

## THE FLAG OF THE ARGENTINE CONFEDERATION (1831–1853)

Gustavo Tracchia

### Introduction

From the years 1831 to 1853, the «United Provinces of the River Plate» changed its name to the «Argentine Confederation». The flags used during the Confederation had the peculiarity of having the traditional three stripes of blue, white and blue with a red sun at the centre. In the early stages of the Argentine revolutionary movement of 1810 for independence, the colour red also played an important role. Red was the colour representing Spanish nationalism, being used in the River Plate on cockades of the army personnel when in civilian clothes, according to an ordinance of the Viceroy. During the English invasions of 1806 and 1807, the forces repelling both attacks used red cockades. Also, red and white banners were carried by some of the regiments during the defence of Buenos Aires in 1807. Combining these two colours was supposed to recall the alliance between Spain and France during the War of Succession to the Spanish throne of 1702–14, red for Spain and white for the Bourbons. In 1810, the troops of Buenos Aires kept the red cockade during the subsequent struggle against the Spanish royalists, a struggle that eventually led to total independence from the Spanish crown.

By 1812, blue and white cockades were used simultaneously with the traditional red. Plain white cockades and yellow and red cockades were also in use. In February of the same year, Belgrano, writing from Rosario to the government of Buenos Aires, requested a «national» cockade to become official. The government immediately acted and resolved on 18<sup>th</sup> February 1812 that, «from this day the blue and white cockade will be the colours used by the United Provinces of the River Plate» and «the discontinuation of the usage of the red cockade». However, only the red cockade was abolished. The decree of 18<sup>th</sup> February does not mention the white cockade used by those loyal to the Spanish Bourbons, nor was there any mention of the yellow and red cockade, which was a naval insignia. Before concluding with this introduction, the author would like to underline, that the predominant posture in Argentina today is that the blue and white cockades were used by the supporters of Ferdinand, the King of Spain.

### From bicolour to tricolour

During the Wars of National Organisation (1820–1853) red was used again, but this time it had a different significance. The well known «Flag of the Federation», hoisted in Santa Fé in 1815, was the first time an Argentine flag including the colour red was hoisted. The forces that displayed this new tricolour flag, belonged to the Federal Party, which was struggling for a federal constitution of the United Provinces. José Gervasio de Artigas has been credited for choosing red as the colour of the Federal Party, combining it with blue and white. The «Flag of the Federation» was also known as «Artigas' Flag» or simply as «the Tricolour». The «Flag of the Federation» had three horizontal stri-

pes, blue, white, and blue from top to bottom, with a red band crossing them from upper hoist to lower fly. Artigas, leader of the Eastern Bank province, stated that red was «the symbol of our race», but he was also keeping the blue and white, which were «representing the nation». The province of Buenos Aires was the political centre of the United Provinces, Buenos Aires being controlled by the Unitarian Party, which advocated a centralised type of administration for the nation. The Unitarian Party was the main opposition and bitter enemy to Federalism.

In July of 1816, Congress made the three horizontal stripes of sky-blue, white and sky-blue from top to bottom the official flag of the nation. The wars of independence had been fought under those colours, and foreign nations recognised them as the colours of the United Provinces of the River Plate. At the same time the tricolour used by the Federal Party was gaining popularity in the provinces of Santa Fé, Entre Ríos, Corrientes, the Eastern Bank and Misiones. Shortly before independence was secured, the national colours had been monopolised by the Unitarian government of Buenos Aires, which considered national and Unitarian colours as a synonym.

The fundamental disagreement in the type of government to be adopted prompted in 1820 the dismemberment of the United Provinces of the River Plate into autonomous regions. The leaders of the May revolution of 1810 declared independence hoping for a change from an authoritarian system towards democracy. However, the May movement was primarily an event of the Buenos Aires inhabitants (=Porteños), independence having been declared without consulting the provincial governments. The provincial governments of the Viceroyalty had shown sympathy towards the movement first, but when the provinces disagreed with Buenos Aires on how to go about the process of independence, or what was to be done afterwards, the relationship between Porteños and the provinces started to erode. This wedge between city and country lasted until 1853 with a variety of ups and downs for both parties.

### The raising of the red sun

In December of 1825, the United Provinces were engulfed in a war against the Empire of Brazil which had occupied the Eastern Bank province. The United Provinces armies and navy successfully pushed back the imperial forces to their pre-war borders. However, what achieved in battle was forfeited at the table of negotiations, resulting in the creation of a new state, the republic of Uruguay. During the war, the Congress, which had an Unitarian majority, chose Bernardino Rivadavia as president of what they started calling «The Argentine Republic». Rivadavia's presidency was not recognised by the federal provinces since no constitution had been approved by any party. Rivadavia introduced reforms in the army, education, law, medicine, etc, even limiting the power of the Church. In short, Rivadavia's Unitarian administration tilted towards a progressive liberalism for which the country was not ready. Also, the lack of democratic sentiments and the contempt towards the provinces and their leaders jeopardised his entire administration. Rivadavia used the flag approved by the Congress of 1816. This design of a high-

ter shade of blue was labelled by the Federals as «The Unitarian flag of Buenos Aires». The disastrous peace treaty signed by Rivadavia's representatives with Brazil, led to his resignation in June of 1827, and with it the end of the Unitarian domination of Buenos Aires and the Congress as well.

A period of chaos prevailed in Buenos Aires until 1829, when the commander of the South, brigadier Juan Manuel de Rosas, was appointed by the provincial legislature of Buenos Aires as governor with instructions to restore order in the province. Rosas, a federal sympathiser, had never been involved in the internal struggle between these two factions. Nevertheless, the war against Brazil and the events that followed influenced him to become active in the already familiar drama between Unitarians and Federals. For the first time the Federal party gained control over the largest and richest of the provinces, Buenos Aires. During Rosas' administration (1829–1832 and again 1835–1852) the usage of red was imposed in a more visual way. Rosas kept the federal dogma and imposed the red of federalism on every aspect of life. Uniforms of provincial militia, of naval forces, as well as of policemen and fire fighters had the distinctive colour red. Windows and doors of the houses of Federals were painted red, as well as the flag poles and masts of ships. The use of red cockades was again in fashion, but this time mandatory to all citizens.

With Rosas Buenos Aires had its own «caudillo» (=leader), «The Restorer of the Law». He was loved by the urban poor, by the gauchos of the countryside, and even by the merchants of Buenos Aires. He was populist, paternalist, and imperialist. He drew his followers from rich «estancieros» (=landowners) to Blacks, Indians and of course the gauchos. He was not an intellectual, but refined enough to understand political needs. He could behave either as an «English gentlemen» or as a «gaucho of the Pampa». He enjoyed great popularity, but he was in fact a rancher and a «Porteño», and he would cater to his own class. In time, his policies became more centralist than those of the Unitarians which he sought to oppose, but he effectively unified the country.

The flag of the nation, official since 1816 without losing its symbolism, also came into the style of the time. The first of three dramatic modifications was the change of the light blue colour used by the Unitarians, to a darker shade of blue which was already in use in many of the flags of the federal provinces. The second modification was the addition of four red Phrygian caps, one at each corner of the flag. Some authors describe them as a type of hat used by Rosas' soldiers. The third alteration was the slow but progressive change of the colour of the sun from yellow to red. The sun had been added to the national flag in 1818. All of these modifications were happening simultaneously. Precisely during Rosas' first anniversary as governor of Buenos Aires and leader of the Federal party, on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1836, a flag with those characteristics was given to him as a gift. Such a flag is kept at the National Historical Museum in Buenos Aires in the Federal room. [Fig. 1] shows on top a black and white line drawing of this flag by David Prando. The explanation given at that time was: 1) Dark blue instead of a light shade of blue was

chosen to differentiate the flag from the one used by the Unitarians. 2) The red caps at each corner and the red sun were chosen because red was the colour of the party and in fashion at the time. There are records indicating that at the beginning the sun was still yellow but with thin red rays interlocked between the yellow ones, and that by the 1840's the sun had become completely red.

In June of 1836, Rosas wrote to the governor of the province of Santiago del Estero, that dark blue was the official colour of the flag. The new design was hoisted on all public buildings, and used by all the regiments and other military units serving under Buenos Aires command. The country was renamed the «Argentine Confederation»<sup>1</sup> although real unity had not been achieved. Unitarians were still holding control over some provinces and had formed the «Unitarian League». Nevertheless, Buenos Aires was still holding the privilege of handling foreign relations. We also know, that loyal Federals hoisted on their homes flags of red and white horizontal stripes. These flags were also very much in use in popular festivities, but never had an official status. They were mainly used by Rosas' followers as a sign of alliance and support to him and his party.

### The official flag of the Confederation

Historians have argued for decades about the status of the flag used during the time of the Argentine Confederation. Should it be considered as the «official» flag of the country, during that period, or only as a party or regimental type of flag? Two variants were used from 1840 until 1853: Plain dark blue, white, and dark blue. This simple design had the function of national colours. The other variant had the red sun and the four Phrygian caps added. This type of flag seems to be the design used as the official flag of the Confederation [Fig. 1, on top]. A slightly different design of the flag of the Argentina Confederation is depicted in [Fig. 1, centre]. There was a third variant with the national coat-of-arms replacing the sun [Fig. 1, bottom]. This design was primarily used as a regimental flag. Regimental colours had an inscription indicating the unit and another one with the text «¡VIVA LA CONFEDERACION ARGENTINA! ¡MUERAN LOS SALVAGES UNITARIOS!» (=Long Live the Argentine Confederation, Death to the Savage Unitarians). The National Historical Museum in Buenos Aires keeps in the Federal room such a colour of a provincial battalion [Fig. 2]. Slightly different designs of such colours seem to have been used too [Fig. 3].

It is important to bring to our attention some facts over Rosas' period and consequently about the role played by the flags used during his administration. Rosas was governor of Buenos Aires and in charge of foreign relations for 20 years, a period longer than that of any other administrator of the province or of the whole country up to that date. When Rosas imposed his own design, logically it became the flag of the nation. Foreign governments recognised the flag as a new design of the national flag. Furthermore, officials and administrators serving under that flag were legally representing the nation. Events of the time reaffirmed the official status of the flag: Rosas was allied in 1841 to forces trying to overthrow Fructuoso Rivera, who was

the president of Uruguay and hostile to him. Rosas' navy besieged Montevideo. His fleet flew the Uruguayan flag as a sign that the siege was not against the Uruguayan people, but against Rivera. In turn, Uruguayan forces allied to Rosas' hoisted the flag of the Confederation from the main fortress inside Montevideo. Another important event was the French blockade of 1840. This was prompted by an earlier incident with France having to do with Rosas' intervention in Uruguay and the arrest of some French citizens. In 1845 France, alarmed by Rosas' interference in Uruguay, blockaded again Buenos Aires harbour, this time together with the English navy. The attempts of Rosas of fighting the super powers of the time made him even more popular. After the differences had been solved, Rosas requested from foreign officials reparations which were given each time in the form of a gun salute to the current flag hoisted at the Buenos Aires fortress. Those flag salutes were not given to Rosas but to the nation he represented.

In the Soldiers' Chapel adjacent to «Les Invalides» in Paris, two of five flags are exhibited as trophies, their description being in accordance with the flag design used during Rosas' administration. Niox listed those flags in his book «Drapeaux et Trophées» as taken during a combat in Obligado, Argentina, on 20<sup>th</sup> November 1845. Three of those flags are described as «...avec écusson rouge a chaque angle et soleil rouge au centre.» In consequence we can see that foreign governments took those flags as the flags of the nation. However, we are confronted with the fact of not having a single official government record of the time documenting the legal adoption of this design. For that reason, the «Flag of the Confederation» has not been considered by local historians as an official version, but rather as a capricious, illegal and tasteless design adopted and imposed by a reckless dictator. Furthermore, some time later, historians considered Rosas' design, and anything similar to it, a defacing of the national colours. One of the reasons why we do not have more evidence or documents to substantiate the claim of an official flag, is because after Rosas was overthrown in 1853, the people that took over the administration of the nation and the province of Buenos Aires burned and destroyed the documents. Only one important document survived. It is the letter sent by Rosas to the governor of the province of Santiago del Estero, in which the new flag is described.

The official history of Argentina was written and edited by Rosas' enemies, such as Bartolomé Mitre, who was governor of Buenos Aires in 1860 and in 1862 became the second constitutional president of the Republic. He wrote much of the early history of the country using official documents as the sources for his books, and he was Unitarian. The «Men of May» like Moreno, Belgrano and later Rivadavia were the founders of the Unitarian philosophy. This philosophy was based on the belief that only the educated class of the city was prepared to govern the nation. Mitre, which was of a later generation, was an ardent follower of the doctrines and the writings of his predecessors. Domingo F. Sarmiento was also an ardent follower of the centralist doctrine and in two of his books, «Facundo» and «O civilización o barbarie», he depicted the Unitarians as civilised and the Federals as barba-

rians, whereas in reality, at least in many cases, it was the Unitarians who behaved as barbarians. Unitarian efforts tended to deny credit to Federal leaders, who tried to unify the country in a civilised and democratic manner. In 1868, Sarmiento became the third constitutional president of the republic. In trying to erase any memory of Rosas he ordered the total destruction of Rosas' residence outside Buenos Aires, having a park built in its place. If buildings were destroyed, what could we expect of documents or flags? Today, students of architecture are excavating the site where Rosas' residence once stood and are uncovering its foundations. The official position of today regarding the national flag states that there has been only one flag in Argentina and that this was hoisted by Belgrano in 1812 for the first time. Any other flag is considered to be a form of desecration or defacing to the national colours.

### Conclusion

As a vexillologist, the author considers it as his duty to look at the past in an objective way. It is not the job of vexillologists to judge actions, or persons, but rather to avoid political passions and to research the truth of facts without any fear or remorse. Currently, Argentine historians are deeply involved, like the students of architecture and archeology, in bringing into light all the facts pertaining to Rosas' period. The status of the flags used during that era have not yet been scholarly analysed, and no study will be complete until those flags are put into perspective, since flags are also a visual and tangible evidence of the historical and socio-political events of the past. In the early 1950s' a historical revisionism movement became very popular. This movement sought to put the role played by Federalism and its leaders in shaping the country into a more favourable perspective. They succeeded only up to a certain level, the job not yet being accomplished. In modern Argentina Unitarianism can be equalled to land owners and big business, whereas Federalism stays on the side of the poor, the labour force, representing interests of the lower classes. Only one more effort is needed to give back the «Flag of the Argentine Confederation» its proper place in history. May be once this is achieved, we would have a consistent definition on the proper shade of «celeste» (=sky-blue) to be used.

### Bibliography

- Juan Carlos De Lellis, «Las banderas de Rosas», in: «Todo es Historia», nr. 19, Bs. As., September 1969.
- Felix Luna, «Los Caudillos», Bs. As., 1970.
- Julio A. Luqui Lagleye, «Las Moradas de Rosas», in: «Todo es Historia», nr. 118, Bs. As., March 1977.
- Général Niox, «Drapeaux et Trophées», Paris, 1911.
- Ricardo Piccirilli, «Rivadavia y su tiempo», Bs. As., 1944.
- Eduardo S. Rosenkrantz, «La Bandera de la Patria», Bs. As., 1990.
- Mario Guillermo Saravi, «Memorandum sobre la Confederación Argentina y su Bandera», Mendoza, 1993.
- Nicolas Siri, «Las banderas del Obligado», in: «Todo es Historia», nr. 68, Bs. As., November 1973.
- Gustavo Tracchia, «Banderas en el Río de la Plata», in: «Banderas», nr. 9, SEV, Madrid, 1983.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> The origins of the Argentine Confederation can be traced back to the 4<sup>th</sup> January of 1831, when the provinces of Buenos Aires, Entre Ríos, and Santa Fé signed an agreement known as the «Pacto Federal». The current Argentine Constitution, written in 1853, accepts as official names for the country: «República Argentina», «Nación Argentina», or «Confederación Argentina».

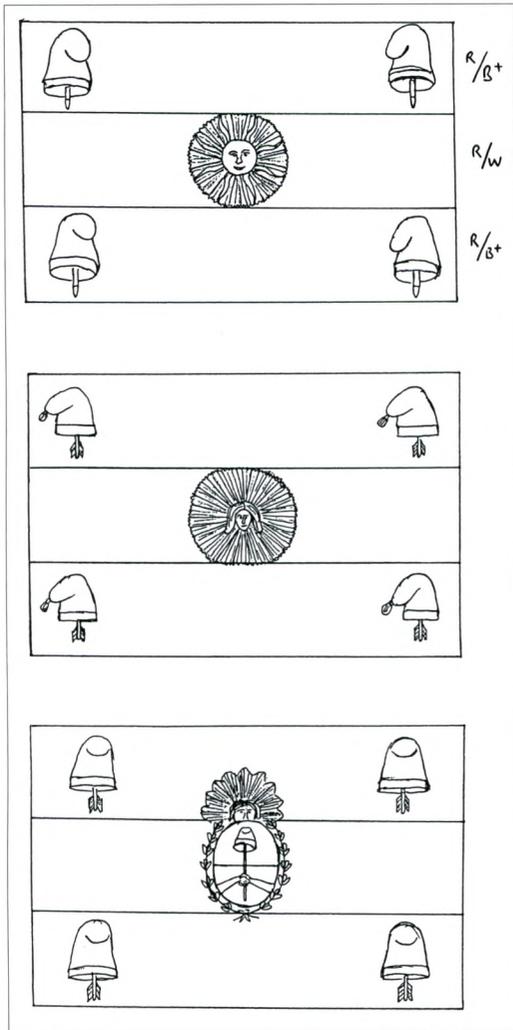


Fig. 1  
Flags of the Confederation. (Drawings by David Prando)

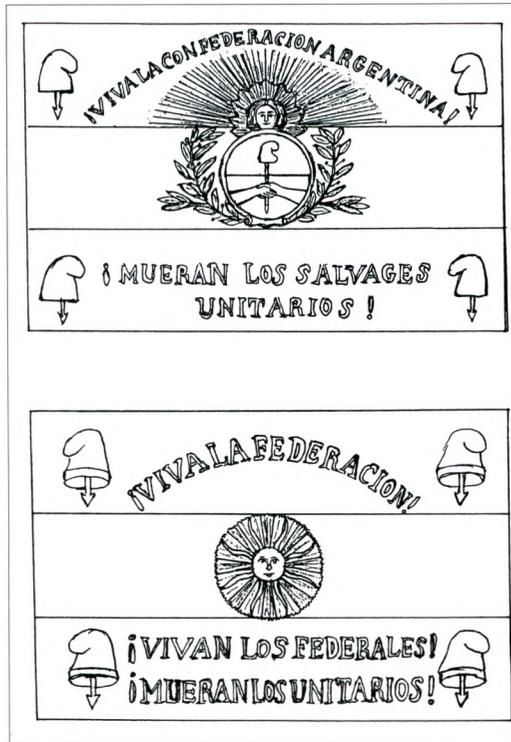


Fig. 3  
Military flags of the Argentine Confederation. (Drawings by David Prando)



Fig. 2  
Colour of a Provincial Battallion used during the Argentine Confederation. (National Historical Museum, Buenos Aires, photograph by the author, with kind permission)