Like many European zoos, the Zoologischer Garten Berlin was devastated during World War II. Allied bombers crushed, exploded, or incinerated more than ninety percent of the zoo’s animal population. Among the dead were seven residents of the Indian-inspired elefantepagode, which suffered a direct hit on November 22, 1943. In the decades following the war’s end, the Berlin Zoo would honor its most famous casualties in a small photo memorial located near the spot where the rebuilt pachyderm house now stands. Upon first encountering the display during a visit to the German capital in 1998, I struggled to imagine the terror the animals must have felt, trapped in their iron-and-concrete bunkers, as explosive shells rained down all around them. At the same time, the scene left me with a vague sense of unease—and not simply because of its macabre subject matter. What disturbed me most was the way the memorial seemed to transform the elephants—their crushed, lifeless torsos half-buried in a mass of concrete rubble—into emblems of the German nation-state itself. Visually coded as innocent victims of outside invasion, the elephants’ mutilated bodies offered German visitors a rare opportunity to mourn their nation’s martial past without the accompanying guilt associated with other German war monuments. Missing from the memorial, of course, was any suggestion of the Berlin Zoo’s role in validating Nazi ideology in the guise of natural science. It also failed to reference the daily miseries—the mundane, though no-less-deadly, acts of violence—suffered by animals exhibited for human entertainment and edification.¹

Over the past few decades, scholars of military conflict have increasingly turned their attention beyond the battlefield to explore war’s numerous after-effects and cultural legacies. This line of inquiry—in such varied fields as history, gender studies, sociology, and popular cultural studies—has provided invaluable frameworks for understanding war’s complex and often paradoxical impact on modern life. However, with few exceptions, there was been little effort to chart war’s effects on zoo animals and the institutions that exhibit them.² In retrospect, this should come as little surprise. Even in the best of times, zoo animals occupy a liminal place in the popular imagination—beloved as local or national icons one day, reviled as dangerous and ultimately disposable creatures the next.³


³ For the purposes of this essay, I use the term “zoo animal” to refer to any nonhuman animal captured or bred for public display in a menagerie or zoological garden. On the uneasy status of zoo animals in modern life, see Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin, Zoo Culture, 2nd edition (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).