

Nations at war: What does a World War I soldier's kit say about his country?

Christopher Howse 14 JUNE 2016 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/17/nations-at-war-what-does-a-world-war-i-soldiers-kit-say-about-hi/>

Thom Atkinson's photographs of kit carried by soldiers in the First World War evoke powerfully the feeling of living under fire. They have also been compared to Renaissance 'cabinets of curiosities' – but here the items of a life are laid out on groundsheets.

Three things proved troublesome and saw slow improvement during the years of war: the headgear, the footwear and camouflage. When the Americans entered the war in 1917, they wore campaign hats of beaver-coloured felt with a cord band.

They quickly opted for French or British steel helmets, settling on the latter. The Germans began by wearing boots that covered the calves. These might be pulled off by the mud of no man's land. Leather shortages led to the adoption of ankle boots worn with puttees – strips of bandage wound around the lower leg.

As for camouflage, the French started the war with red trousers and red kepis on their heads. The kepis were soon covered in duller fabric, as was the steel Adrian helmet introduced in 1915. All sides carried a cut-throat razor, a needle and thread, and a little Bible, prayer book or icon.

Great Britain

The equipment of a British Sergeant in the Battle of the Somme, 1916 supplied by Nigel Bristow, The Queen's Own Royal West Kent Regiment Credit: Thom Atkinson

The trench club (centre left) is a reminder of the ageless deadliness of close-quarters combat. Next to it is the handle to be fixed into the mattock-like entrenching tool (to the right), with its leather pouch above it.

In the mess kit (centre right), with a knife, fork, spoon and shaving brush, is a button stick, allowing the soldier to polish his buttons without getting Brasso on the cloth around them.

The battledress tunic has stripes on the sleeve to denote rank, in this case sergeant. Under its cover, the steel helmet (bottom right) is of the Brodie design from 1915, a million of which were produced in a year.



France

Before this bleu horizon uniform was decided upon in 1913, the French bought red dye from Germany. The front tails of the great coat were buttoned back for marching.

In place of buttons of brass, the French had painted buttons, but they too carried a button stick (right, above the brush) to protect the battledress when buttons were touched up.



The pipe in the foreground was personal property, but tobacco was standard-issue, improving in quality according to rank. The gas mask (bottom left) depended on damp chemicals and was kept in a tin, to stop them drying out; later models were of dog leather.

Germany

The soldier of this Hanoverian regiment wore a Gibraltar battle honour on a blue band on his sleeve, from the siege of the Rock, 1779-83. The camouflage helmet was introduced in the latter part of the war.

Below it is a spade in a leather carrier, which hung on the left side of the belt, along with the bayonet to be attached to the rifle. The belt buckle was made with a regional device according to



