

# **The Social Impact of The Military on Fashion; Uniforms and Uniformity.**

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## **Abstract**

The military outfit has been fascinating for humans in all kinds of periods and situations. It has provoked sentiments in both a positive and negative way. It has been a symbol of corporate spirit but also of mockery. Both of these elements have been subject to fashion houses when creating collections for different target groups. The uniformity in dressing armies has an equivalent in groupings in society: to distinguish yourself from others and to link to the like-minded. But the professionals who are obliged to wear a uniform (soldiers for example) for the recognizability of the mandate they carry out, are eager to distinguish themselves from one another. Military uniforms are not as uniform as they look. How does this work?

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## **Introduction**

History has taught us that mankind used violence for all kind of goals. Already in prehistoric times men (or better to say, mostly men) went into battle for territory, water and food supplies and natural resources. A fight in that era was still an individual man to man confrontation, derived from encounters between groups or tribes. Nowadays, violence is considered to be the monopoly of the forces as an exclusive right of governments or local authorities, operating in state armies or corpses. To achieve this, you need to be unequivocally recognizable as a group with a mandate. Recognizability is not only important for soldiers, but also for other armed or non-armed officials such as policemen and women, guards or even school crossing attendants.

## **Battle look**

Humans have always dressed up for battle when it came to conflict. In prehistoric times and in tribal connections, men tried to create a warlike look for themselves. Painting their bodies, for example, was one such expression, often applied in a ritual setting. It was also a strong believe that it gave strength, protection and that they were blessed by the gods. All such symbolic expressions of a fighter were recognized and understood by both friend and enemy. These symbolic expressions are not reserved to ancient times or tribes. Also, in our era in modern history, we descry similar tendencies, or, speaking more in terms of fashion: trends.

Camouflage prints for example have become an ID-card of the wearer: nationality, rank and geographic provenance.

We see in our modern times that dressing up in patterns and colors, in order to be absorbed in the whole of the surroundings, has become an important aspect of the military outfit (camouflage).

In former eras, it was just strategic to wear more distinguishing colors. An aspect of warfare is chaos and des-orientation. A quick recognition could be vital; to know who stands in front of you and even more important to know where you are. In the Napoleonic Wars (in The Netherlands from 1795 to 1815) for example, the contrast of colors was very helpful.



**Figure 1.** *The Bicentennial celebration of the Battle of Waterloo, 2015. Pinterest*



In 2015 at the bi-centennial celebrations of the Battle of Waterloo, re-enactment groups demonstrated unintentionally the marvelous effects of colorful uniforms. At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the so-called black gunpowder was used. Igniting black gunpowder produces a lot of smoke and causes a dense mist. It took some time until the mist cleared up. It was important then to recognize immediately who is standing around you. Colored uniforms gave a quicker recognition than ashen ones in such a misty environment. Banners and flags have had a similar effect. As a rule, they rose above the smoke clouds and marked where units were located, and helped in the spatial orientation of soldiers. In The Netherlands, the color blue was dedicated to infantry men.

**Figure 2.** *Infantry uniform of The Netherlands, late 18<sup>th</sup> c. Collection: National Military Museum, 050795*

## Social distinction

But what impact do uniforms have on a social level? Through the centuries, the military outfit has been fascinating because of the heroic status it gives. Officers had a good reputation, emphasized by their appearance. Colorful and adorned uniforms became a subject for fashion; they gave status to the way you presented yourself.



At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a uniform had a certain glamour. Military officers developed a kind of dandified or foppish style. This seems to be contradictory, but nevertheless it was considered as the masculine ideal: it had an aristocratic aura in which designers accentuated broad shoulders and in particular, long legs. Long legs were associated to standing and social position. It was the time that military officers were expected to carry numerous trunks on their journeys and sometimes nature needed to be helped by a corset to achieve the wanted proportions and to obtain a perfect shape. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the uniform had a huge influence on civil fashion - an aspect that has continued in pop-culture and in modern fashion until today!

**Figure 3.** *The glamor of a uniform in a social setting.* Source: From Battlefield to Drawing Room, proceedings congress, Brussels, Royal Museum of the Armed Forces and Military History

## After the Second World War



After the Second World War, the after-war generation (in The Netherlands called the 'baby-boom generation') and the Marshall Plan, brought an American lifestyle to The Netherlands. A new generation of youngsters grew up who enjoyed more prosperity than the previous generations and had more leisure time. They created their own role models coming from moving pictures and pop music. The baby-boom generation wanted to react against the older generation, to distinguish themselves from their parents. Very often, military associated clothes have been means to achieve this.

A good example in the early fifties is the Monty Coat. General Montgomery appeared in this duffle coat during the Second World War. A general with an atypical military appearance but with a great achievement in the liberation of Western Europe, was photographed in all kind of situations in such a coat.

**Figure 4.** *The Monty coat, early 1950s.* Collection National Military Museum, 106674

Another example is the introduction of the T-Shirt. It descends from the navy and pictures of sailors wearing it circled around. It got a boost when idols like James Dean appeared a T-shirt in moving pictures. Fashion houses jumped into this trend.

## Pop Music



**Figure 5.** Dolman uniform style favored by pop stars. Collection: National Military Museum, 0533039

The military uniform received a central role for pop musicians in the sixties and seventies. Musicians performed in military uniforms. Many examples can be given. There are famous pictures known to almost everybody of Jimmy Hendriks, The Beatles, David Bowie and Michael Jackson wearing uniform jackets. Especially, Jimmy Hendriks used old uniforms to create his own style.

Very famous was his appearance in a so called 'Dolman', a Hussar kind of jacket like the one of the Dutch Horse Artillery (so called 'Gele Ridders', Yellow Riders. There is an example of

a dolman in the collection of the National Military Museum). In the sixties there was quite some speculation that the use of uniforms by musicians was because they wanted to express the military 'esprit de corps' (corporate spirit). But the combination of uniforms with flowers, lace parts and necklaces in all kinds of colors and shapes, made it more likely that the military spirit was not the main issue. It became clear that esthetic reasons or just mocking militarism were the basis of wearing uniforms outfits. The sixties were the years of 'make love, not war', and protests against the Vietnam War. Wearing uniforms by musicians was not quite new, there were some examples of it at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, just to express identity and corporate spirit, but in the sixties and seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there were a lot more musicians wearing uniforms - all with different intentions, mocking the military or even shocking the establishment. But it had its effect on youngsters. In England there was a run on old uniforms, preferably from retired Chelsea Guards.

## Identification

The yearning to look like somebody and identify yourself as a member of a social group, explains the existence of dressing up in trends. It explains, for example, the mass wearing of jeans. We see that a uniform way of dressing is also a sign of uniformity in subcultures. It is not so very different when compared to the battles in the Napoleonic era: to distinguish yourself from

the enemy and linking to like-minded people. This uniformity can manifest in different ways, not only with clothes can you distinguish yourself, but also with the way you dress your hair and the way you wear your clothes. It does not matter how the pattern of your jacket looks, your haircut (like skinheads) and the zipper up to your neck, can make you a member of a social group. You can see the same thing when only one piece of clothing appeals to a social group. A lot of punkers in the seventies wore military boots as an unequivocal sign, regardless the rest of their outfit. But do not underestimate the social coherence in diversity as we see with the 'Birds of Paradise' (in Dutch: *Paradijsvogels*), elderly ladies, wearing colorful dresses with colorful accessories. How different can they be from one another when there is an underlying association. Although you have all the possibilities to give a personal touch to your outfit, the style will still be associated with a social group.



**Figure 6.** *Confrontation between two social groups. Pinterest*

In this photo, we can see how a confrontation between two social groups can happen. Not knowing who these people are, we can see that two different groups have crossed paths. Not that this is a conflict situation, but you can see by the way they are dressed, the way they sit on the stairs or pass by, that two different groups are confronting each other. Looking at their faces it appears that apparently not everybody feels at ease in this encounter. Probably based on each other's outfits they have made judgements about the other group without knowing each other personally.

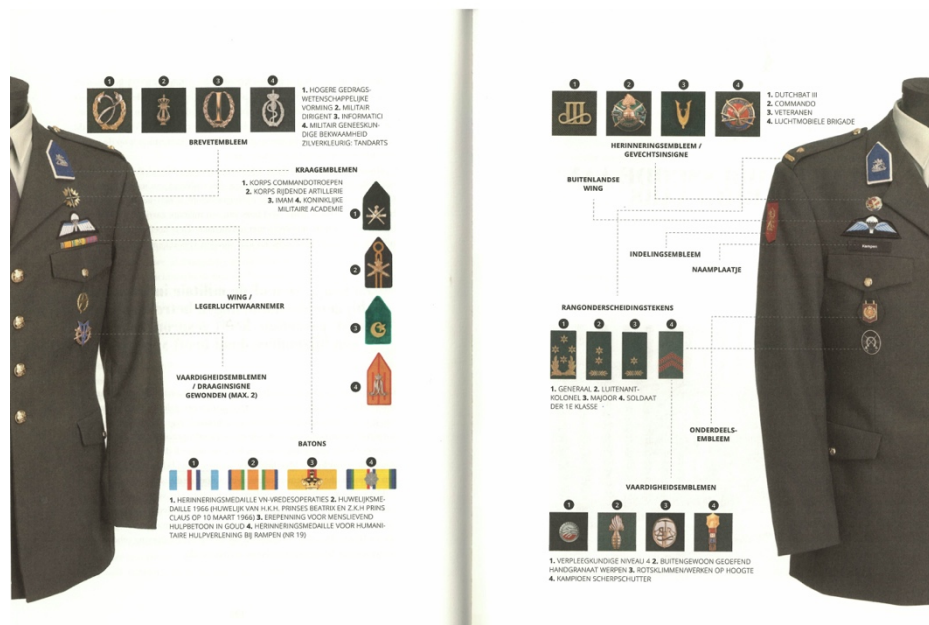
## **Fashion**

From a social point of view, we also see that brands dictate a particular dressing behavior. Can we state that fashion houses create armies? Do they create uniformity with their collections and marketing campaigns, appealing to all kind of lifestyles and target groups? We have already spoken about (blue) jeans. The quantity sold of this kind of trousers is enormous. The production of huge quantities also relates to accessories. Copies on a large scale make it affordable for a

larger public that can purchase their version. Just like the Dior saddlebags, they have a difference in their pattern, but in their shape, they are the same.

## Professionals in uniform

But what about the military, those who are inherently obliged to wear uniforms. There you see more and more the opposite. Just in the uniform appearance, they are eager to distinguish one from another. Here you see that they want to show their merit. As a result, the uniform is not so uniform as we might consider. In a group portrait with servicemen and women, it looks like they are dressed up equally. As a matter of fact, they are. But when you zoom in on the uniforms you can see all kind differences that forms a curriculum vitae of the wearer.



**Figure 7. Military emblems. Ministry of Defense, The Netherlands)**

We see here all kinds of emblems that show what someone's career looks like: what has he or she done and how does it differ from somebody else. We see emblems that show in what unit he or she serves. We see the ranks and, after all, we can see in what (international) missions he or she has taken part. Medals show the merits somebody has accomplished, but medals are not always convenient to wear. In less formal ceremonies, it can be sufficient to wear the so called 'batons'. When you look at them you might think it is a kind of barcode. But 'batons' replace the medals. The colors derive from the official ribbon the medal hangs on and the colors and stripes correspond to the original ribbon. It is just a question of knowing and recognizing all these emblems and colors. You need knowledge to recognize them, but here uniformity just leads to an eagerness to distinguish one from the other.

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