



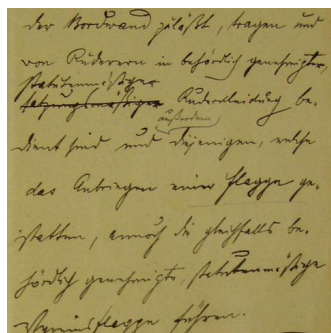
The survey of flags used by rowing clubs in the Czech Republic

Aleš Brožek

Abstract

According to laws applied in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and in Czechoslovakia before 1952, societies could use banners or flags if they had mentioned them in their rules. However, before actually displaying them, they had to present descriptions and/or a drawing of these symbols to the authorities to get permission. The majority of societies preferred banners. Only clubs practicing rowing and other water sports activities, probably influenced by similar sports clubs in England and Germany, introduced meaningful flags. The author has been searching for their rules and flag designs in Czech, Moravian and Silesian archives since 2008. He has succeeded in finding dozens, the oldest dating from 1864. Some of them were not used after the late nineteenth century and have never been shown in newspapers, journals or books. The author will compare them with those used in Austria and Germany and with the contemporary Czech rowing club flags.

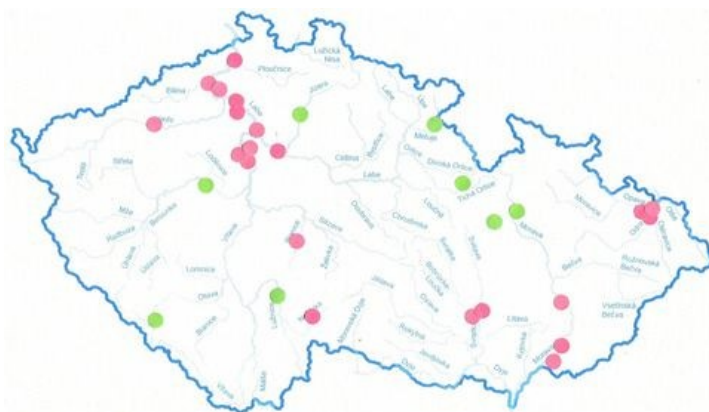
Flags and banners of Czech societies have been important symbols and therefore they are mentioned often in their rules. These rules were approved by Austro-Hungarian authorities and later on by Czechoslovak ones. The texts could be found in the archives of these authorities and are valuable sources for the study of rowing flags. These flags had an important status as they were mentioned in decree No. 105381 of 29 September 1910 issued by the highest authority in Bohemia (České místodržitelství). Rowing clubs in three towns on the river Elbe had requested the right to depart from the standard procedure for marking their boats, described in an earlier decree of 4 August 1909. The České místodržitelství answered that the complete marking of such vessels was not obligatory if their design did not permit it. However, it ordered that the members of rowing clubs operating such vessels should wear uniforms as described in the approved club rules and fly club flags according to such rules. The decree also ordered the clubs to send a copy of their rules, plus a description and drawing of their flag to the river administration in Ústí nad Labem. Unfortunately, the archives of this river administration have not been preserved.



A manuscript version of decree No.105381, 29 September 1910



Position of club flags on boats



Location of rowing clubs in 1900: flags known (red); flags unknown (green)

Flags of rowing clubs were not used only on boats: they also served to decorate boat houses, and they flew during races and regattas. Clubs also exchanged them during their races. Thus, in its 1934 annual report a German rowing club in Ústí nad Labem proudly declared that it owned 86 club flags, and in 1937 it had added another 23 .



*Blesk club, Prague, 1909:
display on a mast outside the
boathouse*

The oldest rowing club was not established near the main Bohemian rivers, the Labe (Elbe) and the Vltava, but on the river Morava in Uherské Hradiště. In 1864, the Moravian authorities approved the rules, in German and in Czech, for **Veslářská jednota Moravia**. Paragraph 13 reads, 'The Society has its own flag in colours of blue, red and yellow', but the description is too brief to determine whether the flag had vertical or horizontal stripes. We can guess that they were horizontal because the municipal flag was blue over red, and Moravian flags were usually red over yellow.



*Veslářská jednota Moravia, 1864-7:
reconstructed flag*

In new rules adopted in 1867, the flag was changed and became white with a striking canton consisting of eight equal vertical stripes of red and blue, with a superimposed yellow diagonal.



*Ruderverein 'Moravia':
flag 1867-1908*

This flag pattern (a flag with a canton) was used by many of the Bohemian and Moravian rowing clubs established in later years. However, not only had these flags a canton but many also had narrow horizontal stripes of two colours. This pattern began with the flag of **Brünner Ruder-Verein**, a club in Brno, the capital of Moravia, during the rowing on the Svatka river in 1869 where the Moravian eagle was displayed in a blue canton and the rest of the flag consisted of nine equal horizontal stripes of white and red.



*Brünner Ruder-Verein, Brno: 'Der Verein hat seine eigene Flagge, dieselbe besteht aus weißen und rothen Querstreifen, im linken oberen Eck an der Stange ein blaues Feld, darin der gold und roth geschachte mährische Adler, sie wird am Heck eines jeden Vereinsbootes gehißt.'
Club rules, paragraphy 17*

A similar pattern could be seen on the flag of the oldest Prague rowing club **Regatta**.



*Regatta, Prague, 1870-2:
'Die Flagge des Clubb's ist roth und weiß gestreift, in der oberen linken Ecke auf schwarzen Felde das Clubmonogramm bestehend in einem rothen lateinischen R.'*



Regatta: second flag, 1872



Regatta: third flag reflecting post- First World War political changes

Because the authorities were unwilling to permit the use of the country's arms nor of any municipal arms in the flags of what they considered such insignificant societies as sports clubs, the Regatta club used the letter R in the canton and seven equal horizontal stripes of red and white. The colours of both the letter and the canton have changed several times. The oldest flag of Regatta from 1870 had a red R on the black canton but after two years, the R was

changed to yellow to reflect the combination of black and yellow as the Imperial colours. After the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918, however, the monarchical colours were discouraged in Czechoslovakia and therefore the canton had to be blue and the letter white.

The oldest known picture of the flag of Regatta could be found in a newspaper advertisement published in the daily *Národní Listy*, 5 May 1877 where one could read that membership applications were being accepted from 6 May in the boathouse. The flag also appears in a black and white photo of club members taken by Mr Fridrich, President of the Club and a well-known photographer in the 1870s.

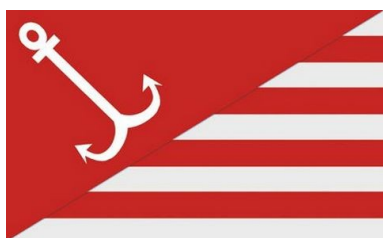


The Regatta club uses its flag in an appeal for new members. Národní Listy, 5 May 1877)



Regatta club flag photographed on a club vessel

Initially, the membership of the rowing club Regatta included both Czechs and Germans, but the relations between these two nations deteriorated in 1874. German rowers complained of the aversion of Czech rowers to flying the Imperial colours, and of their preference for flying the Slavic colours (white, red and blue). These frictions caused the Czech members to leave the Regatta club and to found a new club called **Český klub veslařský i bruslařský v Praze** in April 1875. Book publisher Karel Bohuš Kober together with brewer Jan Z. Veselý drafted the rules and designed a flag containing white, red and blue in an unknown combination.



Český klub veslařský i bruslařský v Praze: first flag, introduced 1875



Český klub veslařský i bruslařský v Praze: flag in Municipal Museum, Prague



The authorities disapproved of this flag and therefore Kober changed it so that it contained only Bohemian colours, i.e. white and red. There was a white anchor in a red triangle at the hoist and nine equal horizontal stripes of white and red. The plenary meeting of the club members which took place in November 1875 added more paragraphs to the rules and changed the colour of the triangle to blue. As this new flag contained the Slavic tricolour, the authorities refused permission for it to fly, and so the club had to return to the old flag and used it until it dissolved in 1886. A copy of the flag is still kept in the Municipal Museum in Prague.

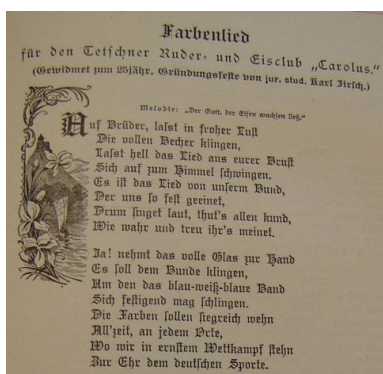
Prior to 1875 two more tribar rowing club flags existed. **Ruder-Club Carolus**, which had been active on the river Elbe in the town of Děčín from 1873, flew a blue over white over blue flag with black letters R for rowing and C for Carolus in the upper corner. **Troppauer Ruder-Verein**, the oldest rowing club in Silesia (Silesia together with Bohemia and Moravia form the modern Czech Republic) was established in Opava in 1874 and its flag was described in its rules as red over white over red with a black anchor and the letters T.R.V. The colours of both the Carolus club and the Silesian one were derived from municipal arms.



*Ruder-Club Carolus,
Děčín, 1873-*



*Ruder-Club Carolus: boathouse with
the flag flying*



Ruder-Club Carolus, flag song

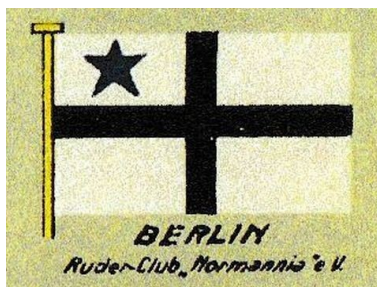


*Troppauer Ruder-Verein,
Opava, 1874-*

This period saw the rise of another club in Brno, **Ruder-Club Bruna**. It existed only for a short time, from 1874 until 1875, and according to its rules its flag was white with a red cross and with the municipal arms on a yellow canton. Flags of such a pattern were also used by rowing clubs in Berlin (for example, Rowing Club Victoria and Normannia).



Left, Ruder-Club Bruna, Brno, 1874-5;
below, flags of two Berlin rowing
clubs, Victoria and Normannia



Six years later, another club bearing the same name 'Bruna' was established in Brno. Its founders made efforts to use the municipal arms on the flag but they were not granted permission by the municipal authorities. Therefore they adopted a red over yellow over red flag with a white shield bearing the red fess from the municipal arms.



Flag of the re-formed Ruder-Club
Bruna, 1881

The 1870s was a period when the German population of Bohemia started to enforce pan-German ideas, which could be seen reflected in flags. It is said that from c.1876 the members of **Ruderclub Regatta** in Ústí nad Labem were flying a black over red over yellow flag with the white letters A and R in a blue canton. The letter A stood for 'Aussig', i.e. the name of the town in German, and the R stood for 'Regatta'. Another German rowing club arose in Litoměřice, a town not far from Ústí nad Labem, in 1885. Its name was **Ruder- und Eisclub 'Germania'** and its flag consisted of nine horizontal stripes of black alternating with red and yellow (the pan-German colours). A yellow canton contained a black letter G for Germania (i.e. in the Imperial colours).



Ruderclub Regatta, Ústí nad Labem,
1876-



*Ruder- und Eisclub 'Germania',
Litoměřice, 1885-*



*'Germania' club flag, now in the
archives in Louny, 2008*

However, the majority of rowing flags before 1900 contained cantons and many narrow horizontal stripes. This was the case of **Roudnický veslařský spolek** whose flag was described in Paragraph 35 of its rules from 1877 and contained a white star in a blue canton and horizontal stripes of white and red. Their number, unfortunately, was not given. Luckily, other clubs' rules described their flags in more detail. Therefore we can reconstruct the flag of **Klub veslařů Beřkovských** as a blue canton and six horizontal stripes of white and red. The rules mentioned that the white stripe was on the top. The blue canton contained an anchor of unknown colour and the letters DB for the town of Dolní Beřkovice which, like Roudnice, lies on the river Elbe.

Both clubs had only Czech members and their flags contained Slavic colours even though these colours were not arranged like a tricolour and therefore were not so provocative to the German population. These flags flew for only a couple of years because these clubs ended their activities in 1879 and 1887 respectively.



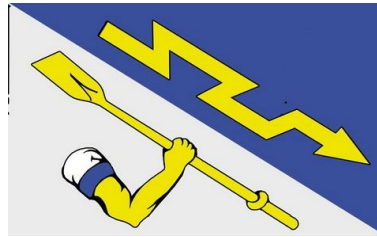
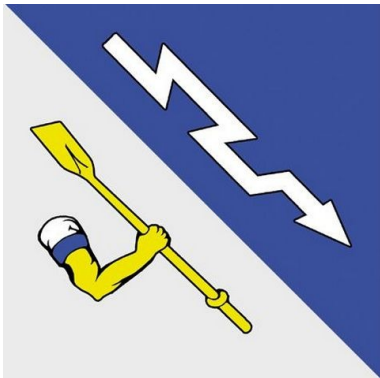
Roudnický veslařský spolek, 1877-9



Klub veslařů Beřkovských, pre-1887

Other clubs were established before 1900 and are still in existence. The rowing club **Blesk** ('lightning' in English), which was located in Prague, appeared in 1879 when some rowers (including the previously mentioned Karel Bohuš Kober) left Český klub veslařský i bruslařský v Praze.

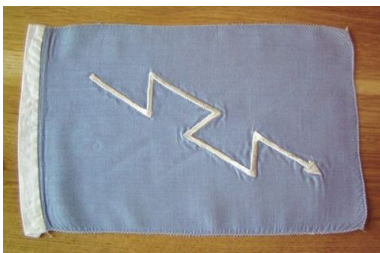
The report of the committee meeting held on 9 December 1879 says that a decision of making one copy of a flag for trial was accepted. Later on four small and four larger flags were ordered. They were square diagonally divided with a descending diagonal into a white triangle bearing a human arm holding a yellow oar at the hoist and a blue triangle with a white thunderbolt in the fly. The colour of the thunderbolt was changed to yellow in 1882, and in 1898 the proportions of the flag were changed from the original 1:1 into 2:3.



Left, original flag of the Blesk club, Prague, 1879-81;
right, flag of the Blesk club, as modified in 1898

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There was also a special ceremonial blue flag with a white thunderbolt. The club flag was very popular. In 1890, J. Godet, the badge manufacturer, was already offering a badge with this flag, as we can see from an advertisement. There were even seals (from 1897), membership cards (in 1912) and medals (produced in 1913) all depicting the flag. Letterheads had been showing the flag since 1900.



Ceremonial flag of the Blesk club



Blesk flag in advertisement for Berlin jeweller J. Godet & Sohn (1890)

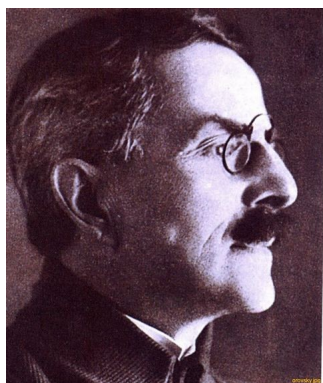


Blesk club membership card, 1912



Blesk club medal, 1913

The flag of the Blesk club was often reproduced in a diary of Blesk member and well-known sportsman Josef Rössler-Ořovský (1869-1933). He participated in races in 1889 and drew the flags of all the competing clubs. We can see the flag of Regatta but also of the rowing club Pirat from Vienna, which was black with a red symmetrical cross fimbriated in white.



Josef Rössler-Ořovský (1869-1933),
Blesk member and vexillographer



Rössler-Ořovský's notebook showing the flags of clubs participating in races, including that of the Blesk club (upper left).

The second and third oldest rowing clubs still in existence were established in 1882. One of them has the unusual name **Český Athletic Club** although it did not compete in athletics. The main sports activities were originally rowing and football, and later on, rowing and swimming.



Český Athletic Club: as originally stipulated



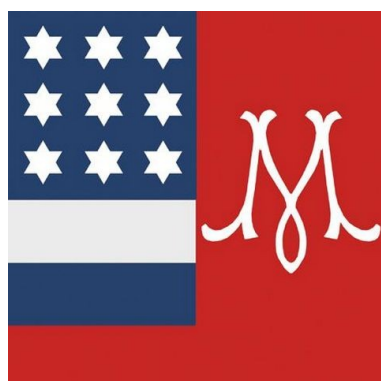
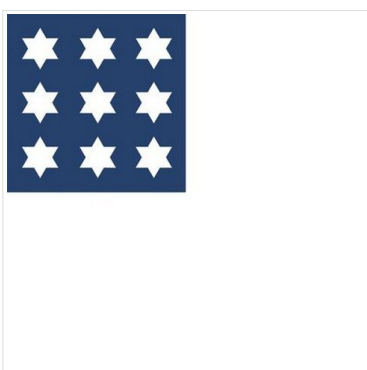
Český Athletic Club: as noted by Rössler-Ořovský

According to the rules of this club, located in Roudnice nad Labem, the flag was red with a blue oblong field bearing white letters A and C. After several months the letters were changed to ČAC. A flag drawn in the diary of J. Rössler-Ořovský perhaps mistakenly places the white letters CAC on a red oblong field within a blue one. The contemporary flag has these letters in a decorative, ornamental form as we can see from the pre-1900 membership card.



Český Athletic Club: flag as shown on a pre-1900 membership card

The other club, **Club veslařů mělnických**, was established not far from Roudnice, across the river Elbe in the town of Mělník. Initially, it flew a white square flag with a blue canton bearing nine six-pointed white stars. Their number stood for the nine founding members. After a year the club started to use a red flag with a blue canton and white stars, and with white and blue horizontal stripes below the canton making a Slavic tricolour. The next step in the evolution of the club flag was the addition to the fly of a white M for the name of the town. The last step was a shift of proportions from 1:1 to 2:3 and a change in the stars to five-pointed. However, the authorities refused to accept the flag changes in 1896 and the club only succeeded getting permission to fly the flag a year later.



*Club veslařů mělnických:
above left, original flag; above right,
failed modification; left, modified flag
as approved by the authorities*

A flag evolution can be seen also with **Veslařský klub 'Slavia'**, located in Prague and still in existence. Its history started in October 1885 when members of Český klub veslařský i bruslařský v Praze and of the rowing club Triton made an agreement to establish a joint rowing club. It is said that the flag of this new club was determined at this meeting. However, it was not described in the rules approved by the authorities in 1886, nor in 1893. The text of the rules adopted in 1905 only claimed the right of club members to wear an emblem and uniform and to fly a flag. The flag description appeared only 50 years after its actual use in the rules of 1945. The oldest flag drawing can be seen in the German magazine *Wassersport* and its 1894 yearbook where the flag has mistakenly only three red stripes instead of four. A more precise flag drawing was used in a leaflet with a concert programme organised by the club in 1904.



*Veslařský klub 'Slavia':
above left, from a concert programme,
1904; above right, 1930s;
left, 1985 to date*

The flag of this club never contained a blue colour and, therefore, it is surprising that in 1915 some 'ultra-patriots' denounced club members for using the Slavic colours as the 'enemy colours'. The flag design is very similar to that of Český klub veslařský i bruslařský v Praze but instead of a white anchor there is a white S for the name Slavia. From the 1930s, the division line on the letterheads ceased to be diagonal, so that the red part at the hoist has been smaller than that in the fly. This was confirmed in the rules of 1945. The contemporary flag was slightly modified in 1985, when the club celebrated 100 years of existence. The flying part now consists of five red and four white horizontal stripes.

In this paper, there is no time to cover all the numerous flags of the rowing clubs which have been used in the territory of the Czech Republic. I have not succeeded in finding all these flags – but of the 28 clubs which existed in 1900, 20 flags are now known to me. Further rowing clubs were established in Czechoslovakia, and others were created after Czechoslovakia's split.

After 1918, several Czech rowing clubs were established in those border areas of Czechoslovakia where the majority of German population lived. But a lot of Czech teachers, postmen and officers moved there and did not want to row in German clubs. Therefore **Český veslařský klub v Ústí nad Labem** was founded in 1923. Their members agreed to use a white over blue over red flag with red letters ČVK in the upper right corner. Four years later they changed the colour of letters to blue as we can see on a copy of a flag kept in the municipal museum. This flag in black and white appeared also on a photo taken by a musician Jiří Šosvald, who was a member of this club before and after the Second World War.



Český veslařský klub v Ústí nad Labem: left, flag displayed in a local museum; right, flag in use, mid 20th century. Photograph, Jiří Šosvald

There was even a club where only women were rowers. It was established in 1931 under the name **Ženský veslařský klub Praha**. Its flag was very similar to that of Český veslařský klub Praha, but in reversed colours. This was because the Český veslařský klub Praha helped to organise the ZVK.



Ženský veslařský klub Praha



Český veslařský klub Praha

One of the youngest rowing clubs is **Paprsek**, located in Ústí nad Labem, which has brought together handicapped and blind rowers. Its flag is blue with a yellow sun. The designer of the flag Mr Petr Janák told me that the flag was used for the first time in 2007. The number of rays corresponds to the number of founding members, of whom five were handicapped.



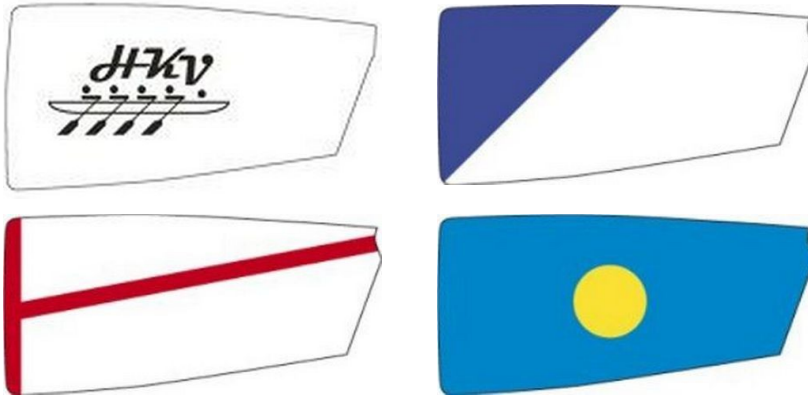
Paprsek, Ústí nad Labem

The attitudes of rowers to their flags have changed in the last decades. Only traditional rowing clubs fly them with respect on flagpoles in front of their boathouses. As one can see on the photo of races in Litoměřice, national flags of Poland, Czechia, Germany and the US, together with the flag of **Veslařský klub Slavoj Litoměřice** (a white flag with a red letter L and six red narrow oblongs) merely had their upper side attached to handrails.



*Veslařský klub Slavoj, Litoměřice:
the club flag amongst national flags
attached to a handrail on the
clubhouse balcony*

Today, unfortunately, the flags of rowing clubs no longer seem to be identification signs, and oar blades have replaced them in this role.



Oar blades now display club emblems

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Author biography

Aleš Brožek was born in 1952. He is one of the founders of the Czech Vexillological Society, its first secretary and editor of *Vexilologie* (1972-5, 1983 to date), and a recipient of the Vexillon (1997). He is the author of *Lexikon vlajek a znaků zemí světa* (1998, 2003) and numerous articles on Czechoslovak municipal flags, and the compiler of annual bibliographies of flag books and charts. He delights in spending free time in archives seeking rare documents dealing with flags. FIAV recognised him as a Fellow of the Federation in 2009.