

BETWEEN SALONS AND TRENCHES

SOCIAL HISTORIES AND SOCIOLOGIES OF THE MILITARY UNIFORM

The seminar aims to study and discuss selected issues related to the history of the modern military uniform. Uniforms are an important research area of military historians and an object of interest of numerous enthusiasts, including non-academic authors and researchers. Despite a large number of publications about the army clothing, only a few of them employ the social perspective or deal with the cultural meaning of uniforms. Therefore, we would like to draw the interest to those understudied research areas of military history, historical anthropology and sociology.

The rise of modern, national European armies was a process which included the introduction of new type of a more standardized clothing. The result was the military uniform, which served both aesthetic, symbolic and practical purposes. As for the former, uniforms reflected the fashion of their time and were an instrument of social distinction. Until the end of the 18th century and in many countries well beyond, although rank-and-file soldiers were usually commoners, officer corps was composed mostly of noblemen. Consequently, military clothing reflected hierarchies and internal divisions within armies, as well as the aristocratic taste of those who commanded them. Obviously, it also served as an instrument which separated soldiers, from the broader society, being an important component of disciplinary practices and a sign of professionalisation. They also express a whole variety of gender identity types – from being symbols of exclusively male identities, through symbolizing gender distinction within the military to demonstrating the supposed equality of men and women within the military society. Recently they are designed to fit both male and female bodies. Of course, exactly as any other clothing, uniforms served practical purposes, which involved durability and some degree of usefulness.

A particularly interesting period in the history of uniform was the 19th century, when most armies opened their officer corps for the commoners, mostly members of urban middle classes. Newly developed ideas of individual hygiene, as well as a new industrial technology, especially the advances in chemical and textile ones, influenced the design, production and usage of clothing. In the final decades of the century new weapons of a larger range and destructive ability, changed the military tactics in a significant way. All these processes cumulated during the First World War, fought by the soldiers wearing steel helmets and field uniforms in dull colours, which helped to camouflage them, instead of being instruments of social difference, including the visual distinction between common soldiers, NCOs and commissioned officers.

The evolutionary trend towards the practicability of a specialized field uniform – as well as the convergence between the military and the bourgeois taste – deepened in the interwar period, during the Second World War and in the post-war period. In the recent years one may observe

still another shift – the development and spread of the field gear made of printed camouflage cloth. Such uniforms are sometimes used even on formal occasions, what resembles the spread of sport clothing among the civilian society. On the other hand, sport fashion and technologies influence the materials and cut of the military clothing.

Our seminar is an attempt to map out and connect the research areas for historical, anthropological and sociological studies of military uniforms. We are interested in the history of the modern uniform in the armed forces from the beginning of the standardized military clothing during the 17th century to contemporary army gear. We invite scholars interested in historical, anthropological and sociological study of military uniforms, whatever branch of social sciences and humanities they represent. We would like to discuss four types of issues. The first one relates to the very materiality of army clothing: their life-cycles from the production, through the practical ways in which they were used – by whom and how they were worn, cleaned, washed and repaired, to the point when they were replaced and thrown away (or recycled). Welcome are contributions which deal with formal and informal practices related to designing, production and usage of military gear, including economic issues.

The second field of interest are the cultural meanings and practices of military communities. The seminar's aim is not only to study the ones approved, or even commended by military regulations. It also should be a place of a scrutiny of those meanings and practices which remained unofficial, bypassing or even breaking regulations, yet reflected the values and attitudes of people who wore them. They sometimes treated them as a means of social distinction, but in many cases the uniform became a stigma. Another interesting aspect is the creation of hybrid “uniforms” and their use during various insurrections, civil and guerrilla wars, from the American War of Independence, right up to the present day, including the Russo-Ukrainian War.

At the seminar we would also like to analyse the afterlife of military uniforms in the civilian life, especially when used by ex-military personnel, as a remainder of their former military service. People who wore army clothing because they in some way aspired to the military status are also an interesting subject. They included persons who, like an American writer William Faulkner, bought officer uniforms to produce faux social identities of war veterans, but also members of militias, cadets and members of various army-related, voluntary paramilitary organizations, and contemporary historical reenactors.

The last, but by no mean least interesting topic is the aesthetics of the military uniform and its social meaning, as intended by those who designed and issued them, but also as perceived by the broader, civilian and military public. The key issue here is the transformation of the military “fashion” as a reflection of the change of political and symbolic power relations, as well as of the military itself, especially the change of the social composition of the officer corps. We would like to trace and analyse the shift away from the aristocratic patterns towards the tastes of urban middle classes, resulting in the transformation of the uniform, which in the course of time more and more resembled civil outfits. Does the recent stylistic shift towards sport clothing

and the wide usage of camouflage field uniforms resemble some fundamental social change, or does it just superficially correlate with a socially irrelevant change of the civilian fashion? Another important research subject are the histories of social and political meanings of the uniform design – as intended and perceived by the military and civilian public. This area of study of course includes the role played by particular national symbolics and traditions. An interesting case are the new states of Central-Eastern Europe, which after 1918, and again after 1989 strived to give their armies the look which would not only reflect the military fashion of the day, but which would also involve the nationalist imagery. Besides national symbols a variety of special patterns and individual elements of clothing was considered a component of national tradition and re-appeared repeatedly, such as the Polish square cap. Certain patterns and colours became specific national uniform traditions, such as the grey colour of German uniforms – from the greenish Feldgrau to the less distinctive (and controversial) shade, East German Steingrau.

The seminar will take place on March 6-7, 2025 in Warsaw.

Organizers:

Centre de civilisation française et d'études francophones and Faculty of Sociology, Warsaw University and Společnost pro výzkum dějin vojenství.

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Scholars who are interested in attending the seminar are kindly asked to send their abstracts (in English, separate files in docx or pdf format, up to 300 words) to the address j.kilias@uw.edu.pl or info@dejinyvojenstvi.cz until December 8, 2024.