THE MILITARY FLAGS OF BERN: A CONCISE HISTORY

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Whereas the flag of the town and canton of Bern is well known, its history and the development of military flags of Bern has rarely been the object of research. Allow me to trace the vexillological history of Bern with special attention to its military flags. Bern was founded in 1191 by Berchtold of Zähringen. After becoming a town in 1218, Bern started using a seal with a bear[1] [**ill.1**] - the oldest seal we know is dated 1224 and shows a bear marching upwards to the right[2]. It seems as the flag of the town originally had a black bear on white cloth, as is reported in the chronicle of Justinger[3], written in the early 15th century. Whereas Justinger has no pictures, both the chronicles of Tschachtlan[4] (1470) and of Schilling[5] (1485) [**ill. 2**] depict this probably first flag of Bern. The chronicles refer, that the flag was torn in a battle against duke Rudolf of Hapsburg in 1289. As a consequence of this defeat, the Bernese decided to alter the design of their flag [**ill. 3**], with the black bear now marching on a yellow bend[6] on red, in the form we know today.

There is no material evidence for this interpretation, but it seems credible if we compare the seal and the evolution of the coat-of-arms. We know that Bern had first a seal and a flag[7], adding only later to its state symbols a coat-of-arms which derived from the flag. The Historic Museum of Bern (HMB) keeps a heavy wooden shield [**ill. 4**] dating from the end of the 14th century, with the arms as we know them today painted on it[8]. The oldest existing Bernese coat-of-arms is to be seen on a capitol at the town hall dated 1412[9], and the first coin bearing these arms was minted in 1492[10]. The colours red and yellow are taken from the arms of the Zähringer family[11], the bear obviously is an allusion to the name of the town, the coat-of-arms being canting arms[12].

It is not known, whether the new flag was made immediately after the battle. The chronicles first show it during the battle of Wangen in 1298. We have to wait until 1375 to have an exact written proof of the banner in the so-called „Guglerlied", a song about the war of Bern against English mercenaries[13]. This date is quite close to the first material evidence of the coloured coat-of-arms.
Unhappily enough not a single of such very first Bernese banners [**ill. 5**] has survived, the last ones having been taken from the arsenal by French troops in 1798. The trophies were sent to Paris, where they were burned as a symbol of the detested ancien régime.

The banner with the bear represented the whole town and state in its full power. It was the most important flag and was only carried into battle by the main force when the state was in danger[14]. All the subjects and allies had to follow with their main banners in the line of battle.
Less important military actions, where only a minor force was necessary, were fought under a flag second in importance: this was the „venli" [**ill. 6 5**], which you may call the „little flag" and which generally consisted of a triangular flag with the state, town or county colours.

Bern makes an exception to this rule, since its „venli" was red with a white cross, as can be seen on the old Chronicles. We do not know, at which time the Bernese „venli" came into use, but evidence points to the second quarter of the 14th century[15].

Such a „venli" [**ill. 7**], dating from the end of the 14th c. is exposed in the Historic Museum in Bern.

Before the battle of Laupen in 1339 a white cross of linen was placed on clothes and armour of Bernese troops and their allies as a common emblem. Saint Maurice of the Thebean Legion use1d to be depicted with a cross flag, like all saints. Saint Ursus, which was highly venerated in Bern used to be depicted holding a red flag with a white cross. The Bernese „venli" probably derives from these Christian symbols[16].

A number of Bernese towns and counties had „little flags" of their own [**ill. 8**], a picture from the Schilling chronicle shows those of Thun and of Bern.

On rare occasions, a different „venli" was used [**ill. 9**]. In 1477, during the war against Charles the Bold, the confederates sent an expeditionary force to Nancy. The Schilling chronicle depicts the Bernese troops carrying a square „little flag" with the state colours red and black defaced with the common emblem of the Swiss confederates, a white cross.

On 26 April 1513, a few weeks before the battle of Novara, Bern announced to his ally Solothurn a change in its little flag [**ill. 10**]; the upper two quarters of its red „venli" were changed to black. A stained glass plate from 1532 depicting on its upper part the battle of Novara shows this new „venli" of the town of Bern[17].

The third flag in importance was the „Schützenfähnlein", or „shooting troop" flag, which usually had a triangular shape as well, and which belonged to companies of archers and crossbowmen, and later to such of riflemen[18]. This pennant of a riflemen company [**ill. 11**], dating from the second half of the 15th c., is the oldest such one in the Historic Museum of Bern. It is the oldest existing flag on which the Bernese coat-of-arms is shown.

Another pennant [**ill. 12**] kept in the HMB, red with golden devices, has the date 1531 inscribed on the crossbow. This „Schützenfähnlein" may have been copied from earlier flags [**ill. 13**], since the Chronicles of the 15th c. already show riflemen companies with red pennants very similar to the one in the HMB.

These three types of flags did not only serve to characterise the degree of power deployment of the state, they also served as flags for the vanguard, the main force and the rear-guard of an army and as command flags in battle. The order of precedence of the flags was jealously defended and dispute between the troops about privileges and honours of their banners was common[19].

There have been trumpet banners as well [**ill. 14**], as can be appreciated in this picture from the Tschachtlan chronicle, showing the Bernese main force approaching Thun in 1340.

Bern expanded its territory by conquest and alliances, becoming the most important military power of the confederation. Several towns and counties subject to Bern were conferred the right to carry into battle their own banners, giving precedence of course to the Bernese flag

or „venli"[20] Some of these heraldic banners from the 15th c. still exist, like this one from Hasli in the Oberland [**ill. 15**], or this one from Thun [**ill. 16**].

The main banner of Thun has a „Schwenkel", which apparently was cut after the battle of Murten[21]. Whereas the „Schwenkel" is an addition to the banner, well-known in Germanic usage at least by the 14th century[22], its significance remains unknown in most cases[23], including that of Thun.
A stained glass plate [**ill. 17**] dated 1515 depicts the banner of Aarberg, whereas another glass plate of 1566 [**ill. 18**] shows the banner of Saanen.

The custom of presenting little stained glass plates with the emblems of the state to allied cantons became increasingly popular in Switzerland from the early 15th century on[24] . Beautiful stained glass plates [**ill. 19**], like this one from 1514, with the arms of subject territories or districts, were used for the embellishment of council rooms[25].

Bernese military actions decreased in number after the second quarter of the 16th century, the old banners being less needed. Flags began more and more to show different sizes and patterns than the traditional ones, colours in the flags shifted from the state or town colours to the personal colours of the noblemen leading the units[26]. This flag in the HMB [**ill. 20**] shows the coat-of-arms of the noble François Seigneux below the cantonal arms on a red rectangular flag. It can be dated to about 1560. It belonged to the garrison unit of Lausanne, which this nobleman commanded. It is one of the earliest flags from this new vexillollogical period still existing.

During the late 16th and early 17th century striped patterns [**ill. 21**] became popular too, like the one of this flag belonging to the 5th company of the 2nd regiment from Lower Argovia. The flag was lost during the religious war between the cantons at the battle of Villmergen in 1656. The catholic canton of Lucerne, winner of that battle, had the trophies carefully registered and depicted in a flag-book[27], which is kept in the Swiss National Museum and which can be dated back to the immediate time after the battle of Villmergen. Another Bernese flag [**ill. 22**] probably lost at the same battle is that of an unknown company from the French speaking part of the canton[28].

The development of warfare made it necessary to modernize the militia system, and the government tried several times to remodel the units, but tradition and love for the old banners, the privileges of a powerful noble class, the selfconsciesness of rich towns and the proudness and independence of mountain counties made it very difficult to introduce new unit structures and uniform flags.

The government had decided already in 1595 to reorganise its army into 13 military units, called „Fähnlein" or little flags, and to give each of those a „venli" with a white cross on red and black cloth, like the little flag of the town of Bern, which was still in use. This project however never came into effect due to resistance mainly of the subject counties, which would not give up their beloved old banners. Again in 1598 the government tried to persuade its military leaders to adopt flags with a white cross[29]. It took until 1614 to have the newly constituted regional county units adopt flags with a white cross as a common pattern, like those we have just seen.
Tradition often prevailed; this armorial banner of 1623 [**ill. 23**] was carried into battle at Villmergen in 1656 by the company from the town of Wiedlisbach[30], which according to the orders from Bern should have had a flag with a white cross.

Another type of flag popular from the 16th to the 18th century was the „Amtsfahne", the flag of administrative districts, usually in the form of an armorial banner, and from 1598 on more often with a white cross quartering the colours of the district. These flags ranked behind all

the other military flags and they came into use in militia units mainly in counties because of the restricted rights to use banners and „venli".

Only a few of those flags have survived until today, one of the earlier ones [**ill. 24**] is the district flag of Büren, dated 1610 and kept in the HMB. This district flag of Fraubrunnen [**ill. 25**] from the end of the 18th century bears the popular motto PRO DEO ET PATRIA. The blue and yellow colours are the livery colours of the von May family, of which a member was bailiff at the time.

Since Bern had a militia system, counties and towns usually formed smaller units with their own flags. These troops were united into larger units, batallions or regiments, which in turn had flags too. The army carried district flags, town and county flags, some were old armorial banners, some were new flags according to regulations, and there were flags of mercenary units too, called „Freifahnen" (=free colours). These units were set up by patricians with men from their posessions. All the various changes in military organization meant a change in flags too, old flags being laid down, new ones created or old ones changed, regiment names being sewn in gold on the flags and in many cases unit names being altered.

The period from the second quarter of the 16th century until end of the 17th century is thus vexillologically characterised by a vast variety of different types of flags, though more and more flags began to show the white cross.

The first official Bernese flag regulation to come into effect dates from 1668[31]. It introduced red square flags with black fringes, showing a white cross and the local emblem in gold in the upper hoist quarter. Only two such flags have survived, they have been registered by Bruckner in 1942 but they have almost disintegrated meanwhile. Paul Schulthess was a flag collector of the late 19th century, who painted all the old flags kept in museums into a booklet[32]. This booklet, now in the possession of the Swiss National Museum, shows the militia flag of Büren [**ill. 26**] from about 1670, it has no fringes, and the emblem is white instead of gold. This flag [**ill. 27**] belonged to the Thierachern militia from the same period, with a golden emblem, but again no fringes.
Not only was the 1668 regulation carried out reluctantly, it also did not apply to the French speaking part of the canton, which continued to use the old banners.

The text of the second flag regulation issued in 1703 exists no more, but we know from other sources[33] that it urged the colonels to provide their regiments with flags having red and black flames and a white cross, only a few towns and the Obersimmental being allowed to keep their old armorial banners. This new model obviously was inspired by the „venli" of 1513 and by the flags of the Swiss regiments in France, mainly by the flag of the Bernese regiment von Erlach [**ill. 28**], which carried this flag in 1672[34]. The red flames of the flag, which is in the HMB, have become yellowish with time.

Many Swiss nobles made a military career in French service and brought their flags and military traditions back home, thus greatly influencing the Swiss military organisation.This lead soldiers display Swiss regimental flags [**ill.29**] in French service, as they were in 1764[35].

The military flags were altered in 1713 in the way as to contain the coat-of-arms of the city, of the county or of the colonel in the centre of the white cross [**ill. 30**]. The HMB had some of the flags they kept painted into a book at the end of the 19th century[36], so that today, where most of these flags have disappeared, we have an accurate document of them. This water-colour shows the remains of a company flag from Brugg, with red flames diagonally crossing a black field, quartered by a white cross.

The wreath around the arms was officially abolished on all flags in 1725.
All illustrations, if there ever were any, accompanying the flag regulations and other ordinances concerning military flags of Bern have been lost. Thus we do not know exactly, how the pattern of flames might have looked at each period. Also do we have to consider, that regulations were obeyed reluctantly, that most flag regulations contained exceptions and that flags were in many cases only adapted to new patterns instead of being newly made for reasons of economy.

This company flag [**ill. 31**] with red flames on black is kept in the town hall of Saanen and may well have been made after 1725, but before 1730. This flag of the company of Schenkenberg [**ill. 32**] from the flag-book in the HMB has red flames on black and no wreath. Note, that the number of flames also varied from one flag to another.

The same flag-book shows the flag [**ill. 33**] of the 3rd Oberland regiment, which has the usual red diagonal flames on black used prior to 1730. The big-sized arms of the Upper Simmenthal are placed in the centre of the cross, which bears a golden inscription.

The HMB possesses a series of water-colours of 18th century Bernese flags made by Karl Buri at the end of the 19th century [**ill. 34**]: This regimental flag of Burgdorf has diagonal flames but no arms in the centre of the cross, whereas the flag of the 3rd regiment of Upper-Argovia [**ill. 35**] has different flames for each the 1st and 4th and for the 2nd and 3rd quarter.

In 1730 yet another flag regulation came into effect [**ill. 36**], changing the diagonal pattern of the red and black flames into a radial form with the centre of the radius in the middle of the cross, as can be seen on this company flag of Yverdon, made in 1741[37]. Also was red and black inverted in two of the 4 quarters, resulting in two quarters with red flames on black and two quarters with black flames on red.

Sometimes the quarters changed alternately and sometimes both upper quarters or both quarters at the hoist showed the same colour distribution.

The last flag regulation of the ancien régime, dated 13 January 1766, abolished all prerogatives. All the flags had to be sent to the arsenal in Bern to be altered so to contain no coat-of-arms nor any other emblem. Only the name of the regiment was to be placed on the horizontal bar of the cross[38], like in the flag of the Vevey regiment from 1769 [**ill. 37**].The two quarters at the hoist are red with black flames, whereas those at the fly are black with red flames. Nevertheless 5 exceptions were made to the 1766 regulation: the regimental flag of the Obersimmenthal county and the company-flags of the garrisons of 4 towns in Argovia (Brugg, Aarau, Zofingen and Lenzburg) were allowed to keep their arms on the flag.
The flag of the Zofingen town company was such an exception [**ill. 38**].

In 1782 the names of regiments were changed. The 3rd regiment of Lower Argovia changed its name to Zofingen regiment [**ill. 39**]. According to the regulation issued six years before, the new Zofingen regimental flag on this water-colour by Buri had no arms, only its name in gold was placed on the cross. There was a flag for the whole Zofingen regiment, whereas its companies, like the garrison company of the town of Zofingen, had flags of their own too.

The flags of the Vevey regiment, of the Zofingen town company and [**ill. 40**] this one of the Lenzburg town company are taken from Bruckner[39]. We know this Lenzburg flag to have

been made in May 1767[40] according to the privilege to maintain its arms and even the diagonal pattern of red flames on black.

Bernese cavalry standards are first mentioned in 1663, but none of that era are known to exist. First they used to be red with the arms of the county or town, later they were similar to the infantry colours, but of smaller size[41]. The HMB keeps a couple of cavalry standards. One can be dated to about 1730 [**ill. 41**]. It belonged to a dragoon company composed of cavalrymen from various regions of the French speaking part of the canton and it shows the arms of Bern in the honour position, followed by those of Lausanne, Yverdon, Morges, Nyon and Romainmôtier.

An unidentified standard [**ill. 42**] is in the HMB as well, the illustration shows an undated water-colour from the collection of Dr. Engi in the state archives of Fribourg. [**ill. 43**] shows another cavalry standard of the early 18th century. Note the unusual position of the bear, which perhaps resulted from a manufacturing mistake.

A cavalry standard regulation was issued in 1774, denoting that the 1st and 2nd regiments would carry white standards, whereas the 3rd and 4th ones would carry red standards, all of them with different symbols[42]. This is confusing, since the regulation is contrary to the general uniformity of military flags of that era. The reason for such a divergence may be found in the high social level of the predominantly aristocratic cavalrymen, who did not want to be mixed up with common infantrymen, and who emphasized this difference even with special flags.

May be that this [**ill. 44**] unidentified standardin the HMB was made according to the regulation of 1774.

The artillery had flags of its own too [**ill. 45**] - the flag-book in the HMB contains these two artillery flags, the red one shows the date 1737. The white one is from the 17th century.

You will be amazed to learn that Bern had a navy on the lake of Geneva [**ill. 46**]. It was created in the second half of the 17th century[43] and its ships flew ensigns like the ones on this water-colour from 1785[44], depicting manoeuvres of the fleet. The navy, which never saw action in battle, was dissolved in 1793.

The army reorganization of 1782 had suppressed company flags and the battallions were left with two flags each [**ill. 47**], like this flag in the HMB. Batallions of the reserve had their unit name on the reverse side of the flag, the motto FÜR GOTT UND DAS VATERLAND was placed on the obverse side of the flag, whereas the infantry batallions [**ill. 48**] had it the other way round. Four battalions formed a regiment, the Bernese army counting at the time 21 regiments.

This strength however did not prevent French troops to invade a politically weak Bern in early March 1798, sweeping away the patrician republic[45] and ultimately leading by midst of March (19.3.1798) to the establishment of a centralistic Helvetic Republic, which a month later (14.4.1798) adopted the colours green-red and yellow[46].

The Helvetic government ordered on 13.2.1799 all the remaining old flags, which had not been taken away by the French, to be collected and its cloth to be sold for the benefit of the republic. The new flags for the army had to show the colours and emblems of the Helvetic Republic[47].

Napoleon himself had to put an end to growing political struggle in 1803 by dissolving the Helvetic Republic and giving the confederation of cantons a new constitution on 18.2.1803. The canton of Bern immediately reverted to its old bear flag and its military flags with red and black flames.

One such flag[ill. 49] is the colour of the newly formed legion of the town of Bern, denoting the resurrection of splendour with a sun rising from the cloudy past. It is interesting to note that exactly the oldest pattern of flames was chosen, as an expression of the will of restauration. The illustration painted by Buri shows the obverse side of the flag.

Cloth was scarce and mostly of bad qualitiy at the time and from 1803 on batallions were given only one flag each, so that only a few flags from the mediation period (1803-1815) still exist.

After Napoleon=s defeat the old political system was restaured and new cantons had joined the confederation. The Bernese army was organised into batallions in 1817, the flags bore no more regimental names. The flags [ill. 50] became smaller in size and all the quarters formed by the white cross contained 3 black flames in a red field[48], like this obverse side of the flag of the 1st infantry batallion, kept in theHMB. The change of inscriptions from the obverse to reverse sides of the flag depending on the category of unit was continued as it had been introduced in 1782. A water-colour by Buri [ill. 51] shows the obverse and the reverse sides of the flag of the 4th infantry batallion.

The federal army, which had been created in 1815, used the old cantonal uniforms and flags, the only common emblem of the diverse units being a red brassard with a white cross[49]. Already in June 1792 a first federal contingent had been ordered to protect the frontier with France. Its units then had carried their cantonal flags [ill. 52] without any inscriptions on them, like this Bernese federal flag of 1792[50]. This system applied as well to the flags of the new federal army of 1815, its Bernese troops carrying flags with only 3 black flames in red and no inscriptions on the bars of the white cross.

The federal army decisively contributed to the development and propagation of a Swiss national sentiment, influencing the political change from a loose cantonal confederation into a federal state. The red flag with a white cross played a vital role. General Dufour, then colonel and representative of Geneva at the federal diet, repeatedly urged the government from 1830 on to give the federal troops such a common flag[51].

Politics of the time were not favourable to his proposition and it took until the 21st July of 1840, when finally the red flag with a white cross was adopted for the army. All cantons were invited to supply their units with the federal flag with the canton=s name inscribed in golden roman letters on both sides of the horizontal bar of the cross. Whereas some cantons had voted against this regulation, Bern had been in favour and its first federal flag [ill. 53], kept in the HMB, was issued to the 1st infantry batallion on 28 May 1842[52].

On 17.5.1841 a cravat in the cantonal colours was added to the federal military flag.

The federal constitution of 1848 provided that all troops in federal service should exclusively carry the federal flag.

The military flag regulation of 1852 [ill. 54] described the flag in accordance with the model for the federal flag of Zurich troops, which had been drawn in late 1841 by Carl Stauffer[53]. Nevertheless many units still continued to carry their old colours until they had to be replaced because of usage or dissolution of the unit.

This was the case in Bern too. The flamed flags had been passed on to the reserve units, until these units too finally got federal flags in 1865.

In 1884 the cantonal name on the reverse side of the batallion flags was replaced by the unit designation, the size of the inscriptions became smaller and the type of letters changed from roman to antiqua typeset[54].

The unesthetic form of the cross was changed on 12.12.1889 into the more slender form we know today and the army flags were modified accordingly a few weeks later.

Many military flag regulations have been issued since then, each introducing minor changes only concerning sizes of the flag and inscriptions on it. The regulation of 13 November 1913 reduced the size of the infantry flags from 135 x 135cms to 110 x 110cms. The batallion name was placed on the obverse side and the cantonal name on the reverse side of the flag. An official, coloured illustration of a Bernese infantry batallion flag [**ill. 55**], according to the 1913 flag regulation, may serve as an example.

At present the military flag regulation of 18 November 1982 is effective[55]. [**ill. 56**] The illustration shows a modern Bernese unit flag.

The old Bernese military flag [**ill. 57**] with red and black flames is still widely used in the canton as a decorative flag. This old symbol [**ill. 58**] is an affectionate testimony of the „belle epoque".

Acknowledgements

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The reader wishing a general information on Swiss historic flags is recommended to refer to the following items (where the reader will further find an extensive bibliography):

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∃ Mäder, Peter. M. , Mattern, Günter., Fahnen und ihre Symbole, Drapeaux et leurs symboles, Flags and their symbols, Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, Bildband 4, ISBN 3-908025-24-9, Zürich, 1993.

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Notes

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2   The heraldic language gives all directions as if the spectator was behind the shield (seal in this case). Also compare: Thomas Woodcock & John Martin Robinson, The Oxford Guide to Heraldry, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, pp. 55.

3   Justinger, Conrad. Conrad Justingers Berner-Chronik vom Anfang der Stadt Bern bis in das Jahr 1421, herausgegeben von Rudolf Emanuel Stierlin und Johann Rudolf Wyss (der Jüngere), XVI, Bern, Haller, 1819.

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6   In heraldic language, a <u>bend</u> is characterized by two diagonal lines running from the upper right to the lower left (=from dexter chief to sinister base). Also compare: Boutell=s Heraldry, revised by C.W. Scott-Giles, Frederick Warne & Co. Ltd., London and New York, 1950, pp.41, ill. 76.

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10   Lory, Martin, Das Geld im Leben der alten Berner, Hrsg. Kantonalbank von Bern, Bern, 1979.

11   v.Fischer, R., Vom Bärner Wappe, op. cit..

12   The definition of canting arms by the Oxford Guide to Heraldry (op. cit., p. 198) is: „Ams containing charges which allude punningly to the name of the bearer."

13   The text of this song, written down by Justinger (op. cit.), exactly describes the arms of Bern and its colours: „Bernerwaffen ist so snell / mit drin gevarwten strichen, / der ein ist rot der mitel gel, / darin stat unverblichen / ein ber gar schwartz gemalet wol, / rot sint im die klauwen, / er ist schwertzer denn ein kol, / pris er bejagen sol.".

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