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Pickelhaube an Iconic Symbol of German Military Might

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)

Sergeant First Class Thomas McHenry Van Natta collected these two World War I German "pickelhaube" ("point bonnet") helmets during his service in World War I. Van Natta (1890-1970) was a resident of Lewistown, PA, and served with US Army Ambulance Service from June 2, 1917 to April 28, 1919. He was in overseas service from June 13, 1918 until April 23, 1919 and participated in engagements at St Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne. Van Natta likely collected the helmets during one of those engagements.





The silver colored metal pickelhaube is a Jager zu Pferde (Mounted Dispatch Rider) helmet. The helmet is constructed of blackened steel with a fixed spike at the top center and gilt fittings. It was manufactured before World War I and demonstrates the high quality of German manufacturing at that time. A helmet of this type would have been worn by a soldier whose duty it was to deliver urgent messages between headquarters and military units in a time before radio communications were technologically possible.



The black helmet is an enlisted man's helmet made around 1913 and likely issued to an infantry soldier. The helmet is also an excellent example of German pre-war manufacturing and is constructed of leather with brass fittings and German unit markings on the interior. The helmet again bears the iconic fixed spike at the top of the crown. Leather pickelhaube produced later in the war bear a removeable spike, as the spike became unwieldy (and an excellent target for snipers) inside the cramped trenches of WWI.

Originally designed by Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm in 1842, the pickelhaube's distinct appearance was intended to project an image of a highly aggressive military force. Following Germany's decisive victory over France in 1871, armies (including the United States from 1881-1902) copied the design. After the outbreak of World War I, German manufacturers struggled to maintain product standards and quality. Pickelhaube of increasingly flimsy construction were produced from cork, leather, wool, and thin steel or tin recycled from collected cooking utensils. The German army discontinued use of the pickelhaube helmet in 1916, in favor of a steel helmet that afforded its wearer better protection from the dangerous conditions of trench warfare as the spiked helmet's striking appearance provided little protection to the wearer and often served as a target for French and British snipers.

During the war, souvenir collecting was a popular pastime of soldiers on all sides as a means both to alleviate boredom and to commemorate service. The pickelhaube was a prized souvenir among Allied soldiers and when found, could often be sold for high prices. They are a potent and easily recognizable symbol of the German militarism that defined the early 20th century. While set during World War II, the popular 1960s sitcom Hogan's Heroes, depicts a character wearing a pickelhaube, providing an excellent example of the helmet's enduring iconic nature.

