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The spoils of war

Use and transformations of secondhand uniforms during the First World War in France

Manuel Charpy

In March 1914, writer André Warnod (1885–1960) described a visit to a flea market in Bicêtre, a southern suburb of Paris, where he was able to observe *chiffonniers* at work. The *chiffonniers* were peripatetic ragpickers, or collectors of used clothing, who carried their finds on their backs, in baskets called *hottes*. Warnod was surprised to hear them discussing their business “going badly,” with one man exclaiming, “It’s the fault of their damned war . . . What are they bothering us with this nonsense for?” Warnod engaged with the men and a *chiffonnier* explained, “Stores complain that they aren’t selling because people aren’t buying new things; so people don’t want to give away their old clothes, which means that we are struggling . . .”¹ These were common complaints at the time, but not necessarily indicative of the reality. Although the secondhand market experienced major disruptions during the war, it generally saw a surge in activity, as used goods were in high demand. The market for used clothing had been a constant presence in French society since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and was especially common for the purchase of uniforms. But the war did, indeed, reconfigure the second hand market, changing how items were both sold and used.² From the damaged uniforms of soldiers killed at the front, to leftovers from factory production, to souvenirs and trophies from the battlefield, military clothing inevitably found its way into civil society—where it was repaired, transformed, and ultimately, imbued with new symbolic associations.

Repurposed uniforms and the secondhand Parisian markets

The market for old military uniforms was by no means new during the First World War. Throughout the nineteenth century, uniforms were an integral part of the continuously expanding secondhand market. In Paris, during the early 1800s, a vast, centralized market known as the Temple, capable of accommodating 1,880 vendors, replaced the older set of smaller, more widely dispersed markets. In the 1830s, the Temple was the largest secondhand market in the world, as well as the largest market for ready-made clothing in France. By 1847, 1,550 merchants were working there, including 864 with licenses.³ Next to the Temple market proper stood a large rotunda which had been built in 1781, and was described in the mid-nineteenth century as “a gallery with forty-four arcades supported by Tuscan pillars, underneath which are laid out the rags, castoffs, hussar jackets, and sequined carnival and theatre garb of 44 clothing merchants, resellers, and *uniformiers*.”⁴ Jules Robert de Massy wrote of the outdoor market in 1862: “The Temple is always crowded. The throngs of buyers of all classes, whether frequent customers or first time visitors, help to explain the quantity and variety of the goods on display; the low prices ensure that items are sold quickly.”⁵ In 1865, a larger covered market hall was built at the site of the old Temple market which could now accommodate 2,000 merchants. To this remarkable figure, we can add yet more purveyors of used goods in Paris: a hundred or so stand-alone shops, and beginning in the 1880s, various new flea markets—at Bicêtre, Clignancourt, and Montreuil—where, as Warnod noted in 1914, “you can find everything, down to military cast offs.”⁶

This immense market was not set up in the informal, chaotic manner frequently depicted in picaresque novels, with *chiffonniers* selling wares directly from their packs. Rather, it was a highly professional, organized affair. In 1847, the 864 licensed vendors employed 271 workers outside of their family circle, and 93 of them employed between 2 and 10 workers. The volume of goods exchanged and the degree of specialization point to a highly structured system of supply and distribution. While merchants by no means ignored the “bourgeois rags” the *chiffonniers* provided them, they received the majority of their clothes from avenues capable of centralizing larger quantities. The idea of clothing arriving from morgues captured the public imagination—contributing to the image of the “rags of misery” worn by those on the lowest rungs—but, in truth, this represented only a small portion of incoming items. Hospitals, on the other hand, were major contributors, and would regularly organize large sales of clothing, as did the customs administration and hospices.⁷ Secondhand merchants sourced from almost every possible public and private institution—from boarding schools, for linens and uniforms, to auctions houses such as Mont-de-Piété or Drouot, which provided items from liquidations, stocks of damaged goods, and court auctions.⁸ A government report from 1892 confirms, “Merchants buy principally from public sales or in bulk.”⁹

One of the largest providers of clothing, however, was the military. Military uniforms were indeed the first clothes to be mass produced in fixed sizes, and this, along with frequent regime changes and

redesigns, ensured that tens of thousands of uniforms were funneled into the commercial sphere.¹⁰ During the Bourbon Restoration (1814–30), the government organized the auction of a great number of, “greatcoats, coats, waistcoats, canvas and wool trousers, shirts, boots, shoes, gators, police caps, epaulettes, haversacks etc.”¹¹ Wholesalers bought, on average, 2,500 pieces per year. This phenomenon became even more prevalent after 1852, during the Second Empire (1852–70). Contracted manufacturers such as Dusautoy and Godillot received massive orders as wars and military expeditions grew in number.¹² The Empire, concerned with the appearance of its armies, augmented the frequency with which it renewed its uniforms. Shirts were renewed every six months and pants every year.

From the 1830s, the Temple market imported uniforms from all of Europe, as many countries preferred to export their outdated military dress. Once in the market, these uniforms entered the civil sphere. A dictionary of commerce released in 1861 noted that a uniform bought for 3 or 4 francs could be resold for between 7 and 10 francs after being “beaten, washed, ironed and, with the help of a mordant, colored on the seams and other areas which were lacking.”¹³ These retired military uniforms could also be remade into work jackets, shirts, “coachmen’s jackets,” or “ceremonial robes.”¹⁴ Consumers were eager to buy this former military garb, which was reputed to be relatively sturdy in its construction (Figure 14.1).

Figure 14.1 “Le Marchand d’habits militaires” (*The military clothing merchant*). André Warnod, *La Brocante et les petits marchés de Paris* (Paris: Figuiere, March 1914), p. 23.

A portion of the recycled uniforms sold in the Parisian clothing exchanges was sent to the countryside.¹⁵ In 1857, a journalist for the *Figaro* remarked that, “almost all the shops post the following announcement: will send clothes to the provinces and abroad.” The merchants thus developed a nationwide clientele. Giroult, for example, “did business with the municipal governments of every small commune in France, in order to inexpensively clothe the national guards” in secondhand uniforms.¹⁶ A municipal report from 1892 stated that the secondhand merchants from all of France traveled to the Temple market to buy merchandise, which they “would go on to sell in all of the county fairs . . . everywhere where people are economical in their purchases.”¹⁷

Goods from the markets could travel even further afield. In 1847, Felix Mornand commented that the Temple vendors “sent their surplus clothing to the Congo, Senegal, or the West Indies, where they delighted the black kings and dandies of Saint-Domingue or Barbados.” Indeed, the numbers are astonishing. In 1859, the Temple exported over 800 metric tons of these “uniforms in varying states of repair, notably to the Antilles and Brazil,” with the total number of items amounting to “the incredible figure of nearly 16 million.”¹⁸ Beginning in 1849, the new emperor of Haiti, Faustin I, clothed his army entirely from the Temple. A commerce guide from 1861 comments on the market’s exports abroad: “A considerable quantity of these old uniforms are bought for export. This is how 200,000 national guard tunics were shipped to Saint Domingue and Brazil, all of them leftover from the events of December 2, in Paris alone, and this is how Soulouque’s [Faustin I] guard of honor was equipped with the jackets of our Garde Mobile.”¹⁹

The accounts for the French customs administration, published in *Tableau Général du Commerce*, established a category for secondhand clothing in 1834. In that year, 50 tons of secondhand clothes were exported. This number ballooned to 1,260 tons in 1854, and 1,838 in 1867. European nations and trading partners—especially those bordering France, including the Savoyard state and the Hanseatic League—absorbed over 60 percent of these exports. Russia, Latin America, and the Atlantic Coast of the USA took in an overall 10 percent. North Africa and Senegal began importing in the 1830s, and quantities rose rapidly, notably in Algeria, which, in 1860, collected 5 percent of total French exports. In 1886, the *Grande Encyclopédie* wrote: “International commerce has resulted in mountains of old pants and overcoats being sent overseas; if there is inadequate demand in France, the market abroad is guaranteed. Enormous bundles are boarded onto ships. The oceanic crossing is a voyage of rejuvenation for these threadbare items, which, under new skies, find a second life.”

Repurposed uniforms, both refurbished or unaltered, predominated in these bundles departing from Paris or London, and this would remain true through the beginning of the twentieth century. By the start of the war in 1914, then, repurposed uniforms were a regular part of working class dress, not only in France, but also in its overseas territories—in the Antilles and Senegal since the 1860s, in Tahiti since the 1880s, and more generally, throughout the globe.

From waste to wardrobe

The war aggravated certain long-held fears about the proliferation of used clothing. Suspicions that secondhand clothes were vectors of disease had existed since the beginning of the nineteenth century. When cholera spread through France in 1832, many believed that the supposed miasmas arriving from India were carried by infected clothing. The authorities were especially concerned about the clothing circulating in and out of the Temple market, and in August 1831, forbade the import of “all old clothing items which are part of the second-hand market.” These fears were heightened by popular tales of contagion in “exotic” locales such as Mauritius or the caravans of Mecca.²⁰ The cholera epidemic in 1884 reignited public concerns, resulting in the same import bans. In Paris, medical authorities observed a concentration of deaths on a street “running parallel to the Temple market, occupied in part by resellers of old clothing, which is rarely disinfected or even cleaned, as it almost always is in the market proper. These clothing items can carry not only cholera, but any number of contagious diseases.”²¹

Preventative measures were quickly adopted across Europe, from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the Kingdom of Denmark, the latter of which forbid “the importation of old linen, second-hand clothes or bedding, . . . rags, old wadding, carding wool and waste paper” from a number of locations, including Marseilles, Sicily, Egypt, Tonkin and Cochinchina, India, the Dutch East Indies, Red Sea ports, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and Puerto Rico.²²

This association between secondhand clothing and disease continued during the Great War. Episodes of typhus, meningitis, measles, tuberculosis, and eventually the Spanish flu all provoked periodic measures to suspend the secondhand market or halt it entirely.²³ An enquiry by army hygienists singled out *chiffoniers* as carriers of disease, due to their being regularly covered in lice.²⁴ In 1916, the *Revue d'Hygiène et de Police Sanitaire* (Review of Hygiene and Police Sanitation) published an investigation on the “*Chiffonage* in Paris and its Suburbs,” wherein the authors, all doctors, confused the roles of *chiffoniers* and secondhand merchants, tied the practice to the spread of measles, cholera, and pestilence, and called for their suspension. They proposed instituting new sorting plants such as those at Issy-les-Moulineaux, a southwestern suburb of Paris.²⁵ It was believed that these sorting plants could also help fill the gap left by the departure of much of the male workforce that made up the profession.

Mass purchases from hospitals and the army attracted a great deal of negative attention, often ignorant of the fact that the practice of steaming clothes to rid them of disease had been commonplace in the industry since the end of the nineteenth century. The greater visibility of the phenomenon in view of the ravages of war, however, led to public concern, with some equating the practice of selling secondhand clothes with stripping the remains from cadavers. In 1917, the Institut Pasteur de Tunis, in reference to the spread of disease, advised, “Old clothing, sold by peddlers, is all the more suspicious, as most of these clothes have come from the dead.”²⁶

Concerns over repurposed military clothes were not limited to hygiene; many were worried about the circulation of millions of unaccounted for uniforms, forgotten in the confusion of war. These could have potentially been used for deceptive enemy actions. Internal investigations were indeed alarming: on May 1, 1917, the army had lost track of over 8 million greatcoats, 13 million trousers, 21 million marching boots, 38 million shirts, and 20 million bandoliers.²⁷ Criminal impersonations using repurposed uniforms had long been considered a risk by the army and police departments, and restrictions on the free flow of army uniforms date back to the early 19th century. After 1802, merchants were mandated to carry a placard from the Paris police prefecture and keep a log that detailed “day by day, without a single omitted entry or error, the objects bought and sold.”²⁸ Purchasing directly from soldiers was forbidden, and the police were attentive as well to other types of uniforms, including those of city officials and clerics.²⁹ Oddly, while the government under the July Monarchy (1830–48) organized large sales of uniforms, they also lifted the ban on purchases directly from military personnel in the years 1831, 1835, and 1841. By 1850, restrictions were reinstituted, with one military member confirming that “obsolete uniforms must be sold by the department of an auctioneer at public auctions, but before then, the buttons will have been taken off the breast of the tunics, and the cuffs of the sleeve cut off.”³⁰

Surveillance of the trade of uniforms was particularly pronounced in Algeria, where it was feared they could be appropriated by Algerian resistance fighters or bandits. In 1841, an order issued in Arabic and French forbid “the purchase of military uniforms and accessories,” and punishment was severe: any person found with a uniform was issued a fine and two months in prison. Anybody who found an abandoned uniform had to immediately deliver it to the local authorities, or risk the same sanctions. The law increased the penalty if the uniform was found in the hands of a “reseller, second-hand merchant, innkeeper, landlord, restaurateur, or beverage salesman.” The measures even extended to any secondhand merchant “recognized as having once possessed items of the type here listed,” even if the “distinctive markers [have been removed] in order to hide the origins of the item, rendering it suitable for commerce.”³¹

In 1857, military law reinforced these provisions against possession—including the suspected possession—of uniforms.³² The city of Saint-Louis and the island of Gorée in Senegal were subject to similar scrutiny in the 1860s. The emergence of the secondhand market and the constant presence of French soldiers triggered close surveillance of auctions for “tunics, shakos, etc. . . .” as well as heavy sanctions for those selling their uniforms directly (most commonly, members of the navy).³³ The volatility accompanying the First World War played into these ongoing fears. France was particularly worried about uniforms in Algeria and other colonies being diverted for criminal purposes or for political uprisings. Throughout the war, soldiers were required to carry a booklet detailing all of their issued items, a provision which complemented the measures already in place requiring merchants to keep records of goods. With direct sales from soldiers banned, there could at least be some regulation over military clothes’ inevitable drift towards the sphere of commerce.³⁴

The rags of war

These circumstances should have led to a rejection of the secondhand market—and especially, a rejection of clothing exchanges between the military and civilians. Instead, the second hand-market was embraced—although not without conflict. Heightened awareness of the spread of contagious diseases, disgust at the intimacy of sharing clothing with the unknown, and the idea that clothing was being stripped from the dead—all of these factors fed the negative public perception of secondhand clothing. At the same time, patriotism and popular support for the armed forces led to increased interest in clothing donation, including a resurgence of charitable clothing lockers in Protestant and Catholic churches.³⁵ The act of giving thus erased any prior disgust.

Charitable initiatives were launched, some of which were supported by the army (Figure 14.2). The autumn 1914 campaign “Knitting for the Soldier,” which was led by newspaper *l’Écho de Paris*, encouraged women to knit and mend clothes and underclothes to send to the front. The operation was a success: in November, the *Écho*, along with a second newspaper, *L’Illustration*, claimed to have received 700,000 sweaters, 85,000 pairs of socks, and 80,000 shirts in one month alone, a significant portion of which were previously used.³⁶ The daily newspaper, in continuing to publish a record of gifts received for several months, replaced the unsavory nature of the secondhand with an aura of quotidian heroism (Figure 14.3).³⁷

Figure 14.2 “Le tricot du combattant” (*The soldier’s knit*). *L’Illustration*, October 24, 1914.

Figure 14.3 *Clothing distribution on the Front on the initiative of La Revue hebdomadaire. La Revue hebdomadaire, May 8, 1915. © Manuel Charpy.*

These charitable good works became common. The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, a congregation of nuns who cared for the wounded during the war, called for donations for Christmas, specifically, “gifts of bedding, socks, and clothes, or gifts of coin.”³⁸ The magazine *Le Foyer*, headed by the devoutly Catholic Henry Bordeaux, led its own initiative, “Clothes Against the Cold for the Soldiers” in September 1914, whose messaging proclaimed: “Each French man or woman can help our army: 1. In donating, without delay, flannel gilets or shirts, knitted vests, hunting vests, wool socks, and wool gloves; 2. In offering a monetary donation that can be used to purchase these items; 3. In employing the laborers who can work ceaselessly to produce these clothes.” A large portion of the items received from this charitable drive—40,000 in several weeks—were secondhand clothes (Figure 14.4).

During this time of scarcity, the army continued to look for ways to reuse the piles of uniforms that had been abandoned, left on corpses, or damaged by military action and surgical intervention. Since the 1850s, the Bureau de l’Habillement (the administration office in charge of providing clothing to national employees) had been charged with recuperating lost or damaged items. They had also historically regulated resale to secondhand markets, determining the prices for “transformations”—

industrial organization of labor.”⁴² These factories continued producing new clothes, but now took on the role of the secondhand merchant as well, refurbishing greatcoats, jackets, shell jackets, trousers, or breeches. This work was costly and time consuming—seventeen hours of work were necessary for repairing a greatcoat and five-and-a-half for a pair of pants—but it allowed for economizing on the cost of fabric.⁴³ The practice of mending damaged clothing saw a resurgence among civilians as well. The Jesuit preacher Léonce de Grandmaison noted that, “a number of ‘war trades’ have emerged, not to mention all of the stores that ‘mend’ used goods (for example dyeing of faded clothing, refurbishment of old costumes, or invisible mending).”⁴⁴

As the war drew on, even greater efforts were made to recuperate lost items. In October 1916, the *Figaro* called for the “creation of an army corps of *chiffonniers*.” They justified the necessity of the position as follows:

The task of the military *chiffonnier* should be to collect, in service of the state, all that is left behind, lost, rotting, or burned in the wakes of the army’s movements . . . The soldier complains of carrying too much weight, . . . so he throws his bothersome surplus by the side of the road, or leaves it in the camp. . . . We thus find in any area where soldiers have passed greatcoats, bedding, shoes, and mess kits; we find furniture and borrowed objects of all kinds in the abandoned houses of the neighboring village. This hodgepodge may appear picturesque on first glance; on deeper reflection, it is quite unfortunate. It is lost capital. . . . It is disorderly. *Chiffonniers* of the army, You will fill your baskets many times over!⁴⁵

The army had had trouble providing uniforms since the start of mobilization—recruits were initially asked to provide their own shoes—and was seeking to maximize its recovery of uniforms from the dead. Since the beginning of the war, rules had been set in place to ensure that damaged items were returned before new ones were sent. The regulations read as follows: “The corps must send back all unusable equipment to the *Entrepôts d’Effets d’Habillement* (Clothing Warehouse) . . . In principal, all delivery of new items should follow the receipt of those returned. . . . The officers in the camps must ensure the collection of all items left by the corps, and arrange for their return.”⁴⁶ Unfortunately, this rule had been poorly observed, despite the bonuses offered for particularly zealous camps.

The issue first reached the national parliament in March 1916.⁴⁷ The figures from a set of reports in May 1917 reveal just how poorly recuperation efforts had played out: for the 12.2 million greatcoats sent to the army, only 4.1 million had been returned; out of 22.2 million pairs of pants, 7.4; for 29.2 million marching boots, 8.7; for 42.3 million shirts, 4.3.⁴⁸ The investigators pointed out that soldiers were not adept in the “methodical and careful gathering of all detritus, bedding, gear, or objects,” and that “sudden, urgent departures” explained the fact that equipment in good condition was frequently abandoned. Poor returns were also explained “by the instability of the units, and the fatigue and preoccupation” of the soldiers. The reports arrive at the same conclusion, advocating for the creation

of “teams of *chiffoniers*” to pick up objects left in camps as well as “by the roadside, in the trenches, or even on the battlefield.” The 3,300 men proscribed for the role would be the oldest in the army reserve force or “those employed as *chiffoniers* in civilian life.” The report continues: “There will be created within the Army’s area of operation a specialized territorial service charged with collecting all of the military dress that is abandoned, for one reason or another, by the troops . . . All of the material collected will be sent to the *Entrepôts d’Effets d’Habillement* after brief sorting, without further handling.” And while the report makes clear that there were already persons charged with collecting, “tinplate, bottles, bones, rags, horse skin, horsehair waste, equipment and gear,” there would now be created new “Compagnies de Chiffoniers.”⁴⁹ The uniforms that these *chiffoniers* collected, if overly damaged, would go on to rejoin the civilian secondhand market.

Souvenirs and surplus: The economy of leftovers

Mass mobilization on an unprecedented scale forced the military to confront the question of how to treat the uniforms of demobilized men. The Ministry of War had been concerned with the issue since at least the 1870s. At that time, the possibility of allowing men to keep their uniforms, in the manner of the National Guard, was considered. Army veterans were, after all, considered reservists, and this option also recognized the patriotic and almost corporeal attachment men developed with their uniforms. The newly established government of the Third Republic was worried about potential negative effects, however, and settled on a compromise: the Ministry announced in 1873 that demobilized “foot soldiers” could take with them “a pair of suspenders, a shirt, a cravat, a pair of canvas gators, and a pair of shoes.” Furthermore, it was specified that, “these items must be, whenever possible, those in the poorest conditions that the men have as choices available to them,” and that all other items must be “delivered, in a suitable state of cleanliness, to the army depot.”⁵⁰

The length of the First World War, as well as the sheer number of deaths and injuries, made the issue all the more apparent. Again, the army was worried that weapons or uniforms would fall into “suspicious hands.” The administration thus called for strict checks, conducted with, “the utmost tact, especially when conducted with veterans whose motives could not possibly be called into doubt.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, soldiers continued to take small objects, uniforms, or even weapons as “souvenirs” of the war and reminders of their fallen brethren.

In February 1919, the Department of Mobilization attempted to clamp down on matters, issuing the following statement: “In an effort to punish theft of items belonging to the state by demobilized men, the Commander-in-Chief of the French Armies of the North and the East has proscribed the inspection of these men’s luggage both at the departure of their unit and upon their entry into the grouping centers.”⁵² The army established “baggage checks on demobilized men,” announcing that

those “found with material belonging to the Army will be punished by law.” The sheer number of demobilized men, however, made the task nearly impossible; and in the wake of the long war it was difficult to truly sanction men heading home with an errant bandolier, shirt, or greatcoat.

Authorities also noticed the emergence of another phenomenon; French soldiers were keeping German uniforms as “trophies,” and conversely, civilians and British soldiers were collecting French military uniforms. The Ministry of War reminded citizens in June 1919 that material “taken from the enemy is the property of the state,” but prying trophies from soldiers was a delicate matter, and the state had little means to enforce these provisions, especially for foreign items.⁵³ The explosion of the secondhand market only complicated the issue.

In 1919, British uniforms and even American uniforms—rare before the war—began pouring into European and Mediterranean markets, from Morocco to Anatolia.⁵⁴ The English army began reselling uniforms itself, first transforming them by dyeing them and altering their buttons.⁵⁵ Legislation in the United States facilitated matters there—while it was illegal to wear old uniforms, nothing prevented their purchase. Often unbeknownst to the army, factory rejects would enter into the market through the intermediary of contracted workshops in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.⁵⁶

From 1917 onward, the army itself sold uniforms outside the United States. In 1920, official estimates suggested that \$500 million worth of American military material had been sold in France, half of which was from uniforms.⁵⁷ This allowed the army to rapidly rid itself of rejects and decommissioned uniforms. France soon adopted the American term “surplus” to describe the flourishing sector. Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia became hubs for these surplus goods; secondhand merchants would buy goods from France or from American exporters and sell the items—modified to varying degrees—in the markets. In 1920, the *New York Times* was shocked to find in the markets of Algiers, “the olive drab blouses and overcoats that once belonged to the American Expeditionary Forces in France.”⁵⁸ Although brick and mortar shops specializing in US military surplus would not be established in France until after the Second World War, American and French uniforms were being sold in markets and thrift stores from Morocco to Paris from 1917 onward.

Subversive uses

This flourishing market fed fears about criminal impersonations. Since the end of 1918, crimes committed by persons wearing French or American uniforms had multiplied. In January 1919, the *New York Times* published an article entitled, “Paris Apaches in Our Uniforms,” which responded to incidents of American soldiers committing crimes in the French capital, claiming these as “existing nearly exclusively in the vivid imagination of sensational local newspapers.”⁵⁹ Instead, these violent acts came from “Apaches of all nationalities dressed in American uniforms.” This assertion was

supported by evidence provided by the Paris Police Prefecture. While some part of the criminal population surely dressed in repurposed uniforms, stories such as these undoubtedly magnified fears.

Even beyond such impersonations, uniforms began taking on new meanings, gaining even greater symbolic significance among the general population. In the aftermath of the war, the uniform became a complex symbol evoking, depending on the context, either glory or trauma, order or mass-scale violence. Artists began to subvert the uniform's longstanding patriotic connotations. Use of the uniform for artistic purposes was not new. Throughout the eighteenth century, painters and other artists, especially theatre directors and "fairground spectacle performers," bought repurposed uniforms in order to "stage scenes of all of the European armies," of "every era."⁶⁰ During the early stages of wartime, in 1914, André Warnod described an exchange at the Temple in which a secondhand merchant was hesitant to sell a greatcoat, telling a client, "I can easily rent these things out to theaters staging military pieces."⁶¹

During the war, censorship prevented ambivalent depictions of the national uniform (although the cabaret Voltaire in Zurich staged such shows in 1916). But shortly after the war, pacifist and anti-military plays in Paris began depicting the uniform in a new light. Beginning in the 1920s, the "Phalange Artistique" made use of "makeshift sets" and "thrift store costumes," including uniforms.⁶² In a 1924 theatrical staging of Henri Barbusse's pacifist novel *Le Feu*, the costumes, which stood out against relatively plain sets, were secondhand coats that had been used in the war by communist forces.⁶³ The views expressed in these pieces were not mainstream by any means, but they nevertheless represented a growing practice of using uniforms for anti-military or anarchist purposes.

This kind of subversive use of the uniform was not limited to the political sphere. Uniforms were also appropriated in homosexual circles in Paris and Berlin. While uniforms had been accessories to homoerotic fantasies before the war, notably in the case of the Navy, the war heightened these trends. Photographs of the "bal des folles" at Magic-City show gay attendees dressed as marines and soldiers.⁶⁴ The venue, fittingly, was a former amusement park near the Eiffel Tower in Paris which had been occupied by the army during the war. Gay iconography of the uniform managed to challenge both heterosexual gender norms and nationalist propriety.

The colonies were another place where uniforms could take on new meanings outside of their intended use. There, uniforms, which had been traded for natural goods and slaves since the eighteenth century, were used for displays of authority, or as status symbols and gifts. The Archbishop of Algiers made use of the uniform's seductive powers in 1884, when he gifted "the outfits of senators and ministers," bought from the Temple market, to King Muteesa I of Buganda.⁶⁵ In Africa, South America, and the West Indies, indigenous populations had taken a liking to military uniforms.

While Europeans commended themselves for imparting modesty upon local populations by having them wear western dress, travel narratives often mocked the efforts of "savages" incapable of mastering the proper use of the military wardrobe. The Count of Castlenau, for example, described an encounter in Brazil in the 1840s with a "sort of old monkey wearing a Portuguese officer's uniform."⁶⁶ This racist

trope from Europeans reached a peak in the Americas with the rise of Faustin I of Haiti, who dressed his new army with uniforms from the Temple; the press delighted in their depictions of “*négrits* in uniform.”⁶⁷ In Africa, the image of the native in uniform was common in both text and photographs (Figure 14.5).

From 1860 onwards, various kings became the subject of mockery, including Denis Rapontchombo of Gabon, whose wardrobe included embroidered uniforms, some of which were from the 18th century. In a travel narrative that was widely reprinted, including in France, Henry Morton Stanley described his encounter with the chief Ngufu Mpanda along the Congo River, describing him as, “a veritable Uncle Tom—in an English red military tunic, a brown felt hat, and ample cloth of check pattern around the lower portion of his body.”⁶⁸ In *La Grande Encyclopédie*, Marcellin Berthelot states that: “the black kings adopt the uniforms of generals, prefects, and academics, or even the servant’s livery.”⁶⁹ At the end of the century, Belgian lawyer Pierre Verhaegen mocked the King of Tumba for wearing an “ancient uniform from the British army, with a faded red jacket” and sporting a “carabinier’s hat straight out of Offenbach.”⁷⁰

Figure 14.5 Local leaders in European secondhand clothing. A common representation prewar, it disappeared with the involvement of Senegalese skirmishers. Colonel Henri-Nicolas Frey, Côte occidentale d’Afrique: Vues, scènes, croquis (Paris: Marpon et Flammarion, 1890). Drawing by Pierre-Georges Jeannot. © Manuel Charpy.

Until the 1880s, neither explorers nor colonial governments were particularly disturbed by these displays, particularly in the case of these subjugated kings. But use of uniforms soon spread within the local populations. In 1890, the Belgian friar Alexis Marie Gochet wrote: “The Western coast of Africa takes in an unimaginable quantity of old coats, worn frocks, outdated tailcoats, and obsolete tunics. The old red or blue uniforms of English or French soldiers take pride of place.”⁷¹ While the image of the king adorned in castoffs was still a source of amusement, the prevalence of native servants or merchants in elevated dress was more alarming. *L'Expansion Belge* wrote in 1910, “The blacks of Sierra Leone are even more unbearable than the ruling class of Dakar. They are all dressed in the latest fashions from Europe, and celebrate their Sundays by promenading in frock coats in 38° [Celsius] heat in the shade, in fine form.” On the subject of the Congo, the Belgian Lieutenant General Baron De Witte noted in 1913:

Today the indigenous people of Brazzaville are already overdressed, and come Sunday, those who possess multiple pairs of pants or multiple jackets will wear them one on top of the other, in order to show off their wealth. Many are eager to follow Parisian fashion, and having learned that Europeans would make fun of the negro's propensity for top hats, [. . .] most have given them up, and are seen today wearing elegant Panamas.⁷²

These practices suggested a threat to colonial hierarchies, and colonial governments took notice, especially in Western and Central Africa. The French colonial government were cautious about contesting the uniforms of the Tirailleurs who had fought in the French army—even those who had been demobilized—but did survey the use of the uniforms closely.⁷³ Of particular concern was the anti-colonial movement in the Congo that formed around the religious figure and politician André Grenard Matsoua, who at one point, refused to remove his own uniform. Followers would wear military dress from the First World War, signaling their unwillingness to remain second class citizens. Colonial literature from 1920 to 1960 was rife with depictions of “negroes in their Sunday best,” in uniforms bought from secondhand markets or retained by former Tirailleurs. These works range from *Tintin au Congo*—which ridiculed blacks in English uniforms with epaulettes—to André Gide's *Voyage au Congo*, which describe a Congolese chief “in a very long and very used frock coat, with a khaki helmet, khaki breeches, black leggings, and big hobnailed boots. The whole was indescribably ridiculous and ugly.”⁷⁴ Even when these uniforms were worn by former Tirailleurs, they continued to appear to Europeans to be incongruous or even threatening.

Conclusion

While repurposed uniforms had been prevalent in civil society since the 1830s, both in France and throughout the world, the First World War ushered in major changes to the secondhand market. Old

uniforms were widely seen as being carriers of disease, unceremoniously stripped from the dead. And yet, scarcity and the massive scale of the war pushed the military and the general population alike to recuperate, repair, transform, and resell countless uniforms. The governments of France, the United States, and England all made forays into the secondhand market, selling items such as shirts, breeches, and jackets, either domestically or abroad. Whereas the French uniform in many respects gained in symbolic power during the war as an emblem of nationalist valor, it also eventually became a tool for contesting that same power, especially after demobilization. Homosexuals, pacifists, anti-militarists, anti-colonialists, and other groups and individuals used the uniforms from the First World War to play against prescribed roles, often confronting the great nations that had ushered in the war in the first place.

Notes

- 1 André Warnod, *La Brocante et les petits marchés de Paris* (Paris: Figuiere, March 1914), 15–16.
- 2 See Manuel Charpy, “Formes et Échelles du commerce d’occasion au XIXe siècle: L’Exemple du vêtement à Paris,” *Revue d’histoire du XIXe siècle* 24 (2002): 125–50.
- 3 Chambre de Commerce de Paris, *Statistique de l’industrie à Paris résultant de l’enquête faite par la chambre de commerce pour les années 1847–1848* (Paris: Guillaumin et Co., 1851), s.v. “Vêtements.”
- 4 Félix Mornand, “Le Temple,” *L’Illustration*, August 14, 1847.
- 5 Jules Robert de Massy, *Des Halles et des marchés et du commerce des objets à Paris et à Londres* (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1862).
- 6 Archives Municipales de Saint-Ouen, AR/2706; Archives Départementales de Seine-Saint-Denis, DM6 3/3; Warnod, “Le Marché aux Puces” [Porte de Clignancourt], *La Brocante et les Petits Marchés de Paris*, 2.
- 7 For sources on hospitals, see Archives de l’Assistance Publique—Hôpitaux de Paris, Comptes Généraux des Hôpitaux et Hospices Civils, 2M/1-30 et APP, DB371, note from prefect Delessert, October 24, 1845. For information on the hospices, see Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris (BHVP), series Actualité/120, Comptoirs des Ventes.
- 8 Archives de Paris (AP), commercial correspondence from Blin, rue de la Corderie au Temple, DQ10; Groupe Archivale de Mont-de-Piété, boxes 13, 58, and 60—clothing represented 60 percent of objects sold mid-century, and, in 1883, the municipal institution still sold 110,000 clothing items per year; AP, auctioneers archival group; AP, Lycée Saint-Louis, letters from Blin Jeune, bulk secondhand sales, specializing in civilian and military items, rue de la Corderie au Temple and rue de Ménilmontant, 1904; letters of J. Landau and his sons, mass exportation of civil and military clothes to England, Africa, and the East Indies, with trading stations in Bombay, Durban, Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Lourenço-Marques, and agencies in Lahore, Kubachi, Calcutta, Madras, Beira, Inhambane, Madagascar, rue de Sévigné, 1907; Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris (APP), DB371, petition to prefect, March 12, 1842.
- 9 De Massy, *Des Halles et des marchés*.
- 10 Manuel Charpy, “Ajustements: Corps, vêtements à tailles Fixes et standards industriels au XIXe siècle,” *Modes pratiques: Revue d’histoire du vêtement et de la mode* 1 (2015), “Normes et Transgressions,” 96–127.

- 11 AP, DQ10/369 and 370.
- 12 See the expeditions in Crimea, Italy, Mexico, and Cochinchina, for instance.
- 13 *Dictionnaire universel théorique et pratique du commerce et de la navigation* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1859–61), s.v. “Vêtements confectionnés.”
- 14 Albert Monnier, “Le Temple: Étude de Mœurs parisiennes,” *Le Figaro*, March 15, 1857; Norbert Truquin recalled a mid-nineteenth-century tailor creating “ceremonial robes in repurposed military uniforms” in *Les Aventures d’un Prolétaire à Travers les Révolutions*, reprint (Paris: Maspéro, 1977 [1887]), 47.
- 15 We should add that the same was true for Petticoat Lane in London.
- 16 AP, 10 AZ 328.
- 17 *Rapport Présenté par M. Georges Villain au nom de la 2e commission sur diverses pétitions relatives au Marché du Temple* (Paris: Conseil Municipal de Paris, 1892), 151–7.
- 18 “Vêtements confectionnés,” *Dictionnaire Universel*.
- 19 AP, D3R4/21, steward’s letters, no. 2510 ff.
- 20 Augustin Fabre and Fortuné Chailan, *Histoire du choléra-morbus Asiatique: Depuis son départ des bords du Gange en 1817 jusques à l’invasion du Midi de la France en 1835* (Paris: Hivert et Marseille, Olive, 1835).
- 21 *Gazette Médicale de Paris*, December 13, 1884.
- 22 *London Gazette*, August 8 and June 9, 1889.
- 23 See municipal archives such as the Archives Municipales Île-et-Vilaine, which detail preventative measures for epidemics during 1914–19: 5 M 80–81 (diphtheria, meningitis, measles, scarlet fever . . .), 4 M 86–87 (epidemics in schools), and 4 M 96–97 (cholera).
- 24 SHAT, GR 7 N 403, “Chiffonniers—Commission de récupération des effets d’habillement des armées,” Typhus “amongst chiffonniers covered in lice,” November 9, 1917 and January 22, 1918.
- 25 Robert Würtz and A. de Lauradour, “Le Chiffonnage à Paris et dans la banlieue en 1916,” *Revue d’hygiène et de police sanitaire* 38 (1916): 416 and 430–3.
- 26 *Archives de l’Institut Pasteur de Tunis* 10 (1917): 115.
- 27 SHAT, GR 7 N 403, “Chiffonniers,” 1917.
- 28 Ordinance of 4 Germinal year X (March 25, 1802).
- 29 Ordinance of November 25, 1812 regarding secondhand merchants; APP, DA52.
- 30 AP, D3R4/20. Letter 39, 1850.
- 31 E. Sautayra, *Législation de l’Algérie: Lois, ordonnances, décrets et arrêtés* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1883), 255–6, s.v. “Effets Militaires, Mars 1841.”
- 32 *Répertoire Méthodique et alphabétique de législation de doctrine et de jurisprudence en matière de droit civil commercial criminel administratif de droit des gens et de droit public jurisprudence générale* (Paris: Dalloz, 1869).
- 33 *Feuille Officielle du Sénégal et Dépendances*, 1860.
- 34 See *Le Livre du gradé d’artillerie . . . Contenant toutes les matières nécessaires à l’exercice de leurs fonctions et conforme à tous les règlements parus jusqu’à ce jour . . .* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1915), 837.

- 35 Jean-Luc Marais, *Histoire du Don en France de 1800 à 1939: Dons et legs charitables, pieux et philanthropiques* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1999).
- 36 "Le Tricot du combattant: L'Œuvre des lecteurs et des lectrices de *L'Écho de Paris*," *L'Écho de Paris*, November 9, 1914.
- 37 *L'Écho de Paris*, November 11, 1914.
- 38 Ibid., December 18, 1915.
- 39 SHAT, XAF 7, Imperial Guard, 1854–70.
- 40 Félix Chapuis, *L'Instruction théorique du cavalier par lui-même . . .* (Paris: 1915), 58.
- 41 *Bulletin du Ministère du travail et de la prévoyance sociale* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1916), 149.
- 42 SHAT, GR 7 N 403, "Chiffonniers," May 1917.
- 43 "Addition au tarif des confections, retouches et réparations des effets du service de l'habillement," *Bulletin Officiel des Ministères de la guerre*, June 10, 1918, 1966.
- 44 Léonce de Grandmaison, ed., *Impressions de Guerre de Prêtres Soldats* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1916–1917), 332–3.
- 45 SHAT, press cutting, "Créons un Corps de Chiffonniers Militaires," October 9, 1916.
- 46 SHAT, GR 7 N 403, "Chiffonniers," and "Récupération des effets d'habillement dans la zone des armées: Rapport de la commission d'étude," May 7, 1917.
- 47 "Tabling of a report by M. Seydoux, conducted for the Commission de l'Armée, on the need for immediate discussion, and on the basis of the motion for a resolution by M. Brenier and several colleagues, attempting to organize the complete recuperation, on the front and in the rear, of all usable detritus and objects abandoned by the troops," March 1916.
- 48 SHAT, GR 7 N 403, "Chiffonniers—Commission de récupération des effets d'habillement des armées," "Récupération des effets d'habillement dans la zone des armées. Rapport de la Commission d'étude," May 7, 1917.
- 49 Ibid.
- 50 Ministère de la guerre, *Projet de règlement pour les services de petit équipement et de la masse individuelle dans les Corps de Troupe* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1873), art. 33.
- 51 SHAT, 7 N 175, EMA, 1914–1919, "Uniformes—Insignes," Ministère de la guerre, "Commerce sur le front," June 1919.
- 52 SHAT, 7 N 175, EMA, 1914–1919, Bureau de l'Organisation et de la mobilisation de l'armée, "Uniformes—Insignes," February 14, 1919.
- 53 SHAT, 7 N 175, EMA, 1914–1919, Ministère de la guerre, "Uniformes—Insignes," June 17, 1919.
- 54 "The second-hand clothing market in Turkey," *Levant Trade Review* (1915): 418.
- 55 "Foreign trade notes," *Clothing Trade Journal* (November 1919): 81.
- 56 "Army uniform sale subject of inquiry," *New York Times*, August 1, 1918.
- 57 "Sales of army materials abroad," *Commercial and Financial Chronicle* 111–12 (1920): 1713.
- 58 Charles Divine, "After-the-war scenes in Algerian market towns," *New York Times*, February 8, 1920.
- 59 "Paris Apaches in our uniforms," *New York Times*, January 31, 1919.

- 60 BHVP, series Actualité/120, advertisement for Fortin, c. 1845; Cabinet des Estampes du Musée Carnavalet, advertisement for Jallais, 20, rue de Bruxelles, “Curiosities, antiques, weapons, military costumes for every era. Rentals for artists,” c.1870.
- 61 Warnod, *La Brocante*, 23.
- 62 Léonor Delaunay, *La Scène bleue: Les Expériences théâtrales prolétariennes et révolutionnaires en France, de la Grande Guerre au front populaire* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011); André Palin, “Un Essai de théâtre populaire: La Phalange artistique,” *La Révolution Prolétarienne*, 1926, private archives of Madeleine Palin.
- 63 Delaunay, *La Scène Bleue*; This performance was organized by the group “Art et Action,” led by Louise Lara, pacifist and anarchist, and Édouard Autant. See also Paul Vaillant-Couturier, “Trois conscrits,” *Trois conscrits, Le Monstre, Asie* (Paris: Bureau d’Éditions, 1929). For theatre during the war, see Chantal Meyer-Plantureux, ed., *Le Théâtre monte au front* (Paris: Éditions Complexe, 2008).
- 64 See photographs by Brassai, as well as Farid Chenoune, “Leur Bal: Notes sur des photos de Magic-City, Bal des Tantes de l’entre-deux guerres,” *Modes pratiques . . .*, 249–85; and Florence Tamagne, *Histoire de l’homosexualité en Europe: Berlin, Londres, Paris, 1919–1939* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2000).
- 65 The Archbishop had used the strategy of gifting outfits before: during a previous visit to North America, he had distributed Swiss parochial garments. À l’Assaut des pays Nègres: *Journal des missionnaires d’Alger dans l’Afrique Équatoriale* (Paris: À l’Œuvre des Écoles d’Orient, 1884), 18–19.
- 66 Francis de Castelanu, ed., *Expédition dans les parties centrales de l’Amérique du Sud, de Rio de Janeiro à Lima, et de Lima au Para*, vol. 1 (Paris: P. Bertrand, 1850), 351.
- 67 Monnier, “Le Temple.”
- 68 Henry Morton Stanley, *Cinq années au Congo: 1879–1884*, Gérard Hardy, trans. (Paris: Dreyfous, 1885), 84–5.
- 69 “Fripiér,” *La Grande encyclopédie: Inventaire raisonné des sciences, des lettres et des arts* (Paris: Lamirault et Cie, 1886).
- 70 Pierre Verhaegen, *Au Congo: Impressions de voyage* (Gand: Siffer, 1898), 30–100; Lieutenant Lemaire, *Au Congo: Comment les Noirs travaillent* (Bruxelles: Bulens, 1895), 104–7.
- 71 Alexis Marie Gochet, *Le Congo Français illustré . . .* (Paris: Procure générale, 1890), 155ff.
- 72 (Baron) De Witte, *Les Deux Congos* (Paris: Plon 1913).
- 73 Marc Michel, *Les Africains et la Grande Guerre: L’Appel à l’Afrique (1914–1918)* (Paris: Karthala, 2003), 197ff.
- 74 “Tintin au Congo,” *Petit Vingtième*, 1930–1; André Gide, *Voyage au Congo: Retour du Tchad* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927–8).

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