

## THE THREE FLAGS OF GENERAL BELGRANO

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The revolution that took place in Buenos Aires, on May 25, 1810, saw a display of white and red ribbons<sup>1</sup> – the local colours since the British Invasions of 1806–07<sup>2</sup>. Red and white stood for liberty and union respectively, and were, of course, the first Argentine colours under which monarchists and republicans rallied, in their struggle against the Spaniards, even though they simulated loyalty to the captive king Ferdinand VII. And Buenos Aires even had a secret flag, which probably had the same colours<sup>3</sup>.

In August of the same year, José de Moldes was appointed Lieutenant Governor of the city of Mendoza by the Junta of Buenos Aires. He was one of many patriots who wanted a complete break with the mother country. After forming two companies of local halberdiers, on orders from the Junta, Moldes gave them and himself also a new cockade, somewhere between October and December<sup>4</sup>. It was white with a sky-blue ground, white meant the clouds of tyranny (of Spain, and may be of Buenos Aires too, since it was the emblem of the conservative dominated Junta), while sky-blue stood for the South (the provinces of the River Plate, meaning of course regional autonomy as well).

Moldes had lived in Spain and had served in the Royal Life Guards. So, he must have learned much about European cockades, which the French Revolution had made fashionable in those days, and he could also have seen a famous collection of prints of Swiss cantonal uniforms by Franz Feyerabend. Blue and white cockades can be seen in those engravings, which were peculiar to Zurich, Zug, and Lucerne. One belonging to this last Canton is identical to Moldes' creation, and also to the one of the Republic of San Marino, adopted in 1797. And they were also the colours of British liberals and freemasons<sup>5</sup>, since the 18<sup>th</sup> century at least. Moldes might have had them in mind as well: in 1808 he had been an agent in British pay, who had to counter French propaganda in Buenos Aires, apart from spreading the revolutionary gospel. Whatever his inspiration, white and blue were liberal republican emblems to him. But Moldes was not the first patriot of the New World to create a blue and white symbol; for example, the Bahia Revolution («Inconfidência Bahiana») of 1798 in Portuguese Brasil had a sky-blue and white flag with stars<sup>6</sup>; and the Mexicans under the leadership of the priest Miguel Hidalgo raised flags with the same colours (those of the ancient Aztec Empire) in October 1810<sup>7</sup>.

As to Moldes' emblem, it probably was received with hostility by the very traditionalist Mendocinos and, furthermore, the Junta put away Moldes' project: the so called «mask of Ferdinand» had to be maintained at all costs, even though everyone knew that the matter was after independence from royalist domination. But someone in the government passed on the secret of Moldes' cockade to a liberal partisan called Domingo French. This ardent revolutionary was colonel of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment «of America», that had a red star as its badge. French lost no time in imposing the white

and blue ribbon on his men, in January 1811. This was an open gesture of defiance against the president of the Junta, Colonel Cornelio de Saavedra. For there was a rift between liberals, citizens of Buenos Aires the most of them, and conservatives, provincials in the majority. Moldes' colours soon became those of Buenos Aires, but he never got any credit for them.

Shortly after the conservative coup d'état of April 5–6, the Liberal Patriotic Society and the America Regiment which supported it, were prosecuted and purged by Saavedra. And also the bicolour cockade was forbidden. White ribbons and Spanish red cockades prevailed, together with the idea of an autonomous union within the Spanish Empire. But in August, Saavedra was overthrown by the opposition, and in the following month blue and white ribbons became all the rage in Buenos Aires. Even some republican units, like French's, adopted it, while pro-monarchist regiments stuck to the old badge. This state of affairs dragged on until a decree of February 18, 1812 abolished the red emblem and replaced it with the republican one<sup>8</sup>. Ironically, this was due to Colonel Manuel Belgrano's insistence in the adoption of a national emblem, he who was a conservative and monarchist. But he also was a staunch partisan of liberty, and an anglophile like his friend Moldes. Since red was the colour of both Ferdinand's and Joseph Bonaparte's supporters, the liberal rulers had only to take the badge of the Patriotic Society and declare it a national one. But naval and military flags still remained Spanish.

The government soon sent Belgrano to the village of Rosario near the Paraná River, to build a couple of batteries, to stave off possible attacks from Montevideo based royalist corsairs. Rosario was a hotbed of trouble for patriots. Spanish merchants living there engaged in intrigues against the cause of Buenos Aires. And Belgrano, who heartily hated the Spaniards, had to proceed accordingly. He most likely forced them to let him have the necessary material for the flag he had in mind. The new flag was hoisted, on Belgrano's orders, over battery «Libertad», between Rosario and the river, between the end of February and the beginning of March. His banner was white and sky-blue, in two horizontal bands<sup>9</sup>, and made of wool no doubt. A painting of the battle of Sumaypata (1814) by Velazco, the royalist commander at the battle, shows a patriot flag identical to Belgrano's<sup>10</sup>: The flag had two horizontal stripes, white and sky-blue, and belonged to the «Cochabamba Division» of Colonel Arenales, who had defeated Velazco. French artist François Casimir Carbonnier painted in 1815 in London a portrait of Belgrano, showing in the background two horizontally divided flags of white over sky-blue. The Buenos Aires government was shocked to learn about this flag, and sent an order to Belgrano to lower it and put it away. Belgrano never received the order, since he had left Rosario to take command of the «Auxiliary Army of Peru» in the northern provinces<sup>11</sup>. And Belgrano's replacement at Rosario must have hidden it away or destroyed it. Thus the very brief life of Belgrano's first flag.

Once he was in the city of Jujuy, Belgrano, now a general, had another banner made, of the same colours, but smaller and of silk<sup>12</sup>. And just in time for the second anniversary of the May Revolution. Belgrano,

speaking to the people and the troops told them that they had a flag that distinguished them from all nations and that God had granted it to them, to sustain it before the enemy. So, for Belgrano, white and blue were the colours of the King of Heaven, that is monarchist and catholic, and nothing else. Buenos Aires once again reproached Belgrano of disobedience this time, and warned him to desist from further acts of enthusiasm. When he learned of this, Belgrano felt hurt. He had had no intention of disobeying the government, having thought that it had approved his flag. And he promised to destroy the flag. Doubtless, he kept his word, for we know no more of it. So his second banner also had as short an existence as his first. Meanwhile, blue and white flags were being displayed in Buenos Aires on certain occasions. They were tolerated by the State, which still had not adopted them officially. National flags were still Spanish.

After a forced exodus from Jujuy, in face of enemy threats, Belgrano and his army established themselves at Tucumán. And while preparing a counter offensive, Belgrano decided to have a third flag made, this time for the army, in January 1813. It was the same as the second one. Buenos Aires agreed that it should be only an army standard, not a national one. But for Belgrano and the inhabitants of northern Argentina it would always be the «Flag of the Fatherland». So there were two 'national' flags at the time, Belgrano's official Army flag with two horizontal bands of white and sky-blue and the unofficial sky-blue and white triband of Buenos Aires. Advancing once more towards Salta, Belgrano's banner stirred great enthusiasm among the simple folk he encountered, who also idolised him; they wanted to sacrifice themselves for him and for his flag (as a folk song of the time says<sup>13</sup>). Finally, the bicour colour flag was present at the battle of Salta, which ended in victory for the patriot arms.

With him, Belgrano brought large division or brigade flags furnished by Buenos Aires, the same as his own in colour and design, and had them distributed among the patriot divisions, that would soon wage guerrilla warfare on the enemy in Salta and in the provinces of Upper Peru. The stripes of those flags were white and sky-blue, just like Belgrano's flag. These banners were commonly used by Upper Peruvian irregulars for many years, may be until the end of the war<sup>14</sup>. One of those irregular units, for example, still had the white and sky-blue two-band colour in December 1817.

After the victory of Salta, Belgrano suffered defeat at Vilacapugio and Ayohuma (1813–14), but managed to save his flag and maintain the love and loyalty of his men. Belgrano left command of the army to José de San Martín, yet another of his friends and also a convinced monarchist. In 1815, José Rondeau, another commander-in-chief of the «Army of Peru», had his army destroyed by the royalists at Sipe-Sipe (or Viluma), and retreated south, together with Belgrano's flag that saw triumph only once, and no more. In 1816, Belgrano reassumed command of the army, and had independence sworn in with his battle-worn banner at Tucumán. And on September 24, the now official blue, white and blue flag replaced his own as the «Army of Peru's» flag. Belgrano solemnly left his banner as a relic in the cathedral of Tucumán<sup>15</sup>.

The triband flag of Buenos Aires had become the «minor» national flag in 1816, after independence had been declared in Tucumán on July 9. In 1818 the flag became the navy ensign as well, with addition of a golden sun in the central white stripe.

Yet another flag was derived from the flag of Belgrano: the flag of San Martín. This friend of Belgrano's had of course known those flags very well, if briefly, in 1814<sup>16</sup>. Later, in 1816, while forming the «Army of the Andes» for the purpose of liberating Chile, general San Martín created a flag for his army. white and blue, like that of Belgrano, with the addition of the national coat-of-arms established in 1813<sup>17</sup>. A perfect blend, one might say, of monarchist and republican symbols, and a vibrant call to arms against a common enemy, of what was considered a national flag by many. The flag of the Andes was at the victory of Chacabuco, the defeat of Cancha Rayada, and in the final triumph of Maipo (or Maipu), in 1817–1818. San Martín's standard appears in a rather mediocre lithograph, which has only documentary value, and which shows general San Martín carrying the flag in front of his troops (which in fact he never did) [Fig. 1]. The lithograph was published in London in 1819 by a certain T. E. Brown, and is a proof of the influence of Belgrano's banner upon San Martín's. Even the Chileans hoisted white and blue flags before adopting a new tricolour<sup>18</sup>.

Before the Peruvian expedition of 1820, San Martín's battalions received their new flags before setting sail from Valparaíso. Those banners were the local tricolour based on the Andes flag, the original Andes flag remaining in Chile. The book by Bartolomé Mitre «Historia de San Martín», published in 1876, contains a chromolithograph picture of a flag believed to be the «Flag of the Andes» [Fig. 2]. One interesting and rare example of a flag from that period is the one of the «Artillery Battalion of the Andes» [Fig. 3], which is preserved today at the National Historical Museum of Montevideo, Uruguay<sup>19</sup>. The same museum keeps the flag of the No. 9 Infantry Regiment, a unit of Belgrano's Army of the Andes [Fig. 4]: This flag with blue, white and blue horizontal stripes was probably made in Tucumán, between 1816 and 1819, and used until the unit was dissolved in 1820<sup>20</sup>. Interestingly, the central white stripe with the unit emblem is of double width than each the blue ones.

Soon after the Cisplatine War between Argentina and the Brazilian Empire, a long and very bloody civil war took place between the federalists (autonomists) and the unitarians (liberals or centralists). During this civil war Belgrano's third and last flag was taken from Tucumán cathedral in 1831 by the unitarian general Gregorio Aráoz de Lamadrid, who had been a veteran of the war of independence and one of Belgrano's favourite officers. Lamadrid gave the flag to the 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion «of Chasseurs», that had fought in Brasil. No doubt Lamadrid sought to raise his men's spirits with a flag that most of them remembered. On November 4 of the same year, Lamadrid's army was smashed at the citadel of Tucumán by another veteran, general Juan Facundo Quiroga, a much feared paladin of federalism in the provinces<sup>21</sup>. The 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion lost its banner to a federal unit, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Regiment of «Auxiliaries of the Andes», com-

manded by yet another old soldier, José Ruiz Huidobro. Belgrano's bicolour was kept by Quiroga as a trophy for some time, until he gave it to Ruiz Huidobro as a gift.

In June 1836, Ruiz Huidobro was at San Luis, on a special mission across the provinces, on orders from general Juan Manuel de Rosas, leader of the Argentine Confederation and bitter foe of unitarians. Ruiz Huidobro decided to send Rosas the flag, stating that it had forbidden colours<sup>22</sup>, which in fact was wrong, since only sky-blue and green, the liberals' colours, had been suppressed by Rosas, who favoured red, white and dark blue<sup>23</sup>. We suppose that Rosas received the banner, but we do not know what happened to it afterwards. There is no proof that Rosas had it destroyed, and he cannot be blamed for its loss either, not without proof, at least. He used to keep captured flags, though, as is demonstrated during his campaign to the Desert in 1833, where he carried an old bicolour flag<sup>24</sup>.

Such is the story of Belgrano's three flags, incomplete though it may be. They exist no more, but at least shreds of information have helped us to preserve their memory, which, of course, belongs to their immortal creator.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Martín V. Lazcano, «Las Sociedades Secretas, Políticas y Masónicas en Buenos Aires», Buenos Aires, El Ateneo, 1927, t.I, cap.VII, pp.119-123.  
<sup>2</sup> David Prando, «La Enseña de los Voluntarios de la Unión», in: «Boletín del Club del Soldado de Plomo», Bs. As., año 17, 4a secc., 30 nov. 1991, pp.19-21.  
<sup>3</sup> David Prando, «Una Secreta Bandera Argentina en 1810», in: «Historia», Bs. As., año XII, segunda serie, n° 45, marzo-mayo 1992, pp.33-35.

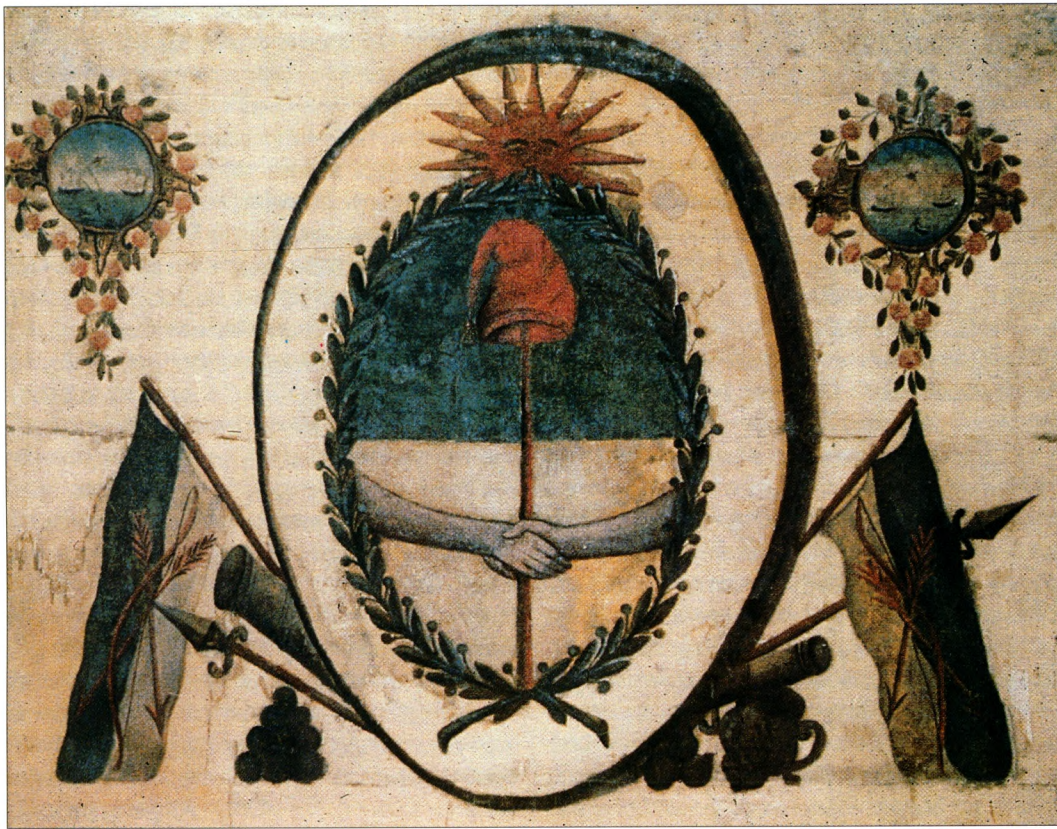
<sup>4</sup> David Prando, «José de Moldes, el Verdadero Creador de la Escarapela Argentina», in: «Historia», Bs. As., año IX, segunda serie, n° 35, sept-nov. 1989, pp.109-113.  
<sup>5</sup> Patricio José Maguire, «Los Colores de la Bandera Nacional y los de la Masonería Inglesa», in: «Boletín del Instituto Revignani», Bs. As., año XIV-XV, segunda serie, t. XIV-XV, n. 24-25, 1970-71, pp.118-140.  
<sup>6</sup> Clovis Ribeiro, «Brazoes e Bandeiras do Brazil», Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo Editora, 1933, pp.132-133 and 135.  
<sup>7</sup> Joel Roberts Poinsett, [A Citizen of the United States], «A View of South America and Mexico», New York, H. Huntington, Jr., 1826, vol. I, VIII, p.137.  
<sup>8</sup> R. H. Marfany, «Origen de la Bandera Argentina» in: «Boletín de la Academia Nacional de Historia», IV-LV, Bs. As., 1981-82, pass. .  
<sup>9</sup> Marfany, «Origen . . .», op. cit. .  
<sup>10</sup> «Archivo Arenales», in: «Archivo General de la Nación», Bs. As., boxes 10 and 13, pass.  
<sup>11</sup> Mario Belgrano, «Historia de Belgrano», Bs. As., Espasa-Calpe, 1944, pass. . Note: This author was the first to notice that the bicolour flag depicted in his ancestor's portrait had only two horizontal bands. Sadly, few historians took him serious.  
<sup>12</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>13</sup> Juan Alfonso Carrizo, «Cancionero Popular de Jujuy», Tucumán, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán, 1939, pass. , and MCMXXXIV, pass. .  
<sup>14</sup> Eduardo Ocampo Moscoso, «Historia de la Bandera Nacional», Cochabamba, 1954, segunda parte, p.40.  
<sup>15</sup> Ernesto J. Fitte, «Banderas que ondearon en la Patria», in: «Anales del Instituto Belgraniano Central», Bs. As., n° 2, 1980, pp.29-30.  
<sup>16</sup> David Prando, «Identificación de una Bandera de los Andes», in: «Boletín del Soldado de Plomo», Bs. As., año 18, 4a secc., 5 dic. 1992, pp.7-9.  
<sup>17</sup> Manuel de Olazábal, «Memorias», Bs. As., Instituto Sanmartiniano, 1942, pass. .  
<sup>18</sup> Dardo Corvalán Mendilaharsu, «La Estrella Chilena», in: «La Nación», Bs. As., miércoles 18 sept., 1940, p.6.  
<sup>19</sup> Prando, «Identificación . . .», op. cit. .  
<sup>20</sup> David Prando, «El pabellón del Regimiento 9 de Infantería», in: «Boletín del Club del Soldado de Plomo», Año 17, n° 18, Bs. As., 1991, pp.22-23.  
<sup>21</sup> Silvestre Peña y Lullo, «Juan Facundo Quiroga en Cuyo», Mendoza, 1981, cap. XI, pp.87-88. See here as well: Ap. Doc., doc. N° 70, «Quiroga a varios gobernadores», Tucumán, 6 nov. 1831, pp. 242-44.  
<sup>22</sup> «Ruiz Huidobro a Rosas, San Luis, 8 jun. 1836», in: Fitte, op. cit.; and in: A. G. N., «Archivo Farini», VII-3-3-6, doc. n° 93.  
<sup>23</sup> Juan A. Pradère, «Juan Manuel de Rosas. Su Iconografía», Bs. As., J. Mendesk y Hijo, 1914, pass. .  
<sup>24</sup> Jorge María Ramallo, «Dos Banderas de Rosas en el Museo Histórico Nacional. El Silencio en su Torno», in: «Revista del Instituto Juan Manuel de Rosas», Bs. As., tercer trimestre, n° 17, 1958, pp.95-101.

left: Fig. 1  
Lithograph of 1819 by T. E. Brown (detail), showing General San Martín carrying the Andes Army flag.

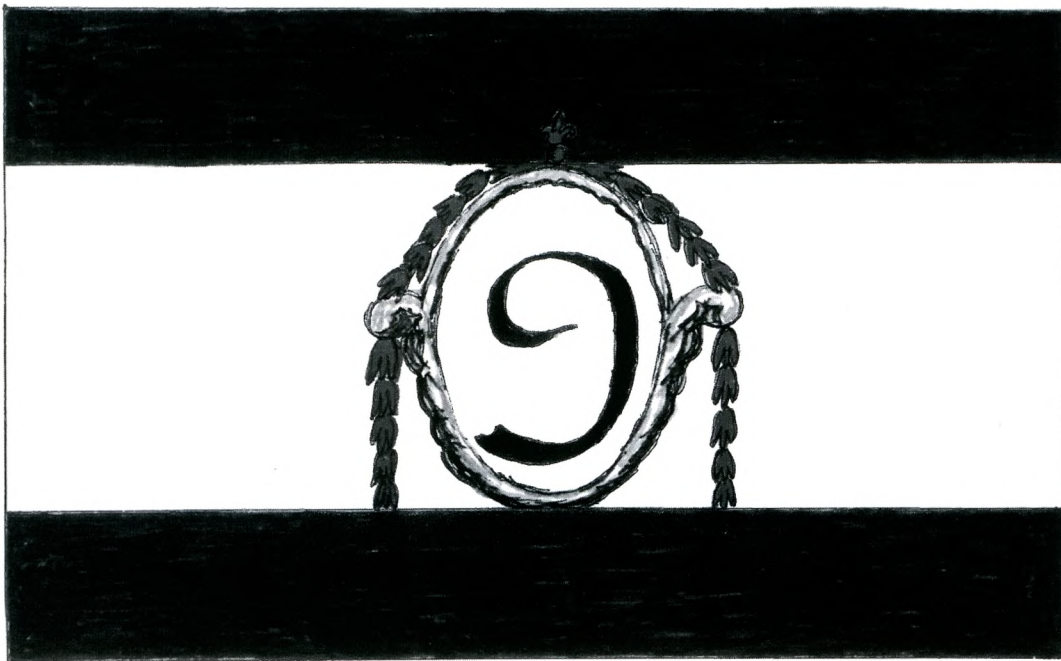


right: Fig. 2  
A 1876 lithograph of the supposed «Flag of the Andes», in B. Mitre's «Historia de San Martín».





**Fig. 3**  
Original colour of the «Artillery Battalion of the Andes» (National Historical Museum, Montevideo).



**Fig. 4**  
Blue-white-blue triband flag of the 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the Army of the Andes, 1816/19–1820. The black unit number is within a golden oval with a red wreath. (Artwork by the author)