

Wrasp, wrasp, wrasp the sound of nailed boots on clay and cobblestone is a common sound for many reenactors of the 18.th Century. But are hobnailed boots verifiable for the Prussian army of the Seven Years War?

In the collection of the DHM (German Historical Museum) Berlin a pair of enlisted man's shoes from 1786 have survived to this day. Although they are over twenty years later than the Seven Years War they are nevertheless important, since their form did not change during the longer era. The shoes are welt-sewn zweiballig[1] buckle shoes with a heel and the distinctive stump tip. Upper leather and sole consist of pit tanned cowhide while the heel is constructed from multiple patches fixed with wooden pins.[2]



Picture 1: Sole of the Berlin pair. The wooden pins in the heel are clearly visibel.
(Source: Hohrath: 2011, P.97.)

Nails or holes created by them cannot be observed in the sole. Since the Berlin pair is the only known contemporary example we have today this alone would be enough evidence not to wear any hobnails in your boots. Nevertheless we are often faced with the objection that the Berlin pair was made for the Depot and would have been fitted with nails after been distributed to the troop. And it is in fact possible that crown Prince Friedrich Wilhelm III

who compiled the collection during the process of an ongoing uniform reform in 1786 to preserve the army of his granduncle Friedrich II collected items from the Magazines of the Regiments.[3] So we will extend our search a bit.

Since a few years Archaeologists from the University of Poznań (Poland) are examining the Battlefield of Kunersdorf (1759). During this work an area of roughly 1 x 1km was prospected in depth. It is part of the Mühlberg a height where the Russian army erected an extensive Fieldwork including an artificial bank crowned with felled trees and bushes to serve as an approach obstacle (Abatis).[4] During the battle roughly 5.000 Prussian soldiers attacked this position. Thanks to a lot of finds from Uniform buttons, grapeshot and even whole hole cartridges dropped during the hasty approach[5] the process of events on this area could be reconstructed quit detailed. Initially the approaching Prussians got under artillery fire, when they reached the abatis a short exchange of fire with small arms followed. After this the Russians retreated up hill and the Prussians removed the Abatis to follow them.[6]

So we can summarize that a big number of Soldiers crossed a rather small area under fire and even conducted heavy work by removing the abatis. Nevertheless not a single Hobnail was found in this area. If we compare this archaeological picture with that of army's which undoubtedly wore nailed boots like the roman legions in the time of the early emperors which left thousands of nails on the roads and in camp[7] it's very likely that the Prussians didn't use hobnails.



Picture 2: Gaiters and shoes of Caspar Ernst von Normann (1696-1748) a Prussian Officer. Although the Coat cant be linked to a specific regiment the Gaiters and Shoes are destinctive military fashion. (Source: picture alliance / dpa)

But what about the written sources? In a list of the spare material which the Prussian infantry Regiment Number seven took with him into the field dating from the 12.8.1756 we find per company: 150 pair of boots, Shirts, under Shirts, barrels, bayonets, Musket shafts... but no Hobnails.[8] Instead they took with them "für die ganze Compagnie geschnittene Sohlen" (for the whole company ready cut soles) additionally to the complete set of shoes.[9]

Another important source is Schmettau who, in his work regarding the company economy, mentions following. „Acht Groschen monathlich auf den Mann betragen jährlich vier Reichsthaler, für welche der Dinestthuende das Jahr über erhält: 2 Paar Schue, das Paar zu 1 rthl. 2gl. Beträgt / 2 Paar Sohlen das Paar 6gl / 2 Unterhemden das Stück 12gl.“[10] (Eight Groschen per month for each man add up to four Reichstahler per year, for which the serving man receives every year two pair of shoes, the pair for 1 rthl. 2gl. / 2 pair of soles the pair for 6gl / 2 under shirts 12gl the piece.). Following this source the soldier received no hobnails but two pair of good shoes and spare soles per year for which the shoes maker was accountable.[11] During peace time soldiers often needed only one pair of shoes per year. To regard this economical behavior and encourage the good preservation of the uniform parts in general soldiers who needed less pieces of uniform than they could have had per year were paid the price of the pieces in cash as a reward.[12]



Picture 3: Today shoemakers are not always accountable for their work. (Source: Fotoforge.eu)

Summing up the contemporary written sources, preserved originals and archaeological finds all indicate the Prussians walked on Quiet soles into the horror of the battles of the Seven Years War. The wear off of the shoes during the long marches was countered with additional soles and spare boots.

With this in mind go out and buy good replicas without Hobnails. It is authentic and will prevent a lot of freezing in the winter and lakes in the shoes during marches. In addition the historic floor in Museums and historic sites will be very pleased with smooth leather soles.

[1] Both shoes (left and right) were crafted on the same strip. This meant there was no

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designated left or right shoe. To keep them in good shape and prevent one sided wearing off the shoes should switch the foot every day. (Cf. Schmettau)

[2] Daniel Hohrath: Friedrich der Große und die Uniformierung der preußischen Armee von 1740 bis 1786. Verlag Militaria, Wien 2011, P. 96.

[3] Hohrath: 2011, P. 46.

[4] Grzegor Prodruczny / Jakub Wrzosek: Lost elements. Earthworks of the fortified camp of the Russian Army from the time of the battle of Kunersdorf in the light of the recent research. 2013, P. 74.

[5] Prodruczny: 2013, P. 77.

[6] Prodruczny: 2013, P. 77.

[7] Thomas Fischer: Die Armee der Caesaren Archäologie und Geschichte. Verlag Friedrich Pustet, Regensburg 2012, P. 137.

[8] C. Kling: Die Infanterie Regimenter im Jahre 1806. Putze und Hölzer, Weimar 1902, P. 54.

[9] Kling: 1902, P.54.

[10] Schmettau: Einrichtung des Kriegs-Wesens für die Preußische Infanterie zu Friedenszeiten 1773. (Bearbeitung: Martin Winter) Duncker und Humboldt, Berlin 2016, P. 195.

[11] Schmettau: 1773, P. 197.

[12] Schmettau: 1773, P. 198.



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