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## The Development of Uniforms and Equipment in Trench Warfare From 1914-1918

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# The Development of Uniforms and Equipment in Trench Warfare From 1914-1918

## Abstract

The First World War was one of incessant destruction, but the birth of a new modernized era with an abundance of technological advancements. These advancements ranged from the introduction of the first ever tank, to the individual details that soldiers changed on their uniforms. The uniform is also a vehicle to express a soldier's memories and experiences, preserving their story.

## Keywords

World War I, The Great War, Militaria, Military Technology, Pickelhaube

## Disciplines

European History | Military History

## Comments

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# The Development of Uniforms and Equipment in Trench Warfare From 1914-1918

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“The Pity of War” First Year Seminar, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg PA

## Introduction

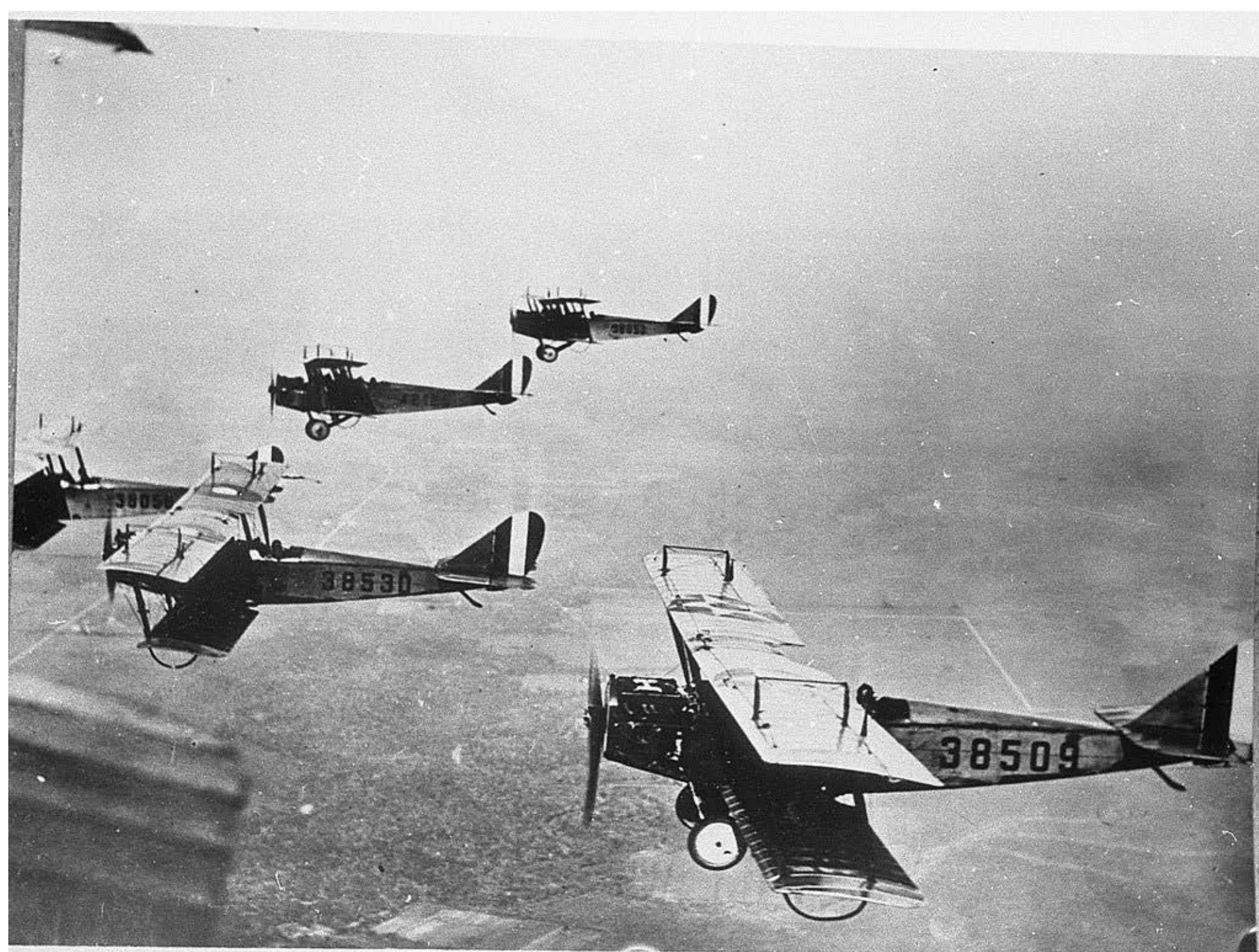


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In the trenches, solace and comfortability is elusive to come by. Honor is a child of the last generation, that now has grown into a creature of machine and malice. The First World War brought incessant destruction, but also a ground for innovation and the development of new generations who would grow to adapt to its encroachment. There were “Micro” and “Macro” changes to technology from the start of the war until it’s end. Throughout this display, the “Macro” developments in technology will be demonstrated through the usage of the biplane in combat, the creation of the tank and the increased utilization of artillery. The “Micro” developments that demonstrate the advancements of uniforms and equipment will be shown in the example of the *Lederschutzmaste* (Leather German gas mask) and the change from the *Pickelhaube* (spiked-hood) to the *Stahlhelm* (steel helmet). The term “Macro” in this context refers to the large technological changes in mobility and machinery, while “Micro” refers to the detailed advances on uniforms and equipment encouraged by individual soldiers.

## “Macro” Technological Developments

- At first, airplanes were used to carry out low-range aerial photography and gather information to have a precise idea of where to guide artillery fire into enemy positions.<sup>1</sup> When artillery combined with the airplane, and machine guns were placed behind the propeller, airplanes participated in “dog fights” instead of supporting the ground infantry.
- Airplanes were closely linked to the creation of the tank because since they could no longer support the ground infantry, tanks were able to offer the support that was lacking. Tanks were also used to make navigating no-man’s land more efficient, creating a new form of advanced mobility.



“Aircraft-In-Ww1” by Great War Observer is marked with CCO 1.0.

## “Micro” Developments In The Uniform

### The German Gas Mask



“File:Gas mask (AM 611086-3) jpg” by Unknown author is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

The first large scale use of chemical warfare took place at Ypres, Belgium on April 22, 1915.<sup>2</sup> In 1917, the Germans introduced mustard gas, forcing them to advance their gas mask to be able to withstand the fumes. The German gas mask (*lederschutzmaste*) is a prominent example of a continuously upgraded and constantly changing piece of innovation. The Germans used both *leder* (leather) and *gummi* (rubber) masks during the war. For example, the eyepieces of the gas mask are removable metal “spiders.” Compared to *Gasmaste* 17 (M17), the improved *Gasmaste* 18 had no “spiders” on the inside eyepieces,<sup>3</sup> making this an example of a micro technological advancement. The gas mask was changed so that the survival and comfortability of the soldiers would be reached as efficiently as possible.



“Container, gas mask” by Unknown author. Unknown author is licensed under CC BY 4.0.



### The Pickelhaube To The Stahlhelm



Another object subjected to the rapid changes during wartime was worn on the head of the German soldier. The distinctive iconic “spiked hood” known as the *Pickelhaube* demonstrates Prussian militarism and the remembrance of an era of European monarchy.



“Archiv U874 Soldat mit Ausrüstung, Waffe, Porträt, WWI, 1914-1918” by Hans-Michael Tappen is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.



“File: GM.018374-2 German WW1 military steel helmet Stahlhelm M1916” by Emir Curt / Anno is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

The original purpose of the *Pickelhaube* was to deflect blows to the head with the brass spike.<sup>4</sup> This was generally a defense mechanism tailored to the era of Napoleonic fighting, where the *Pickelhaube* was more useful. In the mobilized and modernized warfare of the First World War, the *Pickelhaube* offered almost no protection against shrapnel or bullets. This was because the body of the *Pickelhaube* was made of leather and the leather neck guard did not protect from pieces of shrapnel to the neck, and the body also did not prove very effective against bullets to the head. Officially in 1916, the *Stahlhelm* (steel helmet) replaced the *Pickelhaube* throughout majority of the Prussian military. This ended an era of militarism and honor, leaving soldiers conforming like many other countries to the helmet instead because of its more practical use.

## Uniform Symbolology



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The uniform is a host for a soldier’s stories and experiences, allowing memories and a feeling of emotion to be attached. In the chaotic realm of the trenches, order and command is difficult to maintain and the uniform serves to distinguish rank and position. Uniforms also give soldiers a meaning of purpose, depending on how they use them and personalize their experiences that enhances their feeling of belonging. Uniforms also carry with them the capability to push soldiers to do certain actions. “*ils grognent mais ils marchent encore*” [They grumble but they still march.]<sup>5</sup> They march on because their comrades and their pals do, because they all in the same boat, one in which they must survive. During wartime, soldier’s memories are sewn into uniforms, etched on helmets and written letters. The uniform serves as a way for us, the future generation, to observe those thoughts and memories, and incorporate them into connections we make in our lifetime.

## Lest We Forget

The men at the front, living with the dead and the alive, who remain in a constant realm of fear and tragic loss formed deep relationships with each other to maintain a sense of belonging and humanity. They reassure themselves when at deaths doorstep, it is better with those you’ve learned to cherish and love. With or without the uniform, they are mere boys with hopes and aspirations of their future ahead and would wish to share it with those who gave them the greatest sense of comradeship in their greatest hour of suffering. These mere boys sprouted throughout the war, becoming men in uniform that fought on hallowed ground to make our lives pleasant ones. Many of their memories grow on, and never shall they grow old. May their actions be forever remembered as history moves fourth; for lest we forget the pity of war.

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