

*Die Waffen hoch!*

**The Resiliency of Academic Fencing in Germany**

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## **Abstract**

The *Mensur*, a type of academic fencing, is the only form of organized dueling that still exists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has been outlawed numerous times, survived two world wars, the cold war, and reunification in Germany. No historian has ever attempted to cover the entire history of the *Mensur* and explain what unique traits have allowed it to outlive all other forms of dueling. The *Mensur* has been able to survive the test of time due to highly motivated students who refused to let the custom die. They have always seen this custom as an appropriate way to express their honor, and as a result the *Mensur* has continued to reappear after every disappearance. Sympathetic authorities, as well as situational factors surrounding events in German history, can also be held responsible for making the *Mensur* so resilient throughout the past centuries.

## Introduction

While exploring Europe during the 1800's, Mark Twain described the event as “wonderfully stirring.”<sup>1</sup> He was referencing the *Mensur*, or student duel, in Imperial Germany. Twain had the opportunity to receive a special invitation to witness a student duel, and his writings provide unique insight into this curious enterprise. These were usually closed events, and Twain was one of the first outside observers to report on what he saw. The custom of academic fencing dates back to the Middle Ages, and continues in modern-day Germany. In the rest of the world, organized dueling has ceased to exist. It is shunned as an activity of the past and as a waste of life. However, the last bastion of dueling, the *Mensur*, has withstood the test of time. It has survived for well over a century, enduring laws, attacks, and sanctions. At times students were forced to duel in secret for fear of being caught by the police, and even after being arrested they continued dueling upon their release. Now legal in Germany, the *Mensur* is still practiced by a strong cohort of fraternity students and is alive and well. There has never before been a study as to why this unique custom has been so resilient over the centuries. No historian has ever delved into the nature of the *Mensur* to identify what traits have allowed it to outlive all other forms of dueling. The reasons are diverse and many, and each has made a contribution to keeping the *Mensur* alive.

The lifespan of the *Mensur* can be compared to a chameleon, for both use similar traits to survive. A chameleon will change colors in order to adapt to its environment and avoid predators, just as the *Mensur* has changed its form over time in order to adapt to changing societal norms and attacks from the authorities. Although the *Mensur* may have changed slightly throughout history, it still retains its core values of honor and prestige into the present day.

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<sup>1</sup> Twain, Mark. *A Tramp Abroad*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996. 12.

Therefore the *Mensur* can be seen as one continuous dueling custom that has modified itself to its surrounding environment, often times having to camouflage certain aspects from the public and police. The *Mensur* changed its rules, weapons, locations, and practices to abide by certain laws or hide from the authorities, but even so the core values and basic form of the *Mensur* have never changed. No war or government effort could change the students' concept of what was honorable in society, which helps explain why they dedicated so much time and effort to keeping the *Mensur* alive. The ways that the *Mensur* has adapted over time reflect what was happening in society, and shed light on an important part of German history.

Before dealing with the issues responsible for allowing the *Mensur* to survive, one must first understand the history of academic fencing in Germany. The *Mensur* can trace its roots back to French universities during the Middle Ages, where fencing was a part of everyday instruction. German students visited these schools, then took and applied what they learned back home. By 1500 every German university had a fencing master, and by the mid 1700s it was common to see students carrying rapiers to class to defend their honor against spontaneous insults. Following the Seven Years War students were forbidden to carry weapons, so the duel moved from impulsive street fighting to more orchestrated, planned events. They were scheduled in advance, a student audience would be in attendance, and there were certain rules and regulations to be followed.<sup>2</sup>

This was the beginning of the *Mensur*, though there is no documented start date because each university and each fraternity adopted it at different times. A *Mensur* originally was initiated by a student who felt his honor had been infringed. This could have been due to a student being insulted, thinking he was insulted, or simply because a student desired to fight. At this point, a date would be set for the students to fight, and word would spread throughout the

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<sup>2</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994. 212.

fraternities so that others could watch the spectacle. Over time this style of the *Mensur* gradually gave way to the *Bestimmungsmensur*, or determining *Mensur*. No longer were students insulting each other in the street, rather if they desired to fight a *Mensur*, their fraternity would arrange a duel with a rival fraternity. In dueling fraternities, participation in a bout was a requirement to be accepted, hence the “determining *Mensur*,” for it determined whether or not one would be admitted. No longer was a formal insult required to fight, rather a student only needed to express a desire for a bout. Most fraternities also required new members to fight a minimum number of *Mensuren* in order to become full fraternity members.<sup>3</sup>

A *Mensur* consisted of two duelists who took positions a few paces in front of each other, with a line drawn behind them that they were forbidden to cross. Each fencer would have a second, present to ensure that the opponent did not violate any rules, while an umpire supervised the entire match. At every *Mensur* a doctor stood ready to bandage the participants when they were wounded, and he had the authority to call off the match if a student was not medically able to continue. The purpose of the *Mensur* was not to slay your opponent as in most duels, but rather to leave a scar, or *Schmiss*, on his face. While receiving a blow from an opponent’s blade, one was not to flinch or move in any way. Rather, he should continue the bout as if nothing had happened. Honor and bravery were shown through sustaining wounds and injuries. A *Schmiss* granted the student a certain amount of honor within his own fraternity and within society at large. Upon graduation, he could expect to obtain a high-profile position in the civil service or government, for these institutions were saturated with former fraternity members who also possessed the coveted *Schmiss*. For instance, in the *Kösener* fraternity “20 percent of senior civil

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<sup>3</sup> Biastoch, Martin. *Duell und Mensur im Kaiserreich, Am Beispiel der Tübinger Corps Franconia, Rhenania, Suevia, und Borussia zwischen 1871 Und 1895*. Vierow: SH-Verlag GmbH, 1995. 23-28.

service positions in Prussia in 1928 were filled by *Kösener* alumni.”<sup>4</sup> As a result, an elite circle of fraternity students were in constant contact with alumni who could almost guarantee them a job, which led many to pay less attention to studies and devote considerably more time to dueling. Although many student fraternities existed, only the most elite ones practiced the *Mensur*, making the *Schmiss* even more of an exclusive item.<sup>5</sup>

The motivations for students desire to continue this unique form of dueling are diverse and have changed over time. Laws have constantly been passed banning it and providing for punishment if caught bouting, yet students continued it. One explanation can be seen with the unification of Germany in 1871. This time period saw many important reforms, which led to increased pressure by the middle class for admittance into universities, prompting upper-class students to take action. The *Mensur* served as a way for upper-class students to remain an exclusive group even with middle class intrusion.<sup>6</sup>

The First World War provides additional explanations for the *Mensur*'s resiliency. Elite fraternity students often had the reputation of being idle drunkards, and in an effort to prove their bravery, many joined the Army at the beginning of the First World War. In 1914 at the first battle of Ypres, a formation composed mostly of German students was decimated when they mounted a frontal charge against entrenched British troops. They did not flinch while running towards the enemy, and legend has it that they sang the German national anthem while they charged. The values of the *Mensur* were exemplified during this charge, for the emphasis of dueling was on sustaining, not delivering, hits, just as the students charged and sustained

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<sup>4</sup> Giles, Geoffrey J. *Students and National Socialism in Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Howitt, William. *Life in Germany*. London: George Routledge and, Soho Square, 1849. 23

<sup>6</sup> Holland, Barbara. *Gentlemen's Blood*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2003. 87.

significant damage. Following the conclusion of hostilities, the Langemarck students were constantly invoked as a group that represented pure, untainted honor, as opposed to the government or civilian population. Monuments were erected for them, organizations named after them, and Hitler himself even visited the site of the battle. After the war, the amount of attention paid to these soldiers made students who were too young to fight feel as though they had missed a rite of passage in life, and the *Mensur* provided them with one way to prove their honor and bravery in lieu of combat.<sup>7</sup>

The Weimar government attempted to ban the *Mensur*, though their measures were largely unsuccessful due to the students' concept of honor. The *Mensur* was something pure that could not be taken away from them; it was a sacred event that allowed them to prove themselves. After the Second World War, it was banned until 1953 when it was classified as a sport by the allies, and continues into the present day.<sup>8</sup>

Historian Kevin McAleer's detailed report on dueling in Germany is one of the most detailed when it comes to the *Mensur*. However, he says little about why the *Mensur* kept reappearing after every disappearance. There are many dates, documents, and people listed in his work, but very little analysis. He mentions that the *Mensur* continued to appear and disappear over time, but never ventures to explain why this occurred. McAleer does provide a unique perspective that no other author has done, for he is the only one to try and discover the cloudy origins of academic fencing in Germany. He mentions that it was influenced by the Prussian army reforms that took place between 1859-1865. Before these reforms, to become a Prussian Army Officer one had to come from an aristocratic family. However, the reforms created a

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<sup>7</sup> Baird, Jay W. *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990.12.

<sup>8</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994. 225.



reserve officer corps, which allowed middle-class men to obtain a commission. The influx of middle-class officers into the Army threatened the nobility and exclusiveness of the aristocratic officers. The aristocratic officers began dueling more, in the hope that they could preserve the elite nature of their institution and rank. This led to more dueling amongst the middle-class officers, who desired to emulate the permanent officer corps. When reserve officers left the Army, they brought with them the concept of dueling, meaning that the duel was no longer primarily a military phenomenon, but now became a part of civilian life. He has claimed that the bridge between the military and the civilian population built by the reserve officer corps brought students into contact with dueling as a means to preserve their honor, though this assertion requires further investigation. Although his research is by far the most detailed, it is still lacking. McAleer discusses the *Mensur* in isolation, and fails to relate it to external influences that have kept it alive, such as social issues in the Kaiserreich or the First World War.<sup>9</sup> Kiernan's research shows the same issues. He delves deeply into the history of the *Mensur*, but never answers any questions as to why it is the last surviving form of organized dueling.<sup>10</sup> The factors responsible for the *Mensur*'s resiliency are just as important as the *Mensur* itself and deserve equal attention.

Throughout its entire history, the *Mensur* has survived by changing and adapting. Attempts at outlawing the *Mensur* were ineffective due to students' willingness to change the custom and hide it from the eyes of the authorities. Following both World Wars, the *Mensur* always came back in full swing, for it provided an outlet for students to prove their honor. Not even the institution of National Socialism could permanently end the *Mensur*, nor could the forces of the Cold War. Today it represents the only form of organized dueling left in the entire

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<sup>9</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994. 197.

<sup>10</sup> Kiernan, V. G. *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988, 87.

world, and its resiliency throughout time can be explained by its unique ability to change, adapt, and camouflage itself, in addition to students refusing to let it die.

## The *Mensur* in Imperial Germany

The origins of the *Mensur* remain extremely cloudy and obscure. There was never a set date that clearly established this as an organized form of dueling at German universities. This is mostly due to the fact that Germany did not become unified until 1871. Before this time, German states were separate entities and operated independently of each other.<sup>11</sup> This meant that the university system was scattered and disjointed, which did not allow for universal policies to develop at schools. Furthermore, individual fraternities at universities each adopted policies at different times and independent of each other. As a result, there is no clear start date for the *Mensur* at universities due to the fragmented nature of the country and school system.<sup>12</sup> Where the *Mensur* originated and how Germany came to adopt the custom is even more mysterious. During the late Middle Ages, it was common for French and Italian universities to include fencing lessons as part of their normal coursework. German students studying at these institutions took back what they learned abroad and implemented it at their home universities. By the 1500s most German universities practiced fencing, and here we see the first instance of students using fencing as a means to preserve their honor.<sup>13</sup> At this point fencing was still very unorganized and the *Mensur* was still taking shape, but the concepts behind both were the same. Students would challenge each other in the middle of the street, and a crowd would quickly form around them. A public audience provided students with a way to display their fencing prowess, and the winner of course would receive the benefits of increased prestige within society.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kissinger, Henry. *Diplomacy*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994, 137-146.

<sup>12</sup> Rüegg, Walter. *A History of the University in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004, 285-288.

<sup>13</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 121.

<sup>14</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 121-122.

This style of fighting became known as *Strassenrencontre*, or street fighting, and continued for about 250 years. However, following the Seven Years War in 1763, Frederick the Great made this type of street dueling illegal.<sup>15</sup> This marks the transformation from unorganized, impulse dueling to more controlled bouts, and the birth of the *Mensur*. Although there is no documented start date for the *Mensur*, it certainly began during the late eighteenth century, and was in full swing in the mid-nineteenth century. If a student's honor was insulted or challenged, a duel no longer immediately took place. Rather, they usually occurred the next day, with referees and seconds present. Originally protective gear was minimal and inadequate, leading to many injuries and fatalities. There were also certain rules and regulations to be followed. The duelists stood two paces apart from one another, and movement forward or backwards was forbidden. The idea of standing one's ground and defending oneself was highly valued in this custom, and retreating away from danger was condemned as a shameful act. Only the face was a target, and oddly enough, it was not necessarily important to win the bout or slay one's opponent. Rather, the central idea was to receive a wound without flinching. By sustaining injuries without showing pain, it demonstrated bravery and courage under fire. Following the bout, a scar on a student's face, or *Schmiss*, signaled that he had participated in a *Mensur* and was a brave and honorable individual. The *Schmiss* garnered a large amount of respect in Imperial German society, and when students graduated, a network of former fraternity students who also possessed the coveted *Schmiss* made it very easy for their fellow brethren to obtain high profile jobs.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 121-122.

<sup>16</sup> Biastoch, Martin. *Duell Und Mensur Im Kaiserreich, Am Beispiel Der Tübinger Corps Franconia, Rhenania, Suevia, Und Borussia Zwischen 1871 Und 1895*. Vierow, Germany: SH-Verlag, 1995, 19-22.

This formed the basis of the custom of academic fencing, and as will be shown, throughout the centuries many aspects of the *Mensur* had to be changed or altered, but its core concept and values remained the same. It remained a fight over the preservation of one's honor, and the basic concept of fencing one another without movement or flinching has remained constant throughout history.

The *Mensur* faced its first test in 1819, when the favored weapon of students was banned by the University of Breslau. Most students preferred to use the *Stossdegen*, a long, thin, pointed weapon very similar to the modern-day foil in fencing. Its long and sharp nature made this weapon very deadly, for it had the ability to pass through the padding and rib cage of fencers, causing many punctured lungs. The majority of universities followed Breslau's example, and by 1840 dueling with the *Stossdegen* was outlawed at every German university.<sup>17</sup> Students, however, would not allow this coveted custom to vanish due to a law such as this, and replaced the *Stossdegen* with the less deadly *Schläger*. This weapon, like the *Stossdegen*, was straight, but lacked a sharp point. Instead it was designed as a cutting weapon, having a sharp edge along the entire length of the blade. This facilitated the infliction of a *Schmiss* much more than the *Stossdegen*, and it was much less deadly. This represented the first transformation of the *Mensur*, and as a result the authorities allowed it to stay, at least for the time being.

The *Mensur* continued in this form throughout the next few decades, and experienced another fundamental change in the nineteenth century. Following the unification of Germany 1871, the *Mensur* was transformed by students into a highly organized and orchestrated sport. No longer would students insult each other and duel. Rather, fraternities would arrange a duel

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<sup>17</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 121.

between two students who might otherwise have no reason to despise one another.<sup>18</sup> Although the method of finding and fighting opponents changed, the idea behind the *Mensur* remained the same: students were dueling to preserve their honor. This change in the *Mensur* only meant that students were proving their honor to their fraternity brothers in order to be offered an invitation to become a full member of that fraternity. In this sense, the idea of preserving honor became even more important, for dueling became a pre-requisite to become a fraternity member.<sup>19</sup> If they failed this test of honor, they would not be permitted to become a member, meaning they would lose all of the potential connections they might have had to find a job once they graduated. This form of dueling became known as the *Bestimmungsmensur*, or determining duel, and is the form that can be seen in modern-day Germany. Students no longer chose their opponents, but rather they were chosen for them by their fellow fraternity brothers.<sup>20</sup> This change in the form of the *Mensur* was a slightly altered form of its previous version, but in no way meant a complete change or eradication of the previous style.

For the first half of the nineteenth century, the German state ignored the *Mensur*. Many of the elite in German society were former fraternity students, and as such had no desire to interfere with the practice of academic fencing, for many of them had been participants. However, since there were no laws or regulations concerning the *Mensur* other than the type of weapon allowed to be used, students continued to be injured and killed because of ineffective and inadequate protection. In 1876, a student at the University of Göttingen, who opted not to wear his protective cap, was killed after receiving a serious blow to his head. Following this

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<sup>18</sup> Biastoch, Martin. *Duell Und Mensur Im Kaiserreich, Am Beispiel Der Tübinger Corps Franconia, Rhenania, Suevia, Und Borussia Zwischen 1871 Und 1895*. Vierow, Germany: SH-Verlag, 1995, 21.

<sup>19</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Biastoch, Martin. *Duell Und Mensur Im Kaiserreich, Am Beispiel Der Tübinger Corps Franconia, Rhenania, Suevia, Und Borussia Zwischen 1871 Und 1895*. Vierow, Germany: SH-Verlag, 1995, 22.

incident, a law passed in 1877 made *Mensuren* entirely illegal.<sup>21</sup> However, outlawing the *Mensur* would certainly not be sufficient to stop students from taking part in it. They needed an outlet to prove themselves honorable, and social conditions within the Kaiserreich also influenced students to not only maintain, but to broaden the institution of academic fencing. The unification of Germany in 1871 led to increased pressure from the middle-class to attend universities. Formerly it had only been the elite in German society that were allowed to, or could even afford to attend, institutions of higher learning.<sup>22</sup> But during the industrial and economic boom that followed the unification of Germany, the country became a welfare state, and later on Bismarck instituted many economic changes, such as the tax reform of 1873, which altered the tax bracket system, making things a little easier on the middle and lower class.<sup>23</sup> These economic reforms that Bismarck passed allowed the middle-class to have a greater chance of going to college, which threatened the elite status of the upper-class students. Previously they were guaranteed to be the only class at a university, but now their identity was under attack, and the *Mensur* was a way for them to showcase and declare their privileged status. By excluding middle-class students from participating in *Mensuren*, fraternity students could distinguish themselves as upper-class, preserving class distinctions at the university that were beginning to disappear in mainstream society.

Upper-class students desire to continue the *Mensur* even though it was illegal allowed it to survive for the time being. Students still needed a way to showcase their honor and bravery, and also a way to establish themselves as distinct from the middle class. Not only did *Mensuren*

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<sup>21</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 125.

<sup>22</sup> Jarausch, Konrad Hugo. *Students, Society, and Politics in Imperial Germany: the Rise of Academic Illiberalism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1982, 310-314.

<sup>23</sup> Pflanze, Otto, and Otto Pflanze. *Bismarck and the Development of Germany / the Period of Consolidation, 1871-1880*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Pr., 1990, 80.

increase during this period, but so did dueling outside of the university. Between 1871 and 1914, Germany did not engage in armed conflict on a large scale, and as a result their officers had little to busy themselves with. In the absence of combat, “officers scarcely saw any active service, and had to fall back on other ways of manifesting courage. A soldier who never fights comes to border on the ridiculous, or must feel that he does. Meanwhile French, Russian, and above all British officers had continual opportunities to distinguish themselves in colonial wars, and pile up ribbons.”<sup>24</sup> Dueling in the Army began to rise, and as a result in 1890 Kaiser Wilhelm began investigating how extensive dueling was within the armed forces. It was thought he would crack down on this institution to end needless deaths of trained officers, while at the same time enforce the law outlawing dueling at universities. However, to the great delight of university students, Kaiser Wilhelm II praised the *Mensur* as “providing the best education which a young man can get for his future life.”<sup>25</sup> By expressing his support for academic fencing, the Kaiser had just reversed the previous laws that had prohibited it. Even so, the previous law was not revoked, nor were any new laws passed allowing the *Mensur*, so it still remained illegal. Nevertheless, the *Mensur* continued, mainly because of a lack of enforcement of the 1877 law. It was “rarely invoked, as even the lawmakers admitted, dueling being one of the ‘necessities of life’ and basically inevitable. The legislators, lawyers, judges, and attendant bureaucrats were usually *Alte Herren* [fraternity alumni, though not necessarily from a dueling fraternity] themselves and inclined to see the defendant’s side. Sometimes brief sentences were imposed, served in comfortable, well-appointed jails, and in some the prisoners were let out in the evenings to

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<sup>24</sup> Kiernan, V. G. *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988, 274.

<sup>25</sup> Baldick, Robert. *The Duel; a History of Duelling*. London, NY: Spring, 1970, 149-150.



carouse in the local bars.”<sup>26</sup> Police were known to avoid the areas where *Mensuren* were known to be taking place, and even if a student was arrested, minimal sentences were handed down. The Kaiser himself intervened on many occasions, and he “usually pardoned any duelist serving more than a few months.”<sup>27</sup> In one remarkable example, a student was given the choice of serving jail time between semesters, thus preventing prison from interfering with the *Mensur*.<sup>28</sup> On the rare occasion that students were imprisoned, the conditions in student jails were quite comfortable. They were allowed to have hot meals brought in, and they were permitted to leave the prison to attend lectures and fraternity meetings. So in theory, a student could be arrested for fencing, be let out during the day to continue dueling, then return to prison for the evening while he awaited his pardon. This demonstrated the authorities’ unwillingness to enforce the ban on the *Mensur*, which no doubt contributed to its survival. It is important to remember that even though a student jail may have existed, students were rarely imprisoned. At the *Studentenkarzer* in Heidelberg, the students who were unlucky enough to be caught passed the time by writing on the walls, and the writing is still preserved today.



Heidelberg *Studentenkarzer*, author’s photo.

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<sup>26</sup> Holland, Barbara. *Gentlemen's Blood*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2003, 266.

<sup>27</sup> Holland, Barbara. *Gentlemen's Blood*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2003, 266.

<sup>28</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 127.

The drawings on the wall can be categorized into two dominant themes: fraternities and fencing. Students drew their fraternity colors and crests on the wall, and also made illustrations depicting *Mensuren* and the *Schmiss*. This demonstrates how dedicated students were to the institution of academic fencing, and how apathetic the authorities were when it came to enforcing the laws regarding fencing. By drawing graffiti on the walls of the institution meant to punish them, students were making a deliberate statement, one that indicated fencing would never disappear. The writing also says something about the police. They did not stop students from depicting fencing on the walls (for which they were in prison for in the first place), nor did they attempt to remove the writing. This supports the idea that the authorities felt the *Mensur* was an appropriate way for students to express their honor in society. At this particular prison in Heidelberg, the most common offenses for being incarcerated were climbing street lamps to extinguish them, and drunkenly chasing pigs through the street, again demonstrating the authorities' unwillingness to enforce laws regarding the *Mensur*.

Interestingly enough, Germany had some of the most stringent laws against insulting others in order to prevent dueling, however they were rarely used. Going to court over an insult was seen in society as cowardice; the danger of dueling was far more masculine and allowed one to assert oneself as an honorable individual, rather than having honored bestowed on him by a judge. It was expected that "a real man extracted his vengeance in person, taking a real man's risk in the process."<sup>29</sup>

Throughout the *Mensur's* appearance up until 1914, it constantly evolved and changed to adapt to changing societal norms. A switch of weapons was required early on to alleviate fears of

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<sup>29</sup> Holland, Barbara. *Gentlemen's Blood*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2003, 267.

needless deaths. However even this soon proved to be inadequate, for the *Mensur* was eventually outlawed. Nevertheless, not even this was enough to eradicate this unique custom. Students had such a strong desire to prove their honor that *Mensuren* actually increased. This was also highly due to the fact that following the unification of Germany in 1871, middle-class pressure to enter universities increased. This led to upper-class students feeling the need to separate themselves from the middle-class through the *Mensur*. The lenient sentences given by sympathetic authorities only encouraged students to continue practicing the *Mensur*, but more importantly their practices allowed the *Mensur* to survive. This, combined with upper-class students' desire to isolate themselves from the middle-class and therefore increase *Mensur* frequencies, prevented the *Mensur* from disappearing during the period from 1877 to the First World War.

## The *Mensur* and the First World War

At first, the events of 28 June 1914 may not have seemed to endanger much of Europe. However, less than two months later in August 1914 Germany was at war with several adversaries. Thousands of young students enthusiastically abandoned their university studies to help support the Fatherland and participate in the glorious struggle. Up until the First World War, student attendance at universities had been growing steadily. Students at universities numbered about 60,000, with another 20,000 enrolled in technical high schools, and averaged between 19 and 23 years old.<sup>30</sup> As historian Konrad Jarausch points out, academic studies at universities before the Great War were not very rigorous, which left students with a lot of free time to devote to fraternities and fencing. Fraternities and fencing, in particular the *Mensur*, were “instinctively traditionalist, hearkening back to feudal and medieval forms (even if these were newly invented). The effect of such a corporate sub-culture on academic youth was a sense of social superiority and a strong political loyalty to the imperial German system...”<sup>31</sup> Academic fencing therefore contributed to student’s motivation to enlist in the Army, for the allure of combat fostered the same values of chivalry, bravery, and honor that the *Mensur* elicited.

However, the *Mensuren* contribution to student enlistment meant that attendance at universities rapidly declined, leading to a cessation of academic fencing. *Mensuren* became rare events, and they were highly discouraged by university administrators as well as the national government, for they needed all able-bodied students to save themselves for military service. But this was not the first time, nor would it be the last, that the *Mensur* became threatened. It was too resilient a custom to simply disappear from the academic community. The situation this time,

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<sup>30</sup> Jarausch, Konrad. "German Students in the First World War." *Central European History* 4th ser. 12 (1984): 311

<sup>31</sup> Jarausch, Konrad. "German Students in the First World War." *Central European History* 4th ser. 12 (1984): 313

however, was much different from the situation that the *Mensur* faced in Imperial Germany. Before the First World War, laws were passed that eventually led to the *Mensur* becoming illegal. In spite of all this, students kept it alive, partly due to the help of sympathetic authorities, judges, and policemen. It was also partly due to upper-class students' motivation to separate and distinguish themselves from middle-class students, who were becoming an increasing part of the university population. These factors kept the *Mensur* alive before the Great War; however a whole new set of factors came about from the years 1914-1918 that both ended the *Mensur* and brought it back to life. This shows how there is simply not one, single, definitive answer as to what has allowed the *Mensur* to survive throughout history, for the conditions the *Mensur* faced from 1914-1918 were drastically different from the conditions it faced in Imperial Germany. The *Mensur* is like a chameleon, which changes its form and adapts to different environments in order to survive.

In 1914, the call to arms led a large number of students to leave the university and join the military. Shortly thereafter, *Mensuren* ceased since there were simply not enough students to allow such an activity to take place.<sup>32</sup> Determining what factors contributed to the *Mensur*'s resurgence following the conclusion of hostilities is a very complex issue. One would think that after fighting in a brutal, ruthless war, students returning from the front would be weary of fighting and combat and wish to settle down rather than take part in a duel. This theory is supported by the fact that the Germans lost the war, which should have led students to unite and resist outside enemies, such as those drafting the Treaty of Versailles, rather than fight amongst themselves. However, just the opposite occurred. Following the war the *Mensur* came back in full force. Students who were too young to fight began participating in the *Bestimmungsmensur*

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<sup>32</sup> Rüegg, Walter. *A History of the University in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004, 345.

in order to prove their honor to their fellow fraternity brothers.<sup>33</sup> Although they were still practicing the *Mensur* the way it had been conducted before the war, the reasons that the *Mensur* returned have to do with an event that occurred during the war itself.

At the war's outset in 1914, the Germans conducted an assault near the town of Langemarck, Belgium. A report from the battle that day stated: "We made good progress yesterday in the Yser sector. West of Langemarck, young regiments broke forward with the song "*Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles*" against the front line of enemy positions and took them. Approximately 2000 men of the French infantry line were captured and six machine guns were captured."<sup>34</sup>

In reality, everything about this report was false. To begin with, the battle actually took place at Bixchote, the only explanation for the complication is that "Langemarck" sounds decidedly more German, while Bixchote with its odd spelling would certainly not have sufficed to become the symbol of a heroic German struggle. The communiqué also states that a number of French with their machine guns were captured. In reality, the Germans were forced to retreat, suffering extremely heavy casualties. Furthermore, the alleged singing of the "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles" cannot possibly have been true, as historian George Mosse makes clear. Singing was most likely a way for units to maintain contact with each other through the dense fog and smoke, and "it seems unlikely that they sang very much, given their circumstances: under strong fire which came from an unknown direction, stranded in some godforsaken field,

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<sup>33</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 126.

<sup>34</sup> Mosse, George L. *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990, 70.

surrounded by death and confusion... The evidence clearly speaks against the claim that the song was an expression of enthusiasm for battle.”<sup>35</sup>

It is impractical to believe that those involved in the battle actually sang a patriotic hymn while trying to survive in such a chaotic environment. In addition to this, the “young regiments” referenced in the battle report were supposedly composed of mostly students and volunteers, however a close examination of this reveals something quite different. Out of all the regiments present at the battle, only about 18% were university students. Nothing about this report was based on fact, yet it was still widely published. It was “meant to disguise defeat and the reckless waste of life. In reality it created a popular myth and restated that theme which dominated not only the August days but the whole history of the volunteers: manly youth sacrificing themselves joyously for the fatherland.”<sup>36</sup> The idea of youthful students sacrificing themselves for the fatherland was greatly needed on the home front to boost morale. Germany faced numerous enemies during the war, and needed to garner support at home by any means necessary.

The youth at Langemarck were said to have run at the enemy without flinching, and their trial by fire represented their transformation from boys to men. Interestingly enough, this is highly reminiscent of the *Mensur*. In a bout, an individual is required to be extremely stoic and calm while under attack. If he flinches, the bout is lost and he must re-start in order to be considered an honorable, noble student. The same values shown here through the *Mensur* were present at Langemarck, or at least, present in the report of the battle. Students allegedly faced the enemy without flinching, for if they did it would have been dishonorable. They ran into the face of danger even while sustaining heavy casualties. This again mimics the *Mensur*, for the idea of a

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<sup>35</sup> Mosse, George L. *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990, 71

<sup>36</sup> Mosse, George L. *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990, 72

bout was to sustain damage without showing any sign of pain or discomfort. What must be recognized from the events at Langemarck is that the report of heroic students had an enormous influence on post-war German culture, which would eventually lead to the return of the *Mensur*.

Following the conclusion of hostilities in 1918, there was a heavy feeling of disappointment, sadness, and pessimism throughout all of Germany, not to mention the violent political unrest that was unfolding. On 28 October 1918 sailors in the port of Wilhelmshaven were given orders to launch an attack, which they refused to carry out. This was followed by a sailor mutiny in Kiel on 3 November. The orders to attack were not conceived in an effort to help win the war. Rather, the high command was intent on saving the honor of the navy through one final, grand, suicidal battle, even though they knew it would result in defeat, death and destruction for the sailors who participated. The mutiny was “a protest against the sacrifice of thousands of men to an anachronistic notion of honour.”<sup>37</sup> Also during 1918, the Freikorps entered the historical scene. They consisted of disgruntled soldiers who were unhappy with the capitulation. This was a paramilitary unit who fought what they saw as enemies of Germany, such as communists. Within their ranks were many students, “who were attracted for diverse reasons: hopes for military adventure, patriotism, anti- if not necessarily counterrevolutionary zeal, or simply the relatively high pay offered.”<sup>38</sup>

Both the mutiny in Kiel and the Freikorps are examples of the chaos Germans were experience at the conclusion of the war. These cases, coupled with the stab-in-the-back myth, only led Germans to become more enraged about the situation at the conclusion of the war. The

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<sup>37</sup> Rurup, Reinhard. "Problems of the German Revolution 1918-1919." *Journal of Contemporary History* 3.4 (1968), 115-116.

<sup>38</sup> Diehl, James M. *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977, 29.



myth, developed by the German high command, propagated the idea that it was not the German military that lost the war, but rather the home front. The armed forces were betrayed by rebellious civilians who toppled the monarchy.<sup>39</sup> This shifted blame away from military officers and generals and onto those behind the lines. As a result, the military would be hailed as an honorable fighting organization, and this extended to those who fought at Langemarck. The communiqué from the actual battle, although an exaggerated account of what actually occurred, resonated with the German population. They had lost the war, and blame was placed on the German people, yet the student sacrifice at Langemarck became a symbol for the struggle of Germany in the Great War. Soon after the war, organizations, committees, and Army units aligned themselves with those student soldiers. Pilgrimages to the Langemarck cemetery were organized, and after discovering the deplorable condition of the cemetery, a grave maintenance organization was set up with the specific purpose of fixing the gravesite. Monuments were erected in Langemarck students' honor, countless anniversary celebrations took place, and later on the Nazis even set up scholarships in their names, and "through propaganda and poetry, their graves became sacred shrines. They had not died; instead, their souls had passed the earthly boundaries and had been transfigured. Their blood sacrifice had guaranteed the nation's future. The young men of Langemarck became the symbol for all of the German fallen in the Great War... The image of the purity of the youth of Langemarck had an undeniable transcendent force."<sup>40</sup>

The honorable student soldiers who died at Langemarck had been transformed into something that Germans could readily identify with. They symbolized pure, untainted warriors,

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<sup>39</sup> Strachan, Hew. *World War I: a History*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998, 287-299.

<sup>40</sup> Baird, Jay W. *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990, 4.

disconnected from corrupt politics behind the lines. In a purely unselfish gesture, they stared danger in the face and willingly sacrificed their lives for the Fatherland. Literature pertaining to their accomplishments abounded, so much so that a young corporal named Adolf Hitler even claimed to have taken part in the assault. He described the assault in *Mein Kampf*:

And then came a damp, cold night in Flanders, through which we marched in silence, and when the day began to emerge from the mists, suddenly an iron greeting came whizzing at us over our heads, and with a sharp report sent the little pellets flying between our ranks, ripping up the wet ground; but even before the little cloud had passed, from two hundred throats the first hurrah rose to meet the first messenger of death. Then a crackling and a roaring, a singing and a howling began, and with feverish eyes each one of us was drawn forward, faster and faster, until suddenly past turnip fields and hedges the fight began, the fight of man against man. And from the distance the strains of a song reached our ears, coming closer and closer, leaping from company to company, and just as Death plunged a busy hand into our ranks, the song reached us too and we passed it along: 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, über alles in der Welt!'

Four days later we came back. Even our step had changed. Seventeen-year-old boys now looked like men.

The volunteers of the List Regiment may not have learned to fight properly, but they knew how to die like soldiers.<sup>41</sup>

Historian Thomas Weber has conclusively demonstrated that Hitler's reports of the day's events are a fabrication of his imagination. He points out that Hitler wrote letters immediately after the battle describing it in great detail, but never mentioned the singing of the German anthem. In addition to this, the regimental history of the List Regiment also mentions nothing about the anthem. Weber makes clear that the soldiers who "marched into machine-gun salvos at Langemarck (the German term for 1<sup>st</sup> Ypres) with 'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles' on their lips, as they were mown down by British machine guns, have to be understood as stemming from the post-war nationalist myth."<sup>42</sup>

The soldiers of Langemarck had become so infamous that everyone wished to emulate their values, Hitler so much so by claiming that he took part in the attack. The atmosphere of

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<sup>41</sup> Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001, 164-165.

<sup>42</sup> Weber, Thomas. *Hitler's First War*. New York: Oxford UP, 2010, 44.

chaos and defeat following the end of the war could be tempered by invoking soldiers who were honorable, noble, heroic and brave. They represented purely German ideals, and at a time when terms and reparations were being forced on Germany, they represented hope and redemption. By invoking the memory of fallen heroes, Germans could hope to use them to reach back to purely German ideals in an effort to stem the tide of the victor's influence on German society.

While these developments in Germany following the Great War may seem insignificant to the *Mensur*, they are in fact quite crucial to understanding why the *Mensur* returned after the conclusion of hostilities. Students were returning home from the front and slowly made their way back into universities.<sup>43</sup> Throughout the existence of the Weimar Republic, the *Mensur* flourished once again.<sup>44</sup> It seems odd that students, after experience such a traumatic war, would have a desire to continue a violent, dangerous practice. After having survived the front line trenches, their desire to continue fighting seems questionable and absurd. However, the Langemarck legend and the honorable status that students had after returning from the war is exactly what motivated them to bring the *Mensur* back to life.

Those students who were too young to fight grew up in a culture that constantly referenced and honored those who served in the war. The Literature, monuments, organizations, and anniversaries concerning the brave students who fought at Langemarck, and by extension students as a whole, portrayed them as some of Germany's noblest fighters, unselfish in nature and courageous at heart. They were willing to face danger without fear, all because of their patriotic zeal for the Fatherland. Hitler can even be seen visiting the site of the battle and the Langemarck cemetery.<sup>45</sup> The photo depicts him mourning the graves of Langemarck students

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<sup>43</sup> Rüegg, Walter. *A History of the University in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004, 345.

<sup>44</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 126.

<sup>45</sup> Baird, Jay W. *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990, 2.



Hitler visits the Langemarck Cemetery, 2 June 1940.<sup>46</sup>

who fell in battle, indicating the intense feeling of connection that Germany had with these fallen soldiers. Germans wished to honor their dead, and Langemarck students were constantly invoked as sacrificing their lives honorably and bravely. The connection German society felt with these soldiers helped strengthen the idea of comradeship and solidarity. It was the mark of a true German, somebody who was brave, noble, and untainted by corrupt politics. They were not seen as responsible for losing the war, but rather they fought honorably and represented purely German ideals. Students who attended a university after the war yearned to be like the heroes they had grown up learning and hearing about. This led them to seek the same values the Langemarck students came to represent, those of honor, courage, bravery, and steadfastness under fire. Students who were too young to fight in the war felt as though they had missed out on an important rite-of-passage, and it seemed almost impossible to obtain the same honor that their fellow students had obtained through fighting. However, a unique custom that had been around

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<sup>46</sup> Baird, Jay W. *To Die for Germany: Heroes in the Nazi Pantheon*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990, 2.

for more than a century would allow students to impart on themselves the values that the Langemarck students represented.

The *Mensur*, well before the Great War, had always been a custom that embodied chivalric principles and ideals. After the war, the *Mensur* came back as a result of a desire on the part of students to prove themselves just as honorable as the youth who fought in the First World War. All of the rhetoric about students who fought at Langemarck concerned how brave and honorable they were. They unquestionably gave their lives for the Fatherland, refusing to flinch under fire even though they suffered heavy casualties. The same concept of sustaining damage without flinching is exemplified in the *Mensur*. This duel required students to stand two paces apart from each other, and when fencing began, if they moved their head so much as an inch in order to avoid being hit, the entire bout had to be restarted. Obtaining a *Schmiss* was considered almost sacred, and receiving one not in accordance with the rules and regulations set forth in the *Pauckomment* meant that one's *Schmiss* might as well not even exist.

The *Mensur* therefore came back after World War One as a result of student's desires to prove themselves just as brave and noble as those who sacrificed themselves for the Fatherland. They felt that the opportunity to prove themselves in battle had passed, but the *Mensur* proved to be a worthy substitute for the battlefield. Before the war, the *Mensur* survived laws passed against it because students were able to circumvent them with the help of sympathetic authorities. This time around, students needed a way to showcase their bravery, and brought the *Mensur* back to life. This shows how the *Mensur* has continued to find ways to survive the test of time, and a whole new test awaited this custom in the years to come.

## The Mensur during National Socialism and the Second World War

Following the conclusion of the First World War, the *Mensur* again reappeared, albeit it was still an illegal activity. It gradually began to regain the popularity that it enjoyed among elite fraternity students in Imperial German society, and it became increasingly accepted by politicians and legislators. Students also began pressuring the authorities to make the *Mensur* legal once again, even though many were at the same time dueling in secret. In 1912, students at the Technical University of Aachen gave the Prussian Minister of Justice a petition, which stated that “of the ten thousand or so student duels annually, not a single death had occurred in the last decade. It also cited statistics from 1908 of 19 deaths and 150 severe injuries contracted in the American collegiate pastime of football. In figures published in 1930, the *Mensur* ranked penultimate on a list that had track and field and bicycling as more profligate killers.”<sup>47</sup> This demonstrates the strong attachment that students had to the *Mensur*, for they viewed it as a very important custom and necessary to express and display their honor in society.

Students eventually got their wish with a 1932 German penal law, describing in detail the *Zweikampf*, which consisted of an arranged fight between two individuals. This custom was outlawed and punishable under the law because it was considered a deadly activity. This could have potentially threatened the *Mensur*, since a *Bestimmungsmensur* was exactly that, an arranged duel. However, a stipulation was inserted, stating that “Student *Mensuren* are not *Zweikämpfe* in the sense of the law, since the use of the *Schläger* is practiced with protection and not used as a deadly weapon.”<sup>48</sup> The distinction made between a *Zweikampf* and the *Mensur* is very important, for it re-legalized the *Mensur* and allowed students to once again practice this

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<sup>47</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 129.

<sup>48</sup> Gerland, Dr. Heinrich. *Deutsches Reichstrafrecht*. Berlin Und Leipzig: Walter De Gruyter &, 1932, 318-322.

custom openly. Soon afterward on 6 April 1933, the Prussian Minister of Justice declared that the *Mensur* was a joyous custom, and that it should be embraced by all youth as a means to strengthen their fighting spirit.<sup>49</sup> During the Weimar period, the *Mensur* enjoyed almost the same status as it had before World War I. It was embraced by the authorities, allowed under the law, and fraternity students were participating in ever increasing numbers. However, the National Socialist party would bring about the greatest threat to the *Mensur*.

When the Nazi Party rose to power in 1933, initially the *Mensur* was safe. A 1935 law, much like its 1932 counterpart, again declared that the *Mensur* was not a duel, and therefore not punishable under the law.<sup>50</sup> The National Socialists were not necessarily against the *Mensur*, but rather they did not like the idea of fraternities, and eventually shut them down. With the death of the fraternities also came the end of the *Mensur*, for a time at least.

In January 1926, the National Socialist German Students' Association (*Nationalsozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund* or NSDStB) was created, with the goal of bringing National Socialism to the universities.<sup>51</sup> This organization would grow steadily over the next decade, and students had mixed reactions to the infiltration of National Socialism in their fraternities. Some were apathetic to this new form of government while others tried to resist. The fraternity issue was placed before Hitler in 1935, when he decided not to entirely shut down the fraternities, since "this would merely give rise to clandestine opposition. The police did not close down the known haunts of criminals, for then they would lose control of the whereabouts of these people..."<sup>52</sup> The equation of student fraternities with criminals demonstrates Hitler's

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<sup>49</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 126.

<sup>50</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 126.

<sup>51</sup> Giles, Geoffrey J. *Students and National Socialism in Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985, 28-29.

<sup>52</sup> Giles, Geoffrey J. *Students and National Socialism in Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985, 181.

disdain for the institutions and his desire for them to be eradicated. As an example of Hitler's unwillingness to tolerate the fraternities, in 1935 the *Kösener* fraternity was disbanded because they refused give into National Socialist demands to use an Aryan membership requirement.<sup>53</sup> At the Nuremburg Rally that same year, it was declared it would henceforth be illegal to be a member of both the NSDStB and a fraternity. This move effectively eliminated the national organizations of student fraternities, although individual fraternities still existed at the local level.<sup>54</sup>

With the shutdown of the fraternity system, the *Mensur* ceased entirely. In previous situations when the *Mensur* was outlawed, students were still able to duel, albeit in secret. This was in part due to sympathetic authorities who would intentionally avoid known dueling locations, and judges who willingly pardoned students. However, the situation the *Mensur* faced this time was significantly different. The NSDStB, combined with the Nazi Party and Hitler, was so intrusive and dedicated to the destruction of the existing fraternities that no force could stop them. Although some fraternities resisted, their efforts were in vein. Students could not practice *Mensuren* in secret because the authorities would actively look for duels and punish students, which differed greatly from the situation in Imperial German society. Students also no longer had an organization to practice the *Mensur* with. *Mensuren* were arranged by fraternities and fought out between fraternity students. But with the elimination of fraternities, the *Mensur* simply became impossible to conduct. It is important to note that the Nazis were not necessarily against academic fencing, but rather they were against the idea of student fraternities not adhering to National Socialist ideology. By the time of the Second World War, the majority of

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<sup>53</sup> Giles, Geoffrey J. *Students and National Socialism in Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985, 182.

<sup>54</sup> Giles, Geoffrey J. *Students and National Socialism in Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1985, 184-186.



students were out fighting. This, combined with the shutdown of fraternities, effectively ended the *Mensur* from the period 1935-1945. Simply put, the *Mensur* had a very short history during the rule of National Socialism; it disappeared and was unable to reappear throughout this period because of pressure from Nazi authorities and another world war.

## The Modern *Mensur*

The end of the Second World War in 1945 left Germany divided, conquered, and at the mercy of the victors. The country needed time to recover from the devastation brought by the war, and the *Mensur* would have to take a back seat during the reconstruction period. There was chaos throughout the country, for refugees and soldiers were coming back to Germany while slave laborers and POWs were leaving to return to their homelands. Unlike after the First World War, when the German homeland had not been ravaged by war and battles, this time Germany was completely devastated, and had to submit all of their authority to the Allied Control Councils, who were to oversee that Germans were abiding by the terms set forth in the unconditional surrender. The control council for Germany was established after the war, and had members from the United States, the Soviet Union, France, and England. Their responsibilities included denazification, reorganization of the judicial system, demilitarization, and finding those guilty of war crimes. They were also tasked with minor duties, such as regulating taxes and rationing gas and electricity.<sup>55</sup> The control councils penetrated deep into German infrastructure, and the amount of power and control they exerted demonstrated their desire to keep a close watch on everything the Germans were doing. This watchful eye extended to the *Mensur*, and in 1945 the allied control council issued a directive pertaining to academic fencing.

The Control Council directs:

1. To prohibit all activities of and to dissolve by 1 January 1946 all sport and military or para-military athletic organizations (clubs, associations, institutions, and other organizations) which existed in Germany prior to its capitulation.
2. To prohibit the conduct and development among the German population of all military athletic organizations. This prohibition shall apply particularly to

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<sup>55</sup> Allied Control Authority Germany. *Enactments and Approved Papers of the Control Council and Coordinating Committee*. Vol. 1. Legal Division Office of Military Government for Germany, 1945, 81-306.

organizations engaged in Aviation, Parachuting, Gliding, Fencing, Military or Paramilitary drill or display, shooting with firearms.<sup>56</sup>

For students who were hoping that the *Mensur* would return after World War II as it had after the First World War, they would be severely disappointed. The control council viewed the *Mensur* as being associated with the German military, for in the same document they allowed non-military sports to be conducted. This association of academic fencing with the military could have stemmed from the fact that *Mensuren* exhibited ideals of bravery and courage; traits that were highly valued in the armed forces. From this decision, students once again began dueling in secret, although it is difficult to determine to what extent dueling took place, since most bouts had to be hidden from allied authorities and documenting them meant jeopardizing oneself. In Imperial Germany, total secrecy was not entirely necessary because the authorities were sympathetic to the custom, but in the post-war period the authorities were actively searching for perpetrators and violations of the control council's directives.

There were discussions about bringing the *Mensur* back legally, but most of these discussions took place among German students, who did not have the authority to overturn the control council's decision. Eventually in 1953, the council came to the conclusion that the *Mensur* did not represent a threat to society and no longer equated it with the military. It was decriminalized and classified as *Sportmensur*, meaning that it was on the same footing as other non-military sports in Germany. The re-legalization on the *Mensur* in 1953 meant that this custom was once again practiced in the open, and it gradually became increasingly popular amongst fraternity students. It is important to note, however, that the lifting of the ban only occurred in the western zone of occupation. It remained forbidden in the east, for it was seen as

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<sup>56</sup> Allied Control Authority Germany. *Enactments and Approved Papers of the Control Council and Coordinating Committee*. Vol. 1. Legal Division Office of Military Government for Germany, 1945, 304.

embodying the tenets of competition and capitalism. Nevertheless, following the reunification of Germany the *Mensur* spread to the eastern zone, and today it is still practiced throughout the country, though of course it does not enjoy the same level of participation that it did during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> McAleer, Kevin. *Dueling: the Cult of Honor in Fin-de-siècle Germany*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1994, 126-127.

## Conclusions

Throughout history, the *Mensur* has proved to be the most difficult form of dueling to eradicate. It has survived numerous attempts to outlaw it, as well as two world wars, the cold war, and reunification. There is not one single trait that has allowed it to survive all of this time, but rather we must observe the entire history of academic fencing, from its inception to the present day, in order to determine what makes this custom so resilient throughout history.

Although the origins of the *Mensur* are still an object of discussion, it is known that it the idea of academic fencing originated in Italy and France, where fencing was a part of normal instruction at universities. German students brought this custom back to their homeland, where it took various forms. Beginning as unruly street fighting, over time fraternities adopted fencing as a formal custom during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the *Mensur* became a part of their traditions and rituals. Students attached so much honor to this custom, no doubt a result of the coveted *Schmiss*, that the *Mensur* became increasingly popular. This popularity attracted the attention of the authorities, who began noticing that unregulated dueling was leading to many severe injuries and deaths. The first laws passed against the *Mensur* concerned the types of weapons used and the amount of protection worn. These laws were not necessarily an attempt to ban the *Mensur*, but they represented the first test that this form of dueling would face. Students would not let the custom die simply because a slight alteration to it needed to be made, and so they obeyed.

The year 1877 marked the first official outlawing of the *Mensur*, though this of course did not mean it stopped. The *Mensur* continued during this time period as a result of the authorities' unwillingness to enforce the mandate, either because they had participated in the event themselves or felt that it was an appropriate way for students to express their honor. In addition to this, elite fraternity students simply refused to let it die, for they felt it was a

necessary part of their social education. They would duel in secret, ensuring that the *Mensur* would survive.

The First World War meant the cessation of *Mensuren*, but this proved to be only a slight interruption in the entire history of academic fencing. Although *Mensuren* could not take place because the majority of students were out fighting, when students returned from the front after the conclusion of hostilities the *Mensur* returned. This can be attributed to the honorable status students obtained following the battle of Langemarck. Students were hailed as pure, noble warriors, and as untouched by corrupt politics. Monuments and scholarships were set up in their names, and those who were too young to fight after the war felt as though they had missed out on an important rite of passage. One outlet for proving themselves worthy of being honorable students was by obtaining honor through the *Mensur*. Although the *Schmiss* was not a battle wound, it proved to be a worthy substitute, and as a result the *Mensur* came back to life following the First World War.

During the early part of the inter-war period, the *Mensur* once again flourished, until the National Socialists came to power. Students were unable to participate in *Mensuren* after 1935 simply because the Nazis effectively shut down the fraternities. With no institutions through which to practice the custom, the *Mensur* once again ceased. Any possibility of reviving it in a timely matter was eliminated by the Second World War, for once again German students were called into battle.

In 1945, if students were hoping to bring back the *Mensur*, they were gravely mistaken. The allied control council saw academic fencing as a military custom, and in an effort to demilitarize Germany, banned the *Mensur*. Dueling would continue in secret, but on a very small scale. However, in 1953 the council decided that this custom was no longer a threat, and declared

it legal as a sport. This classification still stands in the law books and the *Mensur* is still practiced in the present day under this title. The control council would no doubt have left the 1945 ban untouched if there was no desire on the part of students to bring the *Mensur* back. This desire stemmed from the fact that the *Mensur* represented something purely German. It was a custom unique to Germany, and embodied ideals that were highly valued in both Imperial and post-war society. It represented a way for students to reach back to their untainted heritage, one that did not have the stain of National Socialism. With four foreign powers occupying Germany, the *Mensur* was also a way for students to reestablish some form of nationalism, albeit in a very small way. The *Mensur* was something that no other country could lay claim to, and by practicing it once again students were able to reestablish some semblance of German national identity.

In this form the *Mensur* continues today, although as shown it has undergone some changes from its initial form. These changes have allowed it to survive the test of time, ensuring that the *Mensur* would not vanish. Situational factors, such as sympathetic authorities in Imperial Germany and the Langemarck legend, have no doubt had a tremendous influence on the *Mensur's* ability to keep reappearing in the historical record. The changes the *Mensur* has had to make over time do not indicate a deviation from its original core values. Bouts are still conducted to determine one's courage and bravery. The same basic rules still apply, for no movement is allowed, only the face is a target, and the *Schmiss* is still desired as much as ever before. The evolution of academic fencing in Germany has resulted in controversy and disagreement, but one fact remains strikingly clear. The resiliency of the *Mensur*, from wild and untamed street fighting to organized dueling to a sport, can be attributed to fraternity students'

desire to maintain a custom through which they can display their honor amongst their fellow fraternity students and society.



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