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"Interspecies Affection and Military Aims: Was There a Totalitarian Dog?"

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The image of totalitarianism is central to liberal ideology as the nefarious antithesis of free market exchange: the inevitable outcome of planned economies, which control their subjects' lives down to the most intimate detail. Against this image of complete state control, the multispecies ethnography of early Soviet institutions gives us a fortuitous edge to ask how centrally planned economies structure the lives of those actors whose biosocial demands can be neither stamped out nor befuddled by propaganda. In this article we examine the institutions of the Stalinist state that could have created the totalitarian service dog: institutions that planned the distribution, raising, and breeding of family dogs for military service. Our narrative begins with a recently discovered genealogical document, issued to a German Shepherd bred by plan and born during the World War II Leningrad Blockade. Reading this document together with service-dog manuals, Soviet physiological studies, archival military documents, and autobiographical narratives, we unravel the history of Leningrad's early Soviet military-service dog husbandry program. This program, we argue, relied on a particular distinction of public and private: at once stimulating affectionate interspecies bonds between dogs and their handlers and sequestering those relationships from the image of rational, scientifically objective interspecies communication. This reduction of human-dog relations to those criteria that could be scientifically studied and centrally planned yielded tangible results: it allowed the State's dog husbandry program to create apparently unified groups of dogs and dog handlers and to successfully mobilize these groups for new military tasks, like mine detection, during World War II. (Text from authors' abstract)

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