

Proper care and feeding for historical leather footwear.

This was written for WWII German footwear but most of the information applies to other types of leather and other periods and nationalities of footwear. If you follow this information you can greatly increase the length of the life of your boots, the overall look and your enjoyment of them.

Dyeing/Blackening your boots

The German army required its soldiers to dye their own boots black. All boots were issued in Brown leather and the soldier was responsible for blackening them. There is historical evidence of boots being left brown based on the branch of the service and the time in the war but by regulation black was the color for most soldiers. The first thing to consider is if your leather is chrome tanned or vegetable tanned. This will tell you what product to use. Assuming they are natural, vegetable tanned leather as issued by the German army your best bet is commercial leather dye. Brands such as Fiebings have been the standard for years. It is an alcohol based dye and will do a great job. Apply it sparingly with a dauber in long even streaks. Several coats will even out the results. For best results allow it to dry thoroughly between applications. Once your boots are sufficiently black you will need to replace some of the oils that were lost due to the drying action of the alcohol in the dye. Select an oil or cream product from the list below and apply a light coat. This will also darken the boots somewhat. If your boots are chrome tanned there will already be a colored coating on your boots and a somewhat shiny surface. If the surface is reflective you might want to open the pores with steel wool, a scotch bright pad or sandpaper. In stubborn cases I have even used a power sander with a 300 grit belt to remove the old finish on boots before drying the black. Once the surface has opened pores you can proceed with the dyeing like you would for with vegetable tanned leather.

Polishing your boots

Once your leather has been dyed and the oil replaced I would recommend you apply a coat of black shoe polish. I like Kiwi brand but any good quality paste shoe polish will work. This will provide your leather with beautiful surfaces, even color and a nice sheen. I apply shoe polish with a shoe polish dauber brush. A clean cloth can be used for this but I greatly prefer how nicely the brush pushes the polish into the fibers of the leather. You have three main choices for color-- black, brown and natural (clear). I use black on black boots but for brown boots I have to choose between brown and natural. If I want an even brown color I choose the brown polish. However if the color is already where I want it to be I choose the natural polish which does not darken or alter the color. Once the paste polish is on the leather it should be allowed to dry for a few minutes. When dry the leather should be buffed. I use a good quality horse hair brush. This raises the sheen of the leather and further pushes the polish into the leather. If you want a really fine surface you can buff even further with a damp and then a dry lint free cloth or rag.

Drying your boots when they get wet

When boots get wet dry them slowly and naturally. Do not use heat to dry them. Putting your feet near a fire to warm your feet and dry your boots is the fastest way to ruin them. The leather will

become hard (like wood) and crack. If they are completely waterlogged you can stuff them with newspaper and set them in a well ventilated area. Change the newspaper daily. Another effective way to dry them is to wear them dry. The heat in your feet and the movement will allow them to dry slightly quicker than just leaving them alone. The added bonus of this is your boots with even further conform to the shape of your feet and fit better than ever.

Cleaning your boots

The best option for cleaning your boots is to wait until they are dry and brush off any dried mud or other material that may be on your boots. I have the head from a small natural bristle push broom that I have cut in half (which gave me 2) in my leather care kit. It is about 3" square and is very handy. If your boots are particularly saturated with dirt and mud you may opt to use saddle soap. Only do this sparingly since it can cause difficulty if done too frequently. If you get mildew (white spotting on the leather) your best tool is sunlight. Bright sunlight kills mold and mildew. Let the boots sit in direct sunlight for a few hours, rotating them to be sure all surface are exposed to the light. This will cause the spotting to disappear. You may need to brush off any flaky mildew from the surface. Really stubborn mold or mildew can be treated with vinegar on a paper towel. Do not saturate the boots just rub lightly. If you use vinegar you will need to lightly oil or grease your boots to replace the moisture that was lost from the acids in the vinegar.

Greasing/oiling your boots

This is an area of much confusion for reenactors. Some folks religiously oil or grease their boots with fine results. Some who oil their boots regularly have poor results with the entire boot falling apart or even disintegrating. Still other folks almost never grease or oil their boots and they have no trouble at all while others that so this have their boots crack and split. The solution to the problem is twofold--purpose and moderation. The first thing to consider in this matter is purpose; why are you putting oil into your boots? Are you softening the leather? Are you waterproofing the leather? Are you feeding dried out leather? Are you darkening the leather? All of these are valid reasons to oil or grease your boots. However each of these probably requires a different method. The second consideration is moderation. I have seen the best of intentions ruin high quality footwear with over enthusiastic application of grease and oil. This is not necessarily a "less is more" situation in the strictest sense of the phrase but more is definitely not always more. If you are one of the people who religiously applies grease or oil after each event you are probably doing more harm than good. Put down the oil and slowly back away from the boots.

Products to use

I use the first three products more than any others. Each of them has their place in my arsenal. If they are used properly each one can do a great job with your boots.

1. **Skidmores Leather cream:** I love this stuff. I use it on all of my boots before I ever wear them. It softens stiff leather, provides protection to the leather and makes the leather fairly water repellent. For most boots I only use this a single

time. I will reapply after a few years if the leather feels dry. I also use this on other leather straps and field gear. **(Cream)**

2. **SnoSeal:** This is my favorite product for greasing and waterproofing footwear. It is a thick ointment similar to vaseline. It is best applied to boots that are warmed by sitting in the hot sun for an hour. Put on a light coat and put the boots back in the hot sun until all the grease has been absorbed. One or two applications like this will keep you dry for months of hard use. I apply this to my boots no more than 2 times per year. If you are not able to use sunlight and natural warmth a hairdryer can provide the needed warmth. I would recommend against using your oven even on the lowest setting since the chances of forgetting and ruining your boots is fairly high. I will reapply a light coat if I am going to an event that is predicted to be extremely wet as insurance. **(Grease)**
3. **Obenauf's Leather oil:** This product is main go to for hardened and dry leather. A little goes a long way. When I encounter straps or leather parts on something that has been used hard by a reenactor I reach for this every time. I do not use it as often on footwear as I do on field gear. **(Oil)**
4. **Pecards Leather Dressing:** This product an excellent choice for hardened and dry leather. It also can be used as a waterproofing and softening agent for the leather. **(Paste)**
5. **Huberds shoe grease:** Extremely good for softening and preserving leather. It will darken the leather somewhat and provides a measure of waterproofing. It soaks into the leather more quickly than products like SnoSeal and does not make the leather as water resistant. It is a great all around single stop product. **(Grease)**
6. **Pecards Antique Leather Dressing:** This product is my go to for hardened and dry leather parts on an original item. **(Cream)**
7. **Obenauf's Leather preservative:** I use this product when I encounter straps or leather parts on something that has been used hard by a reenactor that will not be in the field immediately. It takes time to soak into the leather but it both softens and preserves the leather. It is a nice balance between a grease and an oil. **(Paste)**
8. **Saddle soap:** Used for cleaning boots that look dirty. Use this sparingly. It can moisturize stiff leather. Do not apply after every event. **(Cream)**
9. **Neetsfoot Oil:** Very good for softening and preserving leather. Caution must be used because too much will cause the stitching fibers to degrade, the leather to lose its structural integrity and glued elements to come unglued. Sparing application every year or two when leather feels particularly dry can be valuable. Do not apply after every event. **(Oil)**
10. **Mink oil:** Very good for softening and preserving leather. Caution must be used because too much will cause the stitching fibers to degrade, the leather to lose its structural integrity and glued elements to come unglued. Sparing application every year or two when leather feels particularly dry can be valuable. Do not apply after every event. **(Oil)**

11. **Olive Oil:** This is a very good, inexpensive, and ancient historical option for softening and preserving leather. Caution must be used because too much will cause the stitching fibers to degrade, the leather to lose its structural integrity and glued elements to come unglued. Sparing application every year or two when leather feels particularly dry can be valuable. Do not apply after every event.
(Oil)