

Der Unterwäschauruf

by Ernst Deksheimer,

11./J.R. 129

Period Underwear -- (1890-1917)

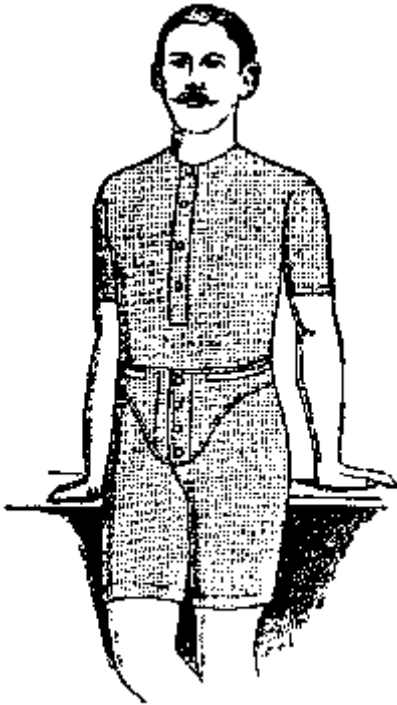


FIG. 94. MAN'S VEST AND DRAWERS, AERTEX, 1906

This information was taken mainly from "*The History of Underclothes*" by C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington. As recreators of Great War history, we have all worked hard to develop as authentic a kit as possible, from our Feldmütze with the correct piping and using steel cockades down to using leather soles and heels on our shoes and boots. Yet, that which is worn underneath, where no one sees, has remained *sacrosanct* for most of us. Without checking (no, I'm not that much of a pervert), I would wager that at least half, if not most are wearing BVDs or boxers under those very authentic *Feldblusen* and pants. The purpose of this short article is to help us to recreate the last of the basic articles of the German impression -- the soldier's undergarments. To do so, I have chosen to start with the year 1880 and move forward to the present 1917. First, a couple of generalizations about underwear and trends. While Germany was a country with a nationalistic ideology, (uniformity was considered good and proper) variation in men's fashion was still both common and normal. Underwear, like regular clothes, had gone through a definite trend toward simplicity and comfort since the early 1800s. While men from the upper class had used fancy undergarments and even corsets since the 1840s, the common man used either a two piece undervest and drawers, or starting in about 1880 a one piece "union suit" undergarment. For our period, both the one piece and two piece underwear suits were used by soldiers. German men, (probably not soldiers in rough woolen pants) typically wore no underwear at all in the summer months. When used, the underwear was typically close fitting, button and tie front with different materials depending on the temperature.

1880 to 1910



- **Vests:** Undershirts or "vests" as they were called were made of lamb's wool, silk or flannel and usually had a slit from the throat down one third to one half the chest with buttons of bone, bakelite or mother of pearl to open and close. The sleeves were either short or long depending on the weather and by 1895 a popular variation had "ventilated" underarms (slits or holes to allow more air in the armpit). Many working men preferred sleeveless vests of flannel. During cold months it was common to have, in addition to the vest, a body-belt of flannel about 15-18 inches wide with ties to wrap around the chest and stomach. Note: If you look in the government

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recommendation for packing the tornister, you will find this item was a regular entry.

- **Drawers:** Drawers, also called "linings", were made in natural and lambs wool, flannel and twilled calico. Like the vests, both shorts and long drawers were common. The drawers were close fitting, with a button fly and waist tape or button closure and sometimes with tape ties around the ankles. Colors were becoming common for both vests and drawers. One source said colors were used on work days and white drawers for Sundays. Notice the illustration at the top with a man in a two piece vest and drawers. Both pieces are short and close fitting.
- **Combinations:** One piece suits of the same materials and styles as above with both long and short sleeves and pants lengths were becoming more common.

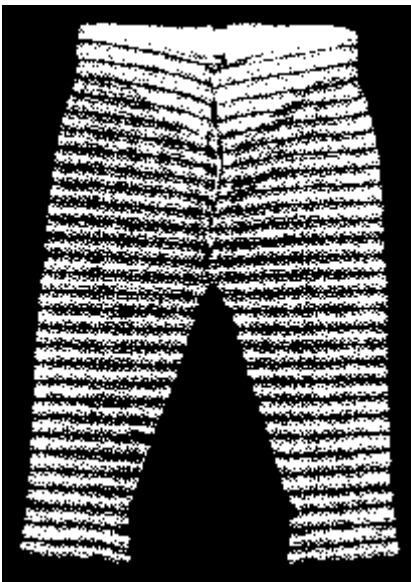
1910 to 1919

- **Vests:** Two piece suits were still very common. Made with long or short sleeves, the vest was typically of unbleached cotton, white gauze or net for summer and of merino wool, llama and flannel for winter. Vests were usually worn by tucking in the bottom edge beneath the drawers.
- **Drawers:** Materials used were as in vests and styles were much the same as in the 1880s-1890s. Ties for ankles are totally gone. As the war progressed, less and less wool was available for both vests and drawers; flannel becoming more the cold weather material of choice. Also shorts are becoming much more common.
- **Combinations:** Now very common. Much of this one-piece fashion was coming from America. No ties at the ankles and in different styles. See the illustration above which shows a man wearing a one piece undergarment. Although the garments still fit closely, the close fit at ankle and wrist was usually done with gathers.

Conclusions

Underwear in the war years was most certainly worn by the soldiers. The rough woolen pants virtually assured that the soldier needed the drawers, even in the summer months for protection against chafing. The two piece, undershirt (vest) and drawers were very common and were close fitting garments. Flannel and cotton seem to be the most common materials for the average working man. The American "union suit" had become so popular by the end of the war that two of three ads for underwear sales showed men in these suits.

Suggestions for recreating underwear:



- Union suits are very easy to get and are totally acceptable. Replace the plastic buttons with mother of pearl, bone or even wooden buttons. Avoid suits with elastic ankle and wrist gathers. If this suit is too hot for you, feel free to cut the legs into shorts and the arms into short sleeves. Typical lengths of shorts were just above the knee to several inches higher. The short sleeves are typical for today length. Hem the edges.

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- For a two piece variety, again consider modifying a union suit.
- Cut the garment at the waist and add a tape waist tie and hem all the edges. Some two piece sets had buttons to tie the vest to the drawers. If you want to get really creative, dye the suits different colors. Typical colors were rather muted, (lighter primary colors (even *feminine* colors -- pink or salmon were common). Stripes, both vertical and horizontal, were considered fashionable. Sewing your own with different materials and patterns is certainly an option if you have access to talented and willing seamstering.

Bottom line--Ditch those BVDs and let's all wear striped drawers/vests at the next event!!!

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