

RUSSIAN CUIRASSIERS OF THE LINE, 1786-1796: THE POTEKIN UNIFORM Richard L. Sanders

Prince Grigory Aleksandrovich Potemkin-Tavricheski (1739-1791) was a Russian military leader, statesman, nobleman and favorite of Catherine the Great. In 1774, Under Catherine's patronage, Potemkin became the governor-general of Russia's new southern provinces, where he set up so-called "Potemkin villages," a ruse involving the construction of painted façades to mimic real villages, full of happy, well-fed people, for visiting officials to see. While he is best known in the West for the "Potemkin villages," he was also note for his military reforms, including changes in the army's and navy's uniforms.

In 1786, at Potemkin's initiative, the uniforms for the Russian line regiments were changed radically and the new attire was said to be imminently practical. For example, the tight gaiters, that limited circulation to the feet, were replaced by wider pants, while the powdered queue was abolished in favor of cropped hair.

When Catherine died and was succeeded by Emperor Paul I, he abandoned many of the Potemkin initiatives and emulated the Prussian Army of Frederick the Great. Yet, the some of Potemkin's creations were longer lived, for example, the Potemkin helmet, shown and described below, was reintroduced for the heavy infantry regiments in the Imperial Guard from 1802 to 1804, and again in a modernized form as the headgear for the Guard Light Cavalry in 1831 and it remained in use in a number or regiments until 1914!

The Potemkin Cuirassier Uniform 1786-1796:

Moving on to the cuirassiers, on 4 October 1786 Prince Potemkin introduced a standard uniform for the five existing cuirassier regiments.

The headgear consisted of a rounded bowl of black felt with a visor and its bottom was edged with leather. Visors on the remaining examples of the helmets vary from small to large. In the bottom of the front, above the visor, was a brass plate with the stylized imperial monogram the "Є" (Cyrillic "ye"). A white woolen crest (black for Ordens) running from side to side topped the helmet. In the rear, attached to the felt bowl from one end of the brass band to the other end, was a cloth strip in the regimental color. Additionally two wide tails of yellow cloth rounded at the bottom with black edging and tassels hung down in the back. These tails protected the neck from rain and in cold weather could be tied around the ears. On the helmet's left side was a white ribbon cockade with a black plume. The helmet had s narrow chinstrap of black leather. See figures 1 through 4; figures 2 though 4 are not of the cuirassier helmet, but give a good idea of its appearance including the distinctive "tails."



Fig. 1 - Potemkin Helmet, plate by A. V. Viskovatov



Fig. 2 - Catherine II's (Yekaterina II) monogram on a Potemkin helmet in the Army Museum in Stockholm.



Figs. 3 & 4 – A Model 1786 Potemkin helmet in Moscow Historical Museum.
Photos: Pierre-Yves Chauvin

The cuirassier regiments received a short “straw yellow” jacket of the *kurtka* or *collet* cut with collar, lapels and cuffs in the regimental color. The primary color for each regiment were:

1st Regt. Leib-Cuirassiers – green

2nd Regt. *Voennago Ordena* – Military Order of the Holy Martyr and Victor [St.] George or “Ordenskii “ for short– black

3rd Regt. Yekaterinoslavskii (formerly Novotroitskii) – light blue

4th Regt. Kazan – dark blue

The His Imperial Highness’ Heir Regiment (*Impiroschorskogo Visochesschva Naslednika Polk*) retained the old 1778 uniform, i.e., with red distinctions and with a bicorn in lieu of a helmet.

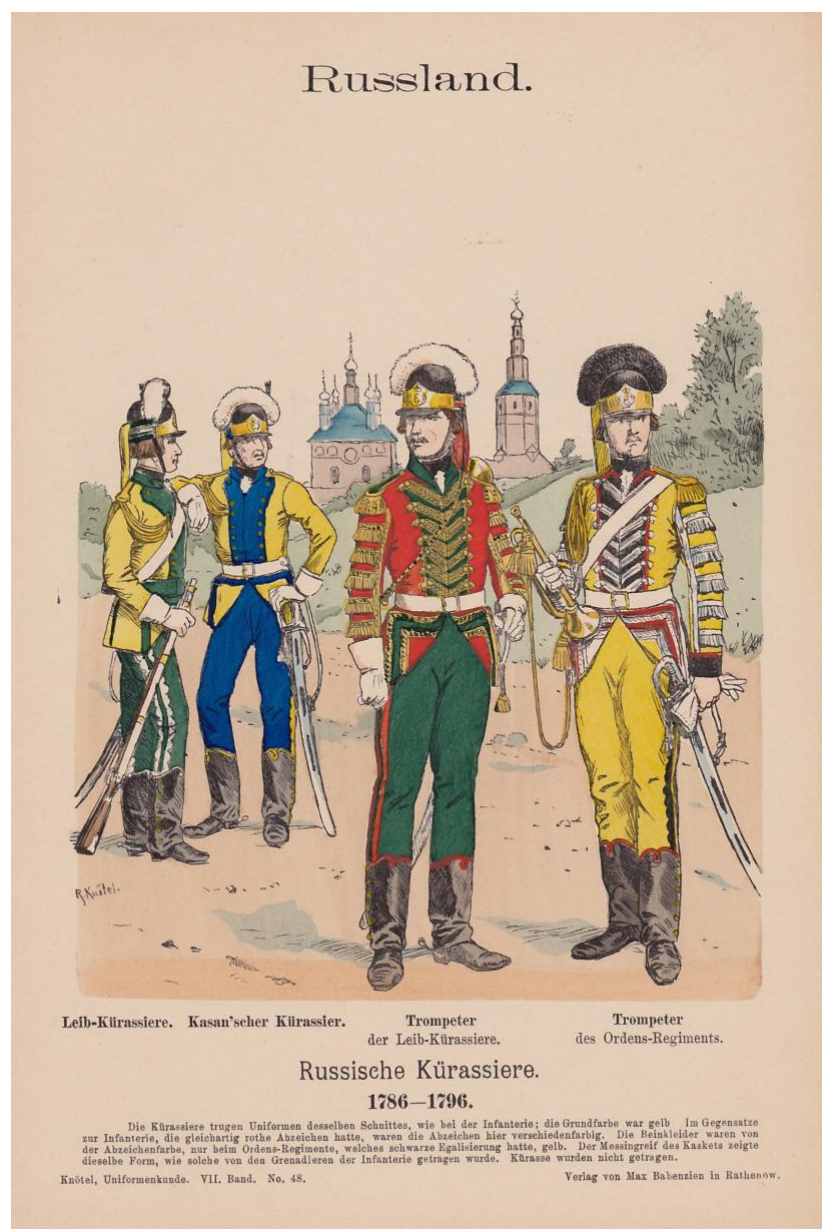


Fig. 5 - Russian Cuirassiers, 1786-96, plate by Richard Knötel

The front corners of the coat were turned back and showed a lace trim in the regimental color. The coat itself was worn tightly except for a small space where the neck-ruff was visible. The coat had the old-style shoulder strap on the left and an aiguillette on the right shoulder, both in yellow. The buttons were yellow. The neck-sock was black with edging. NCOs had lace on the collar and cuffs.

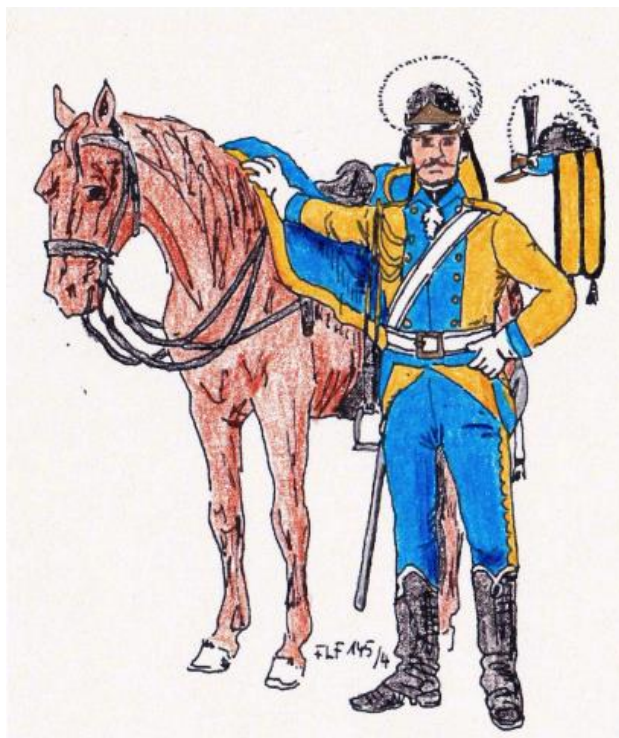


Fig . 6 - Cuirassier in the Potemkin uniform according to W. Zvegintzow, *L'Armee Russe, 2e Partie, 1763-1796*, Paris, 1969 & Plate, figure 4, pg. 145. Colored by Sanders in the sky blue distinctions of the Yekaterinoslavskii Cuirassier Regiment.

In Glinka's book, there is a photo of a coat from the "Yekaterinoslavsky Cuirassier Regiment 1786" in the Suvorov Museum of Military History in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), which has an embroidered cloth badge on the left shoulder's shoulder strap. The badge is oval, with a blue field surrounded by a silver and gold border and with the "Є" (Cyrillic "ye") monogram in gold in the center. The shoulder strap is piped in the regimental color. See Fig. 3.



Fig 7. Yekaterinoslavsky Cuirassier Regiment shoulder strap badge

The cuirassier regiments reportedly also were authorized a regimental *soubreveveste* (supravest), but Viskovatov, the primary documenter of the Russian Army's uniforms, did not depict this piece of clothing, so the cut is unknown. However, the color of the cloth and the trim were documented and are shown in the table below. It was said to have the Imperial symbol (a double-headed eagle) in brass wire on the front and the back.

The trousers were long and broad and in the regimental color (except those of the Ordenskii Regiment were yellow!). On both sides of the outside seam were yellow saw-toothed cloth stripes (for Ordenskii Regt. in black). The trousers were reinforced with black leather to the calf and extended over the short boots with rounded ends.

Russian Cuirassier Regimental Distinctions 1786=1796

Regiment	Leib-Cuirassiers	*Yekaterino-slavskii (former Novotroitskii)	Kazanskii	Ordenskii
Hat band, collar, facings	Green	Sky blue	Blue	Black with orange piping
Trousers cloth	Green	Sky blue	Blue	Straw
Trousers stripes	White	Straw	Straw	Black
Schabraque & soubreveveste cloth	Green	Sky blue	Blue	Black
Schabraque trim & soubreveveste trim	White	Straw	Straw	Orange
Belt**	Green	Sky blue	Blue	Black & orange stripes
Valise	Green	Sky blue	Blue	Black
Figure Number(s)	5, 8, 9	6, 7	5, 10	5
Geissler Plates	36, 37	42, 43	44, 45	40, 41

Table primarily from Zvegintzow.

*Cuirassier Regiment in 1784, ostensibly to honor the Tsarina, Catherine II (Yekaterina II). See von Stein, p. 175.

**The waist belt was in the regimental color according to Zvegintzow, however, the other sources consistently show it as white. A sleeveless vest that reached to the waist could not be seen, so it was made of old materials in any possible color.

The cuirassier trooper's footgear does not appear to have been traditional boots, but a round-toed shoe with loosely fitting black gaiters, with seven brass buttons on the outside and a very narrow trim on the top edge similar to that of hussar boots. In the Geissler and Knötel prints the trim is shown as white; in the Plates from the Vinkhuizen and Knötel plates, the edging on the trumpeters' gaiters is shown in red.

The summer uniform consisted of a vest and trousers. For cold weather, the overcoat was of white cloth.

The cuirassier's hair was worn cut straight across in the back and not powdered. Gauntlets shown in the 1793 illustrations are shown in yellowish leather while Zvegintzow refers to them as being white.

The cuirassier troopers' weapons were a carbine and a "*palasch*" straight sword, although on mounted service they also were armed with two pistols. They, like the white belting, carbine bandolier, pistols, and cartridge box were the standard 1778 issue. The sword knot was black with a white tassel. Cuirasses were not worn!



Figs. 8 - Leib-Cuirassiers, plate by A. V. Viskovatov



Fig. 9 Trumpeter of the Leib-Cuirassier Fig. 10 Cuirassier of the Kanzanskii
Cuirassier Regt.,
Plates from the Vinkhuizen Collection in the New York Public Library on-line
collections.

Schabraques were of the standard cavalry model, colored and decorated as shown in the table above.

The musicians, i.e., kettledrummer and trumpeter, had lace and tassels of varying colors based regiment's uniform.

The Leib-Cuirassier kettledrummers and trumpeters received a special gala uniform having a green helmet with red flames, a red *kurtka* coat with green collar, facings and coattails, gold laces with green and black silk fringes and tassels (Viskovatov and Knötel both omit the aiguillette in their drawings, although the latter is probably based on the former). Trousers were green with red stripes. The schabraque was green with yellow edging, monogram and laurels, and the valise was also green.

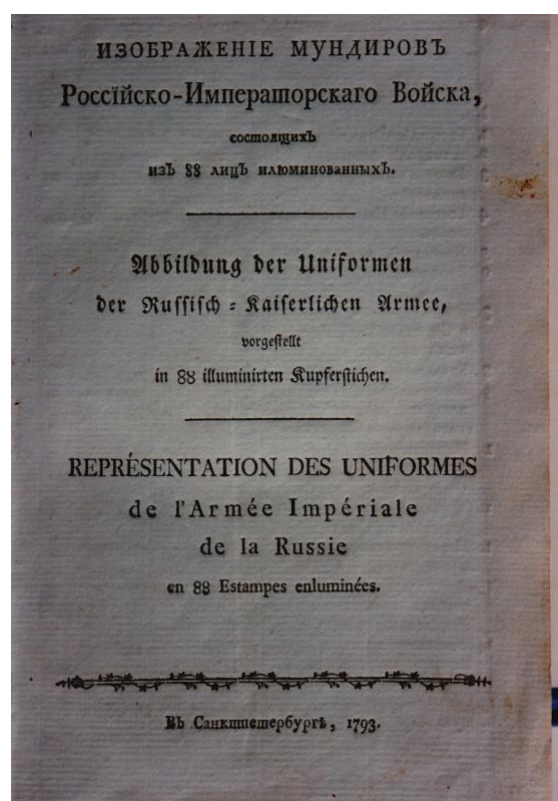
For the Ordenskii Cuirassiers, trumpeters, as shown on Zveguntzow's black and white plates 93 (Fig. 1059) and 130 (Fig. 1611) have a uniform identical to that of the normal trooper (helmet with a black crest, straw-yellow *kurtka* and trousers, black distinctions and orange piping), but with more laces (orange with oblique black stripes, possibly in the pattern of Xes), and orange and black fringes. The musicians were only armed with a straight sword. See figure 5 for Leib and Ordenskii trumpeters.

The officers retained their old attire from 1778, but the Kazanskii officers changed their old raspberry distinction for blue ones. The hats were taller and flatter; the coat had turned back tails; the pants were white. See figures below.

During the period 1786-1796, the Russian Army participated in numerous campaigns, however, the cuirassiers participated in only one major campaign, the suppression of the Kosciuszko Revolt in Poland in 1794.

The Geissler 1793 Uniform Plates

The following title page, table of contents extract and plates (Nos. 36-45) are from Geissler, *Izobrazheniye Mundiroy Russisko-Imperaschorskago Voyska/Abbildung der Uniformen der Russisch-Kaiserlichen Armee/Représentation des Uniformes de l'Armée Impériale de la Russie*, St. Petersburg, 1793. The photos are obviously varying. Photos by Markus Gärtner, courtesy of the Anne S.K. Brown Collection, USA.



No.	No.
33. Главной Артиллеріи Бомбардиръ, Канонеръ и Фузельеръ.	33. Bombardier, Canonier und Füseler von der Artillerie.
34. Инженерный, минерный и пионерный Офицеръ.	34. Ingenieur-Minier- und Pionier-Officer.
35. Инженеръ, Минеръ и Пионеръ.	35. Ingenieur, Minier und Pionier.
36. Лейбъ-кирасирскаго полку Офицеръ.	36. Officer des Leib-Cuirassiers-Regiments.
37. Лейбъ-Кирасиръ.	37. Leib-Cuirassier.
38. Его Императорскаго Высочества Наслѣдника кира-сирскаго полку Офицеръ.	38. Officer von Seiner Kaiserlichen Hoheit des Thronfolgers Cuirassier-Regiment.
39. Его Императорскаго Высочества Наслѣдника полку Кирасиръ.	39. Cuirassier von Seiner Kaiserlichen Hoheit des Thronfolgers Regiment.
40. Военнаго ордена св. Великомученика и Побѣдоносца Георгія кира-сирскаго полку Офицеръ.	40. Officer von dem Cuirassier-Regiment des heiligen Märtyrers und Ueberwinders Georgii.
41. Военнаго ордена св. Великомуч. и Побѣдоносца Георгія полку Кирасиръ.	41. Cuirassier des heiligen Märtyrers Georgii.
42. Новотроицкаго кира-сирскаго полку Офицеръ.	42. Officer des Nowotroitzischen Cuirassier-Regiments.
43. Новотроицкаго полку Кирасиръ.	43. Cuirassier des Nowotroitzischen Regiments.
44. Казанскаго кира-сирскаго полку Офицеръ.	44. Officer des Kasanschen Cuirassier-Regiment.
45. Казанскаго полку кира-сиръ.	45. Cuirassier des Kasanschen Regiments.
46. Карабинерскихъ полковъ Офицеръ.	46. Officer des Carabinier-Regiments.



Officer of the Leib-Cuirassier
Regiment, 1793, plate 36



Cuirassier, Leib-Cuirassier
Regiment, 1793, plate 37



Officer and Cuirassier
of the His Imperial Highness' Heir Cuirassier Regiment, 1793, plates 38 and 39





Officer of the Ordenskii Cuirassier Regt, 1793, plate 40



Cuirassier, Ordenskii Cuirassier Regt, 1793, plate 41



#42 Officer, Novotroiskii Cuirassier Regt, 1793, plate 42



Cuirassier, Novotroiskii Cuirassier Regt., 1793, plate 43

(Renamed the Yekaterinoslavskii Cuirassier Regiment in 1784)



Officer, Kazanskii Cuirassier Regt, 1793
Plate 44

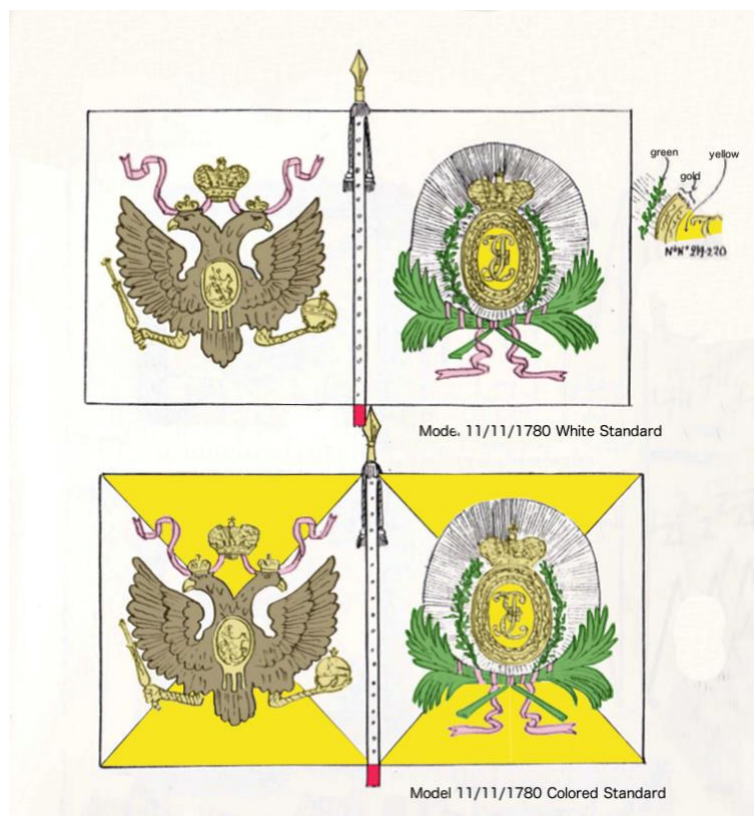


Cuirassier, Kazanskii Cuirassier Regt.,
plate 45

Flags:

During the period 1786-1796 the cuirassier regiments carried the new standard issue Model 1780 flags. Two versions were issued – one “white” and one “colored.” The white standard had a completely white field while the colored standard had upper and lower triangles in yellow; otherwise the devices were identical. One side had the imperial monogram in gold on a yellow oval field circled in gold and with a gold crown. Below it were green fronds tied with a rose ribbon, while around the oval were light grey halo and a green wreath on either side. The other side of the flag had the imperial two-headed eagle in dark brown with a gold oval with a crown on its chest. Within the oval was a sky blue filed with the imperial monogram in gold. The crowns, beaks, legs, scepter and orb were in gold. For both standards, the finial was in gold, the streamers and tassels were silver while the staff was painted red. NOTE: The flag shown in the illustration has St. George in the center oval in gold, however, the cuirassiers would have had the Tsarina’s cypher, like in the obverse of the flag, but on an oval sky blue field instead.

Source: Zvegintzow, W., *Drapeaux et entendants de l’armee russe XVI a 1914*, Paris 1964, page 17 and plate 45, figures 219 and 220.



Figures:

Some 1/72 or 23mm scale figures are available from "History in 1/72" in Germany. See: <http://historyin172.blogspot.com/2017/12/more-russians-in-potemkin-uniform.html> or hagen-miniatures.de for ordering them.



Hagen Miniatures' Russian

Cavalry in Potemkin Uniform 1786-1796

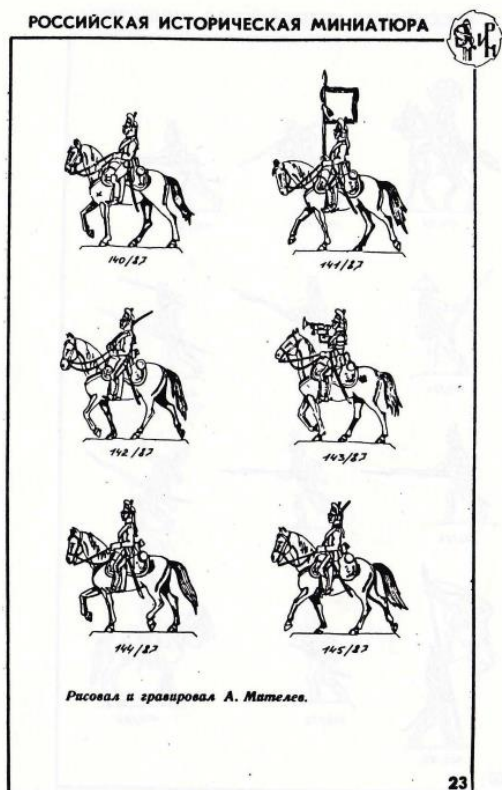
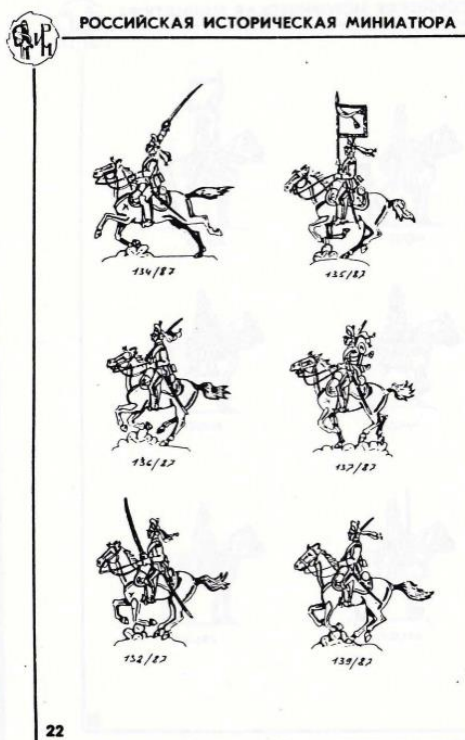
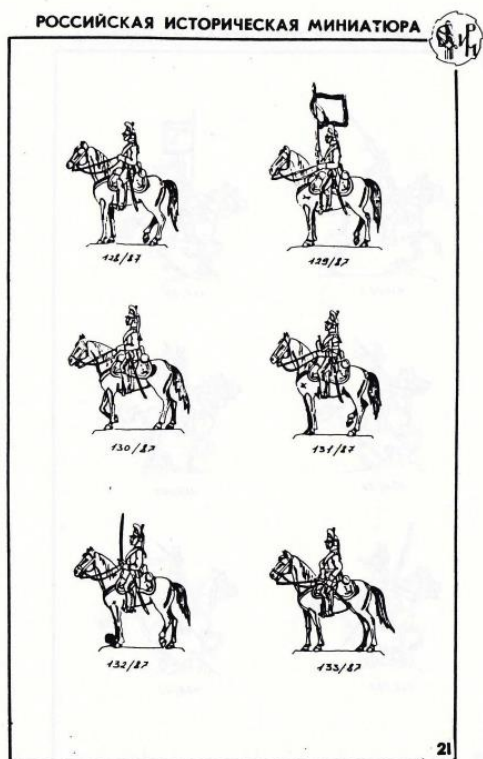


Russian cavalry in Potemkin uniform
1786-1796 - Commandset3 (Code:
FFL-0020)



Russian cavalry in Potemkin Uniform
1786-1796 (Code: FFL-0021)

For “flats,” there are at least 18 30mm figures available depicting Russian cavalry in the 1786-96 Potemkin uniform that can be painted as cuirassiers. They were drawn and engraved by Aleksandr Mitelev of St. Petersburg, Russia. It seems that Mr. Mitelev may have cast these figures using plaster rather than slate molds, and as a result, the quality of the castings decreases with age of the molds and he may no longer be producing the figures, as they are not pictured in his on-line catalogue (<http://www.zinnfiguren.ru/mitelev/>).



Pages from Mitelev's catalogue of 30mm flats.



Aleksandr Mitelev's 30mm flats, left to right: officer 128/87, trumpeter 131/87, standard-bearer 129/87, troopers 133/87, 132/87 and 130/87.



Aleksandr Mitelev's 30mm flats, left to right: standard-bearer 129/87, trumpeter 131/87, officer 128/87, troopers 130/87, 132/87 and 133/87, painted as Leib-Cuirassier Regiment. Photo and painting: R. Sanders

Sources:

NOTE: The two most significant sources are the 1793 plates shown above and the plates of A. V. Viskovatov's (1804-1858) in his *Historical Description of the clothing and arms of the Russian Army* (in Russian). There are also artifacts, i.e., a kurtka cuirassier's coat and an infantry Potemkin helmet in a Russian museum, but the photos are copyrighted.

- Fricke, G. W., *Russland: Kürassiere/Linie & Garde der napoleonischen Kriege*, Darlingerode, 1985, p. 1.

- Geissler, *Izobrazheniye Mundiroy Russisko-Imperaschorskago Voyska/Abbildung der Uniformen der Russisch=Kaiserlichen Armee/Représentation des Uniformes de l'Armée Impériale de la Russie*, St. Petersburg, 1793, plates 36-45.

- Glinka, V. M., *Russkii Voennii Kostyum XVIII-Nachala XX Veka/Russian Military Uniforms 18th to Early 20th Century*, Leningrad, Khyudozhnik, 1988, pp. 41, 43.

- Knötel, Richard, *Uniformkunde*, VII. Band, No 48, "Russische Kürassiere 1786-1796," - Rathenow, Verlag von Max Babenzien, undated.

- Vinkhuizen Collection, plates in the New York Public Library on-line collections.

- Viskovatov, Aleksandr Vasilevich, *Historical Description of the clothing and arms of the Russian Army* (in Russian), St. Petersburg, 1841.

- von Stein, F., *Geschichte des Russischen Heeres von Ursprunge desselben bis zur Thronbesteigung des Kaisers Nikolai I. Pawlowitsch*, Hannover, Helwingsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1885, pp. 175, 178-181.

- Zvegintzow, W., *Drapeaux et étendards de l'armée russe XVI a 1914*, Paris 1964, page 17 and plate 45, figures 219 and 220

- Zvegintzow, W., *L'Armée Russe, 2e Partie, 1763-1796*, Paris, 1969, pp. 117-118, 140, 143, 145; {1} p. 321; {12} p. 186 & plates 139, (figs. 602-1617). 145 (figs. 1933-191935), 153 (figs. 2143-21445), 145, inter alia.