



## **When they ran out of khaki: improvised uniforms and Kitchener Blue**

**by Jane Tynan**

**2014-03-12 12:11:54**

As Britain prepared for war, photographs of men queuing up at recruiting depots captured the drama of mobilization. Less apparent were the problems; in truth the army came under extreme pressure to recruit, train, clothe and equip masses of inexperienced men, often struggling to offer them a smooth transition into the army. Particularly symbolic was the failure to supply military uniforms.

Shortages undermined the optimism of propaganda posters, particularly the images of men in khaki that drove many to recruiting stations in the first place. In retrospect, problems with uniform supply were inevitable in 1914, given Kitchener's decision to raise 100,000 regulars from volunteers; men aged between nineteen and thirty-one were enlisted for three years or the duration of the war (i). However, when the War Office failed to obtain enough khaki uniforms in the opening weeks, many of the early recruits were forced to wear replacement uniforms, dubbed 'Kitchener blue'. The official title of the outfits belies their unmilitary origins, obtained as they were from a range of unlikely sources: 500,000 suits of blue serge uniforms from post office stocks and approximately 500,000 greatcoats purchased from the clothing trade. The War Office ordered a further 1,300,000 jackets and pairs of trousers as well as 900,000 greatcoats from Canada and the United States (ii).

Once it became clear that uniform production could not keep up with the supply of soldiers, Kitchener relaxed regulation appearance for the troops. He took the view that the improvised outfits would be adequate in the short term as long as men in individual units dressed alike (iii). A description of how battalions of the Leicestershire Regiment coped with lack of regulation supplies in the autumn of 1914, however, reveal just how dissatisfied recruits were (iv). The 6th Battalion had khaki uniform, but the 7th were issued with old full-dress parade tunics, scarlet with colourful facings and blue trousers from various reserve stores. The replacement costumes quickly deteriorated under training conditions, while the 8th and 9th Battalions were forced to wear Kitchener blue until spring 1915 (v). These 'shapeless' and 'baggy' styles were at odds with images of smartly-dressed soldiers, as a 1914 article in the Tailor and Cutter reported, one of the alternative outfits was 'not at all liked, the first men to wear it being mistaken for inmates of an industrial home' (vi). When he authorised them improvised outfits, Kitchener departed from his original vision to mould the new armies as a professional military force, a decision which left them, in 1914 and early 1915, looking more like a rag tag army.

According to Cecil Harper, the uniforms given to the men from his battalion in 1914 came in an assortment of shapes and colours: 'The men were kitted out with red coats of uncertain age with tartan trews; or when supply of these ran out, blue trousers with a red stripe down the seam and buff belts.' (vii) The whole principle of uniform 'to create the illusion of unity, to promote discipline and esprit de corps' broke down when these strange garments appeared. Men were issued with a variety of uniform styles, ranging from old standard issue to new designs in blue serge, or even surplus clothing from other official sources. Incorrect uniforms were not just

an absurdity; for many new recruits they were offensive.

The quirky appearance of Kitchener's army made them the butt of jokes. One comical postcard sketched two soldiers trying on their new uniforms: 'What's the matter with 'em, don't they fit?' says one, while the other holding oversized trousers over his chest retorts, 'Well, the trousers are a little bit tight under the arm pits!!' (viii) As these uncomfortable and incongruous styles emerged, the promise of smart khaki uniforms seemed ever more remote. Poor uniform clothing reflected problems with the whole mobilization project in 1914; while the authorities were busy closing the gap between illusion and reality, for the new recruits, nothing seemed to fit.

-----

(i) Charles Messenger, *Call to Arms: The British Army 1914-18*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005, 94.

(ii) Peter Simkins, *Kitchener's Army: The Raising of the New Armies, 1914-16*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, 257.

(iii) Simkins, *Kitchener's Army*, 257. Minutes of directors meeting quoted in discussion of uniforms and equipment, with source from National Archives quoted as WO 107/21.

(iv) Matthew Richardson, *The Tigers: 6th, 7th, 8th & 9th (Service) Battalions of the Leicestershire Regiment*, Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2000, 51.

(v) Matthew Richardson, *The Tigers*, 51.

(vi) 'Uniform for Lord Kitchener's Army,' Tailor and Cutter, 5 November 1914, 877.

(vii) Papers of Cecil Gordon Harper 'A Subaltern's Memoir of the 10th Battalion Gordon Highlanders from July 1914 to July 1915,' by Beryl and Stuart Blythe (eds) January 1998, 11. IWM 98/2/1 Dept. of Documents.

(viii) Papers of G. A. Wilkinson, IWM Con. Shelf. Imperial War Museum

Licensed as Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-SA

[Original version](#)