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Fencing in Sixteenth-Century Strasbourg

Ken Mondschein and

Olivier Dupuis

Situated on the Rhine frontier between the Holy Roman Empire and the Kingdom of France, the city of Strasbourg was both strategically and economically important. As with other free Imperial cities, a large part of the Strasbourg’s military pride was wrapped up in its use of ranged weapons—first arbalests, then gunpowder weapons. The practice of such weapons was promoted by the city government: Strasbourgeois arbalesters and gunners took part in numerous battles and sieges, and even after the decline of the civic militia and the rise of standing armies in the early sixteenth century, the self-perception remained, and the manufacture of firearms was a major industry.¹ In a 1588 military parade, only 275 of 880 footmen did not carry firearms—80 with pikes (*Langspiess*), 70 with halberds (*Hellenpart*), 65 with two-handed swords (*Schlachtschwert*), and 60 with

¹ Thomas A. Brady, *Ruling Class, Regime and Reformation at Strasbourg 1520–1555* (Leiden, 1978), pp. 69–72. The last outing of the guild militia was in 1526.

boar spears (*Federspiess*).² When Louis XIV made his triumphal entry into the city in 1681, he was greeted by a salute from 300 guns.

This was reflected in the official sporting culture of the city by well-publicized shooting competitions, such as a 1576 match with Zurich commemorated in verse by the Strasbourg literatus Johann Fischart (c. 1545–1591) and in art by his frequent collaborator Tobias Stimmer (1539–1584; see figure 1), in which a pot of porridge cooked in the Swiss city was still warm 19 hours later when the Zurich team carrying it arrived by boat in Strasbourg. The implications of this went far beyond the culinary: Protestant Strasbourg was closely allied with the three major towns of German-speaking Switzerland against the Emperor, and the traveling gruel was a declaration to all and sundry that relief could arrive before siege works were even in place.

But parallel to the culture of firearms was a less well appreciated, but still meaningful, martial culture: that of fencing. Although Tlusty notes that fencing was less significant a sport than competitive shooting during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which certainly appears to be the case in the eyes of the elites who ran the city—and there are certainly fewer mentions of fencing culture than there are of shooting in chronicle accounts and the “official” culture of Strasbourg—if we look below the surface, we can see quite a different story.³ In fact, in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-

² Johann Scheible, *Das Kloster: Weltlich und Geistlich* (Stuttgart, 1848), p. 1142. In addition, there were 228 cavalry, making the fighting force over half composed of men with firearms. Thanks to Matt Galas for the source.

³ B. Ann Tlusty, *The Martial Ethic in Early Modern Germany* (New York, 2011), p. 210. Tlusty discusses fencing on pp. 210–17. See also her article “Martial Identity and the

century Strasbourg we can uncover evidence of nothing less than the popular pan-Germanic fencing culture amongst journeymen with its own narrative of martial enfranchisement, tradition, and a community that grounded its legitimacy in the medieval past.

The best-known document of Strasbourg's fencing legacy is Joachim Meyer's (c. 1537–71) grand *Gründtliche Beschreibung der Kunst des Fechtens* ("Fundamental Description of the Art of Fencing"), printed in that city by Thiebolt Berger in 1570 and reprinted in Augsburg in 1600.⁴ Meyer drew on a medieval fencing tradition tracing itself back to the apocryphal master Johannes Liechtenauer, and which we have evidence was at least three centuries old by that time.⁵ Meyer stood at the end of a long line of predecessors, and his work is replete both with reference to a pan-German fencing culture

Culture of the Sword in Early Modern Germany," in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books: Transmission and Tradition of Martial Arts in Europe (14th–17th Centuries)*, ed. Daniel Jaquet, Karin Verelst and Timothy Dawson (Leiden, 2016), pp. 547–70.

⁴ Olivier Dupuis, "Joachim Meyer, escrimeur libre, bourgeois de Strasbourg (1537?–1571)," in *Maîtres et techniques de combat* ed. Fabrice Cognot (Dijon, 2006). Meyer's Fechtbuch was translated and published by Jeffrey Forgeng as *The Art of Combat: A German Martial Arts Treatise of 1570* (New York, 2006).

⁵ See Keith Alderson, "Arts and Crafts of War: die Kunst des Schwertes in its Manuscript Context," in *"Can These Bones Come to Life?": Insights from Re-construction, Re-enactment & Re-creation, Vol. I: Historical European Martial Arts*, ed. Ken Mondschein and Michael A. Cramer (Wheaton, IL, 2014), p. 24–29.

and an imagined past that was better, more noble, and more enfranchised than his own day.

On the other hand, *Fechtschulen* in Strasbourg (which, despite the name, which translates to “fencing schools,” were competitions and not training halls) only appear in three surviving chronicle accounts of which we are aware, all dating from the seventeenth century—well after their heyday. The sixteenth-century Strasbourg historians Sebald Büheler and Jacob Trausch are silent, or at least their mentions were not reprinted by the nineteenth-century historians who preserved Strasbourg’s narrative history.⁶ (The latter scenario is less likely: fencing was more interesting to the nineteenth century than to the twentieth or twenty-first.) Only in Johann Wencker’s so-called “extracts from Sebastian Brant’s chronicle” (which Wencker likely composed himself in the 1630s) do we find regulations for *Fechtschulen* from 1511 and permission for fencing masters to hold “schools” as had been done at Ulm, Nuremberg, and other places for some years

⁶ The original manuscripts were lost when the Prussians shelled the library in 1870. However, most of the chronicles were printed in the series *Fragments des anciennes chroniques d’Alsace* ed. Leon Dacheux vols. 1, 2, and 4 (Strasbourg, 1887–1901). These comprise the *Petite chronique* and the chronicles of Bühler, Trausch, and Wencker. See also “Strassburg im sechzehnten Jahrhundert, 1500–1591: Auszug aus der Imlin’schen Familienchronik,” ed. Rodolphe Russ, *Alsatia* 10 (1873/1874), 363–476; *Die Strassburger Chronik des Johannes Stedel*, ed. Paul Fritsch (Strasbourg, 1934); and *Die Strassburger Chronik des elsässischen Humanisten Hieronymys Gebwiler*, ed. Karl Stenzel (Berlin and Leipzig, 1926).

previously.⁷ In the second record, Balthasar-Ludwig Künast (1589–1667) mentions in his *Argentoratum Sacro-Profanum* a remarkable incident from 1587 (that is, two years

⁷ “Annales de Sébastien Brant,” ed. Léon Dacheux, *Bulletin de la Société pour la Conservation des Monuments historiques d’Alsace* 15 (1892), p. 230:

Item als zwischen den fechtmeistern irrung ist, sol man den meistern die schul halten, gebieten dass sie mit gegen einander uffheben oder fechten. Item als der ammeister anbringt der fechtmeister halb, wie die begehren ihre schulen zuzulassen, und wie er bericht wird dass vor etlichen jaren hie, auch noch zu ziten zu Ulm, Nürnberg un andren orten der gebrauch gewesen und ist, das di lehrherren 2 knechte darzu zu behüten geben, denen die fechtmeister ein verehrung gethan, uffrühr zu verhüten. Erkant dem ammeister gewalt geben. Sabb. Post Valent. —XXI

Item meister Nielaus ist zugelassen, offen schul zu halten, doch dass sich kein uffrühr mache; und ammeister gewalt geben knecht in sein kosten zuzugeben, uffshen zu haben. 3^a post Mathie. —XXI.

Item hh. Florenz Gabriel und Jost gewalt geben die fechtmeister all zu beschicken und ihnen bescheid geben, wer die best freiheit hat, dem soll man die schul zu lassen. 4^a post Miseric. Dom. —XXI.

Item als ein kürsner begert dem fechtmeister das svert abzuhaben, soll man ihm sagen und gebieten bei einer leibstraf, das schwert nit abzuhaben oder schul hie zu halten, noch gegen den meister uffzuheben; woe er darwider thäte, woll man ihn an sim lib stroffen. Sol hh. Gottfried

before his own birth) wherein the wife of one of the visiting fencers accompanied her husband in the customary pre-fencing competition procession to the sound of fife and drum with a crown and a *Paratschwert* (longsword foil) on her shoulder while dressed in men's clothing and then fought in the contest itself, which was held at the Mason's Guild.⁸ The third—an unquestioned eyewitness account—is from a Frenchman, Balthasar

und Gabriel antwort geben, wann die schüler meister warden und das anzeigen, mögen sie erwarten was man ihn erlauben wird. Sabb. Post Miseric. Dom. —XXI

On p. 248 there is mention of another master in 1525:

Mohler und bildhauer suppliciren dieweil durch das wort gottes ihr handtierung abgond, sie mi tempter vor anderen versehen, darneben Hans Bildhauer der fechtmeister bitt ihm ein für oder underhaltung zu geben. Erkt. Ihn sagen so empter ledig warden, mögen sie sich geschriben geben, woll man der bitt ingedenck sin. Des fechtmeisters halb für mhh. die XV gewisen. 6^a post Purif. 1525.

⁸ *Bulletin de la Société pour la conservation des monuments historiques d'Alsace* 17 (1895), p. 33. It has been suggested by enthusiasts in various online forums, blogs, and the “Wiktenauer” historical martial-arts wiki that this woman was the wife of the *Fechtbuch* author Lienhart Sollinger, but I can find no confirmation of this in the primary sources. On Künast, see *Revue d'Alsace* 49 (1898), p. 133, n. 1.

de Monconys, who in his *Journal* mentions watching a *Fechtschule* in 1664 (two years before his work's publication) where the contestants, protected by padded gauntlets, fought with two-handed swords, half-pikes, and *dussacken*, a sort of wooden cutlass, striking one another so strongly that heads were split open.⁹ (This was a brutal sport: drawing blood from the opponent was a victory condition.¹⁰)

The only contemporary reference to fencing competitions comes from Fischart himself, who in Chapter XXVII of his translation-cum-adaption of *Gargantua* (published in 1575) satirically describes a *Fechtschule*, together with a burlesque of the Liechtenauer verses quoted by Meyer.¹¹ In its heyday, the practice of fencing was clearly not deemed something noteworthy or praiseworthy in the life of the city—certainly inferior to shooting sports, at least in Fischart's eyes—and it is not until a very late date that it becomes part of a glorious past.

Bearing Arms in Strasbourg

⁹ *Revue d'Alsace* 48 (1897), p. 557.

¹⁰ The literature on *Fechtschulen* is voluminous, dating back to the nineteenth century—for instance, Karl Wassmannsdorff's *Sechs Fechtschulen (d. i. Schau- und Preisfechten) der Marxbrüder und Federfechter aus den Jahren 1573 bis 1614* (Heidelberg, 1870). For a good overview, see the relevant essays in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books: Transmission and Tradition of Martial Arts in Europe (14th–17th Centuries)*, ed. Daniel Jaquet, Karin Verelst and Timothy Dawson (Leiden, 2016).

¹¹ Johann Fischart, *Geschichtklitterung (Gargantua)* (Halle, 1891).

Strasbourg in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was known as a center of free thought—it figures prominently in the history of both printing and of the Reformation, the latter of which plunged it into several military conflicts. The city had expelled its prince-bishop and become a free city of the Empire in 1262—an event in which the civic militias played a large part—and in 1332, the guilds overthrew the patrician government and established a republic. The patricians were never entirely expelled, however, since their military leadership, role as diplomats, and service as heavy cavalry was valued. Another revolution in 1482 established the government as it stood in the time period for which records of fencing contests survive. Civic organization in the free city had many overlapping organizations, including the *Zunft* (guild), of which there were twenty; the *Bruderschaft* (confraternity); the *Stube* (club); and the *Constoffeln* (exclusive societies for the patricians). These served overlapping social, religious, welfare, political, and military roles. Most important were the *Zunft*: to be a citizen, which is to say having voting rights, required being male, a guild-member, and over 30 (or 25, if married). About 3,000 men of the total population of about 20,000 were so enfranchised.

Besides their roles in regulating trade and in civic defense, the guilds were also the basis of the town government. Each named 15 *Schöffen* (aldermen) to the town senate, for a total of 300. These senators named an *Ammeister*, or chief magistrate. He, together with the four *Stettmeisters* (who were patricians elected from the *Constoffeln*), the Council of 15 (for domestic affairs), and the Council of 13 (for foreign affairs, such as wars), formed the Council of 21. One to two other officials were added into the mix, so that, despite the

name, the Council of 21 consisted of 33–35 men, of whom ten were patricians and the rest (including the *Ammeister*) were citizens elected by the guilds.¹²

The bearing of weapons in medieval and early sixteenth century Strasbourg, especially by the lower orders of manual laborers (*Dienstknechten*, day-laborers, or *knechten*, servants), was tightly regulated both in the name of public safety and because carrying sidearms was an important social marker. Prohibitions against workmen and strangers carrying weapons were reiterated many times,¹³ and innkeepers were required to hold the weapons of foreigners lodging there for the duration of their stays.¹⁴ A regulation of 1510, preserved likely because it was in Sebastian Brandt's hand, specified that no one should carry non-customary weapons; only citizens could carry weapons at night; furthermore, it was forbidden to wear bladed weapons at marriages, to dance, and where there are women present.¹⁵ Valets and workmen were restricted from participation in the culture of arms in other ways, as well: they were forbidden from participating in military expeditions,¹⁶ and an ordinance of 1519 charged that workmen were not to form

¹² For an explanation of this convoluted system, see Brady, *Ruling Class, Regime and Reformation*, p. 165 *et passim*.

¹³ 1MR2 f2v (1418), 1MR2 f25 (1464), 1MR2 f26v (1452), 1MR2 f60 (1465), 1MR2 f85bv (1473), 1MR2 f87v (1474), 1MR3 f6 (1502).

¹⁴ 1MR2 f126v (1488).

¹⁵ 1MR3 f23 (1510).

¹⁶ 1MR2 f114v (1482).

bands and fight in groups.¹⁷ Cases of wounds by bladed weapons were considered serious enough that they had to be tried by the Council.¹⁸

The types of weapons were regulated, as well. It was forbidden to carry weapons other than the “customary” ones.¹⁹ What “custom” dictated changed, however: in the early fifteenth century, knives had to be a handspan or less, but a regulation of 1501 specifies that the *langes messer* could be as long as an *ellen* or *aune* (forearm-length), or .5395 meters. That weapon, the use of which was shown in contemporary *Fechtbücher* (“fight books,” written records of martial-arts teachings), was essentially a machete, differing from a falchion only in that the handle was constructed with scales and rivets and not a peened tang through a pommel.²⁰ On the other hand, sales of arms were not restricted: a regulation of 1525 specifies that commerce in bladed weapons of all sorts had been allowed since time immemorial.²¹

Firearms were, interestingly, less regulated than were white arms, though we can find regulations on range safety and on competitions mentioned as far back as the fifteenth century (for instance, the council forbade playing dice during the shooting competition

¹⁷ 1MR4 fol. 51 (1519) fol. 54.

¹⁸ 1MR3 fol. 16 (16th c.).

¹⁹ 1MR3 fol. 19v (1509): *Gebott Messer und Gewer tragens halb ... das niemans ... dhein ungewonlich Gewere by ime haben oder tragen sol ... als Axtlin, Wurfbyhel, Kolben, Kolben, Wärfkugeln oder anders...* Repeated 1MR3 fol. 83 (1519).

²⁰ A. Hanaeur, *Études économiques sur l'Alsace ancienne et moderne* (Paris, 1878), 6. See Archives de Strasbourg 1MR3 f12r-v (1501).

²¹ 1MR3 fol. 128 (1525).

that closed the fair in 1454).²² In fact, the only decrees regulating firearms use that the present authors can find are two Imperial prohibitions against certain types of firearms and repeated warnings not to discharge weapons inside or within a league of the city (one late fifteenth-century example specifies this is so as not to frighten pregnant women).²³ Since Strasbourg was located in wetlands, the many water birds must have presented tempting targets for those on their way to the target range outside the walls.

Furthermore, shooting sports were officially organized and sponsored, and the subject of great inter-city brouhaha (the famous shooting competition with Zurich is one such instance, though other such competitions were organized in 1466 and 1527).²⁴ Shooting was, of course, also more practical for city defense or even battlefield use. We see the importance of gunpowder weapons echoed even in the changing geography of the city's defenses from medieval curtain walls to the final star-fort shape of the mid-seventeenth century (figures 2–4). We see this paralleled in other towns, as well; for example, Laura

²² On range safety, see Archives de Strasbourg 1MR2 fol. 22 (1441), 1MR4 fol. 15 (1508); on dicing, see 1MR2 fol. 43 (1454).

²³ On Imperial regulations, Archives de Strasbourg 1MR3 fol. 69a (1518) and 1MR3 fol. 71 (1519). On pregnant women, Archives de Strasbourg 1MR2 fol. 115 (1482).

Prohibitions against shooting in or near town are: 1MR2 fol. 46v (1456), 1MR2 fol. 49v (1461), 1MR2 fol. 115 (1482), 1MR2 fol. 134 (1494), 1MR3 fol. 6v (1508), 1MR3 fol. 38 (1512), 1MR3 fol. 61 (1517), 1MR3 fol. 113 (1523), 1MR3 fol. 114 (1523), 1MR4 fol. 137 (1537), 1MR3 fol. 261 (1539), 1MR4 fol. 182 (1541), 1MR3 fol. 276 (1541, repeated 1549), 1MR5 fol. 146 (1587).

²⁴ Archives de Strasbourg 1MR2 fol. 66 (1466); 1MR3 fol. 146 (1527).

Crombie has written on the civic and military importance of the Flemish shooting guilds.²⁵ However, despite attempts to connect weapons ownership to civic defense (a regulation from 1534, repeated in 1535, specifies that all are to stay home with their weapons and armor and not take service elsewhere),²⁶ by the mid-sixteenth century Strasbourg was relying on mercenaries. The militia's last expedition was in 1526, when they marched over the Rhine Bridge to Castle Willstätt to liberate a citizen, Jörg Harder, who had been imprisoned by the bailiff of Count Philip IV of Hanau-Lichtenberg. Finding him already free, they instead liberated some of the count's wine and shot up his dovecote.²⁷

The Rise of a Culture of Arms

Concomitant with the replacement of civic militias with professional armies came a renewed emphasis by private citizens in at least appearing warlike. As Tlusty has noted, “By the sixteenth century, good citizenship [in the German free cities] had become synonymous with an assumption of martial skill”—which we should note meant *individual* martial skill, as opposed to participation in a militia.²⁸ Sword-carrying reached

²⁵ For the context in the Low Countries, see Laura Crombie, “Defense, Honor and Community: The Military and Social Bonds of the Dukes of Burgundy and the Flemish Shooting Guilds,” *The Journal of Medieval Military History* 9 (2011).

²⁶ 1MR3 fol. 225v (1534) and 1MR3 fol. 231 (1535).

²⁷ Thomas A. Brady, *Protestant Politics: Jacob Sturm (1489–1553) and the German Reformation* (Leiden, 1995), pp. 166–67.

²⁸ Tlusty, “Martial Identity and the Culture of the Sword,” p. 549.

a high point between around the middle of the century and continued through the seventeenth; the many regulations against bearing arms found earlier in the century are conspicuously absent (though the 1510 prohibition against carrying concealed weapons at weddings was reiterated in 1589).²⁹

What was the place of *Fechtschulen* in a world that so valued and encouraged firearms and the carrying of other weapons, but in which fencing had only an ancillary relation to military service, which relies more on working as a unit than on individual prowess? Unfortunately, due to accidents of history and the Franco-Prussian war, these are only preserved in the records of the Council of 21 (the *Ratsprotokolle*) from 1539 to 1673 with some short excerpts dating back to 1511. In his research, Olivier Dupuis has found a total of 1,542 *Fechtschulen* event applications from this period, of which 1,338 were authorized to take place.³⁰ Most date from between the Peace of Augsburg and the Swedish Intervention in the Thirty Years' War. At their height, competitions were held nearly every week (see figure 5), with lulls during times of conflict such as the Strasbourg Bishops' War (where most of the fighting had finished by 1593) and following the Defenestration of Prague, with a brief revival after the Peace of Westphalia.

Despite the lacunae, we know that fencing tournaments were held in Strasbourg at least as far back as the fifteenth century. Dupuis has found two records of such early competitions: one similar to German later *Fechtschulen*, the other a sparsely described

²⁹ Archives de Strasbourg 1MR5 fol. 164 (1589).

³⁰ This research was presented by Olivier Dupuis for the first time at the conference *Urban Cultures of Contest in Renaissance Europe* (Institut für vergleichende Städtegeschichte, Münster, 20–22 October 2016). The proceedings are in press.

melee-type event. Four magistrates signed the document detailing the first event: Friederich Bock, Bernhart Bock, Jacob Amlung, and Claus Baumgarter. Friederich Bock was a patrician and knight with military experience who was nonetheless frustrated in his attempts to gain admission to imperial tournaments; the second Bock, Bernhard, was a distant relative and an esquire (*Edelknecht*). Amlung and Baumgarter were rich guildsmen—the first an innkeeper, the second a boatman. The document specifies the tournament will take place within barriers, as was customary, with a platform for guests to view the proceedings. The locale is not specified, but was likely a large public place such as the horse market or in front of the city hall. The city provided the fencing weapons; all other arms were to be left outside the barriers. The audience was to behave in good order, and four referees (*Grieswarter*, “grit-warders,” the same term as was used for judicial duels), assisted by two fencing masters, would officiate. One master was to be local; the other from elsewhere. The regulations also contained details on how fencers would draw their opponents by lot, with bouts fenced to one hit and the victors remaining to fight the next round; the victors were the two fencers who drew the most, highest bleeding wounds.³¹

The term *Fechtschule* was clearly not applied to fencing tournaments until somewhat later, in the sixteenth century. The humanist Jakob Wimpheling proposed (in his 1501 *Germania*) a humanist *Fechtschule*. It is interesting that this was the only German translation he could think of for the Greek “Gymnasium,” γυμνάσιον: “A place where you exercise your body and develop your person.” Obviously, of course he was not

³¹ 1MR13 182. See Dupuis, “A Fifteenth-Century Fencing Tournament in Strasbourg,” *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 1 (2013), 67–79.

thinking of a fencing competition, but a school for the study of the arts and sciences, and he certainly would not have offered this translation a generation later. Sixteenth-century *Fechtschulen* were considerably less grand affairs than the fifteenth-century tournament, and certainly nothing that would be associated with a German *Gymnasium*. There are no surviving records of the Council of 21 allowing them to be held in public places (an application to use a marketplace was refused in 1549), or, from 1567 on, in the private courts of houses (which would include inns and taverns); instead, the few references to location indicate that they were usually held at guildhalls. (The courts of the houses of canons of the cathedral, perhaps because of the number of Catholics there, were especially avoided; in 1568, Meyer himself asked to hold a *Fechtschule* at the lodgings of a canon but was refused, with an apology from the Council since the flyers advertising the event had already been printed.³²

As Tlusty points out, these events were an opportunity for the tradesmen-masters to make some extra money; the fencers could also win cash prizes. The tournament would be publicized beforehand and a maximum price for admission (usually 1–2 pfennig or 1 kreutzner) was set. *Fechtschulen* were usually held on Sundays until 1557, when complaints were brought that the usual processions with drums and fifes were disturbing sermons. Thereafter, they were held on Mondays (which was the journeymen's day off), as well as during St. John's fair, the Feast of St. Stefan, or the New Year.

The noise involved was not the only threat to public order that the *Fechtschulen* posed; warnings against bad behavior such as cursing and stone throwing were a standard

³² Olivier Dupuis, "Joachim Meyer, escrimeur libre, bourgeois de Strasbourg (1537?–1571)," in *Maîtres et techniques de combat*, ed. Fabrice Cognot (Dijon, 2006).

part of the authorizations. The early nineteenth-century Strasbourg antiquarian Louis Schneegans, perhaps drawing on now-lost sources, notes that in 1559, the council investigated Georg Osswald Gernreich of Nuremberg, a student, and came close to canceling some of his *Fechtschulen* based on some scurrilous verses exchanged between him and the tradesmen.³³ Following some disorders in 1571, the town jailer was required to be in attendance. The fencing masters made an attempt to have regulations concerning the procedures for holding contests similar to those in place other cities passed in 1571, 1599, and 1608. Why they were unsuccessful is unclear. In 1610, the council required that fencing contests be separated by two weeks; this regulation, as well as rules concerning the maximum amount to be charged to spectators, are mentioned regularly from 1610 to 1625. Compare this to Nuremberg, Augsburg, and Frankfort, which had clear rules concerning the organization and legalities of fencing.³⁴

Fechtschulen were always organized by individual *Fechtmeister*—never by corporate bodies. The records of the applications mention the organizer’s name and fencing title, the city from which he originated (of which over 400 were represented), and his profession (see figures 6–9). The fencing masters were never organized into their own guilds; instead they formed their own pan-Germanic associations such as the Marxbruder and Freifechter. The pan-Germanic nature of such events is additionally highlighted by the fact the *Fechtmeister* in the applications are often foreigners: the 613 masters who

³³ Ludwig (Louis) Schneegans, “Die unterbrochene Fechtschule,” in August Stöber (ed.) *Alsatia: Jahrbuch für elsässische Geschichte, Sage, Alterthumskunde, Sitte, Sprache und Kunst*, vol. 4 (1853), pp. 180–92.

³⁴ Tlusty, “Martial Identity and the Culture of the Sword,” p. 553.

applied for permission originated from 396 cities and towns and were often apparently transient. More than half—357—only applied for one occasion, and 126 applied twice, usually in the same year. Those who made multiple applications are few: the shoemaker and Strasbourg citizen Georg Köllerle made an astonishing 81 applications between 1574 and 1609; Hans Bartel Grasman, a tinsmith and also citizen of Strasbourg, made 65 between 1595 and 1606. Four others made between 20 and 30 applications in our period; one, Zacharias Schonknecht from Stettin, made 18; and three other probable citizens made 17. We can only conclude that most applicants were foreign workers, itinerant travelers, or journeymen.

Certainly, the other details match well with professional patterns. Journeymen were guild-members and, as their name implies, had no settled abode but were rather expected to wander. As we mentioned above, during their height, *Fechtschulen* tended to be held on the journeymen's day off. The journeymen had ample reason for forming such subcultures: by the mid-sixteenth century, much like adjunct professors, they were being used for cheap labor and were increasingly unlikely to achieve the security of guild-mastery, but were still forbidden from marrying and founding a household. Instead of living in their masters' households, they increasingly lived in boarding houses, kept to their own company, and formed their own confraternities.

All of this points to the origins and organization for the *Fechtschulen*: sport, like the ritualized drinking sessions and initiations that were also a part of their world, served the increasingly proletarianized journeymen's needs for social cohesion. (We can perhaps see a bit of this in the guild-member's mocking of Gernreich, the student-*Fechtmeister*.) Furthermore, it set them apart from the lower-level workers to whom weapons ownership

was forbidden and made them a bit of extra money on the side. (There were cash prizes for successful competitors.) Finally, participating in the “chivalric art” (*ritterliche Kunst*) in a *Fechtschule* was an implicit statement of enfranchisement by the lower-ranking members of the social hierarchy who were often forbidden or unable to marry but being placed under increasing pressure to confirm their masculinity and place in the world in an increasingly regimented socioeconomic system that defined manliness as being a married, respectable householder.³⁵ We can also see something of a ground-up organization in this, a “folk tradition”: fencers from all of Germany could take part in a *Fechtschule* with a common understanding of fencing custom, or *Fechter Brauch*. This understanding and enforced orthopraxy would have been critical when fencing with no protective equipment, and in legal cases arising from fencing accidents, acting in accordance with *Fechter Brauch* was a positive defense. Such understandings and other conventions—such as an interdiction against thrusting—are confirmed by Meyer.

Much as they did in other spheres, journeymen-fencers formed their own confraternities or guild-like organizations. Some years of apprenticeship provided the path to becoming a *Fechtmeister* and being licensed to oneself charge for lessons and hold *Fechtschulen*. Thus, even if he might never be a master in his guild, the journeyman could still be a *Fechtmeister*. Most notable of this was the *Marxbruder* organization, which was accorded by the Emperor Frederick III in 1487 the sole right to use the term *Fechtmeister* and teach throughout the empire. Against the *Marxbruder* were set the

³⁵ See Merry E. Wiesner, “*Wandervogels* and Women: Journeymen’s Concepts of Masculinity in Early Modern Germany,” *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991), pp. 767–82.

Freifechter or *Federfechter*, their rivals, albeit less well documented. There was quite a rivalry between the two groups in the sixteenth century.³⁶ Meyer identifies himself as a *Freifechter* in both his book and other documents, and the term seems to simply refer to one who was not an official member of the *Marxbruder*.³⁷ As we will discuss below, the two groups might also bespeak larger political allegiances.

The frequency of *Fechtschulen* was closely linked to the state of war and peace in the Empire. The high point of such events in Strasbourg was after the Peace of Augsburg, when close to 40 were held per year. Numbers fell off during the Strasbourg Bishop's War from 1592–1604, a small but highly important conflict between the Peace of Augsburg and the Thirty Years' War. Numbers fall off precipitously after 1618, with brief revivals after and the Imperial victory at Stadtlohn (1623), and then after the Peace of Westphalia. In the seventeenth century, however, the *Fechtmeister* increasingly presented themselves not as tradesmen, but as "soldiers."

Fechtbucher as an Early Modern Medievalism

Besides holding *Fechtschulen*, another way for fencing masters-tradesmen to make money was by writing *Fechtbücher*. The aim in this martial capitalism predominantly seemed to be achieving noble patronage; making money from book sales was only a secondary concern. Joachim Meyer stands as a preeminent example of this. A native of Basel, he gained Strasbourgeois citizenship and the ability to practice his trade as a *Messerschmidt* (knife-maker) by marrying Appolonia Rülmann, widow of Jacob

³⁶ Tlusty, "Martial Identity and the Culture of the Sword," pp. 554–57.

³⁷ Dupuis, "A Fifteenth-century Fencing Tournament in Strasbourg."

Wickgaw, in 1560. He was about 23 of the time; baptismal records from Basel indicate that a Joachim Meyer was born to a paper-maker named Jakob Meyer in 1537.

Once established in Strasbourg, Meyer asked the Council of 21 for permission to hold a *Fechtschule* no less than five times between 1561 and 1568.³⁸ Meyer was also apparently teaching fencing at this time: another *Fechtschule* applicant, Christoff Elias, is noted in 1561 as having “von Joachim meiern gelert.”³⁹ Meyer’s first edition of his *Fechtbuch* was a manuscript written for Otto, Count of Sulms, Minzenberg, and Sonnenwaldt, who studied at the Protestant Academy in Strasbourg around 1568. Noble patronage must have encouraged him to take a financial risk: he published his sumptuous *Gründtliche Beschreibung der Kunst des Fechtens* (see figures 10–12) in 1570—an effort that left him at least 300 crowns in debt. Again, Meyer sought noble patronage to advance his cause: the *Gründtliche Beschreibung* was dedicated to Johann Casimir, Count-Palantine of the Rhine and Duke of Bavaria. In June of 1570, Meyer again turned journeyman and set off for Speyer, where the Imperial Diet was meeting.⁴⁰ He was successful, signing a contract to serve as fencing master to Duke Johann-Albrecht I of Mecklenburg-Schwerin, at whose court he thought he could sell his books at a price of 30 florins apiece.⁴¹ Unfortunately, Meyer took sick on the winter journey to Schwerin and

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Archives de Strasbourg AMS 1R24, f. 57

⁴⁰ Lunds Universitets Bibliotek MS A.4°.2. See Jeffrey Forgeng’s “Addendum to the Second Edition,” in Joachim Meyer, *The Art of Combat* (London, 2015), pp. 32–33.

⁴¹ Dupuis, “A fifteenth-century Fencing Tournament in Strasbourg.”

died on February 24, 1571, exactly a year after the date given in the prologue of the *Gründtliche Beschreibung*. And so the knife-maker's hubris ended in tragedy.

Meyer's choice of associations gives us some idea as to his social network. As stated above, he was a *Freifechter* and therefore against the *Marxbruder*; since the latter were Imperially recognized, can we perhaps see a Protestant, anti-centralizing tendency in the *Freifechter*? After all, Meyer was most likely Protestant: Strasbourg was Lutheran during his lifetime, and Count Otto, Count-Palantine Johann Casimir, and Duke Johann-Albrecht were all Protestants as well. Furthermore, Johann-Albrecht had granted the *Federfechter* the same privileges in Mecklenburg as the *Marxbruder* enjoyed in the Empire as a whole.⁴²

Meyer is modern in another way, as well: he self-consciously references the glories of the past. Indeed, the entire treatise is replete with mentions of the glorious past and common customs of the German nation. Much as his Italian contemporary Camillo Agrippa did, in his dedication to Johann Casimir, Meyer decries guns as ignoble, praises the past, and mourns the decline of the art of fencing, which is so useful to the fatherland. This art, Meyer writes, was studiously practiced by "German heroes" such as Pepin, Charlemagne, Louis the Pious, and Henry I, who established the "true chivalric school." Of course, Meyer updates the system: his weapons include not just the longsword—which, with the dussack, provides the pedagogical basis of the system—but also pikes and halberds and the *rappier*, which is not quite a rapier but a cutting-and-thrusting weapon that preserved the thrusts that had disappeared from common practice.

⁴² Ibid.

Meyer, much like contemporary Italians such as Agrippa, sought to order the art of fencing into a rational pedagogy. Unlike the Italians, however, he did not begin anew with a new weapon (the rapier), but rather to order the traditional knowledge handed down as *merkverse* (mnemonic poetry) from the apocryphal master Johannes Liechtenauer. Meyer reproduces the Liechtenauer verses in the third part of his treatise on the longsword and gives his own gloss.⁴³

The various transmissions of and *Zettel* on the Liechtenauer verses have filled works in themselves; what we are concerned with here is their antiquity. The first surviving *Fechtbuch* to record the verses—indeed, the second known *Fechtbuch*—is dated to around 1389. This is Nürnberger Handschrift GNM 3227a, a *Hausbuch* that contains not only the Liechtenauer *merkverse*, but also fireworks, oath-taking, dyeing cloth, alchemical steel-hardening, and medicine, astronomy, magic, and oral hygiene.⁴⁴ As Alderson says, “The common function of all of these different arts or crafts is that they are collected knowledge which the reader was to use to gain ability in an area, which ability would then increase his effectiveness, which in turn gives him power.”⁴⁵ This eclectic nature also enables us to make an attempt at dating the manuscript: the calendar on f. 83v begins in 1390.⁴⁶

⁴³ See Meyer *Art of Combat*, trans. Forggeng, pp. 89–90.

⁴⁴ Alderson, “Arts and Crafts of War,” pp. 24–29.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴⁶ This has been called into question; see Eric Burkart, “The Autograph of an Erudite Martial Artist: A Close Reading of Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Hs. 3227a 451,” in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books*.

Regarding fencing, the anonymous author tells us that Liechtenauer did not invent this art, but rather that it was hundreds of years old and that he searched it out from many lands.⁴⁷ (Meyer, who was about 33 at the time of writing, similarly mentions how he had learned the art from many “skilled and famous” masters and had practiced it for “many years.”)⁴⁸ The Liechtenauer tradition seems to have similarly been transmitted by itinerant masters. GNM 3227a also contains glosses by Andres Juden, Jobs von der Nissen, Nicklass Preußen, and Hans Döbringer (the first of whom was apparently a Jew, and the last of whom was a priest).

Paulus Kal of Dingolfing in southern Bavaria (c. 1420–after 1485), a fencing master and/or military officer (*Schirrmeister*—“fencing master”) who served Ludwig IX, Duke of Bavaria-Landshut and several other members of the high nobility, likewise mentions members of the “Society of Liechtenauer” (*Gesellschaft Liechtenauers*).⁴⁹ Kal mentions seventeen members, including his own teacher, Hans Stettner of Mörsheim, all coming from different cities spread throughout the Empire. Stettner would have belonged to the generation immediately following MS 3227a. The tradition was both martial and literary: some of these masters mentioned in Kal’s list, such as Sigmund ain Ringeck and Andre Liegniczzer, also authored treatises.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Alderson, “Arts and Crafts of War,” p. 26.

⁴⁸ Meyer *Art of Combat*, trans. Forgeng, p. 38.

⁴⁹ The holotype of the various examples of Kal’s work is Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Cgm 1507

⁵⁰ Several of these are collected in the Codex Danzig (c. 1452) (Rome, Biblioteca dell’Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana Cod.44.A.8).

We can get from this an idea of a world wandering journeymen-masters, some literate, some not, who created a shared sense of community by tracing a common heritage to an apocryphal master.⁵¹ Occasionally a literate master, or one in service to a noble with a wish to commemorate his teaching, would produce a *Fechtbuch* to try to appeal to noble patrons. Many depicted unarmed fighting as found later in Meyer; others depicted mounted combat or armored combat in judicial duels. (Even if not very common, the recourse to arms was still an important symbol to the nobility.) We must regard such treatises less as “how to” manuals and more as a sort of martial pornography: something to delight the reader, but in no way a substitute for actual practice.

Joachim Meyer stands firmly in this tradition, albeit making use of the possibilities of print to both increase his potential audience and to explain the art to readers who had not received instruction in person. (Earlier German printed works are all rooted in Andre Paurñfeyndt’s 1516 *Ergründung Ritterlicher Kunst der Fechterey*, which referred also to the Liechtenauer tradition—though it presented somewhat different material—and kept a very medieval ordering of material.) The *Fechtbücher*, however, were only an epiphenomenon: the noumenon was a manifestation of popular culture amongst journeymen. This tradition of wandering artisan-swordsmen was, at the time Meyer wrote, at least 200 years old.

⁵¹ For the current state of the questions, see Dierk Hagedorn, “German Fechtbücher from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance,” in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books: Transmission and Tradition of Martial Arts in Europe (14th—17th Centuries)*, ed. Daniel Jaquet, Karin Verelst and Timothy Dawson (Leiden, 2016), pp. 247–79.

Conclusions

Fencing competitions were indicative of a non-official—which is to say a popular—culture amongst journeymen in the sixteenth-century Holy Roman Empire. The origins of this culture stretched back to at least the fourteenth century. However, its meaning changed with the times. Earlier masters could serve high nobility, but longsword fencing in the days of gunpowder weapons and increasingly effective standing militaries was a deliberate anachronism, a tacit statement of the individual's dignity and right to own arms and practice a *ritterlich* (knightly) art. Fencing thus had a polyvalent meaning: it was a masculine sport, a statement of enfranchisement, a recollection of an imagined past, and an assertion of membership in a pan-Germanic community.

Looking at the specific example of Strasbourg, fencing events had their height before 1618, then fell off after the Thirty Years' War. At the same time, new regulations against carrying weapons became common throughout the Empire, at first mainly targeting servants and journeymen—the class amongst which *Fechtschulen* were most popular. By the time the city was annexed by Louis XIV in 1683, these competitions were almost entirely gone. Daniel Martin, in his French/German conversation book *New Parlement* published in Strasbourg in 1637, presents a dialogue between well-heeled fencers but expects them to be playing at rapiers and daggers, not *auff die Teutsche manier* (“in the German fashion”).⁵² A century later, the fencing master Michel Martin was under the protection of the royal *prêteur* (praetor) and had a monopoly on the teaching of fencing in

⁵² Daniel Martin, *New Parlement oder hundert kurtzweilige, doch nützliche Gespräch* (Strasbourg, 1637), pp. 726–32.

the city, which he taught in the conventional form of the court sword of the Parisian guild of masters.

The realities of war and fashion similarly affected support of fencing culture elsewhere, as well; for instance, in 1647, Danzig banned *Fechtschulen* in favor of pike and musket drills.⁵³ The carrying of the old weapons fell out of favor in favor of Italianate rapiers and then French court swords, and they appear in fewer inventories post mortem.⁵⁴ Still, though the *Fechtschulen* have seemed quite outmoded by the time of Wencker, Monconys, and Künast, they had far from disappeared. Theodor Verolini's *Der Künstliche Fechter* ("The Artful Fencer") of 1679 is essentially a plagiarism of Meyer's work. The practice of the *alter Fechtkunst* was not just a literary conceit: the Junker "von A," in his eighteenth-century *Alchemia Diminicandi*, mentions the *Klopfechters* of the old guilds as if they were still in currency, albeit populated by people of low birth, and recommends that it is better to carry a stout staff and brace of pistols on the road than a sword. (See figure 13.) *Fechter* even came to mean "itinerant beggar": Johann Ebers in his 1796 English-German dictionary gives *Fechter* as a possible synonym for *ein unverschämter Bettler*, "an impudent, saucy beggar." Nonetheless, the practice of *Fechtschulen* persisted, albeit in a reduced form, in the Empire and Low Countries until

⁵³ Gotthilf Löschin, *Geschichte Danzigs von der ältesten bis zur neuesten Zeit: mit beständiger Rücksicht auf Cultur der Sitten, Wissenschaften, Künste, Gewerbe und Handelszweige*, Vol. 1 (Danzig, 1828), p. 355.

⁵⁴ Tlusty "Martial Identity and the Culture of the Sword," pp. 560–61.

the Napoleonic conquest.⁵⁵ Clearly, *Bürgerliche Martialissimus* (“Civic Martialism,” to coin a phrase along the lines of Hans Baron’s *Bürgerliche Humanissimus* or “Civic Humanism”) continued to carry meaning for a good long while in the Empire.

⁵⁵ Bert Gevaert and Reinier van Noort, “Evolution of Martial Traditions in the Low Countries: Fencing Guilds and Treatises,” in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Fight Books: Transmission and Tradition of Martial Arts in Europe (14th—17th Centuries)* ed. Daniel Jaquet, Karin Verelst and Timothy Dawson (Leiden, 2016), p. 391.