Participation in the serious activities of guarding and fighting was not the only means by which early modern townsfolk came into contact with the dictates of the martial ethic. Weapons had peaceful uses as well. In towns, palaces, and villages throughout Europe during the late medieval and early modern period, men spent leisure time practicing the skills of war in competition with one another at organized shooting and fencing matches. In the German towns, shooting matches were normally hosted by local shooting societies (Schützengesellschaften) at permanent shooting grounds, whereas townsfolk practiced sword-fighting at temporary fencing “schools” (Fechtschulen) offered by traveling masters. What exactly were shooting societies and fencing schools? Who participated in shooting and sword-fighting matches, and what purpose did these competitions serve? And what was the relationship of shooting societies to civic defense systems?

Some historians have suggested that early modern shooting societies were essentially synonymous with defense units, referring to the societies as “companies” or otherwise conflating them with local militias.¹ At the opposite end of the spectrum are the works of some sports historians, including local histories by members of modern German gun clubs, who tend to play down military associations and characterize shooting societies strictly as sports clubs.² Neither of these interpretations is entirely correct. Local governments supported shooting societies and sword-fighting schools largely because they provided training in the martial skills considered appropriate for war, and shooting practice was occasionally made into a regular requirement for a portion of a town’s male population. Shooting societies were not, however, military organizations, nor were they intended to be. Both shooting and sword-fighting were also entertainments, and shooting matches in particular

could and often did have the character of international sporting events, complete with the social and diplomatic functions that we associate with major sport competitions in the modern world. In fact, the rules of good sportsmanship and male sociability could take priority over military effectiveness.

For the towns, shooting clubs and competitions offered more than just a chance to hone the ability of the locals to hit a target. The matches also fostered pride in acquiring and adapting to the latest weapons technology and gave the towns a chance to demonstrate their wealth, power, and good sportsmanship. Hosting a major shooting festival could be a huge undertaking, both in terms of expense and organization. Like modern sports events, the competitions also strengthened communal identity and cultivated local pride, occasionally even creating heroes analogous to modern sports idols. By encouraging ownership of guns and skilled swordplay, martial sports contributed to early modern associations of weapons with masculine values such as physical competence, financial strength, courage, and fair play. Their importance to the cultural and political identity of the town also inevitably infused them with political overtones, which could function positively, as an opportunity for diplomacy, or negatively, leading to disputes and even to feuds.

In the mountainous regions of Tyrol and Switzerland, where travel was dependent on narrow passes that could effectively be defended by a few riflemen, shooting societies were eventually militarized and professionalized, developing during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries into modern defense organizations. Despite efforts in this direction by some territorial rulers, this development did not take place in other German-speaking lands. Declining in importance and size during the seventeenth century, German shooting societies were already taking on the character of modern sports clubs by the eighteenth, with their entertainment value eclipsing military interest entirely. Meanwhile, sword-fighting, which was an artisanal skill in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, almost completely disappeared, replaced by the less dangerous and more elite sport of fencing with foils. By the eighteenth century, martial sports competitions in Germany were relegated to the world of entertainment and social clubs (Vereinsleben). Universal conscription would ultimately ensure that the art of war could be practiced in other, more serious arenas.

We are used to thinking of the development of military technology as a battlefield issue. Those who debate the relationship of the “military revolution” to the early modern state see shifts in technology primarily