

The Right Angle Tricolore

by Ralph G.C. Bartlett

Abstract Between June–October 2012, the National Gallery of Victoria, in Melbourne, Australia, hosted an exhibition – “Napoleon – Revolution to Empire”. As part of this exhibition of artefacts about Napoleon Bonaparte, there were some vexillological related items, which naturally caught my attention. Several of these items included an earlier version of today’s French tricolour, but at right angle, i.e. horizontally, instead of vertically. Upon a cursory check of my flag library archives and on-line, I found that there was next no readily available information. Therefore, this Lecture will be about expanding the vexillological world’s knowledge about this apparently forgotten flag of the French Revolution. It will also explore the role played by The Netherlands’ own “*Colours of Liberty*” which inspired not only this early tricolour for the people of France, but also for millions of people across the countries of eastern Europe as they emerged from larger European empires.

In September 2012 I visited an exhibition – “Napoleon – Revolution to Empire” at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. Some of the artefacts and paintings caught my attention, as they called into question my understanding of the origins of the French flag.

Several of these items included an earlier version of today’s French Tricolour, but at right angle, i.e. horizontally, instead of vertically. Upon a cursory check of my flag library archives and on-line, I found that there was next to no readily available information, at least in English, about these precursors to the familiar Tricolour. Therefore, this Lecture is about looking more closely at this semi-forgotten flag of the French Revolution and the role played by the flag of a neighbouring European republic as the origin of today’s French Tricolour.

Where did it come from ? Why was it changed ?

Let’s set the scene. The French Revolution (1789-1799) saw the revolutionaries initially adopt as their symbol, on 13 July 1789¹, a cockade of two colours, red & blue for Paris. By 27 July they had added an additional colour – white – as a conciliatory gesture to the Monarchy². The cockade initially took the form of a circular lapel badge containing these colours in different colour orders from the centre outwards. The cockade was pinned to the side of a man’s cocked hat or on his lapel. Alternatively, the cockade was also worn as a neck tie³. The use of these colours was suggested by the Marquis de Lafayette, the hero of the American Revolution. The wearing of the “Revolution Cockade” became virtually mandatory for all citizens, and was officially adopted by the National Assembly on 4 October 1789.⁴



Revolutionary cockades (from Napoleon Exhibition)



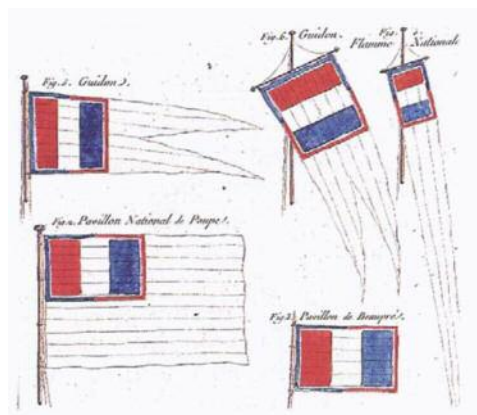
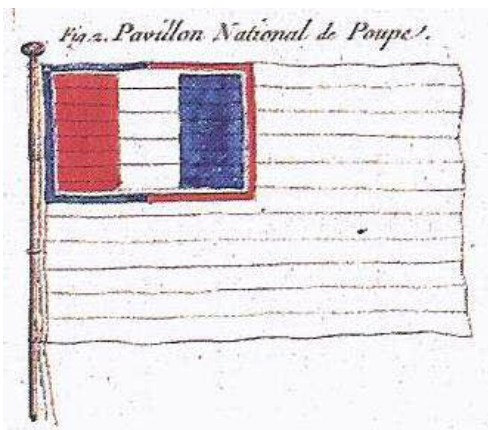


Engraving of the painting "Taking of the Bastille, July 14, 1789" by Charles Thévenin - 1793

We all know the revolutionary origins of the French Tricolore, but there has been surprisingly little written about it. According to one of our founding vexillological colleagues, the late H. Gresham Carr, in his book, *Flags of the World* (1953), states, "There is no doubt that there were two reasons for the adoption of these colours. They were those of the Netherlands [*"Republic of the Seven United Provinces"*], the most flourishing and best-known Republic, ... The second reason, ... is that the red and blue were the colours of the city of Paris and the white that of the Bourbon monarchy."⁵

Adding strength to this theory that the French revolutionaries adopted and modified the Netherlands' flag colours, which were recognised by the French as "the colours of liberty",⁶ is a painting made of the first day of the French Revolution, 14 July 1789, of the storming of the Bastille Prison, in Paris, showing these horizontal Dutch colours being waved as flags. The original painting of this scene was completed in 1793 and can be regarded as a strong indicator of the flag usage, though it is unlikely that the artist was present on the day.

In the early stages of the French Revolution, flags were used, but there was no official flag. On 24 October 1790, the National Assembly adopted a new French Naval Ensign, as part of suite of new banners. This added a canton of red white and blue vertical stripes (surrounded by a border of red, blue and white) to the traditional all-white naval ensign. This canton became the naval jack, with the red stripe at the hoist.⁷



French Revolutionary Naval Ensigns - 1790-94



Revolutionary poster, circa 1791



The Oath of Lafayette at the Fête de la Fédération, 14 July 1790 by unknown artist, 1790s, Carnavalet Museum

On 15 February 1794, the National Assembly abolished these naval flags and formally adopted the Tricolore in the current form, with blue at the hoist.⁸

From the start of the revolution until 1794 a wide variety of forms of the Tricolore were used - vertical and horizontal stripes of differing orders. Most of the flags were home made and all were effective in their sentiments, so long as the three colours were present. The following poster is a good illustration - it shows two striped swallow-tailed flags - the one on the right the same as the Dutch flag and the other with the colours reversed. Sometimes the flag was displayed vertically, as shown in the painting of Lafayette swearing an oath at the Fête de la Fédération, 14 July 1790.

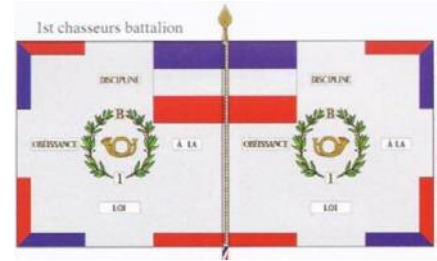


A painted earthenware plate of the Revolution period also illustrates the horizontal striped flags in swallowtail form.



Revolutionary-era "swallowtail" flag variation, c.1792-c.94.

During the initial years of the Revolution there is strong evidence that the horizontal version of the tricolour was widely used, perhaps more than the vertical version. Further confirming the existence of the horizontal "French" Tricolore, various units of the then recently formed National Guard and other republican battalions used this as the base design of their unit colours. Examples are:



Sample revolution-era National Guard Battalion Banners - c.1790-93

Together with these basic designs, there were also other alternative designs, introduced in 1789, which included different coloured quarters showing either red or orange. It is unclear if the use of orange was intentional or merely the result of the vagaries of fabric dyes. The diversity of all these designs is acknowledged in Whitney Smith's book "FLAGS – Through the Ages and Across the World" (1975), p.136, where he says: "Various tricoloured flags of the most diverse patterns imaginable were employed by various units until 1812."



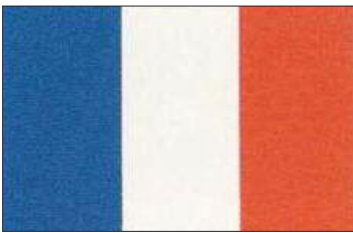
Sample revolution-era Parisian National Guard Battalion Banners – c.1789



During these initial years there were no guidelines on the designs of these unit flags, as they were presented by departments, municipalities, local associations or even groups of citizens. On 23 August 1793 a decree was issued covering the new flags of the volunteer battalions issued after that date. It stated that the colours of the field were to be divided vertically, with red closest to the shaft, white in the centre and blue in the outer fly of the flag.



However, the right-angle Tricolore continued to be used by the military as indicated by a painting by François-Louis-Joseph Watteau, showing Napoleon Bonaparte advancing on the army of the Ottoman-Mameluke rulers of Egypt, at the "Battle of the Pyramids" on 21 July 1798.



National Flag 1794 - 1814, 1815.



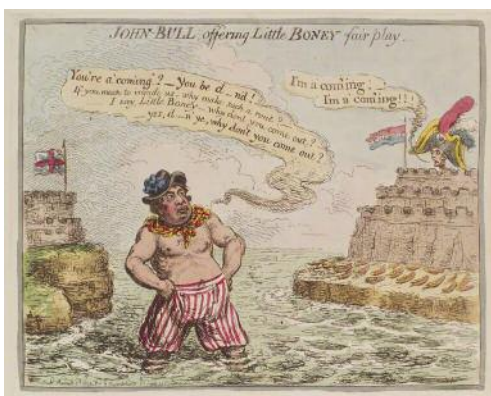
France 1814 - 15, 1815 - 1830

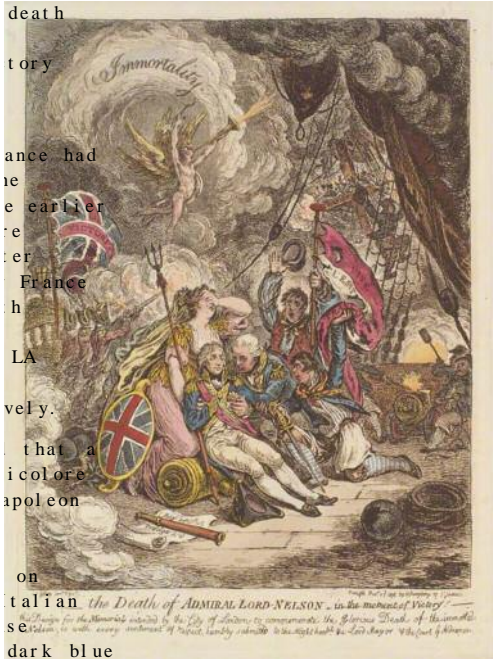
This now official basic design for the volunteer battalions marked the beginning of the end of the previous horizontal tricolore, as it confirmed the current vertical format as the French National Flag.

The success of this basic design led to it being formally adopted by the National Assembly, without any badge and reversed colour order, as the French Republic's National Flag on 15 February 1794. This flag, born from the Dutch "colours of liberty", but altered by 90 degrees, presumably to distinguish France from the Netherlands, lasted until 13 April 1814, when the newly restored monarch, King Louis XVIII, insisted upon the supremacy of the royalist white flag. However, on 8 March 1815 Emperor Napoleon I, having escaped from Elba, re-proclaimed the tricolour as the national flag while en route to reclaim his throne. This restoration only lasted until 22 June 1815, a period of time known as Napoleon's "Hundred Days", when he lost power for the final time after the Battle of Waterloo.

During this period of time Great Britain felt threatened by a possible French invasion, and later battled Napoleon's forces. In response to all of this, British cartoonist, James Gillray, became popular by drawing a series of satirical political cartoons. A number of these, of which I have included two as examples, are of historical vexillological significance, as they show simplified British Union and French horizontal tricolore flags. The first cartoon, published in August 1803, shows the British character "John Bull" defiantly standing in the English Channel calling out to Emperor Napoleon to come out and fight, while the second cartoon, published in late 1805, recalls the death of Britain's Admiral Lord Nelson aboard his flagship, HMS Victory, at the Battle of Trafalgar on 21 October 1805.

Despite the fact that France had been using the vertical rendition of the tricolore for nearly a decade, the earlier short use of the horizontal tricolore had become known and made a greater impact outside of revolutionary France than one may





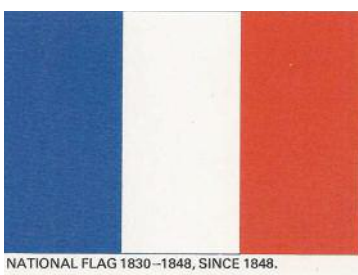
have thought. Also, both horizontal Tricolores contain two slightly different wordings; 'VIVE LA LIBERTÉ' in 1803 and "VIVA L'EMPEREUR" in 1805, respectively.

It should also be noted that a slight variant of the horizontal tricolore was resurrected by Emperor Napoleon between July 1805 – March 1809, as the flag of the French-ruled Principality of Lucca and Piombino, on the upper-west coast of the Italian peninsula. The variation used light blue instead of the mid to dark blue used on the French Tricolour.



Principality of Lucca and Piombino

Following the "July Revolution of 1830", which introduced a French constitutional monarchy, the tricolore was reintroduced on 2 August 1830 by a Decree issued by King Louis-Philippe. This re-restored national Tricolore remained until 24 February 1848, when a third French Revolution commenced, forcing the resignation of the Government and the abdication of King Louis-Philippe, which permanently ended the French monarchy.



The then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alphonse de Lamartine, convinced the revolutionaries on the steps of the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall) to drop their wish to introduce a plain red flag, and to retain the tricolour, albeit amended, by swapping the central and outer fly colours. This amended Tricolore lasted for only one week, when the original French vertical Tricolore was reintroduced on the 5 March 1848. The above painting, by Henri Félix Philippoteaux, shows Alphonse de Lamartine defending the Tricolore on 25 February 1848, and includes both versions of the French tricolore.



The first Belgian Nat. Flag
26 Aug. 1830 – 23 Jan. 1831



The current Belgian Nat. Flag
Since 23 Jan. 1831



It is also interesting to note that revolutionary France is not the only time when a “right angled tricolore” were used. Between August 1830 and October 1831, such national flags were used during the Belgium independence revolution, during which Belgian independence was declared on the 21 July 1831.⁹

In more recent times there are other examples of national flags being used simultaneously at “right angles” during periods of turmoil. These are in Afghanistan in early 2002, shortly after the overthrow of the Taliban regime, and during the Libyan civil war of mid-2011. These modern examples show that in the midst of revolution and political upheaval, the wavers of home-made flags can demonstrate their political sentiment by the use of a flag comprised of the colours of the revolution, almost independently of the exact form in which the new national flag is intended.



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Despite the passage of time and the limited available information about the first “horizontal” French revolutionary flag, a good example of this flag still exists, as a souvenir lead figurine of the standard-bearer of the 1st Battalion Corsica Volunteers – 1792, which is available from a shop called “Les Drapeaux de France boutique NOXA”, at 1 Place Colette, Paris – near the Palais-Royal.

In finishing, I should acknowledge the role played by the Netherlands’ own “Colours of Liberty”, as the “parent” flag of the French Republic. It helped to inspire not only the people of revolutionary France, but also indirectly, millions of people across the countries of Eastern Europe as they emerged from larger European empires.



Acknowledgements

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Illustration Sources

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- Dutch Republic–Seven United Provinces (c.1660 – 1795) & French Nat. Flag c.1792 to c.1794 “*FLAGS Through the Ages and Across the World*”, p.135 – Whitney Smith (1975).
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- French Revolutionary Poster – “*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*” (Brotherhood–1796) – Photothèque des Musées, de la Ville des Paris – <http://thefrenchrevolutionps.weebly.com/art.html>
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Notes

- 1 Refer to “The Tricolore” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_France
- 2 Refer to “The Tricolore” at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_France
- 3 Neck Tie Cockade illustration; “*FLAGS Through the Ages and Across the World*”, Whitney Smith (McGraw-Hill 1975), p.134.



- 4 "FLAGS Through the Ages and Across the World", Whitney Smith (McGraw-Hill 1975), p.135.
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- 6 "FLAGS Through the Ages and Across the World", Whitney Smith (McGraw-Hill 1975), p.161.
- 7 "Album des PAVILLONS NATIONAUX" Introduction by FIAV President Michel Lupant – 6 May 1999 (SHOM, Paris - 2000), p.A15. Also refer to "The Tricolore" at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_France
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- 9 Refer to "History of Belgium – Independence" at; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Belgium



Ralph Bartlett
29–30 March 2013

50th Birthday Flag

Personal Flag

About the Author

Ralph Bartlett has attended fifteen International Congresses of Vexillology and has presented ten Lectures. 1985–Madrid, 1987–San Francisco, 1989–Melbourne, 1991–Barcelona, 1993–Zurich, 1995–Warsaw, 1997–Cape Town, 1999–Victoria B.C., 2001–York, Eng., 2003–Stockholm, 2005–Buenos Aires, 2007–Berlin, 2009–Yokohama, 2011–Alexandria, Va., 2013–Rotterdam.

Bartlett was the Congress Coordinator for ICV 13 in Melbourne – 1989, and served as FIAV's Secretary-General for Congresses between 1989–1997. In Australia, he is a co-founding member of Flags Australia (formerly Flag Society of Australia) and has served continuously on its Executive. He has contributed many articles to Flags Australia's journal, "CruX Australis" and has been involved in the publishing of eight flag charts, and given Lectures to community groups about Australian and international flags.

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