

HOW TO:

GET STARTED ON RESEARCH ON MILITARY UNIFORMS

A Bibliographic Essay

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“Uniform” means “all alike.” Before the mid-17th century, however, in Western Europe soldiers in the same army did not all dress alike. Before then, soldiers in the same unit, or on the same side, might wear a distinguishing mark on their clothing – for example the leek worn by Welsh soldiers in their caps during Henry V’s 15th century campaigns in France (William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act IV, Scene 1) -- but they did not dress uniformly.

The English New Model Army of 1645 was the first Western army to be clothed uniformly. Oliver Cromwell’s New Model Army was raised by Parliament against King Charles I. Cromwell came into a large supply of red cloth and dressed the entire army in red coats. The redcoats had come!

By the second half of the 17th century, uniform dress for soldiers apparently was an idea whose time had come. (As Charles Fort said, “When it’s time to railroad, you railroad.”) By the 1690s, the Swedish army had replaced coats in regimental colors with a blue uniform. Following the Restoration in 1660, the English army continued to dress most units in red. By the early 18th century, the French army was in silvery gray. Under Peter the Great, the Russian army wore clothes of a uniform pattern, although the colors differed by unit.

“Uniform” may mean “all alike,” but that does not mean that uniforms are all alike. They differ not merely from country to country, or from period to period, but by type of unit within a country during the same period (e.g., infantry and cavalry units rarely dressed identically). How do you research uniforms in sufficient detail to reproduce them as costumes?

One might suppose the best source of information to be an army’s (or navy’s or air force’s) official uniform regulations. In some cases they may be; unfortunately, in others the regulation may simply be “according to the sealed sample filed in the Quartermaster General’s office” – not very much help! Further research usually is needed. In this essay, I will endeavor to provide advice on some of the most useful (and reliable!) print and Web sources. All the print sources and web sites are in English. A bibliography of the sources cited below appears at the end.

General Sources. Two works are especially valuable for the breadth of their coverage. *Uniforms of the World: A Compendium of Army, Navy, and Air Force Uniforms, 1700-1937*, by Richard and Herbert Knötel and Herbert Sieg is a basic starting point that deals with virtually all European and many other countries' armed forces. It includes details of changes in uniform, by state, between 1700 and 1937 and is amazingly complete, especially given its breadth. This is an English translation of the 1937 edition of a work in German.

The second work is *The Uniforms of the World's Great Armies, 1700 to the Present*, edited by I. T. Schick. It consists of essays by prominent scholars of military dress, arranged chronologically from 1700 to the Cold War. It is copiously illustrated.

Not sure what a "hackle" is? Consult W. Y. Carman's *Dictionary of Military Uniform*. It defines such terms, and illustrates many of them.

Osprey Publishing, Ltd., is a British publisher of importance for research on uniforms. Osprey's "Men-at-Arms" and "Elite" series of paperbound books cover specific armies or units in specific periods, from ancient times to the present. Each is copiously illustrated with photographs of vintage military dress and paintings. While highly reliable, the brief text in an Osprey book may need to be supplemented from other sources. I will refer to some of these works below, under specific countries or periods. Osprey's web site is www.ospreypublishing.com.

Narrower Sources. A number of works cover several countries' forces during a narrower time span. One of the most valuable is *Uniforms & Insignia of the Navies of World War II*, prepared during the Second World War by the U.S. Navy's Office of Naval Intelligence. It is a comprehensive guide to Allied and Axis naval uniforms intended to assist American troops identify foreign uniforms they might encounter (i.e., how to tell a German seaman from a German admiral). It's a very useful work. Other broad works that are less encyclopedic than Knötel include Guido Rosignoli's *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Military Insignia of the 20th Century*, or *Marine Badges & Insignia of the World*, by Campbell and Reynolds. The latter includes the uniforms and insignia of such obscure marine forces as those of Denmark, Portugal, and Thailand!

Web Site. NATO has an extremely useful web site that provides links directly to the defense ministry and military web sites of all NATO members. It is found at www.nato.int.

Individual Countries. To prevent this from growing too long, I have limited this section to the armies and marine corps of Great Britain and the United States. These also are the two countries with which I am most familiar.

Great Britain. Photographs, painting, and drawings frequently are some of the best sources of information. Unfortunately, however, paintings and drawings by too many

Parisian artists “illustrated” the 1815 uniforms of the British, Prussian, and Russian conquerors using no sources other than their own imaginations!

One far more reliable source is Richard Simkin. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Simkin was a prolific illustrator of British army dress. A major strength of his illustrations is that they cover the same units of the Royal Army over time – from the Restoration to the First World War. A weakness is that Simkin is not always totally correct on the details. Two collections of Simkin’s illustrations have been edited by W. Y. Carman: *Richard Simkin’s Uniforms of the British Army: The Cavalry Regiments* and *Richard Simkin’s Uniforms of the British Army: The Infantry Regiments*. Carman identifies Simkin’s lapses from accuracy. He also adds a good description of the changes in uniforms between the mid 17th century and the First World War.

The Osprey Men-at-Arms series also covers the entire history of British Army uniforms. Volumes include the French and Indian Wars (1760s), the wars of the French Revolution and Napoléon (1789-1815), the Crimean War (1850s), the First World War (1914-1918), the Battledress uniform of the Second World War (actually 1937-1961), and virtually everything in between.

Among other sources, Peter Cochrane’s *Scottish Military Dress* is a good source of information on the uniforms of Scottish regiments from the middle ages to the present. Charles Hamilton Smith was in Spain during Wellington’s Peninsular Campaign; his paintings of British soldiers of the period are from life and may be relied upon for accuracy. They are reproduced in *Wellington’s Army: The Uniforms of the British Soldier, 1812-1815*, with a text by Philip J. Haythornthwaite. Neil Leonard’s *Wellington’s Army Recreated in Colour Photographs* is a book of photos of British reenactors in Napoléonic era uniforms. It includes some valuable close-up photos. *Uniforms of the Royal Marines from 1664 to the Present Day*, by Charles Stadden (one of the world’s finest creators of military miniatures) and George and Christopher Newark, illustrates the Royal Marines’ uniforms through the mid 1990s.

British officers traditionally purchased their uniforms from tailors. Therefore, British works on tailoring tend to include considerable information – including pattern information – on the uniforms of the time. R.L. Shep has published a number of such tailoring works. One example is W.D.F. Vincent’s *Tailoring of the Belle Epoque* (1903), which includes in-depth directions for tailoring Army and Navy officers’ uniforms.

Finally, the British Army’s web site is www.army.mod.uk.

United States. The premier illustrator of the uniforms of the United States Army up to the First World War was Henry A. Ogden. He prepared several volumes for the Quartermaster General illustrating the Army’s uniforms from the 18th century through 1907. While illustrations for some of the earlier uniforms contain some minor errors, the later ones are authoritative, especially those for the period, 1888 – 1907, which were

painted from life. Dover published some of Ogden's first series of prints in *Uniforms of the United States Army, 1774-1889, in Full Color* and Thomas Yoseloff published the second set in 1960 as *Uniforms of the United States Army, Second Series*. The latter is a magnificent folio volume (12"x15") that reproduces every detail in Ogden's 26 plates. Ogden actually is far more useful for the U.S. Army than Simkin is for the British Army!

During the Civil War, the U.S. Department of War took a series of authoritative photographs of the dress uniforms of enlisted men in the U.S. Army. These are available in several sources, including Francis Lord's *Civil War Collector's Encyclopedia*. This work also provides extensive descriptions of enlisted and officers' uniforms of the army, navy, and marine corps of the Union and the Confederacy and illustrations from period military supply catalogs.

The Company of Military Historians published a series of *Military Uniforms in America*. In four volumes, they cover military dress from the French and Indian War through the Cold War. They include illustrations of rare and unusual uniforms – such as the dress uniforms of elite militia units of the mid 19th century -- as well as more common ones. Because different illustrators drew the plates, they vary somewhat in usefulness; however, they are accompanied by text describing the uniforms and identifying sources.

As it does for the British Army, Osprey publishes titles covering virtually the entire period of the U.S. Army in its Men-at-Arms and Elite series. They include the American Revolution (1775-1793), the War of 1812 (1812-1814), the Mexican War (1846-1848), the American Indian Wars (1850-1890), the Civil War (1861-1865), the post-Civil War period, (1865-1890), the First World War (1890-1920), the Second World War (1941-1945), and the Cold War (through the mid-1980s). Other books profusely illustrated with photographs include those published by Stackpole Books in its "G.I. The Illustrated History of the American Soldier," series. These include volumes on the Civil War and the First and Second World Wars. These volumes include photos of uniforms off the body as well as on their wearers.

A number of sources provide a level of close detail useful for costumers on portions of uniforms. The Smithsonian Institution, for example, has a catalog of its collection of U.S. Army enlisted personnel rank chevrons (*Chevrons: Illustrated History and Catalog of U.S. Army Insignia*) that is profusely illustrated and provides detail on how chevrons were made. A second Smithsonian bulletin, *American Military Insignia, 1800-1851*, illustrates the Institution's collection of cap and helmet devices and shoulder- and waist-belt plates.

R.T. Huntington's monograph, *Accoutrements of the United States Infantry, Riflemen and Dragoons, 1834-1839*, studies bayonets and scabbards, belts, belt plates, cartridge boxes, and similar equipment at the level of detail possible by restricting itself to a five-year period. This is an example of the kind of study that is almost as good as having the real accoutrements in your hands!

Shelby Stanton's *U.S. Army Uniforms of the Cold War, 1948-1973*, is an invaluable guide to the Army uniforms of the period since it provides tailoring information, cloth weight, and similar construction detail for dress, semi-dress, duty, field, and work uniforms for enlisted and commissioned men and women. Stanton has similar volumes dealing with Army uniforms during other 20th Century periods.

The U.S. Army's web site is www.army.mil.

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