ONE

ELITE DUELING
The duel is a custom situated at the crossroads of concepts of masculinity, experiences of violence, and codes of honor. The first part of this book deals with the official duel, practiced among elite groups in early modern and modern Europe. Each chapter focuses on a country with its own peculiar history of dueling. Whereas the essay on Germany traces the story back to the early seventeenth century, the contributions on Italy and France pick it up in a later, crucial phase. In fact, all three chapters pay particular attention to the fin de siècle and for obvious reasons. The half century from about 1860 to the First World War is now recognized as a period of the duel's revival. No longer was it the exclusive prerogative of the aristocracy. Many duelists had a bourgeois background, whereas the code of honor that they cherished, in all three countries, was interwoven with nationalism. Together, these three essays offer a comparative perspective on the duel in modern Europe.

Within this overall pattern there were differences of timing. In Germany the duel's history appears to have been characterized by greater continuity than in the other two countries. Hence, Ute Frevert refuses to speak of a revival, pointing to an unbroken line from the early modern period to the “bourgeois era.” Steven Hughes, on the other hand, emphasizes the connection between Italian unification and the bourgeois duel, making a case for revival. These positions are not as antagonistic as they would seem at first. Hughes bases his argument primarily on numbers: in the second half of the nineteenth century more duels were fought in Italy than at any time since the sixteenth. Frevert primarily discusses the ideas of contemporary observers and practitioners; she deals with ideology rather than the frequency of dueling. It appears, then, that the ideology of dueling continued to be influential, whereas its actual incidence was subject to ups and downs. In most of Europe, the military formed the bridge between early modern and modern dueling. In France, for example, civilian nobles by 1700 had become less apt to challenge each other, but aristocratic army officers as well as common soldiers continued to resolve conflicts by way of a duel. The custom was carried over to the new national armies of the nineteenth century. Bourgeois officers and, subsequently, bourgeois
civilians embraced the duel. To the extent that Germany wit­nessed a greater historical continuity, this can be explained by
the greater impact of the military on its society. Although the
Piedmontese military occupied a prominent position in post-
unification Italy, the public life of the elites in that country
was marked less by military influence than in Germany. In the
French Third Republic, the army was hardly a public presence
at all.

There were other national differences. The student duel, for
example, was mainly a German phenomenon. Its origins prob­ably lay in the aristocratization of German universities in the
seventeenth century. The social compulsion to duel, though
clearly present everywhere, was particularly strong in Germany.
Severe sanctions, including social ostracism, awaited “cowards”
who refused to issue a challenge to someone who had insulted
them. With respect to the duel’s association with nationalism,
Italy comes out at the extreme end. Italians sometimes chal­lenged a foreigner to a duel if they felt he had insulted, not them
personally, but their country. There are no such examples in the
essays on Germany or France. Hughes links the Italians’ sensi­tivity to his overall argument that dueling helped the rising elites
of a liberal state handle new freedoms of public speech: a “nor­mal” process inherent to the early stage of a parliamentary sys­tem. Significantly, injurious articles in the press were the main
cause of duels in Italy, rather than insults face to face.

A crucial difference lay in the attitude of the modern state. In
the French penal code (and until 1871 in Rhenish and Bavarian
law) dueling was no longer a criminal matter of its own. Duelists
were to be sentenced according to the laws of physical injury
and manslaughter. Prussian law, which became binding for the
whole German Reich in 1871, maintained special legislation for
duelists. In 1844 the Prussian minister of justice justified this
with the statement that legislators ought to follow public senti­ment by refusing to impose a dishonorable punishment for an
action that usually stemmed from love of honor and courage.
The phrase dishonorable punishment is crucial. As a corollary to
notions of honor, Germans also had strong feelings about in­famy. Particularly infamous were the executioner’s touch and
punishment generally. So it was felt that doing something for honor's sake, however illegal it might be, could never lead to being subjected to infamy. This vision of dueling as absolute contrast to a state of infamy helps to explain the duel's wide appeal in Germany. Yet the difference in attitudes among the various states should not be exaggerated. In France and Italy, not the law but actual judicial practice was discriminatory. The courts tended to be lenient toward honorable duelists. In fact, duelists received lighter sentences than men engaging in "ordinary violence" in all three countries.

A final difference concerns the end of dueling. This time, Germany and France resemble each other: Frevert and Robert Nye agree that the First World War dealt the final blow. Nye says it most explicitly: what killed the duel was the gulf that separated the peacetime pretensions of courage based on the harmless dueling practices of the day and the real, deadly terrors of the trenches. Moreover, the myth that upper-class men had more courage than ordinary souls had lost credibility, now that simple peasants had shown more valor than the gentlemen who sat out the war in their Parisian bureaus. In Italy, by contrast, the duel reemerged after 1918 and remained prominent until about 1925. Were Italians less shocked by wartime experience than the French and Germans? In any case, the war did not have such a devastating effect on the duel in Italy as it had in the other two countries. This may be explained with reference to the stronger association of the duel with nationalism in Italy and the fact that public speech was the duel's principal arena. Italian dueling took place in a context of nationalism and free speech rather than in tales of courage. So the practice could easily be resumed until the fascist regime finally ended it. The fascists not only suppressed the duel outright but they destroyed its infrastructure by curbing the possibilities for public expression.