

## La Comunnaut  and its symbols

by Whitney Smith

A little-known chapter in the history of decolonization relates to the establishment of la Communaut . Successor to the French Union, the Community had an elaborate constitutional structure, comprised thirteen countries, and possessed its own standard and flag -yet for all practical purposes it existed for scarcely more than two years. Understanding the Community and its symbols requires some knowledge of international politics in the post-World War II period.

Following World War I, the League of Nations established a system of "mandated territories" so that lands acquired from Germany and the Ottoman Empire by Allied conquest would not be considered colonies. Following the Second World War, the "trusteeship" system of the United Nations carried on the tradition.

In addition, however, the colonial structures built up over the previous four and one half centuries faced increasing difficulty from growing nationalism among subject peoples across the world - particularly in Africa and Asia.

In 1926 an Imperial Conference in Britain had signaled the beginning of decolonization by recognizing the existence of a British Commonwealth of Nations. The member Dominions - Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Ireland, and Newfoundland - were stated to be "autonomous Communities within the

British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or foreign affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated." The Statute of Westminster gave this policy legal recognition on 11 December 1931. Following the Second World War, the Commonwealth (as it came to be called) extended Dominion status to areas not extensively settled by Caucasians, such as Ceylon, Pakistan, and India. Commonwealth-like groupings were created by other colonial powers. The Netherlands-Indonesian Union and the French Union were attempts to maintain imperial unity in the face of increasing demands for self-determination by non-European populations.

The overwhelmingly dominant role played by the metropolitan power in each of these unions meant that no special flag or other symbol was adopted to represent them. The Union Jack and the Dutch and French tricolors were considered sufficient for this purpose; it was never felt necessary even to give formal recognition to them.

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1. *The Commonwealth finally adopted its own flag in 1972 but "for many years this group of nations was known as the British Commonwealth, and it was unthinkingly assumed that the Union Jack was its flag" ("Flags for the Commonwealth," Flagmaster, No. 59).*

(1) Instead, attention focused on the right of member states to distinctive national flags which could be flown independently of the imperial flag and receive international recognition. The evolution of the colonial world to independence through an intermediate "union" status is precisely reflected in the struggles for national symbols within those countries.

By the middle of the 1950s French colonial and semi-colonial rule was degenerating. Syria and Lebanon had been proclaimed independent in 1943, gained local administration on 1 January 1944, and saw the withdrawal of French troops in April 1946. Under Japanese sponsorship Laos, Cambodia, and Viet-Nam had asserted independence in 1945; French authority was later reestablished only with difficulty. Nominal independence was granted to the three countries as "associated states of the French Union" in 1949, but the real transfer of power occurred five years later following the French defeat at Dienbienphu and the Geneva Conference of 1954.

In North Africa the French protectorates over Tunisia (dating from 1881) and Morocco (dating from 1912) ended in 1956. The 1954 outbreak of armed insurrection in Algeria - which had been considered an integral part of metropolitan France since 1848 - eventually resulted in the independence of that territory in

1962. Togo and Cameroon, trust territories under United Nations supervision, moved slowly towards independence, Togo achieving the status of "autonomous republic" in 1956. By 1957 all these countries had flags of their own, although the Tricolor was still official in Togo, Cameroon, and Algeria. (2)

The events leading to the creation of the Community and its symbols occurred not in sub-Saharan Africa but in Algeria and in France itself. French defeats in Indo-China in 1954 and in the Suez invasion of 1956 encouraged the army and French settlers to seize power in Algeria in May 1958. Their opposition to a French retreat in colonial territories threatened the national government in Paris, whose response was to call on General Charles de Gaulle to solve the crisis. He became premier on 1 June 1958 and arranged for an end of the Fourth Republic as part of his program to protect France from a right-wing coup.

De Gaulle's proposed constitution for a new Fifth Republic was submitted to voters

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2. *Although the flag of the National Liberation Front gained international recognition as the national flag of Algeria only in 1962, before that it had flown in areas liberated from the French. In Togo and Cameroon the local national flags were subordinate to the Tricolor until full independence was granted in 1960.*

throughout the French Union in a referendum on 28 September 1958.

The very first article of the constitution provided that "the Republic and the peoples of the overseas territories who, by an act of free determination, adopt the present constitution, [thereby] establish a Community." The referendum was rejected in only one territory - Guinea - which immediately became an independent country. (3) As alternatives to complete independence, the referendum offered overseas territories the opportunity to retain colonial status, to become departments of France, or to become self-governing republics. Those in the first two categories would be represented within the Community by France, while the autonomous republics would become separate members of the new institution.

By 8 January 1959, when de Gaulle was inaugurated as the first president of the Fifth Republic, twelve republics had been established in Africa. Only one of these, however, had approved a flag of its own - the Central African Republic. Under the dynamic leadership of President

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3. *The referendum took place on a Sunday and Guinean independence was proclaimed the following Thursday. So precipitous was French withdrawal that not until 10 November was a national flag adopted for Guinea.*

Barth l my Boganda, the former territory of Ubangui-Shari adopted its new flag on 1 December 1958 and confirmed it in a constitution effective 16 February 1959. The other republics in the Community, including France, displayed the blue-white-red Tricolor as a national flag, both on land and at sea.

Gradually throughout 1959 distinctive civil flags (i.e., national flags on land) were created by these republics, Upper Volta being the last (on 9 December). At first those flags had limited usage because the republics were not independent, were not members of the United Nations, and were only beginning to organize their administrations under newly-adopted constitutions. Article 78 of the 1958 French constitution specifically stated that "the field of competence of the Community includes foreign policy, defense, money, common economic and financial policy," as well as a number of other subjects. While the status of the new autonomous republics was a striking advance over what had existed the previous year, it was generally expected that independence - if it came at all - would be far in the future.

Under those circumstances the creation of a flag for the Community as a whole was a significant undertaking. In the 1950s international flags were few in number and restricted in usage. The United Nations had

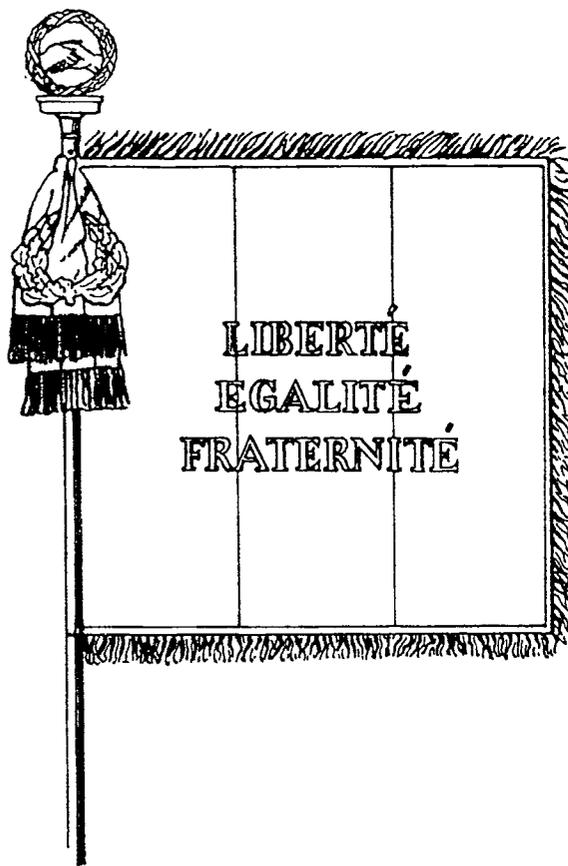


Fig.1

adopted its flag in 1947 (the League of Nations had had none), but other flags only came later - the League of Arab States in the 1950s, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1953, the South East Asia Treaty Organization in 1959, and the Organization of American States around 1965. The flag of the Olympic Games appeared only once every four years; the Council of Europe adopted its flag in 1955, but it was not in use by the European Economic Communities nor more generally by the public.

On 19 December 1958 the Executive Council of the Community was established. On 3 and 4 February 1959 it discussed symbols for the Community, issuing official conclusions on 9 February 1959:

The Marseillaise is the hymn of the Community. The motto "Libert , Egalit , Fraternit " [Liberty, Equality, Fraternity] is the motto of the Community. The flag of the Community is the tricolor flag, blue, white, red, whose staff shall bear a distinctive insignia chosen by the President of the Community.

Preparations were made so promptly that President de Gaulle was able to conduct a special flag ceremony the following Bastille Day, the French national holiday. At 7:45 AM on 14 July 1959 President de Gaulle in his military uniform arrived at the Place de la Concorde in Paris with the

Republican Guard as his escort: (4)

The President of the Republic was to remit to the twelve prime ministers of the countries of the Community their standards. The prime ministers were standing at the foot of the rostrum. General de Gaulle took from the hands of the officers who carried them the standards which he successively handed over to each of the heads of government, after saluting them and shaking their hands. He began on left where Mr. Michel Debr  [prime minister of France] stood.

Those standards closely resembled the regimental colors carried by the French army: each was square, made of silk, fringed in gold, and permanently attached to a staff. The motto of the Community was displayed in gilt letters across the three stripes (Fig. 1). The pole was decorated just above the banner with a tricolored cravat, fringed in gold at each end. Also in gold was a wreath of oak and laurel, bound at the bottom by a ribbon, spread across the three colors of the cravat just above the fringe. At the top of the pole was an elaborate metal finial (Fig. 2) consisting of a pedestal, a wreath bound by ribbons, and a foi (i.e.

4. The quoted account is from "Festivit s exceptionnelles pour le 14 juillet   Paris," *Paris-Dakar*, 15 July 1959. The previous day a photograph of the same ceremony was published in *The New York Times*.

two hands shaking). (5) The device of the finial seems to have served unofficially as the emblem of the Community. (6) The standard was made (by a Parisian flag manufacturer, Arthus-Bertrand) in thirteen examples only - one for each member state. The foi was said to stand for solidarity and mutual assistance; the wreath for union or alliance; and the oak and laurel for power, glory, and authority. (7)

The official flag decree, signed by President of the Community de Gaulle on 15 June 1959, based on a decision made three days earlier, did not mention any symbolism. It simply stated: (8)

Article 1: The distinctive insignia borne on the staff of the standard of the Community consists of a finial representing two hands united at the

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5. This device was common at the time of the French Revolution; a modern example appears in the coat of arms of Argentina.

6. An inaccurate illustration, for example, appears on the title page of the advertising supplement 'The New Franco-African Community,' *The New York Times*, 30 October 1960, Section 11, p. 13.

7. From the caption of a photograph appearing in *Le Figaro*, 14 July 1959.

heart of a crown of laurel and oak. The motto of the Community is inscribed on the tricolor silk of the standard.

Article 2: In ceremonies of the Community in which the army is called upon to take part, honors are rendered to the standard of the Community. The minister responsible for the armed forces of the Community defines the appropriate ceremonial and especially the conditions for the color guard of the Community.

Article 3: The flag of the Community is the tricolor flag, blue, white, red.

Article 4: Buildings of the institutions of the Community display the flag of the Community. Ships of the merchant fleet fly the flag of the Community at the stern.

The decree describing the standard, its physical form, and its actual use make clear that it was a "unique flag" - that is, no multiples in various sizes and fabrics for general use existed. The standard was treated as a military color to be paraded on special occasions only. Otherwise it was (presumably) displayed in some government office in the country to which it had been assigned.

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8. French and English vexillological terminology do not correspond exactly. In the editor's translation of the decree, "standard" is used for the French word *drapeau*; "flag" corresponds to *pavillon*.

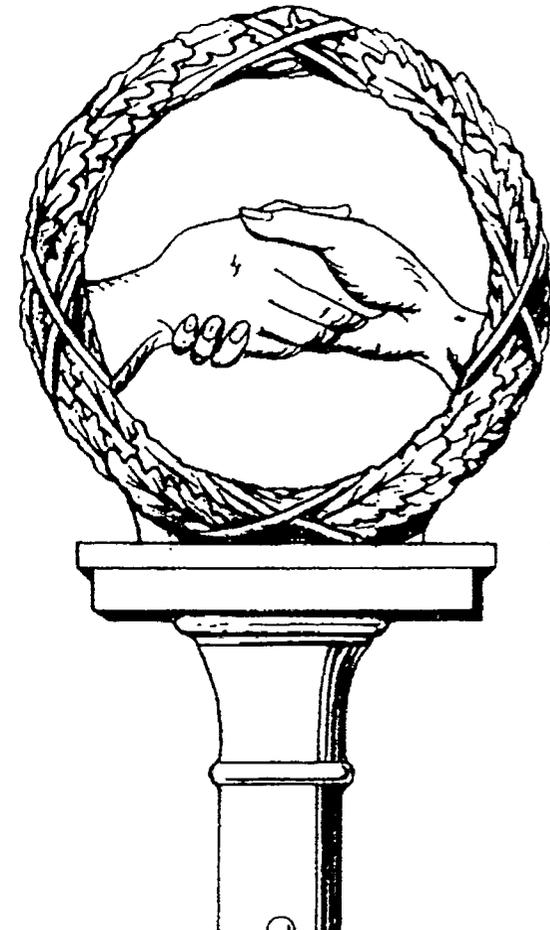


Fig.2

(9) On the other hand the flag of the Community was clearly a "type flag" - a design which could be (and indeed was) manufactured in great numbers, in different fabrics and sizes, for widespread use. Specifically, it served as the civil ensign for Community countries. Since the Tricolor had long been the civil ensign of France and its colonies, in fact this "new" flag represented only a change in designation. (10) Nevertheless there was some significance to this attribution since countries which eventually withdrew from the Community no longer displayed its flag on their merchant ships.

The decree of 15 June 1959 also stated that the Tricolor should fly on buildings of Community institutions. Exactly which buildings were included is not known, but it may well have extended to the government palace in each of the autonomous republics. Their heads of state were ex

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9. *A photograph of the Community standard presented to Mali appears in "Le 11 novembre   Dakar," Paris-Dakar, 12 November 1959. As presented by an honor guard, it takes precedence over a Mali national flag in the form of a military color (fringed and with a cravat).*

10. *Presumably the stripes were in the 30:33:37 ratio (rather than the equal stripes of the Tricolor as used on land), which had been official for maritime usage in France since 17 May 1853.*

officio members of the Executive Council of the Community, which met not only at Community headquarters in Paris but in the capitals of the member republics. In any event it is certain that the office of each high commissioner (who served as the liaison between France and a given republic) displayed the Tricolor, which thereby stood as a reminder that the country was not independent.

That situation did not last long, however. On 1 January 1960 Cameroon achieved independence, followed on 27 April by Togo. It was difficult to justify to other territories under French rule that they could not likewise join the United Nations and enjoy the other privileges of independence, simply because Cameroon and Togo had originally been German colonies which passed to French control first as mandates and later as trust territories. Therefore an amendment was made to the constitution of the Fifth Republic on 18 May 1960, allowing what had been denied to Guinea in 1958 - full independence without loss of membership in the Community or similar close ties to France.

That option was immediately taken by all twelve autonomous republics. The Mali Federation

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11. *On 20 August 1960 the federation split into its two constituent parts, Senegal and Mali, which have been separate nations ever since.*

was the first, on 20 June 1960; (11) the last to gain independence was Mauritania on 28 November 1960. At first this new Community continued with France, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Congo, Gabon, Senegal, and Madagascar as members. (12) The other former autonomous republics had bilateral treaties with France outside the framework of the Community. In substance that distinction proved to be meaningless and the Community quickly withered away without ever being officially dissolved.

While de Gaulle was French president, the Secretariat General of the Community had an administrator. Under President Georges Pompidou, who succeeded de Gaulle in June 1969, no administrator was appointed. The Secretariat General itself was abolished on 19 May 1974 by President Val ry Giscard d'Estaing. By that time the standards and the flag of the Community had long ceased to be used, except by France and its dependent territories.

The current fate of the thirteen standards of the Community is not known. In the thirty-plus years since their presentation to the heads of government of the thirteen Community republics, many changes have taken place in those countries. There have

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12. *At that time Madagascar was known as the Malagasy (pronounced mal-gash) Republic.*

been five alterations in their national flags; Upper Volta is now known as Burkina; civil war has caused extensive destruction in N'Djamena, capital of Chad; Marxist regimes have been established in Benin (formerly Dahomey), the Congo, and Madagascar.

Given the normal vicissitudes undergone by any flag which has no current standing - and which is not old enough to be considered a historic artifact - it would not be surprising to learn that a majority of the Community standards had been destroyed or lost. Although they had been created in that annus mirabilis for flags, 1959, (13) the standards (and flag) of the Community received little attention. The following year they disappeared, unnoticed.

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*13. New national flags were established in 1959 by Chad, the Congo, Dahomey, Gabon, Ivory Coast, Madagascar, the Mali Federation, Mauritania, Niger, Upper Volta - plus the United States, the German Democratic Republic, Brunei, Singapore, the Faroe Islands, the Netherlands Antilles, Hong Kong, St. Christopher- Nevis, Iraq, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, and the Federation of Arab Emirates of the South. Of these 22 flags, only eight continue in use today unchanged.*