pigeons used by the Austro-Hungarian army represent locations on the Italian front, such as Gorizia, Trento, and Veneto regions. In August 1917, one report talked of the use of pigeons in transmission as a novelty on the Italian front:

> In previous battles, relay runners conveyed the most urgent orders and reports in the ancient manner. Now they tried another ancient method, and it was successful: carrier pigeons replaced telephone lines; the pigeon loft is one of the most important aids to the frontline troops and command; a special non-commissioned officer looks after the precious birds, many of whom have already died a heroic death: we can take comfort in the knowledge that the military mail service and this ancient bird of sacrifice and peace may have saved a soldier's life. (*Pesti Napló*, 1917: 5)

A news piece from early 1918 reported a propaganda lecture about the role of animals in the war (*Budapesti Hírlap*, 1918: 7). Indirect evidence suggests that the

use of pigeons became widespread in the second half of the war. There was a ban on keeping pigeons already in early 1916 (*Erdővidék*, 1916). The decree warning local authorities about the possible landing of spy pigeons in the homefront dates to early 1918 (*Maros-Torda Megyei Hivatalos Lap*, 1918). Although pigeons were not named in official gazettes listing soldiers to be decorated for their deeds on the frontline, we find a handful of soldiers who received decoration as commanders of pigeon units in the same year (*Budapesti Közlöny*, 1916: 3).

Despite all this, pigeons were mentioned more frequently as symbols of peace in the press in wartime Hungary. The image of the pigeon as a symbol of peace also appeared in more or less refined poems at various points of the war. Lajos Zilahy was a young writer in uniform, fighting in the area of Lviv in January 1915, when he published a poem titled *Consolation* (*Vigasztalás*) in a daily of a Hungarian town (*Esztergom és Vidéke*, 1915: 1). He was trying to console the wounded soldiers by reminding them of the idyllic rural scene, featuring white pigeons, that they shall one day experience again, and of the pride they will feel recalling their wartime bravery.

> You will have your land and your little house,
> Two mulberry trees in your lovely yard,
> A clean room and a small room,
> And a picture of Ferenc Jóska on the wall –
> Snow-white doves in their colourful cages,
> […]
> You will be happy, happy little kings, then in the evening silence you will kiss,
> The ragged uniform soaked in blood! (*Esztergom és Vidéke*, 1915)

In 1918, Béla Jánossy, a politician from Vas County published a small volume of poetry entitled *Bloody Pigeon* (*Véres galamb*) that included the lines:

> The flutter of your wings
> Pumps blood through Satan's heart
> And his blood that flows like a river
> Falls on the heads of the rouges
> Who have cut your wings
> […]
> Free flutter of your wings
> Will be free forever! (Jánossy, 1918)

Jánossy joined the ranks of those who interpreted the war as a purge leading a better world of eternal freedom.

Figure 3: A carrier pigeon being released from a port-hole in the side of a tank near Albert, 9 August 1918. It is a Mark V tank of the 10th Battalion, Tank Corps attached to the III Corps during the Battle of Amiens. Source: Imperial War Museum, IWM (Q 9247).

One of the most tangible, although coincidental, manifestations of the contradiction between the association of doves with peace and the use of pigeons as tools of total warfare was the type-name of the fighter airplanes used by the German and Austro-Hungarian armies, the Taube (meaning pigeon in German language), which were easily identified based on their white colour, to add one more element to the paradox. Yet it was a piece of news report echoed in a number of dailies and weeklies across Hungary that used this duality most consciously and subtly. A widely cited and circulated report was about German artillery destroying what we would call tanks today and what were then termed armoured automobiles or caterpillars employed by the British troops on the Western Front. The description of the fatal engagement ended with reporting that the crew of one of the tanks that took a direct hit managed to let out a pigeon before their moment of doom. Given the cultural history of the sight of doves, one may assume that many read hope into this episode: the pigeon of peace escaping death and destruction (*Magyarország*, 1916: 5). At the same time, it was not an impossible scene. There is photographic evidence of tank crews using pigeons to communicate and releasing them through a designated hole in the front section of the tank.

After the First World War, the association between pigeons and political goals did not disentangle. Rather, it gained a new facet through assigning a new a political meaning to pigeon racing, a mixture of modernity, patriotism for reconstructing the nation and irredentism, challenging the post-war territorial order. Pigeon races grew to a major scale and reached their greatest popularity between the two world wars. On occasion, thousands of pigeons flew on the course, usually between the capital and a rural town (*Budapesti Hírlap*, 1931). As a January 1927 issue of the *Friss Ujság* put it: "Pigeon breeding is a branch of poultry breeding in itself, bringing together specialist breeders. And it puts pigeon breeding at the service of the country and the nation. We still remember the service of homing pigeons during the World War, which brought news even when we no longer had any means of contact. The pigeon fancier must be clear about what he wants and why" (*Friss Ujság*, 1927: 4).

In the interwar period, associations of pigeon breeders and racers operating at the local level abounded. The area of the Great Plains was the most important one in this regard. Some of these associations had their own periodicals, such as the *Házi Szárnyasaink* (Our Domestic Fowls) managed by the Keletmagyrországi Baromfi- és Galambtenyésztők Egyesülete (Association of Poultry and Pigeon Breeders of Eastern Hungary), which was based in Debrecen, and *Postagalamb Tenyésztők Szakértesítője* (Pigeon Breeders' Gazette; 1931–1944) owned by the national association called Hungaria Postagalamtenyésztők Országos Szövetsége (Hungarian National Association of Pigeon Breeders), edited in the small town of Derecske near Debrecen. The latter periodical had a headpiece with irredentist imagery: two pigeons appeared to guard elements of the pre-1918 coat-of-arms, the three hills symbolizing the different mountain ranges of the Carpathians, with the cross on top of the middle one, while a third dove flew over the hills, probably symbolising an ideal, peaceful situation.

The content of some of the front-page articles of these breeders' journals became overtly political in 1938 at the prospect of Hungary re-annexing territories that had become part of Czechoslovakia and Romania in 1919. Otherwise, the tone of reports was critical but optimistic about progress achieved in the field of pigeon racing. The greatest, unsurpassable opponent was Belgium, where pigeon breeding was a widely practiced activity with the highest achieving homing pigeons born there year after year. The Hungarian team achieved the 6th place in the first pigeon race Olympiad held in Belgium in 1938, coming before England, Denmark, Czechoslovakia, and Poland in terms of total points gained.

There were other spectacular gestures involving pigeons filled with political meaning. One such event took place in Budapest in early September 1937. Amid news of Japan's attack on China and the threat of a world war emerging out of civil war in Spain, during the congress of the International University Association one hundred white doves brought from the countryside were released with the congress's message of peace. The author of a report on the event in *Képes Vasárnap* (Sunday Images) pointed out that pigeons

will attack birds of prey that take their chicks even if it means sacrificing their own lives (*Képes Vasárnap*, 1937: 21). In this case, pigeons were associated with heroic acts of self-defence and bravery.

Pigeons were used as tools of war during the First World War by the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and as symbolic agents of post-war politics of reconstruction, irredentism and anxiety in Hungary. In contrast to descript news well-known to contemporaries about the deeds of Cher Amie and other pigeons deployed in various frontlines of the Great War, research has not revealed any specific stories reported in Hungarian about a daring act of some pigeon in the Austro-Hungarian army. It does not mean there were no incidents specifically described, perhaps they are yet to be uncovered. In fact, such lacuna would be surprising in the broader context of the presence of pigeons in rural and urban Hungary, and the comparatively advanced bird protection movement in place in the early 20th century. The purpose of the following section is to provide this broader context also involving the social patterns behind breeding, knowing, protecting, and hunting pigeons.

Value, bonds and social status in pigeon–human interaction

The tragic scales of commodification of the passenger pigeons and the stories of the bravery and gallantry of pigeons during war occurred nearly contemporaneously, yet they seem to indicate two different extremes on the interspecies bonding vs. alienation axis. The scientific fascination with diving into the natural history of the diversity of pigeon breeds would rank somewhere in the middle on this scale. Daša Ličen has recently argued that pigeon shooting was one of the constituents of the discourse of respectable society setting itself against the "inhumane" acts carried out by the lower echelons of society (Ličen, 2025: 124–125). What was the situation in the late 19th and early 20th century Hungary in this regard?

There are indications of the ubiquity of pigeons in contemporary rural and urban Hungary. Such is a comment in the paper of pigeon breeders stating that pigeon keeping was not only practiced in rural areas. "If we look at the sporting branches of pigeon breeding, and breeding pigeons as pets, we will find that it too is more suited to the farmer's home than to the smoky factory chimneys of the cities, where there is neither space nor a real understanding of the needs and wants of the animals" (*Magyar Galambtenyésztők Lapja*, 1938). From the 1890s onwards, advertisements where breeders offered racing pigeons appeared regularly in dailies, specialised publications and hunting magazines. Breeders' networks and associations, and the exhibitions organised by these played a key role in shaping the value of pigeons. People who kept pigeons became involved in networks through the events, such as races and exhibitions, and were, at least partly, motivated to take part by the social importance of these networks.

Figure 4: The gate of the Szekler National Museum in Sepsizentgyörgy with a pigeon motive and pigeon holes in the upper part [Sfântu Gheorghe]. Source and courtesy of Csaba Zahorán (4 January 2026).

As noted by a 19th century geographer and archaeologist of the Szeklerland, a region named after its Hungarian community and situated at the foot of the Southeastern Carpathians, pigeon keeping was so widespread that the image of pigeons and pigeonholes became a common element of folk ornament (László, 2023).[1]

The names of different breeds indicate the places where they were first standardized, such as kőrösi 'of Nagykőrös', debreceni 'of Debrecen', makói 'of Makó', ceglédi 'of Cegléd', budapesti 'of Budapest', egri 'of Eger', komáromi 'of Komárom'. These locations are in the Great Hungarian Plains and along the Danube, meaning that this geographical zone was the main area of pigeon breeding. The genetic studies of Katalin Balog and her colleagues (2025) confirm this and also show that these activities had a longer history than elsewhere in Europe.

The underlying narrative of newspaper articles discussing pigeon breeding was that the field was underdeveloped when contrasted with potential importance. In particular, the authors referred to the rudimentary pigeon meat market, while emphasising the potential of the business, citing examples mainly from the UK and the USA. This basic tone remained unchanged between the end of the 19th century and the 1930s. For example, in the winter of 1883, a journalist for the *Politikai Ujdonságok* (Political Novelties), in an article entitled 'Pigeon Farming for Kitchen Use', stated that:

> The pigeons that are sold on our markets and sold by the game dealers are exclusively so-called field pigeons. This is a species which is not very large, which, even when well fed, becomes but little fleshy, which, with the care and feeding already mentioned, is of small reproduction, and which is not very careful in hatching its eggs. Although in size it is inferior to the common pigeon, the so-called carrier is distinguished by its peculiar fecundity and care it takes of its chickens, no less careful in laying, and is conspicuous for its size and muscularity. The latter species has a very high price; in England it costs 600 marks or more for a pair. To serve these would be a veritable Lucullan feast. (*Politikai Ujdonságok*, 1883: 68)

In 1908, a newspaper of Heves County, which was becoming an important breeding region with Eger at is head, also emphasised the value of pigeon meat, saying that foreign practice proved that it was worth developing the sector. "The meat of young pigeons is tasty, easily digestible and its nutritional value far exceeds that of any other poultry. People abroad know this well. From Milan alone, an average of 7,500 per day, and from Italy 2–3 million pigeons are shipped at 70–100 pfennigs a piece. It costs hardly anything to keep pigeons. And their winter feed is nothing more than grape marc, which is otherwise

[1] I am grateful to Enikő Gazda, ethnographer at the Szekler National Museum in Sepsiszentgyörgy (Sfântu Gheorghe) for bringing my attention to the presence of pigeons and pigeon holes on this form of folk art.

exploited. And their misjudged pests are nothing, and their weed killing is excellent. And pigeon droppings are the finest garden manure" (*Heves Vármegyei Hírlap*, 1908).

The point was not only about numbers, but also that it was important to have uniform breeds (*Molnárok Lapja*, 1918: 938). The exhibitions, with the Magyar Galambtenyésztők Országos Egyesülete (Hungarian Pigeon Breeders' Association, MGOE) as a key actor in organising these events, were to indicate the state and direction of breeding efforts. The pigeon show, held at the end of February 1923 in the Károlyi Palace in Budapest, an unusual venue, was a major post-First World War event in the field. The purpose of the exhibition was to display all the breeds bred in Hungary and to allow the public, partly consisting of owners, to admire them. The patron of the exhibition, Countess Júlia Teleki (born Júlia Szászy de Apaj), was also President of the National Association of Poultry Breeders, and her person indicated that in the post-war world, the promotion of pigeon breeding was a suitable task for an aristocratic woman. In all, some 800 birds filled the first floor of the palace. According to the correspondents, there were homing pigeons, proud peacock types bred in Debrecen and Budapest, examples of the breed called stork, as well as the so-called breasted, which were puffing themselves up to great stature. The most expensive breeds are reported to have sold for between 20,000 and 30,000 crowns per pair. The organizer, MGOE, saw its future task primarily in multiplying the live pigeon export (*Budapesti Hírlap*, 1923). Thereafter, we read about similar large-scale exhibitions every few years, and in October 1925 and early November 1928, such an event took place in Budapest, that time at the premises of the Agricultural Museum (*Nemzeti Ujság*, 1925; *Budapesti Hírlap*, 1928).

Among the associations of breeders of homeing pigeons formed in the last third of the 19th century or around the turn of the century, the Columbia Association (Columbia Egyesület, founded 1901) and a number of regional associations stood out. The latter often emerged from poultry breeders' associations. The networks of associations were most dense in the immediate Budapest area while the exhibitions brought pigeons to the inner-city population. The members of these associations were mainly located in the settlements around the capital, with a significant number of members, such as in Újpest, Pestszenterzsébet, Pestszentlőrinc, and Rákospalota. Birds that missed their targets during their flights were regularly reported in trade journals in the hope of finding pigeons and their owners. Thus, pigeon breeding associations were important in creating social links between the capital and its hinterland. Moreover, through "producing" lost birds, breeding activities influenced the cityscape and the environment.[2]

[2] Some of the news articles reported opposition to pigeon breeding on the grounds that pigeons caused damage to agriculture by feeding on seeds in arable land as late as the late 1930s. In the 30 January 1938 issue of *Köztelek*, László Gesztelyi Nagy, in his article entitled 'Our Poultry Breeding Policy' claimed that pigeons were not poultry but mere toys, and that they were damaging to the farmers. The editorial staff of the *Magyar Galambtenyésztők Lapja* (Hungarian Pigeon Breeders' Journal*)* responded in its June 1938 issue, and deduced point by point that Gesztelyi's statements were based on misconceptions or errors.

The following two cases – the story of intimate relationship between Lajos Kassák and his pigeons, and the controversy over the practice of pigeon shooting – show that pigeons were part of the noise of the city and of the countryside in the sense that Aimee Boutin interprets the social roots of noise (Boutin, 2015: 4–9). Pigeons created links between distant social worlds, between the rural zone, the suburbs, and the city centre.

From the personal account of the eminent avant-garde poet and artist hailing from the north of Hungary, Lajos Kassák, we learn that care had been a part of human-pigeon relations historically. Pigeons, usually called Tóbiás, played a major role in Lajos Kassák's childhood and later adult life. Pigeons lived in the household he shared with many other people, and one specimen, a white and brown bird, was photographed in the company of the artist and his romantic partner, Jolán Simon.[3] The gestures in these photographs bring to the fore the emotional relationship between humans and an animal.

Based on the chapters retelling childhood experiences in Kassák's *Egy ember élete* (One Man's Life; 2010), Kassák had considerable experience of pigeon-keeping as a child. His dovecote was home also to rabbits and a turkey as pets. In other chapters in the same book, it comes to the fore that he also had an eye for the pigeon's fate during his later travels. From his childhood memories, and from the 1931 short story titled *Tóbiás útja a születéstől a halálig* (Tóbiás' Journey from Birth to Death), we learn that pigeons that had become surplus or were considered to be of no breeding value often changed hands at the markets. Moreover, workers' households of the time also took in quasi-rescued animals. One of the ancestors of the Tóbiás we see in the photographs was introduced in the 1900s to Kassák's household in Angyalföld, which contained many members and lived in deprivation at the time (Szikra, 2021). According to Kassák, the pigeons of his childhood were of the Purzler or Kőrösi breed. The Purzler breed was the result of the work of the Duna-Tisza breeding community, and by the 1860s it was already well established.

Tóbiás' recorded behaviour patterns are described in more detail in Kassák's fictional letters to his mother. From these, we understand that emotional closeness based on mutual observation was a prime feature of the interaction between pigeon and household.

> He likes to bounce around us, sometimes he'll be so happy that you can almost hear his burst of happy laughter, other times he'll jump up and down in front of us to make us laugh, and then we're really grateful for his kindness. We give him broken maize, white millet, light seeds and rape, which he nips from our palms, while he opens his ochre, terracotta brown and silver grey tail feathers, and the flakes on the top of his head

[3] I am grateful to Sára Bagdi of the Kassák Museum in Budapest and Eszter Balázs, Ludovika Univeristy of Public Service in Budapest, for bringing Kassák's Tóbiás to my attention.

> rise up as if he had suddenly grown a crest, and he twists his neck slightly to one side, to wink mischievously at us with one eye, yellow or brown.
>
> He is a little animal, I say, and I must confess at once how many times I have felt him to be a more spirited creature than most human, and how many times he has clung to me with the love that a dove cuddles to her mate.
>
> He is sitting here on my typewriter desk, a little hurt, his wings drooping, his head tucked between the feathers of her inflated breast, because I have just shaken him away from the machine three or four times.
>
> He wanted to play, but I had to work. He was offended, just as intrusive people are when they get tapped on the nose. (Kassák, 1937)

From the descriptions, it seems that Tóbiás adapted to their new situation, to the relations of the household community, to some extent by learning.

The milieu of households was also linked to the veterinarians examining and rescuing pigeons. Kassák describes in detail a scene in which a pigeon – this time a female individual – is rescued owing to the help of medicine:

> For now, she was ill for days, and it seemed that she would soon be leaving us for good. But then we found out what was wrong with her. She was due to lay her first spring eggs, and probably because of her poor diet she couldn't part with them. We took her to the animal clinic and they helped her. The doctor was very pleased with her, said she was a rare beauty, and cuddled her as if she had grown closer to his heart than ours. Then a man with an anaesthetic laid her on the operating table, and the doctor reached into her belly with a long needle and cracked the eggs inside her. So, Tóbiás easily passed them in a liquid state. How silently and with how much surrender such a small animal can endure its troubles. (Kassák, 1937)

Around 1900, hundreds of pigeons were killed in noisy and bloody sporting competitions on the site that was to become the peaceful Japanese Garden on the Margit-sziget (Margaret Island), one of the islands in the Danube and a low-lying green area in Budapest, the capital of the Kingdom of Hungary within the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. Good shooting form could mean as many as 40 to 50 deadly shots in a row. A postcard from a photo of a pre-First World War pigeon shooting competition on the northern part of the island in Budapest shows the cages from which the pigeons,

facing a good chance of death, had to fly out. Shooters needed to wait until pigeons began to lift, shooting them on the ground was against the rules. The 2 February 1894 issue of the journal *Sport-világ* gave a description of the rule based on the prestigious Monte Carlo competition. It stated that participants shoot at the pigeon released from one of the five spots located behind the shooter from double-barrel 12 calibre guns from a distance of 25–30 meters (*Sport-világ*, 1894: 59–60). This almost industrial scale "use" of the creatures for entertainment purposes also demonstrates that the sport of pigeon shooting played an important role in the organisation of the pigeon market, especially in the capital area as well as international bird trade from Southwestern Europe to Central Europe due to the popularity of the Columba oenas species among elite shooters. Moreover, socializing developed around the shooting in various associations, thus, the social history of pigeon shooting opens up the space for looking at the impact of pigeons and their behaviour on the networks of social elites.

From the 1880s onwards, pigeon shooting became more and more organised in Hungary. Although this was most clearly expressed in a provincial newspaper in 1904 – the year in which the Országos Magyar Galamblövő Egylet (National Hungarian Pigeon Shooting Association) was founded – the centre of the sport was clearly in Budapest.

> Pigeon breeding, for the purposes of pigeon shooting, has become one of the most useful branches of poultry breeding. We have reached the point where a pair of ordinary pigeons now earns more than any of the valuable breeds. A pair of homing pigeons, if they are of fresh blood and of good stock, and if they have two broods, will raise at least 10 pairs of young in a year. It costs little or nothing to raise young all the year round, and especially from March to November, 10 pairs of young cost 8 crowns. Thus, a pair of pigeons earns eight crowns, 100 pairs earn 800 crowns. (Bereg, 1904)

Although it would be an exaggeration to see a causal relationship between the rising trajectories of the associations that organized pigeon shooting events and those that advocated and organized the animal protection movement, the similarities in chronology are remarkable. It is indicative for dating the spread of shooting and its social salience that from 1883, the Hungarian hunting magazines published the detailed results of the pigeon shooting competitions in Vienna, and later in Budapest which were modelled on the former. The activities of aristocrat figures, such as Baron Géza Podmaniczky, led to the formation of a sports association outside the capital during the same decade. Géza Podmaniczky was one of the prominent figures of science and politics in contemporary Hungary, mostly known as the founder of an observatory in Pest County in 1884. The case of the association that Baron Podmaniczky initiated in Hatvan shows that the

planned rules of the competition were published in anticipation of critical comments (see issues of *Vadászlap*, *Vadász- és Versenylap* as well as *Sport-világ*) inspired by the animal protection movement that started around the same years.

The engine behind the formation of the Országos Állatvédő Egyesület (All-Hungary Animal Protection Association), formalised in 1882, was the celebrated ornithologist and polymath Ottó Herman. Due to the role of ornithologists such as Herman and István Chernel, another founder figure of ornithology in Hungary, in setting up the network of animal protection societies, bird protection was high on the agenda of the national and local or regional animal protection societies. The *Madarak és Fák Napja* (Day of Birds and Arbour) was a key event of the years about which many local animal protection associations sent in their reports for the journal *Állatvédelem* (Animal Protection) from 1906 onwards. The cause of animal protection received political and financial support from the Ministry of Agriculture. From 1901, dozens of bird species were granted protected status by decree, and from 1906, the Day of Birds and Arbor was institutionalized and celebrated in educational institutions on 10 May. The celebration and events organised on a day dedicated to forests and birds fit into a global trend that began in the mid-1870s in the USA and was directly the result of a pioneering international treaty, the Convention on the Protection of Agriculturally Useful Birds signed in 1902 in Paris (Bowman, 2014; Li, 2025: 42–43). Pigeon shooting was on the agenda of animal protection as early as 1882 when Ottó Herman published a short newspaper article with the title '*Egy merész lövés. Galamblövőkre irányozza Herman Ottó*' (A Daring Shot at the Pigeon Shooters by Ottó Herman) published along with an illustration in the popular weekly *Vasárnapi Ujság* in June 1882. The issue had a marked presence on the pages of *Állatvédelem* in 1909 when the Hungarian association for animal protection embarked on a major data collection about the state legislation of pigeon hunting in European countries. In the same year, the journal also reported the formation of a clay pigeon shooting association near Brescia in northern Italy as a most positive development. Italy was the country where pigeon shooting was reportedly an integral element of popular culture (*Állatvédelem*, 1909a, b, c). The argument of these publications was for banning pigeon shooting altogether outside of hunting on the grounds that it causes pointless suffering for the birds and creates a sight of horror besides lacking the features of actual sports. The key point of contention was what happened to wounded pigeons, since they were often able to fly beyond the boundaries of the shooting range and suffer for a number of hours before passing away. Even if they fell down before the fences, it was dogs that were picking them up, which was the cause of further stress and pain.

The golden days of pigeon shooting as well as of animal protection gave place to decline around the start of the First World War. The pigeon shooters in Budapest found themselves in a difficult situation already in 1913. The yearbook of the National Hungarian Pigeon Shooting Association began with the following sentences:

Figure 5: Participants of Birds and Arbour Day in the Hűvösvölgy Forest (now a part of, then near Budapest) in 1924. Source: Fortepan/Local History Collection of Angyalföld.

> We have managed to amend this termination […] However, it has become necessary to demolish the buildings and possibly rebuild the area by filling it up, to cover the area with earth and to grass it, and negotiations are now underway with the Margaret Island Joint Stock Company (Margitszigeti Részvénytársaság) regarding these works. (*Az Országos Magyar Galamblövő-Egylet Évkönyve*, 1913. 4.)

The sudden change was probably related to the grand but eventually bankrupted property development plans initiated by the Margitsziget Részvénytársaság that would have had a casino venture at its heart (Gyalai, Szekeres, 1991). It was a curious development that the local government of the capital should take such a clear stand against the interests of the National Hungarian Pigeon Shooting Association, a small community with direct links to the imperial court and the international elite, many of whose members were wealthy.

Two thirds of the 140 or so members were aristocrats, barons, counts or dukes. Those who were not formally aristocrats were of the upper class as important public figures or landowners. Examples of prominent members who were not members of the aristocracy include Béla Csajághy of Lower Dabas, son of the head of the 1848 army medical corps, and Thomas Drake Martinez Cardeza, an American banker and by then a survivor of the Titanic disaster, who was ambassador to Vienna. Cardeza

was not the only American with an extraordinary life on the list of members. William Gould Brokaw, the inspiration for the character of Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's world-famous novel, a fan of racehorses, sports cars and sailing, and a highly successful personality with women, appeared in 1910. Gould Brokaw was still on the front pages of American newspapers in early 1910 with his divorces, and he probably arrived in Budapest hiding from the spotlight. Among the well-known and influential members of the Society who did not have the title of count were members of families engaged in big-time food processing industries, such as Dreher, and Pick or a dynasty of writers and artists, such as the Fáy. And, of course, there were also the most passionate hunters, such as the landowner from Heves County, Béla Hellebronth, author of one of the most important books on sport shooting in Hungarian at the time.

In Hungary, pigeon shooting associations were all-male societies, generally with only men taking part in pigeon shooting. The exceptions included Countess Teleki, Géza Teleki's wife who reportedly made it to the semi-finals in a competition organized in July 1913 in Mocs, near the city of Kolozsvár (today's Cluj-Napoca). Women were certainly present among the spectators: reports of the competitions also mention prizes offered by women's societies. The reports do not mention the reason behind this custom but this was also a feature in other sports, such as yacht racing.

It is not fully clear why the Council of Public Works of Budapest (Közmunkák Tanácsa) was trying to get rid of the club's racecourse on Margit-Sziget (Margaret Island), but it is known that the social perception of pigeon shooting was already highly controversial at the beginning of the 20th century. The problem was partly caused by the rules of shooting. In fact, point 6 of the shooting rules stated that "The boundary of the shooting range within which a pigeon must fall to be counted as good shall be enclosed by a wire mesh." In practice, as the discussion in the Association's yearbook shows, this meant that while birds falling inside the range, in the area that was legal for competition, were collected by dogs and killed if necessary, birds falling outside the range could suffer for days before they died. This was no longer an appropriate procedure in the eyes of a section of the contemporary public. It may be assumed that the increasing number of guests arriving at the track on the northern part of Margaret Island, as the Margaret Bridge connecting the island to the mainland was built, also complained about the noise of gunshots and screams. Pigeon shooting in Budapest came to a temporary halt with the outbreak of the First World War, as the use of ammunition seemed wasteful in the war effort, and the noise of the shots could have caused panic. We learn from news and even newsreel reports that the practice of pigeon shooting and international elite tournaments returned to Budapest in the 1920s (*Nemzetközi galamblövő verseny a Margitszigeten*, 1924). The sport in Hungary eventually waned in the 1950s with the emigration, repression, retirement and death of top shooters and was replaced by skeet.

Conclusions

The history of human-pigeon connections in the late 19th and early 20th century is a good example of how animals played a role in human social networks and in the struggle between empires. As this paper has explored, the relationship between humans and pigeons was defined by a profound paradox. The bird served simultaneously as a sacred symbol of peace in poetry and propaganda, and as a mechanized "instrument of destruction" and surveillance within the total mobilization of the First World War. In the late 19th century, pigeons attracted the attention of the army and this resulted in the deployment of pigeon units as messengers near and along the frontlines during the Great War. Thus, pigeons directly shaped military and political history. In the interwar period, Hungarian associations of pigeon breeders and race contestants exhibited irredentism in their publications and perceived the bird races as occasions for competition among peoples. This understanding went along with occasional peace ceremonies also featuring pigeons. It was humans that gave political meaning to events designed to make use of the capabilities of pigeons, while the responses that the birds gave to changing practices were crucial to the human sense of success or failure. Whether serving as subjects for neuroplasticity research in veterinary labs or as "winged spies" crossing the Italian front, pigeons mobilized human knowledge, resources, and emotions. Pigeons were, as Latour suggests, active participants in the networks that shaped social and political transformations.

From the 1870s, pigeon breeding became increasingly important in Hungary, especially in the Great Hungarian Plains, and a community of breeders was established in the region through a network of associations. Pigeon-keeping not only strengthened the links between the capital and the immediate countryside but also brought together social milieus that were otherwise far apart. While just about anyone could own a pigeon loft, the leaders of the associations were members of the gentry, doctors, engineers, and landowners. The most socially exclusive association was the National Pigeon Shooting Association, linked to the Margaret Island racecourse in Budapest, two-thirds of whose members held the title of count or baron. Yet, they encountered a sharp opposition from another organized group, that of the animal protection movement that did not agree that pigeon shooting could be seen as a form of sport and presented the activity as unnecessary cruelty taking place in public view. Eventually, the First World War sidelined the goals of both associations.

While pigeon meat was still a relevant food item in the era, having value as a commodity, it was not as important as squab in contemporary North America. Being a potential food source was not a key determinant of value when it came to how local breeders related to pigeons. In addition to producing stocks of well-defined pigeon breeds that might also turn into companion animals such as Lajos Kassák's Tóbiás, breeding focused mainly on homing pigeons. Despite Darwin's keen interest in the inherited

features of domestic pigeons, their adaptability to human social relationships, such as family life, was not among the aspects explicitly studied. Thus, the surviving notes on the existence, role and behaviour of Tóbiás are a particularly valuable source for the 20th century history of the relationship between pigeons and humans.

This example is in line with Donna Haraway's arguments that in the Anthropocene there is a need for establishing new and caring interspecies relations. Social norms and even political relations can be reshaped by the caring relationships that develop between different species (Haraway, 2016: 12–13). Moreover, Kassák's example confirms that pigeons are the trusted companions of many people from the margins of society, such as workers in precarious conditions. Ultimately, this case study validates the call by Tamm, Simon, and Baratay to push historical analysis beyond an anthropocentric worldview. By tracing the flight paths of these birds, we uncover a more-than-human history where the pigeon is not merely a passive subject, but a constitutive element of the social, cultural and military history as well as of the urban fabric of modern Hungary.

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Zračni agenti: golobi v političnih in družbenih mrežah habsburške in posthabsburške Madžarske

Avtor prispevka izhaja iz t. i. *več kot človeškega* interpretativnega okvira, s katerim analizira delovanje in vlogo golobov (*Columba livia*) v Ogrski in posthabsburški Madžarski. Pri tem zagovarja tezo, da so bili golobi aktivni udeleženci družbenih in političnih mrež in ne le pasivni objekti. V članku raziskuje povezave med golobi in ljudmi v treh zgodovinskih kontekstih: paradoks prve svetovne vojne, medvojno politično simboliko in družbeno stratifikacijo tedanjega časa.

V času prve svetovne vojne so golobi utelešali protislovje, saj so nastopali kot sveti simboli miru v mirovni propagandi in hkrati kot mehanizirani vojaški instrumenti uničenja in nadzora. Avtor podrobno opisuje, kako je avstro-ogrska vojska, zlasti na italijanski fronti, uporabljala golobe za sporazumevanje ter kako so veterinarski znanstveniki v Budimpešti preučevali nevroplastičnost golobov z namenom povečanja njihove uporabnosti na bojišču.

V medvojnem obdobju so se golobarske dirke prepletle s politiko nacionalne rekonstrukcije in iredentizma. Rejske in gojiteljske zveze so prevzemale nacionalistično ikonografijo ter uporabljale golobe kot simbol želje po ponovni pridobitvi ozemelj, izgubljenih leta 1918, hkrati pa so sodelovale na mednarodnih tekmovanjih.

Nazadnje avtor v članku obravnava družbeno razhajanje v odnosih med ljudmi in golobi. Primerja elitno prakso streljanja golobov na Margaretskem otoku v Budimpešti, ki so jo obvladovali pripadniki in pripadnice plemstva, ter nasprotujoče ji gibanje za zaščito živali, ki se je uveljavilo na podlagi intimnih čustvenih vezi med ljudmi in golobi, značilnimi za delavska gospodinjstva. Avtor na primeru avantgardnega umetnika Lajosa Kassáka in njegovega goloba Tóbiása pokaže, kako so golobi delovali kot zaupanja vredni spremljevalci v negotovih družbenih okoljih. V sklepu članka avtor ugotavlja, da vključevanje teh nečloveških akterjev v raziskave razkriva njihovo temeljno vlogo za sodobno družbeno, kulturno in vojaško zgodovino.