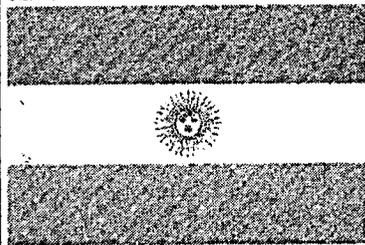


FLAG OF THE ANDES

One version:
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National Arms and
State Flag of Argentina



THE FLAG OF THE ANDES ARGENTINA 1817-1820

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The lack of information prevents us arriving at firm conclusions about early Argentinian flags. Inconclusive evidence casts doubts on the shape and colors of the first flag hoisted by Belgrano in 1812. Also, historians do not agree on the other flags used by Belgrano after 1812. The main problem is the fact that none of the early flags survived.

The case of the Flag of the Andes is different since it was created after Congress had approved an official flag, and given to the official flag its shape and colors. The Flag of the Andes can be seen in the Government House of the City of Mendoza, and although many dispute the present shape, it is the original flag (1).

This flag was used by General San Martin on his expedition across the Andes to liberate Chile in the summer of 1817. The Army under his command was called "The Army of the Andes," and the flag used by San Martin is known to us today as "The Flag of the Army of the Andes," or simply, "The Flag of the Andes."

The Flag of the Andes is completely different in shape and attributes to any previously used, and does not agree with the official specifications. It has two horizontal stripes, not three, and it has the National Coat of Arms at its center.

Therefore, we encounter several serious questions with regard to this flag:

- [] First, the use of the term flag: is it a flag or a banner?
- [] Second, why does it have two stripes and not three, and are those stripes vertical or horizontal ?
- [] Third, why was the Coat of Arms placed in the center when no resolution at that time called for it ?
- [] Fourth, what was the status of the flag: was it a flag for the army, the official flag, or had it another distinction?

Before answering these questions, it would be appropriate to recount briefly the evolution of the flag.

In early 1814, General San Martín was put in command of the Northern Army replacing General Belgrano. San Martín, given the task of reorganizing the army under his command, decided to change the tactic of attacking the Viceroy via the northern route through Bolivia, by crossing to Chile first. Once in Chile he was able to attack the City of Lima, the center of royalist power in South America, directly from the sea. He proposed this idea to the government in Buenos Aires, which immediately accepted this new concept.

He also requested that the new expedition should be armed in the City of Mendoza, located at the foothills of the Andes Mountains. He further requested to be appointed governor of the province of Mendoza to facilitate the task.

In his capacity as governor of Mendoza and Commander of the Army of the Andes, he was notified on 24 July 1816 of the Declaration of Independence and of the official adoption of the flag. The letter communicating this news to San Martín did not dictate the specifications of the new flag, it only mentioned: "*in the ways and styles until now in use.*"

The popular version of how the flag came about is: during Christmas Eve dinner of 1816, San Martín expressed his desire to have a flag for the army. The ladies present, including his wife, the wives of other officers, and those of distinguished patriots (some exiled from Chile) collaborated to make one flag to fulfill the desire of San Martín. These women are known today as: "The Patrician Ladies."(2)

On the making of the flag, we have letters and the reminiscences of participants and witnesses who, with some discrepancies, are in agreement as to the following: the names of the ladies involved, and the difficulty encountered in obtaining blue material for the flag.

The main sources used by the Government of Mendoza are the written recollections for two eyewitnesses.

Laureana Ferrari de Olazabal, one of the Patrician Ladies who recorded her memoirs in 1856 wrote:

the city of Mendoza was poorly stocked with this type of materials ... we went to every single store having almost given up, we entered a small shop previously overlooked ... our surprise being immense when we saw from the shelves the color that we wanted ... There was not enough material for a third stripe.

General Jeronimo Espejo, who witnessed the formation of the army and, although a very young soldier, was present throughout the entire campaign. He wrote in "The Crossing of the Andes"

It is not known to me the reasons why two stripes were made.

Once the flag was finished, it was presented to San Martin, and on 5 January 1817, in an impressive ceremony at the Cathedral of Mendoza, the flag was shown, blessed, and the army pledged loyalty to it.

On 18 January, the army left for Chile.

All this information is very well documented by witnesses, letters, and accounts from some of the participants either in the making of the flag, or present at the blessing ceremony. But the fact that these recollections were recorded by the participants several years subsequent to the actual events, gives us cause to question some of the evidence (3) - i.e. we must examine the four points previously mentioned.

First, let us analyze the use of the term flag. The flag preserved in Mendoza, looks more like a banner or standard to be hung from a cross-bar type of pole rather than a regular flagpole or mast.

Generally speaking, we recognize flags to be rectangular shaped cloths hoisted to a pole from the smaller size of the rectangle. A flag is something that flies and waves with the wind. A banner is hung from a cross-bar pole and is more rigid in its movement, thus more visible.

Nevertheless, the Flag of the Andes as preserved today, though closer to the general description of a banner, has always been called a flag - not only today, but also in letters and documents of the time. If it were hoisted as a flag should be, the stripes would be displayed vertically, white at the pole, blue at the fly, the Coat of Arms on their side.

This perception of displaying the flag has been legitimized in the minds of many people by two popular paintings depicting the flag with two vertical stripes and the Coat of Arms on their side. These paintings were made in 1909 by Subercacaux. One is entitled "The Maipu Embrace", illustrating the battle of Maipu, and the other is called "The Crossing of the Andes" (4). Clearly, the flags in those paintings were depicted according to the popular perception of the term flag, and with reference to the artefact preserved at the Governor's House in Mendoza.

The board of Historical Studies of Mendoza has concluded that the flag preserved in Mendoza is the same flag blessed on the 5th of January and taken by San Martin on the expedition to Chile. The original form and dimensions are still open to question and further study (5).

On the other hand if we raised the flag with the coat of arms displayed in their correct disposition, the stripes of the flag would be seen as horizontal, and that brings us to the second question, Why two stripes and not three?

The memoirs of Olazabal mentioned the scarcity of blue material which could be a reasonable explanation, were it not for the following:

The flag is of double cloth and the Coat of Arms is depicted on both sides of the flag. With the material used to make the flag a second blue stripe could have been made, maybe reduced in size but conforming to the official design.

The other important fact ignored by some authors is that the army of the Andes had more than one flag.

Let us digress for a moment to obtain an insight into the formation of the army.

San Martin had been in Mendoza assembling his army and by 1816 had 6000 men equipped everything necessary for the campaign.

The general proved to be an extraordinary organizer. The Army of the Andes was self supported in every aspect. The manufacturing of armaments from bullets to sabers, carbines and cannons, was done in Mendoza. The manufacture of all the clothing necessary for the uniforms was also done in Mendoza, as well as the dye for the coloring of the uniforms, especially the color blue. Almost everybody in the city was doing something concerning the expedition to Chile.

Furthermore, the army was divided into 5 columns for the actual crossing of the Andes, and at least every column had a flag.

Damien Hudson, a Mendocinian historian, specializing in this part of the history of the province, recounts the blessing ceremony of the Andes Flag, (6) with a peculiarity contrary to other accounts. When referring to the flag, he uses the word *las banderas*, implying that there were more than one. He repeats this in several paragraphs:

"San Martin ordered that the flags should be sworn to by the troops." "The flags are put on the main altar."

"The army chaplain, celebrated mass and blessed the flags."

All these accounts, plus the size of the army, and the nature of the mission give us the notion that besides the flag presented to San Martin by the Patrician Ladies, there were others.

Consequently, it was not too difficult to get more blue material as stated by Laurena F. de Olazabal. The lack of material theory only makes sense if we assume that the process of making the flag by the Patrician Ladies was a private enterprise, done totally independently of whatever was going on with the formation of the army. That possibility should not be disregarded - although Olazabal mentioned that she, together with San Martin's wife, consulted San Martin on two occasions regarding the correct shade of blue.

We have learned not to trust paintings depicting flags since they are seldom accurate. However, there is another painting of the battle of Maipu, this one made in London in 1819, a year after the actual battle. This painting was executed under the supervision of General Alvarez Condarco, one of the army officers. In the painting, the army is seen with a flag of two horizontal stripes of white over blue with the Coat of Arms located towards the hoist (7).

Based on that, some historians (8) argue that the flag preserved in Mendoza is only a fragment of the total size of the original flag. This painting has the status of true documentation because it was done relatively soon after the battle, and under the supervision of someone who took an active part in it. Besides this painting, there are other bits and pieces of records and papers showing the flag with only two stripes (9).

Still, the question remains as to why only two horizontal stripes? To support the validity of the painting as documentary, we have to look for answers from the period around 1812.

The same group of historians believe that the original flag of Belgrano, hoisted in 1812, had two, not three, horizontal stripes, as has been generally accepted. Belgrano hoisted the flag for the first time in the City of Rosario on June 24, 1812. The flag was left there after his departure some days later when he took command of the Northern Army. He hoisted it a second time on 25 May, 1812; this time in the northern City of Jujuy, which subsequently became his headquarters.

On both occasions, Belgrano sent a letter to the government in Buenos Aires informing them of the event, saying:

Seeing the need of a flag and having none, I decided to make one according to the colors of our national cockade.

The government reacted with displeasure over this unilateral decision taken by Belgrano, especially because he used the words "national flag". There was no official decree or declaration by any legal body on the creation of a flag.

The only symbol recognized by the government was the cockade.

The two stripes of the Flag of The Andes, and the previous relationship of San Martin with Belgrano and the Northern Army, make this a strong argument, without taking away any credit on the making of the flag from the Patrician Ladies.

Point number three concerns the addition of the National Coat of Arms. To find an acceptable answer we have to go back again to the time of the Northern Army under Belgrano's tenure, and its transition to San Martin.

In the beginning, the Coat of Arms was only the Seal of the Congress, but later, it was decided to be used as the Arms of the new nation. For a time it was called: The Arms of the Congress.

The parading of the Royal Standard of Spain was a tradition inherited from Spain. This ceremony was performed for special celebrations or holidays by taking to the streets in a procession the Royal Banner of the Kings of Spain. Belgrano, following a Congressional directive of replacing all the royalist emblems with the new Coat of Arms, gave to the City of Jujuy a white flag with the Arms of the Congress painted at the center to replace the Royal Banner. He assembled the army and the people in front of the Cathedral of the City of Jujuy, and an oath of loyalty to Congress was taken by the army, using this new flag as the vehicle representing the new political order.

This new flag was called the "Liberty Banner" and is the fourth flag that we have on record resulting from Belgrano's initiative, and the only one of Belgrano's flags to survive (12).

Historians speculate that he might have added the Arms of the Congress to the Flag of the Army at a later date, although no conclusive evidence could be found.

As mentioned previously, the Flag of the Army had blue and white stripes, and is the one that San Martin probably received when he took command of the Northern Army.

Because of the ambiguity confronting San Martin, he (San Martin) assumed that the design used by the army under Belgrano was the one referred to by Congress.

Therefore, Buenos Aires requested Belgrano not to hoist any flag dissimilar to the ones used by Spain (10).

A description of the flags cannot be found in any of Belgrano's letters or memoirs. He only mentions the colors, sky blue and white, but never how they were arranged.

Authors and historians dealing with these first two flags assume that two stripes were intended because of the lack of details on the description of the flags. If Belgrano had a flag of three stripes, he would have been more specific in its description (11)

We are not sure if he carried out the order of the banning of his flags, but by 13 February, 1813, in a swearing-in ceremony at the River Pasaje, near Jujuy, Belgrano hoisted a third flag of white and blue calling it "The Flag of The Army" since the government had not yet decided about a flag. San Martin, before going to Mendoza, had at first been a subordinate of Belgrano with the Northern Army. Later in 1814, he replaced Belgrano as commander. In a letter from Belgrano to San Martin on the subject of the transfer of command, Belgrano said:

I am also giving you my flag to be hoisted when the new army is ready.

Historians believe that it was the third flag, the flag of the Army, that San Martin got from Belgrano. That flag was left with the Northern Army when San Martin was transferred to Mendoza.

By 1816 San Martin was already in Mendoza when he received the official communication on the Declaration of Independence, and also on the official adoption of the flag. But the letter did not describe the flag. It only said very clearly:

in the ways and styles, until now used.

San Martin could have very well accepted the peculiar design of the Andes Flag because of its similarity in style and form to the ones used by Belgrano. Therefore, having known no other flag except the one used by the Northern Army under Belgrano, he had no objection to the design presented to him by the Patrician Ladies.

We have also to consider two other aspects. First, the respect and admiration that San Martin had for Belgrano. At first, San Martin refused to replace Belgrano as commander of the Northern Army, and asked instead to be put as second in command. Buenos Aires accepted that arrangement for a while, but later insisted on replacing Belgrano with San Martin.

Second, the extensive distance in miles from Buenos Aires, and Mendoza and Jujuy, often resulted in lost or faulty communications. San Martin knew that the Coat of Arms was official and had been used in flags; therefore it would be acceptable to add it to his flag.

Finally, we come to the fourth point; the function of the flag. Some historians, confronted by the fact that the Flag of The Andes does not conform with the official specifications, and seeking other justifications for the peculiar design and shape of the flag, have presented us with two other functions attributed to the flag.

The Congress, after declaring independence on 9 July 1816, had in mind the flag as we know it today.

Subsequently the Congress in the letter of 24 July 1816 authorized San Martin officially to hoist the national flag, and the flag made by the Patrician Ladies, had been intended to be exactly that. Why had the final result turned out to be something rather different? We have explored several possible reasons for that peculiar design, but many scholars will not agree with the conclusions (13).

There are two functions attributed to the flag: The regimental or divisional flag because San Martin during the Christmas dinner of 1816 expressed the wish of having a flag "for the Army" (see page 2).

Therefore, it is not the national flag, and this explains the peculiar and curious design. The Andes Flag is only a regimental or divisional flag.

We might accept that thesis as possible, but the fact of not having records, recollections, or documents, mentioning the existence of another flag functioning as the flag of the nation, militates against that idea.

There is the possibility that the flag preserved in Mendoza is a regimental flag that belonged to the Army of the Andes, although several documents give us testimony that the flag is more than a regimental flag. We cannot overlook the letter sent to San Martin by Congress on the subject of the flag (page 2).

The second explanation is that the flag was San Martin's personal banner of command. This second justification ceases to have any logic when we recall the swearing-in ceremony of January the 5th, 1817 which would never have been performed for only a personal banner. In fact all records available indicate that the flag blessed on that day was something more than a personal banner - it was in fact the Flag of the newly formed Nation.

The Flag of the Andes was incorrect according to the design approved by the Congress in July 1816, but it had the elements and symbols of the Argentine Nation.

What we call today The Flag of the Andes, was the flag of The United Provinces of the River Plate.

We have also to consider the fact that the words "... of the Andes," when referring to this particular flag, were added later on by historians and scholars to differentiate the flag.

After the Chilean campaign, with the victory of San Martin's forces over the Royalists, the "Flag of the Andes" was sent back to Mendoza.

In summary, we have tried to examine the reasons and arguments for the peculiar design and form of the Andes Flag. Damien Hudson mentioned other flags, of which two have survived. These flags are named after the commanders of earlier expeditions: Cabot's Flag, and Pizarro's Flag. Both flags have the Coat of Arms at the center and been classified as the regimental flags of those two expeditionary columns (14).

The Board of Historic Studies of Mendoza has not ruled out any theory as to what the flag (banner) really looked like and the investigation process has not been concluded.

The Flag of the Andes has never been submitted to a scientific test to determine if any alterations have been made to it, nor are there any clues to give us a more accurate idea of what the flag looked like in its original design. The same applies to the flags of Cabot and Pizarro. The Flag of the Andes is preserved as an icon, and the Government of Mendoza does not allow the flag to be removed or touched because of possible damage to it (15).

I do believe the Flag of The Andes is a descendant of the first flags hoisted by Belgrano in 1812, but we cannot substantiate this since there is no physical evidence of those flags. Also, it is very possible that the Flag of the Andes is similar to the other flags used by Belgrano and the Northern Army.

I fail to understand the reasons or motives of some historians who try to deny the Flag of the Andes the official status of National Flag, always seeking justification to prove that the flag is something less. The officially accepted story repeats stubbornly the recollections of Ferrari, and refuses to admit the logical connections between this flag and Belgrano's flags. Hence the official posture makes it appear inaccurate to conclude that Belgrano's design was in any way different from the design used today and approved by Congress in 1816.

The Congress could very well have been inspired to adopt the colors used by Belgrano, modifying the original design by adding a second blue stripe.

We should take note of the fact that Congress never made any mention of Belgrano being the creator of the flag. Furthermore, there is not one single official government paper or document from that time giving credit to Belgrano for having created the flag. Belgrano was actually reprimanded for hoisting a "national flag". San Martin was legally authorized to do so, and he did it: "in the ways and style until now in use".

To be a scientist means not to be afraid to encounter data which will put in doubt or destroy facts previously thought to be correct and true. A true investigator should not suppress or dismiss information which threatens to deviate from the thesis that he or she set out to prove. Let us hope that historians will be faithful to scientific procedure and continue to research the true history of the flag that was used in one of the most daring campaigns to establish the independence of the Americas.

This work has been done with the idea of exploring different possibilities as to the reasons and justifications for the shape and form of the Flag of the Andes. It remains to continue the research for the facts, until universally satisfied, that the history of the Flag of the Andes has been substantiated.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 All documents in existence testify to the authenticity of the specimen preserved in Mendoza. On a close examination of the flag, it is very obvious that it suffered many alterations. The Coat of Arms is a few centimetres off-center towards the left. Also, only the reverse of the flag is preserved.
- 2 The Association "Damas Pro-Gloria Patricias Mendocinas" made of the female descendants of men and women modern organization who participated in the Wars of Independence. One of the many functions this organization performs is the making of facsimiles of the Flag of the Andes as it appears today for donations to Museums and historical organizations.
- 3 Laureana Ferrari de Olazabal wrote at the request of her husband, Colonel Manuel Olazabal, the events leading to the making of the Flag of the Andes to include them in his memoirs.

Laureana Ferrari, later de Olazabal, was thirteen years old in 1816, and the letter to her husband was written in 1856. It was discovered only in 1916 and never yet submitted to a more in-depth scientific scrutiny. General Espejo published his book in 1822, and many of the events were recalled by memory because the original manuscripts of his diaries were lost.
- 4 These paintings can be seen in the Museum of National History of Buenos Aires.
- 5 Acts number 470, page 343 of October 26, 1968
- 6 Damien Hudson, wrote a masterpiece called "Recuerdo de las Provincias de Cuyo (Mendoza, San Luis y San Luis) in 1888.
- 7 See #4 above.
- 8 Professor Roberto H. Marfany and Miguel A. Scenna, are two historians who have written on the connections between Belgrano's first flags and the Andes Flag. Marfany is a member of the National Academy of History.
- 9 Medals given to officers and soldiers after the victory of Chacabuco, show the flag of Chile and of the United Provinces. This one has only two stripes. In the map of the siege of Talca (Chile 1818) the flag is shown with two stripes. In both instances it is without the coat of Arms.
- 10 The letter was signed by Bernardino Rivadavia, member of the Government of Buenos Aires. Enclosed with the letter, was a Spanish flag for Belgrano's use. Belgrano never got the letter or the flag because he had already departed to Jujuy.
- 11 Belgrano was by trade a lawyer, and as such, he was very careful in his words and actions to avoid misinterpretation.
- 12 The flag is preserved in The Cathedral of The City of Jujuy.
- 13 Historians Ismael Busich Escobar and Luis Canepa are more conservative in their views, and have not explored other possibilities.

- 14 Cabot's flag can be seen in the Museum of National History of Buenos Aires. Due to the present condition of the flag, it can not be determined how many stripes it had.
- 15 After 1820, the Flag of the Andes was given by San Martin to General O'Higgins to be returned to Mendoza. In 1823 the flag was brought back to Mendoza and was kept in the Church of San Francisco. The earthquake of 1861 destroyed the City of Mendoza and from the ruins of the church the flag was saved, but badly damaged.

In 1867 the flag was stolen by a group of anarchists, and only ten years later returned. In 1880 the President requested the flag from the Government of Mendoza to cover the remains of San Martin which were brought back from France.

The flag was returned by Buenos Aires eight years later after many requests from the Government of Mendoza. Once again in 1902 it left Mendoza for the inauguration of San Martin's Monument in Rosario, and once again Mendoza had to make several requests for its return.

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