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THE COSSACK SABRE

The Cossack weapons varied in styles while they were either produced by local blacksmiths, purchased in other regions or taken as booty. However, it was difficult to imagine a free Cossack without his sabre. In fact, it might have been their favourite weapon, being mentioned for countless times in proverbs, sayings, songs, legends and epics.

The sabres themselves were not too long (about 70 cm) and rather little bowed. The sabre being well sharpened, a Cossack was able to cut the enemy in two diagonally, provided the blow was performed correctly [1:289].

The sabre was considered to be an attribute of Cossack chivalry of the kind, it was often named as "the fair weapon", since it was the sabre that provided the opportunity to show one's war skills in practice. Fair duelling combats were regarded as a demonstration of valour. The Cossacks are reported to have practised the so called "herts" before a battle or siege. Those were essentially duels between the strongest and the most valiant warriors from different camps, sometimes arranged as group combats. As a rule, a single Cossack used to come forth to the enemies' camp, calling in for a fight; if the opposite side refused, verbal insults ensued, accompanied with gestures showing discontent. The most furious incriminations used to be those of cowardice, intended to strike the opponents' self-respect, which actually worked, e.g. with Polish warriors [2:122-124].

Since the weapons in most cases were acquired as booty, sabres of foreign styles were widely spread across the Cossack territory. However, even after the Cossacks had effectively started manufacturing those by themselves, they could still select the weapons according to their quality or purchase them whenever such a possibility would arise. Amongst the Cossack sabres which have been found, the following types are to consider:

- the Polish-Hungarian type – as a rule these are massive sabres, with a moderately bent blade, a small or no hilt;
- Navaland Hussar, or Cossack proper, type- characterised by a conical flattened and elongate hilt;
- Chechuhy (Fiddlesticks) – with a long extended moderately bent blade, open guard;
- Ordynky (Tartarian) – with a broad curved blade and a massive open-type guard;
- Hussar (black) – the blade of medium length, moderately bent, open hilt;
- Shamshir – the blade of "lion-tale" style, open guard;
- Kylydzh – a short bent blade, open guard;
- Turkish type, resembling Iranian styles – the blade of medium length, moderately bent;
- Balkan – blade of Iranian origin, decorated, open guard [3:107-108].

It can be inferred from the classification above that a great amount of sabres used by the Cossacks were of foreign origin, mostly coming from Poland or Islamic countries.

The blade was also ornate in sabres, showing the brand of the craftsman who produced the weapon. Wealthy Cossacks could as well decorate their sabres with ornaments of gold and silver. Along with the development of the Cossack state, there began to emerge sabres with gift signatures, such sabres given by the Hetman as a special favour.

The sabre was stored in a wooden scabbard, whenever possible ornated with leather or metal. The wealthier chiefs could afford decorating the sheath with silver, gold and precious stones. The scabbard was also decorated with animal figures or other wood- and metalworks at both ends. The archaeological finds reveal they were decorated by both Ukrainian as well as foreign craftsmen. It can be stated that the craft of the Cossack smiths was in no way inferior to that of the foreign ones [4:150-152].

The sabre was worn on the left side and tied to the waist with a leather belt fastened through two rings on the scabbard, one of them closer to the hilt, the other generally 15-25 cm below.

Nowadays the sabre is used by Ukrainian military as a ceremonial weapon, or a honorary award with an inscription.

So, the sabre is an irreplaceable attribute of an Ukrainian Cossack. This weapon was of immense importance for the warrior who wielded it and was regarded as a war companion. A motive of a large amount of literature, songs, legends, the sabre still draws the attention of many people, including researchers, whereas some Ukrainians have one at home as a memory of the Cossack age.

LITERATURE

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