‘TAILORING IN THE TRENCHES’: THE MAKING OF FIRST WORLD WAR BRITISH ARMY UNIFORM

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Introduction

Images of soldiers had many roles in First World War British culture. Held dear by relatives, representations of servicemen promoted goods, mobilised men and shaped popular opinion. Myths and memories of the war are formed around the figure of the uniformed soldier. In particular, wartime images of soldiers ‘getting prepared’ symbolised hope, human potential, and spoke the language of participation. As a motif for bodily transformation, the uniform appeared to signify symbolic distinctions between military and civilian, the link between home and battlefront. As the smart military figure was valued, it could promote a range of masculine identities in popular culture. Thus a preoccupation with recruits and their preparations, due partly to the inaccessibility of the Western Front to photographers, betrayed a ‘modern’ fascination with body cultures. While press stories often adopted a comical tone, they nonetheless reflected serious public interest in the body disciplines that shaped volunteer recruits, and similar themes surfaced in other kinds of popular, trade and official literature. While soldiers’ bodies were disciplined by dressing techniques long before the First World War, this discussion explores specific wartime representations of dress and adornment to consider how they articulated changing ideas about men’s bodies in the context of consumerism and mass technological warfare.

As many men underwent the change from civilian to soldier to meet Kitchener’s demand for substantial new armies, mass volunteering meant mass production of army clothing.1 By stimulating popular interest in uniform codes, military values were reproduced in civilian life, to articulate concerns about the fitness of British men’s bodies and symbolically resolved them by taking pleasure in the theatricality of

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1 Simkins (1988).
parading and inspection. As mass recruitment demanded widespread public interest in how the civilian body prepared for war, exposing the means of its production professed to expose the army apparatus to civilian eyes. Indeed, uniform codes were disclosed in a way that suggests a popularising of military techniques in response to civilian curiosity about soldiering.

‘The Tidiness of Mr. Tommy Atkins’

Concerns about the fashioning of the soldier’s body surfaced early, in a feature on ‘The Tidiness of Mr. Thomas Atkins’ from The War Illustrated in December 1914. Five photographs itemised instances of the British soldier’s concern for tidiness at the front. Despite the reported difficulty of war conditions, the story offered reassurance that the typical British soldier went to considerable trouble to stay clean and tidy. While this comical diversion may have betrayed public interest in the ‘fashion’ habits of the rank and file soldier, each cell advertised British soldiers’ enthusiasm for army discipline. This unchallenging portrait of life at the front, like many stories, fed public curiosity about the social life of soldiering. As Jay Winter argues, a conflict characterised by significant links between home and battlefront meant unprecedented levels of commercial and official co-operation. Images of the social life of soldiers reflected the strength of those ties, and fed the civilian appetite for reports on military habits. Standardising practices like washing and grooming presented bodies under control, in a contrived attempt to expose the disciplinary regime of army life. For civilians at home this must have appeared to offer an insight into a culture many expected to enter, while offering a metaphor for British army efficiency. In the first photograph a group of soldiers engage in their daily wash and shave with the caption: “A tub and the eventual disposal of the Huns is the eternal question at the front. The one ideal is the essential of the other. Our photograph depicts some British soldiers ‘cleaning up’ somewhere behind the firing-line.” By idealising body management techniques of British soldiers, press stories linked military success with conformity to the rule of uniform. This glimpse of ‘Tommy Atkins’

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3 ‘The Tidiness of Mr. Thomas Atkins’ in The War Illustrated, 26th Dec., 1914, p. 154.