

About the origin of the German nickname "Pickelhaube" and the English name „spiked helmet“

by Sandy Michael Heinemann

In the Prussian army, the spiked helmet was officially called only "leather helmet" or, for the cuirassiers, "metal helmet". There was hardly any mention of a "helmet with a tip (or spike)" in official German..

The nickname "Pickelhaube" was coined by military journalists. This happened as early as 1841, when they first saw the helmet, which was still being tested at that time. Thus, the "Allgemeine Militär-Zeitung" No. 63 of 1841 wrote: "THEY ARE VERY SIMILAR TO THE „PICKELHAUBEN“ FROM THE KNIGHTLY ERA....A PECULIAR FEATURE OF THESE NEW HELMETS, WITH THEIR MEDIEVAL SHAPE, THAT THEY HAVE A CONICAL TIP IN THE MIDDLE AT THE TOP...".

geschlagenen neuen Helme. Sie sind den Pickelhauben aus den Ritterzeiten ähnlich. Merkwürdig ist der Umstand, daß es Mehemed Ali war, der diese Kopfbedeckung, die in Europa nur noch in den Rüstkammern anzutreffen war, in Afrika wieder ans Licht zog, und sie für seine schwere Kavallerie erwählte. Eigenthümlich ist diesen neuen Helmen bei der Form derer des Mittelalters, daß sie oben auf der Mitte eine kegelförmige Spitze haben, welche sich so drehen läßt, daß sie den Luftzug, dem Bedürfnisse nach, zuläßt und abhält, und somit auch die Auddunstuna ableitet.

... They are similar to the bascinets from the times of knights. The curious fact is that it was Mehamed Ali who brought this headgear, which in Europe was only to be found in armouries, to light again in Africa and chose it for his heavy cavalry. A peculiar feature of these new helmets is that they have a cone-shaped peak in the middle, which can be turned in such a way that the draft is allowed and prevented according to need, and thus also the evaporation is drained.

„Allgemeine Militär-Zeitung“ no. 63 (1841), page 503, article: Prussia from 22.7.1841

This shows that the German term "pickelhaube" did not refer to the tip of the helmet, but only to the silhouette of the helmet body, which was similar in shape (without the tip) to the medieval helmets of the Landsknechts. In the direct comparison on Fig. 2 and Fig. 3 it is easy to see how the journalists of the time came up with this comparison. Without the tip, the silhouette of the leather helmet body of fig. 3 is very similar to the helmet of fig. 2 highlighted in yellow.



Fig. 2: Landsknechts at the muster - „Die illustrierte Welt. Blätter aus Natur u. Leben, Wissenschaft u. Kunst zur Unterhaltung u. Belehrung für die Familie, für Alle und Jeden“ Volume 13



Fig. 3 - M42 spiked helmet from a private collection (many thanks to kaisersbunker.com)

The metal helmet of the medieval Landsknechts was the "Bacinet" (German: „Beckenhaube“). In an early German dictionary the "Beckenhaube" is also listed as "Bickelhûbe", from which the term "Pickelhaube" can probably best be derived.

The Landsknechts experienced their greatest importance under Emperor Maximilian I (March 22, 1459 to January 12, 1519), also known as the last knight, as he ended the age of the knights with their help. The Landsknechts were more numerous, cheaper and not as highly specialized as the elite fighters. On the battlefield, they were superior to knights because of their sheer mass.

But it doesn't matter whether it's "Beckenhaube", "Bickelhûbe", "Pechelhaube", "Peckelhuebchen", "Begelhube" or even "Pickelhaube", all of these names are a dialect of one and the same term. And even if the name, as just showed, does not actually refer to the tip of the helmet, I think that it quickly became established in German-speaking countries precisely because of the tip and the witty ambiguity of the name.

In English, the Pickelhaube became known as the "spiked helmet", which sometimes, as I learned through my international collector friends, led to some confusion in translation. This is because if the term "spiked helmet" is translated literally, the English name would be "pimple hood" or "pimple hat". However, I could not find such a term in English texts of the 19th century. The term "spike", on the other hand, I could verify in relation to the Prussian helmet already in a text from 1844¹, and the entire term "spiked helmet" in a text from 1849.² However, it was partly assumed in my English-speaking contacts that the word part "spike" is a translation of the word part "pickel" and also the German term, just like it is the case in English, refers to the tip of the helmet.

However, I think that the term "spiked helmet" is not a direct translation of the term "Pickelhaube". The origin of the name probably also does not refer to the medieval "Beckenhaube", as it was the case with the German name. Because if the English name of the helmet would originally also refer to this type of helmet, then in my opinion the term "Bacinet" or "Balaclava", which are English terms for "Beckenhaube" or "Sturmhaube", would have to be found in one form or another in the naming. But since that is not the case, the term "spiked helmet" can actually only be an independent creation of a word that describes a helmet with a spike.

Sources:

1. [A hot-water cure, sought out in Germany, in the summer of 1844, the journal of a patient - Page 133](#)
2. [Blackwood's Magazine, Volume 66 \(July-December 1849\) - Page 427](#)