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A Soldier and His Many Hats: The Evolution of American Military Headgear

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Abstract

Military headgear is a fascinating topic. It exists on a spectrum from the gaudy to the protective, but how did headgear evolve with the military? Interestingly, changes from the decorative to the practical can be examined through this blog's favorite topic, the 1800s and the American Civil War. By tracing key changes in American military headgear in the 1800s, ideas about the nature of war, as well as how the United States was distancing itself from Europe, become clear.

[excerpt]

Keywords

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Disciplines

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Soldier and His Many Hats: The Evolution of American Military Headgear

By Jonathan Tracey '19

Military headgear is a fascinating topic. It exists on a spectrum from the gaudy to the protective, but how did headgear evolve with the military? Interestingly, changes from the decorative to the practical can be examined through this blog's favorite topic, the 1800s and the American Civil War. By tracing key changes in American military headgear in the 1800s, ideas about the nature of war, as well as how the United States was distancing itself from Europe, become clear.

Initially, military headgear served a very decorative purpose. Of course, at the beginning of American history, the early military defaulted to the use of British uniform tradition. This means that the military adopted the use of the Chapeau hat. Chapeaus came in two styles, either the stereotypical tricorn hat or the bicorn, which is familiar to those who have seen paintings of Napoleon Bonaparte. Although these hats once began life as a civilian covering, gradual changes made them less practical and more decorative. By the time bicorn headgear became standard, it was clear that the hats, offering little coverage from the sun or rain but providing a great, colorful decoration of rank or branch of service, had become more ceremonial than practical.

The Chapeau was dropped from uniform regulations by 1805, and although the foot artillery wore them until 1812, infantrymen found themselves in different headgear during the War of 1812. Instead, one would find soldiers wearing either dramatic dragoon helmets with horsehair, feathers, cockades, and eagles or the new infantry cap. The new infantry cap followed British designs, being a "shako of felt, still cylindrical but with the body shortened and a false front added to give the illusion[sic] of height." These hats served inadequately as weather protection, and the addition of the false front indicates just how important appearance was to designers.

Moving forward, one begins to see early forage caps coming into use in the 1830s, only to be replaced by a new shako that saw service in the Mexican American War. This shako is of a style familiar to those that have seen a modern marching band, as it is one cylinder with a flat brim and, potentially, a feather of some sort on top. In his writings on American headgear, Edgar Howell states, "Whereas several of the more clothes-conscious officers such as Philip Kearney liked the cap and thought it compared favorably with European dress headgear, there were numerous complaints regarding it from the frontier posts." Additionally, fine uniforms fit within

the military doctrine of the time. Combat tactics utilized great blocks of soldiers maneuvering in massed formations against each other. In these forms that nearly mimicked blocks on the parade field, appearance was king.



The felt Hardee Hat that so many soldiers disliked. Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

As time went on, the military began to adapt to headgear that served more practical purposes. This shift was initially seen during the American Civil War. The beginning of the war saw soldiers outfitted in either Hardee hats or the new 1858 forage caps. The Hardee hat, made of black felt, was unpopular. Although it had a brim useful in blocking the weather, complaints ranged from it being a “nuisance,” “heavy, hot, stiff, and ill-looking,” to an “abomination” and “unsightly abortion.” The forage cap, however, began the transition towards practicality. These hats were small, and although their brims did not serve flawlessly, their small size prevented the heat and discomfort that were notorious with other hats. Forage caps were, however, still based off European designs and often had decorative trim. Some, uniquely, were even made in green to serve as basic camouflage for sharpshooters.



An unidentified soldier holds a 1858 forage cap, the most used headgear. The forage cap was an improvement over the Hardee hat but still wasn't very effective at blocking the weather.

Photo via Wikimedia Commons.

America's first move towards practicality in headgear came during America's most transformative time. Military tactics began with great similarity to the European wars of the early 1800s, filled with long campaigns culminating in one decisive single battle between armies of soldiers marching and fighting in line formations. By the end of the war, tactics had begun to shift towards campaigns of constant fighting, such as the Overland Campaign of 1864, as well as the commonplace use of entrenchments in both battles and sieges. Through all this, many individual soldiers began to abandon their forage caps for the civilian slouch caps, which were merely wide brim civilian hats that were effective at blocking the weather.

The abandonment of mirroring the European headgear style coincided with the abandonment of the European tactics. Although the army continued utilizing various forage caps, the next major development in headgear would come with the campaign hat, which in some ways mirrored the slouch, in 1872. This was a practical hat that completely deviated from European military uniforms. Although early helmet design, made to reduce casualties during the World War, initially mirrored European designs, the United States set itself on the path to mature beyond its European roots in war. These changes from decorative to practical mirrored the shift in how wars were fought. These new hat designs were cheaper and easier to produce, while also proving to be better at protecting a soldier from the elements.

Sources

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