

The Saber in Europe: A Weapon's Social History, 1850–1900

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While several authors have recently produced works on dueling culture in France, Italy, and Germany, there is a lack of literature covering the social role of the sword across Europe and across several different contexts. This paper fills part of that gap by documenting the social history of the European cutting saber from 1850 to 1900. It draws on a number of nineteenth-century newspaper articles and military manuals, (including some newly available translations), as well as existing historical research on dueling culture. It focuses on the saber's social role in three major contexts: the battlefield, the duel, and the fencing hall. Most importantly, it looks at the saber as an enduring social symbol of masculinity, honor, and class across all three of these contexts. Swordsmanship had previously been the exclusive domain of the aristocracy, but as the middle-class grew, increasing numbers of European men went to the dueling ground and fencing hall to exercise their newly-acquired rights as gentlemen. Swordsmanship entered the mythologies of several nationalist movements, and even played a small role in the domestic and foreign politics of several European powers. This paper shows that the advancement of military technology made the saber obsolete as a weapon, but not as an important social symbol.

—209 words.