



Why First World War soldiers wore khaki

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Khaki uniform may not be regarded a design classic but it has, in many ways, shaped our memory of the First World War. Perhaps design historians overlook khaki because it is, by definition, inconspicuous. Invented to disguise and conceal soldiers in the field of battle, this clever technique to camouflage colonial soldiers in nineteenth century India was transposed to mass warfare in Europe from 1914-18.

Khaki was thought to begin with Sir Harry Lumsden, when he first discovered what drab colours could do for his soldiers; he raised the Corps of Guides in 1846 as a Lieutenant at Peshawar and to improve the clothing of his troops, he bought up white cotton cloth at the bazaar at Lahore, which was then 'taken down to the river bank; there, first being soaked in water, mud was rubbed into it, which had the effect of making the cloth very much the colour of the plains around.?(i) His camouflage caught on, and in 1848 William Hodson, then second in command, wrote home to his brother asking him to select a 'drab' uniform, and to send enough material to clothe 900 men.

The root of khaki is the Hindi word for 'earth' or 'dust,' which might explain why the military liked drab colours. As Hodson declared, the lightweight khaki uniform made his men 'invisible in a land of dust.' (ii) Amongst the other stories circulating about the origins of khaki in the Indian Mutiny, one describes soldiers boiling light-coloured uniforms in water with mazari palm, to make them less conspicuous (iii). Whatever the genesis of khaki, it was embraced by the British army coming up to the First World War, in response to military technology that gave camouflaged soldiers tactical advantage (iv). By the late nineteenth century, they were transitioning from red to khaki uniforms, and in 1897, the universal dress was adopted for all British troops overseas (v).

So why did the British army embrace khaki coming up to the First World War? One reason was that aerial reconnaissance and smokeless guns made the visibility of soldiers a real problem. Once the smokeless magazine rifle arrived in the 1890s, black powder no longer obscured the soldier's field of vision (vi). Battles were bigger and less ritualized and with the rise of military photography, it made sense to dress for camouflage rather than spectacle. In an effort to modernize, they switched to khaki. But the strong colours that had been standard for armies across Europe, and red - the colour for the British 'were not the only fashionable features that made soldiers targets in the field of battle.

Shiny buttons and conspicuous breeches were also a problem on the western front. According to Paul Fussell, officers found that certain costume features made them targets on the battle field, such as riding-boots, leather puttees and, as he put it, 'melodramatically cut riding breeches,' all of which were discarded, in favour of the humble dress of the troops (vii). In this way, the First World War became a testing ground for the new khaki uniforms, which continued to undergo many changes throughout the war. Discovering the military advantages of drab colours appeared to set the British army on a campaign to design military uniform along more functional

lines.

The scale of the conflict tested the design. As the war got bigger, the demand for recruits became greater, and the project to clothe soldiers grew until the army sent uniform production out to the civilian trades. The 1915 poster 'Why aren't you in Khaki?' offers a sense of how potent uniform was, to mobilise popular opinion and to recruit men to the army. Before long, khaki was part of the texture of everyday life in wartime Britain, as a symbol in propaganda images and a source of steady business for the tailoring trade. Khaki service dress was powerful yet hidden, ordinary yet transformative. Perhaps it is more elusive than iconic, but one thing is clear; the First World War established khaki as the military uniform of the twentieth century.

- i. A. C. Whitehorne, 'Khaki and Service Dress,' *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, Vol. 15, (1936) 181
- ii. Selwyn Hodson-Pressinger, *Khaki Uniform First Introduction 1848 (Battle Use 1849) & Hodson's Memorial*, London: Sandilands Press, 2000, 5
- iii. Denis Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War*, London: Allen Lane, 1978, 51
- iv. Thomas Abler, *Hinterland Warriors and Military Dress: European Empires and Exotic Uniforms*, Oxford: Berg, 1999, 111-129
- v. Harold E. Raugh, *The Victorians at War, 1815-1914*, California: ABC-CLIO, 2004, 279
- vi. Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society 1815-1914*, London; Longman, 1980, 210
- vii. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 [first published 1975] 54

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