

The Swiss flag and its origin

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THE SWISS FLAG AND ITS ORIGIN.

The Swiss flag is, when compared with those of the states of present day Europe, both one of the most ancient and one of the most modern. The white cross upon a red ground, which floats upon its folds, goes far back in history but it was not until the XIXth century that it became really, by popular consecration, our national flag, and by a decision of the competent authorities, the rallying sign of the Federal Army. This decision, due to the far-seeing initiative and perseverance of General Dufour, marked as one realises to-day, one of the first stages of the political unification of our Federative State.

Thus it was to this peace-making General to whom Switzerland owed the rapid termination of her crisis of growth (or growing pains) that we owe the adoption of the Federal flag by all the Cantons, and the victory over the Sonderbund. It cost him no less than ten years of persevering effort to insure this measure. He presented the proposition in 1830 at Geneva with the first declaration of the Confederation's neutrality, in a series of revolutions that threatened to draw the whole world into a European war.

Then a Colonel of Engineers, Guillaume Henry Dufour, insisted upon the organisation of all the defensive forces of the country. Among the questions which should, according to him, be placed before the High Assembly he specified that of the flag.

"The Diet," said he, "must see whether it is not advisable to give the Federal flag to all our battalions; the same cockade to all our soldiers. There is more importance than one thinks in having one unique flag, for the flag is the rallying point, the symbol of nationality. When one wears the same colours, when one fights under the same banner, one is more disposed to lend aid in danger; men become more truly brothers. But it seems that there have been some nuances, separating men, when they are ranged under different colours. Now in times of crisis there must be no nuances; one must do everything to form 'faisceaux'; recoil before no sacrifice, not even before old and honorable souvenirs. These souvenirs which I respect more than others, since they may become the source of the noblest actions, will not refuse to rally them-

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selves under one sole flag, the veritable national banner."

The idea was greeted with opposition, hesitation, and jealousy by many Cantons, justly proud of their individual banners.

Various assemblies in 1830 and 1832 studied the project, elaborating its details, and in 1835, thanks to Dufour's ingenuity in winning the military leaders of the Confederation to his idea, the majority of 17 Cantons voted for the measure.

In 1839 it was again put to vote: Berne, St. Gall, Vaud and Geneva recommending it: "Since the Federal Army should be animated by one single spirit, the Federal one. That all insignia of separate Cantons in which Switzerland is divided in times of peace, should disappear in time of danger when they must show themselves a single people, like one great family of brothers." The deputation of Zurich warmly seconded this. The Federal flag was finally adopted on 21st July, 1840.

Historically the red flag with a crucifix in the upper corner was the emblem of the Imperial liberty of the Canton of Schwyz, and carried with them at the battle of Morgarten, according to the ancient chronicle.

The Sacred Emblem being conceded to them by the head of the Holy Roman Empire, as a recompense for their valour. This record from the Berner Chronik of Conrad Justinger, was transcribed by the learned Dean of Einsiedeln, Albert de Bonstetten, who affirms that the King Rudolf of Habsburg was the monarch in question, whom the mountaineers had accompanied to Besançon in 1289. At the epoch of the Hohenstaufens the Imperial pennon bore an upright cross in the form of a crucifix upon a purple ground.

A beautifully illuminated Ms. of the XIIth century in the Stadtbibliothek at Berne shown two of these pennons; one of the Coronation of Henry VI at Rome in 1191, and again at the taking of Salerno in 1196. In the first the ground is purple, in the second it is red. At the Battle of Göllheim (1298) the King, Albert of Austria, and his competitor for the Empire, Adolf of Nassau, both had as battle flag a red standard with a white cross.

The Roman Emperors had formerly carried before them a purple standard upon which Constantine had placed the cross of Jesus Christ with this device, if one can credit the legend of his biographer Eusebius of Cesarea: 'In Hoc Signo Vinces' (Thou shalt conquer by this sign.)

The silken banners embroidered in gold presented by Pope Julius II. through the intermediary of his legate Cardinal Schinner to the Confederates who participated in the battle of Pavia, all bore religious emblems.

Those of the Forest Cantons, which are still in our days the object of special veneration, all present in the upper angle the image of Christ upon the cross.

In illuminated chronicles there is nearly always placed a crucifixion in white or in colour in the upper corner of the banner of Schwyz, nearest the staff. At Morgarten the victors wear upon their clothing a white cross.

On the contrary, the followers of Duke Leopold all wear a red cross, emblem of the House of Austria.

In more recent chronicles, dating from the epoch of Burgundian wars and those of Milan, a white cross with equal arms placed upon the clothing, so as to be

very visible, generally upon a red ground, is also the distinguishing mark of the Confederates.

Lacking the chronicle of Schwyz which is lost, one knows from that of Berne, that in 1339 the men of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, of Weissenbourg and Hasli, marched with the Bernese of Laupen. "All were marked with the sign of the Holy Cross, a cross of white stuff upon a red field." (Ein wiss crüz in einem roten velde.)

"All the Confederates," wrote Josias Simmler in his book upon the State of the Swiss, 1576, "wear in war a white straight cross."

This cross worn on the amour or a piece of clothing by the plain soldiers, was also upon the red scarves of the leaders. The chronicles, and as one can see for one's self by studying the rich historical collections at Zurich, Berne, Lucerne, Altdorf, Schwyz, Stans and Fribourg, the ancient painted glass windows and banners of the XVth and XVIth centuries, show it also on the flags.

It was at the epoch of the Suabian war and on the Rhine that the Federal flag as such, first floated in the breeze in 1499. It was confided to a free company of paid soldiers, forming the little garrison of the tiny fort of Coblenz, which commanded the passage of the river to its confluence with the Aare.

The cross upon the écu (money) of Schwyz is mentioned officially in 1553, under the name of Federal Cross. (Eidgenossen Crütz). The gold medal which the Diet in 1547 had struck by Hans Jacob Stampfer, of Zurich, on the occasion of the baptism of the second daughter of Henry II., King of France, of whom the Confederation was the godmother, bears in the centre of the coats of arms of the thirteen Cantons and of their allies, a straight cross with arms of equal length.

It has been shown how in the course of the XIXth century, the Federal colours definitely replaced, in the camps those of the twenty-two sovereign states. The flag of a people is a thing that one does not improvise. Nothing here could replace the work of Time. For a flag to speak to the hearts of children, it must have been carried by the fathers or recall great memories. Then only is it what it should be.

The ancient Swiss surrounded their flag with respect and love. The great rectangular banners of the Cantons deposited at the town hall or with the banneret (standard bearer) were only unfurled when the honor or existence of the State was in question, and when all the militia were called to arms. They were the object of the greatest care. The banneret, who was responsible for it, was a high magistrate. He was surrounded by a numerous guard chosen from among the most valiant at Berne; the four first had to swear to watch over the banner, and if the banneret fell to seize it or hold it high, or hand it from one to the other and never abandon it until death. The others took an oath "to stay with the banner, and aid in defending it, to hold and protect it and to sacrifice their lives for it."

This banner was for the Swiss the symbol of the Mother Country.

They gave their lives for it with a heroism of which history has preserved numerous examples. In foreign service, as well as at home, our fathers have always considered their ensigns as the visible sign of the oath taken, as the emblem of fidelity to military duty.

Arbedo, Grandson, Marignan, Cappel, Malplaquet, the Tuileries, the Beresina have all been witness of it.

In our days, in our eyes, the Swiss flag is something still more. It is the dazzling symbol of national unity, a unity realised in spite of the greatest obstacles, in spite of the diversity of races, of languages, of religion, upon the basis of democracy by the conscious will of populations animated by the same ideal.

From this flag of a little nation born of the spontaneous union of twenty-two Republics, there sprang into life the neutralised international flag which extends its protecting folds over the work of the Red Cross. The plenipotentiaries of thirty-five States who gathered on July 6th, 1906, for the revision of the Geneva Convention wished to state it in these terms: "In homage to Switzerland the heraldic sign of the Red Cross upon a white ground, formed by inversion of the Federal colours, is now maintained as a distinctive emblem of sanitary service in armies."

This nation, ancient by reason of its history, is modern in its aspirations.

Its flag is resplendent as the banner of the victors of Morgarten, first victory of liberty in the Middle Ages. One might say that this flag symbolizes the whole national life of our people: their thirst for independence, their ideal of justice and Christian brotherhood; their 'raison d'être' in Europe. When it passes at the head of our battalions everyone must take off his hat to it. It is six centuries of liberty passing by.



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