Killing Cats in Garmisch

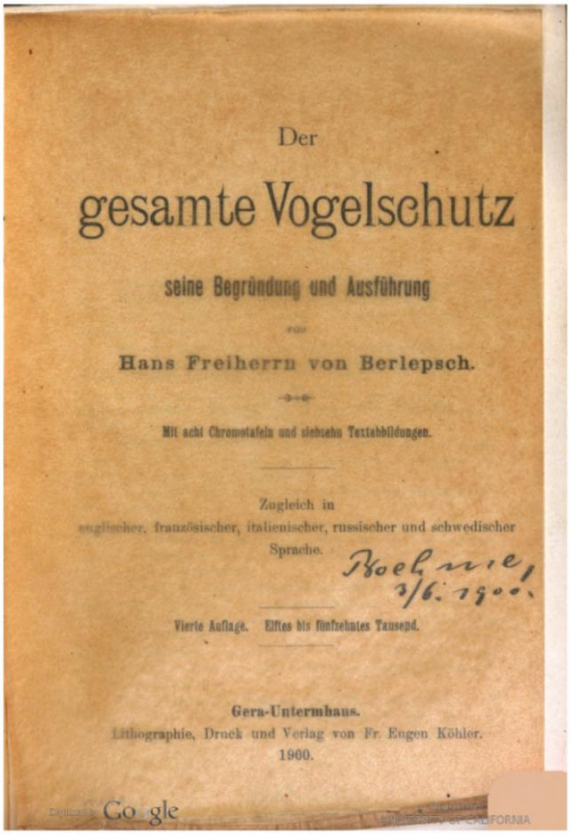
Frank Uekötter

Summary

Animal protection is one of the oldest fields of what we nowadays call environmentalism, and the protection of birds was one of the most popular issues. The Garmisch cat murder trial shows how both concerns could clash. After moving into the South Bavarian town, the staff of a bird observatory embarked on a feline killing spree. The practice sparked outrage among the locals and led to a spectacular trial. However, the code of law was so cat-hostile that the staff was acquitted. The event showcases perceived hierarchies within the animal kingdom and the insider mentality of the conservation community.

A murder trial is always a major event. If it is about a serial killer, public attention is certain. If the perpetrator shows no signs of remorse, outrage is virtually guaranteed. In 1932, such a trial took place in the Bavarian town of Garmisch. The killers were employees of the bird observatory, a Bavarian state agency. The helpless victims were cats.

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Berlepsch' blueprint for bird protection went through several editions and was translated into English, French, Italian, Russian, and Swedish.

Title page of Hans Freiherr von Berlepsch's *Der gesamte Vogelschutz, seine Begründung und Ausführung* (Gera-Untermhaus: F. E. Köhler, 1900).

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The love of animals is one of the oldest fields of what we nowadays call environmentalism, but it has not always been an unqualified love. Bird lovers are traditionally known to loathe cats, and this is more than just a state of mind. We can see that in the works of Hans Freiherr von Berlepsch, who maintained a private bird observatory at his castle in Seebach in Thuringia, which was acknowledged by the Prussian state as a state authority in 1908. As one of the leaders of the German bird protection movement, he devoted several pages in his classic book *Der gesamte Vogelschutz* to the capture and subsequent annihilation of felines. The 1910 Bird Protection Conference (*Vogelschutztag*) in Berlin became so excited about the topic that it set up, in a way that only Germans can, a Committee for the Solution of the Cat Question (*Kommission zur Lösung der Katzenfrage*).

In short, there is reason to suspect that the Garmisch incident was not unprecedented, and yet its circumstances

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were particularly dubious. The bird observatory had just come to town from the Franconian city of Bamberg, and municipal authorities had supported the move. It occupied a central location in a popular urban park. Many of the cats had owners, and the staff members of the bird observatory did not bother to ask for a license to kill. In fact, they did not only kill the cats but also fed their flesh to injured birds of prey and used the remains to stitch fur coats for their private use. It was as if the friends of the birds had been out to destroy their local reputation.



Cats and sparrows were singled out as targets for annihilation campaigns in Hans Freiherr von Berlepsch' influential book. But unlike cats, sparrows did not have owners or their own community of enthusiasts.

Picture by Heinrich Pforr from Hans Freiherr von Berlepsch' *Der gesamte Vogelschutz, seine Begründung und Ausführung* (Gera-Untermhaus: F. E. Köhler, 1900).

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Garmisch was a place where these deeds could not escape attention. It was a boomtown of Alpine tourism and yet small enough that disappearing cats would not go unnoticed. It also had a strong sense of local identity. The cat murder case did not compete with a lot of other local news. It should come as no surprise that the trial became the talk of the town.

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When the head of the bird observatory took the witness stand he was unabashed: "A hatching bird has ten times the value of a roaming cat." He also stressed that his motive was to protect the birds, rather than to feed them, as if that would matter much to cat lovers. It was a perfect example of the conservationists' insider mentality: they had their own convictions about the demands of bird protection and the relative value of different animals, and that was all that mattered. The view of the general public was perceived as simply that of an uneducated layperson and thus of no real concern.

In the end, the staff got away with murder. Thanks to a rather cat-hostile code of law, they were acquitted, but the damage to their reputation was done. The Garmisch incident demonstrated the ambiguities of animal protection and the perceived hierarchies within the animal kingdom. It also shows a notable degree of tunnel vision that was, and is, one of the more troublesome aspects of conservation thinking.

The affair and the subsequent trial are well documented in Staatsarchiv München LRA 62538. The quotation is taken from an article in the Garmisch-Partenkirchener Tagblatt *(no. 267 of 18 November 1932).*

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Further readings:

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