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Flags of the Boers - a very old history

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ABSTRACT: As with nationalist movements elsewhere in the world, the Boers in South Africa have long used flags as symbols of nationality. In most cases the origin of these flags can be traced back to the Netherlands' own struggle for sovereignty. The evolution and use of the most important of these flags is traced and it is pointed out how some of them have been annexed by the State. Since they are not used by the so-called "New South Africa" there are those who believe that these flags should rightly be returned to those who hold them dear.

The illustrations for this paper appear on Plates 17–18.

1 Introduction

The Boers of South Africa have long considered themselves to be a separate nation and thus entitled to their own national flags. In South Africa symbols of Boer nationality have evolved on a regional basis. The designs of these flags have their origins in Europe, and in particular in the flags associated with the Netherlands' freedom struggle in the 16th and 17th centuries.

2 The Netherlands - The "Prince's flag"

This is probably the oldest national flag in the world! The origin of this flag dates back to the 1500s when the Dutch were involved in a struggle for freedom against the Spanish. There is evidence that Dutch soldiers wore orange, white and blue armbands at the siege of Leiden in 1574. The forces of the Catholic conqueror of Holland at the time, Philip II, put thousands of Protestants to the

sword and one of his followers, a certain Willem I from the province Orange (an area in France where oranges are grown), was placed in charge of certain parts of the Netherlands by Philip. Willem was received in Ghent in 1577 by followers dressed in orange and carrying orange, white and blue banners. After some brutal murders, Willem turned against his master because of Philip's cruelty.

Willem was then chosen as their leader by Dutch patriots, who used his personal colour, orange, as a symbol for their struggle against the Spanish leader. Later under Willem II, blue and white were added to symbolise the struggle of the seafaring Dutch against the North Sea. The end result was an orange, white and blue tricolour and the battle cry "Oranje Boven!", which means "Orange on top!" **(Fig. 1)**. The name 'Prince's flag' is thus obvious. The Dutch continued fighting for freedom and in the law courts their lawyers were branded as a "bunch of beggars."

Patriots who fought the Spanish at sea took this insult as an honour and called themselves the *Water-beggars*. These Water-beggars continued fighting and eventually seized the port of Briel, which sparked open revolution and led the way for an assertion of Dutch independence from Spain in the year 1581. Another 67 years of struggle followed and by the time they regained their freedom in 1648, political changes swung toward more liberal policies.

In 1654 the Dutch government of the time signed a secret defensive alliance with England, promising Oliver Cromwell that members of the House of Orange, which did not favour the English, would be excluded from stadholdership of Amsterdam. It was obvious that this government was opposed to the more conservative followers of Willem, and the colour orange with which he was so closely identified. They gradually began to change the Dutch national colours of orange, white and blue to red, white and blue, which were associated with both them and the English. In 1794 French troops overran the Netherlands, and the Batavian Republic, based on the French model, was proclaimed. In 1796 a red, white and blue horizontal tricolour was adopted as the first official Dutch flag. It became known as the Batavian flag **(Fig. 2)**.

Sailors were reluctant to accept the Batavian flag and continued to fly the Prince's flag on their ships and elsewhere. Despite all their efforts the Batavian flag reigned officially on land and at sea as Holland's national flag from 1807–1810. From 1810–1813 it was replaced by the French Tricolor of Napoleon, who had annexed the territory. When the Netherlands was declared independent again in 1813, the Prince's flag was restored to distinguish between French and Dutch loyalties.

In 1815, after the overthrow of Napoleon, the former Prince of Orange who was by now King Willem I, decided against all odds that the Batavian flag would be the official national flag, but a proclamation was issued in terms of which a separate triangular orange pennant was to be flown above the red, white and blue national flag in honour of the House of Nassau. This custom is still followed today.

In the 1930s a movement for the re-establishment of the Prince's flag gained

some support, but in 1937 the Queen put an end to the debate by Royal Decree, proclaiming the Batavian flag the official national flag. The Netherlands still use orange as their national colour on the sport fields, on cultural days and also in a political context to pay tribute to the House of Oranje Nassau.

3 The Cape of Storms

When Commander Jan van Riebeeck and his men set foot on the stormy shores of South Africa in 1652, the majority of his sailors still remembered the glorious days of the Water-beggars, and carried with them the oldest national flag of the world, the Prince's flag.

It is important to remember that, being sailors, they had long favoured the use of this flag on their ships. The official flag of the Cape, being a refreshment station of the Netherlands, would have been the Batavian red, white and blue. Therefore, it may be assumed that both flags were in use at the Cape during the 1600s, one official, used mainly on land, and the other unofficial, used mainly at sea. The two earliest Boer Republics, Swellendam and Graaff-Reinet were later to use the Batavian flag to symbolise their freedom.

When the Cape was annexed by the British, the Union Jack became the official flag of the colony. There was also a colonial ensign on the standard British pattern. After the unification of South Africa in 1910, the Cape became a province, although it never had an official provincial flag of its own. When "Vryburgers" (which means free citizens) in the Cape, who were opposed to British policies, decided to move northwards in order to escape British rule, they called themselves *Voortrekkers,* which means "front explorers." They were to establish a number of independent republics of their own in the hinterland.

4 Natalia

When the Voortrekkers moved through what is now the Free State and over the Drakensberg mountain range into Natalia they had with them the Batavian flag. However, they felt that this was the flag of the mother country and desired to have their own symbols. The result was the Flag of Natalia, a distinctive swallow-pointed version of the red, white and blue **(Fig. 3)**.

To date, nobody knows who designed this beautiful flag. Unfortunately for the Trekkers, the British also annexed this territory, put it under the Union Jack, and made it a crown colony. As a colony, it had its ensigns on the standard British pattern. The flag of Natalia thus fell into abeyance.

However, there is a junior cultural movement, called the "Voortrekkers," who use the flag of Natalia as an unofficial flag, and it can still be seen on their parade grounds. This could be the reason why, in certain circles, this flag is also known as the "Voortrekker flag."

When the Union of South Africa came into being in 1910 Natal also became a province but was never granted a provincial flag of its own.

5 The Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek

In 1852 the Voortrekkers founded a Boer Republic between the Vaal and the Limpopo Rivers and named it the "Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek" (ZAR). In creating a flag for this new Republic, Marthinus van der Hoff and his friend "Stuart" used as its basis the Batavian flag, but placed a green vertical panel against the hoist, probably to symbolise the youth of the new Republic, hence the birth of the "Vierkleur" **(Fig. 4)**. On 18 February 1858 it was officially proclaimed as the official flag of the ZAR.

When the first shots of the first and second Anglo-Boer Wars were fired, it was the Vierkleur which proudly waved above the Boer commandos. This flag became world-famous at Majuba, Spioenkop and Magersfontein, and many a British soldier feared its presence during times of war. Boers were known to fire from horseback with one hand, the other holding aloft a Vierkleur! With a short interlude in the time of President Burgers, the Vierkleur served as the official flag of the (ZAR) from 1858 to 1902. After 1910 it was, at times, used as the unofficial provincial flag for the Transvaal province. It also featured in South Africa's first national flag.

Because of its historic connotations, former State President P.W. Botha had this flag registered with the Bureau of Heraldry in the name of the State (Cert. No. 1375, dated 4 October 1983). After the old Transvaal Province was divided into four provinces with the coming of South Africa's new political dispensation on 27 April 1994, the Vierkleur was dropped as an unofficial provincial flag. But, whenever the freedom of the Boers is in danger, the first flag that the oppressor will face will be the Vierkleur and it is still to be seen at gatherings of the Boers **(Fig. 5)**.

My people feel strongly about the registration of this historic flag in the name of the State and have written to President Mandela requesting that he releases the registration of this flag on the grounds that it has traditionally been the property of the Boers and should thus be returned to its traditional owners.

6 The Orange Free State (Oranje-Vrijstaat)

Another group of "Voortrekkers" founded a republic between the Orange and the Vaal rivers in 1854 and named it the *Republiek van den Oranje-Vrijstaat,* or the Republic of the Orange Free State, in honour to the House of Orange. Of all the Boer flags, this one has the most interesting history. In 1855 President Hoffman of the Orange Free State wrote to the King of the Netherlands, advising him that the House of Orange was honoured in the name of the new Republic.

He requested the advisors to the King to design a suitable flag and a coat of arms for the newly founded Republic. The Netherlands' envoy, Cornelius Hiddingh was duly sent to the Free State with the King's gift of a flag and coat of arms. When he arrived in Bloemfontein, the capital of the Free State, after the long sea journey and a month on an ox wagon, nobody was there to welcome him, because Hoffman was no longer in office and Boshoff, who had in the meantime become President, knew nothing about his predecessor's request to the King. Boshoff himself had in the interim ordered a national seal from the Cape and this had arrived at his office, on another ox wagon, at the same time!

What was to be done? The King of the Netherlands could hardly be insulted, neither could the Cape Governor, through whose kind offices the seal had been arranged! On 28 February 1856 the Free State Volksraad decided to accept the flag design which had arrived from the Dutch King, but to combine the coat of arms design received from the Netherlands, with that of the seal which had arrived from the Cape. On 23 February 1857 the new flag **(Fig. 6)** and coat of arms were unveiled in a fitting ceremony. President Boshof then took the flag and, together with members of the "Volksraad," walked in procession to the Bloemfontein Fort where the flag was hoisted to a twenty-gun salute. This was to serve as the official flag of the Free State Republic from 1857 to 1902. It was, like the Vierkleur and Union Jack, later to find a place in South Africa's first national flag.

During the Anglo-Boer wars this flag was, like its counterpart the Vierkleur, to become world famous. After 1910 it was from time to time used as the unofficial provincial flag of the Orange Free State Province. Again like the Vierkleur, one will see this flag wherever the "struggle" of the Boer is fought and like its counterpart, former State President P.W. Botha also had this flag registered with the Bureau of Heraldry in the name of the State (Cert. No. 1340, dated 14 October 1983). Despite the constitutional changes it would seem that this flag is still used from time to time as an unofficial provincial flag of the Free State.

Here too, President Mandela has been requested to release the registration of this flag and return it to our people.

7 De Nieuwe Republiek

Before the British annexed the northern part of what is now the Province of KwaZulu/Natal in the 1880s, General Lućas Meyer founded a small republic there, which he named "De Nieuwe Republiek." They also adopted a Vierkleur, but one in which the green and blue changed places **(Fig. 7)**. The town of Vryheid, the former capital of this republic, still uses this as the official flag of their municipality. It is sometimes seen in Boer processions, but it is very rare in this context.

8 The War flag

During the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 the two Boer Republics of the Transvaal and Free State united against British rule, and the need to combine their symbols was obvious. One solution was to add an Orange panel to the bottom of the Vierkleur **(Fig. 8)**. This flag which is also known as the "Taungs Vyfkleur" was mostly used towards the end of the war.

9 The Union of South Africa

After the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 the two former Boer Republics became British Colonies which, together with the Cape and Natal, united into the Union of South Africa in 1910. This new dominion within the British Empire did not have a distinctive flag of its own and bitter debate followed in Parliament from 1925–1927 on the national flag question. In general, English-speaking South Africans were inclined towards the Union Jack, while the Boers wanted nothing to do with it because of the reminders it brought of the war-time British concentration camps. In 1927 the Flag Commission decided that the oldest South African flag, the Prince's flag, should provide the basis of a new national flag and that the Union Jack, the Vierkleur, the Free State flag and a Southern Cross should be placed on a shield in the centre of the white stripe of the Prince's flag. This became known as the "Shield flag" **(Fig. 9)**.

A problem was that the Union Jack held the premier position. The solution to this question of precedence was eventually achieved by placing the Free State flag vertically to serve as flagpole for the Union Jack and the Vierkleur **(Fig. 10)**, thus ensuring that no flag took precedence over the others. This national flag continued in use unchanged when South Africa became a Republic on 31 May 1961.

Over the years, the basis of this flag was accepted by many of my people, who are descendants of the "Water-beggars," although it is equally true that some of them dislike this flag, because of the presence of the Union Jack. During the Border War of the 1970s in South West Africa (later Namibia) and Angola, this flag flew over thousands of young South African soldiers who respected, and even today cherish it, as a symbol of their own. Others have called this an apartheid symbol, but this is far removed from the truth because, as you are aware, the origin of this flag dates back to 1574, some 375 years before apartheid was implemented!

Having been the national flag of first the Union, and later the Republic from 1928–1994, this flag is still registered in the name of the State. Since its origins lie so closely in the old Prince's flag, we as the Boer nation feel that it belongs to us, despite the presence of the Union Jack. In consequence, the President has been requested in writing that this flag also be given back to my people as our property.

10 The "Rebel flag"

One might ask what has become of the Prince's flag, and whether it is still in use somewhere? Why, also, did King Willem choose the Batavian flag, when throughout his entire struggle he had used the more patriotic and loyal Prince's flag? Why did the early Boers choose the Batavian flag while they were, in actual fact, the real rebels of the cause who should rather have chosen the Prince's flag?

During the Anglo-Boer Wars a large number of Boers from the Cape Colony fought on the side of the two Boer Republics. These "Burgers" were known as Cape Rebels. If such a Rebel was caught by the British he could expect to die in front of a firing squad, the Cape then being a British Colony. These Rebels could thus hardly advertise their origin or sympathies by carrying flags and banners! However, according to oral tradition these rebels used the Prince's flag, but with a vertical green hoist panel **(Fig. 11)** to express their sympathy with the two Boer Republics. This flag thus comprised the Orange of the Free State in place of the red, in a design otherwise similar to that of the Vierkleur. Some called this the Rebel flag and others called it the "Vryburgervlag."

When the original Vierkleur was unveiled by the brothers Van der Hoff, a poem was read in which the words "en wapper ook op zee" appear. The Vierkleur certainly never saw service at sea, being the national flag of a land-locked State. This must thus be a reference to the earliest form of the Rebel flag.

Although I have no proof, oral tradition has it that during the Battle of Majuba the Rebel flag was also seen among the Vierkleurs and Free State flags. It is also told that the famous Free State General Christiaan de Wet used this flag at times.

When South Africans were called up in 1914 to fight the Germans in South West Africa (now Namibia) during World War I, thousands of Boers rebelled, and refused to fight against what they considered to be their own flesh and blood. As could be expected, the Rebel flag was used during the Rebellion! Again, during World War II, when South Africans where called upon to fight against the Germans on the side of the British, many Boers again rebelled and found a national movement, the Ossewa-Brandwag. It is well known that this organisation used the Rebel flag as its unofficial flag. When Prof. Boshoff and a number of other Afrikaners founded their "Volkstaat of Orania" in the Northern Cape, this flag was chosen to symbolise their aspirations. Other organisations who support a so-called "Volkstaat" in the Cape also use this flag to symbolise their nationalism.

During the negotiations leading to the establishment of the new political dispensation and the 1994 elections, the Rebel flag emerged again among supporters of a "Volkstaat" and was hoisted as a symbol of freedom together with the Vierkleur and Free State flag. This Rebel flag was, in fact, registered under the Heraldry Act on 31 October 1995, for the "Afrikaner Volksfront," now the "Vrye Republikeinse Beweging."

Whenever the Boer struggle has been fought, this flag seems to emerge "from nowhere" to join the Vierkleur and the Free State flag in the struggle. Surely, this must be sufficient evidence that this is the real flag of the patriotic Afrikaners in the Cape.

11 Conclusion

As our forefathers fought for their freedom in Germany, the Netherlands, France and other countries centuries ago, we, the Boers in South Africa now again find ourselves engaged in a struggle for self-determination and our own nationality. The Irish, Quebecois, Basques and Bretons have also long been engaged in similar struggles.

This is a struggle in which symbols which have, in the past, rallied the Boer nation are once again serving the same purpose. In the years to come, and especially during the centenary commemorations of the Second Anglo-Boer War, which will take place in South Africa from 1999–2002, thousands of the traditional Freedom symbols of the Boers will be in evidence. We have a proud tradition which we intend to preserve, and flags form an important part of that tradition.

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Franz Jooste's interest in vexillology and heraldry date from childhood and since 1977 he has been actively involved in designing and drawing symbols of Boer nationality. This ranges from the composition of the AWB flag, to the development of rank, badge, flag and medal systems for the modern-day Boer Commandos.

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Plate 17

Figure 1

Figure 2

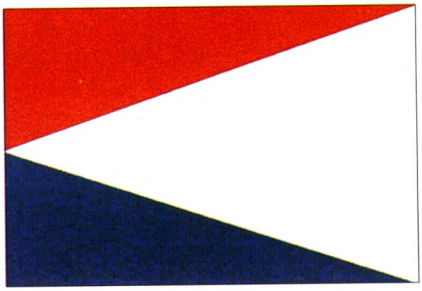

Figure 3

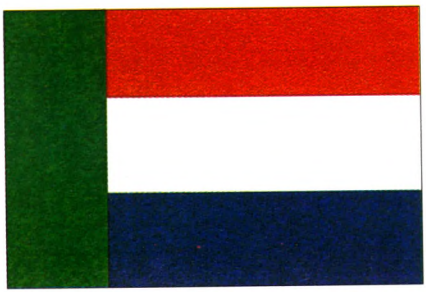

Figure 4

Figure 5

Plate 18

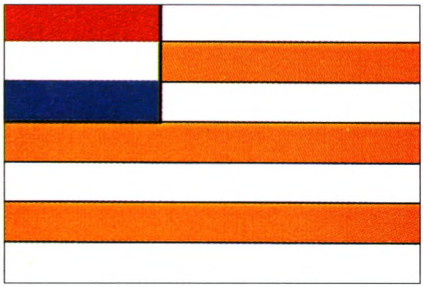

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

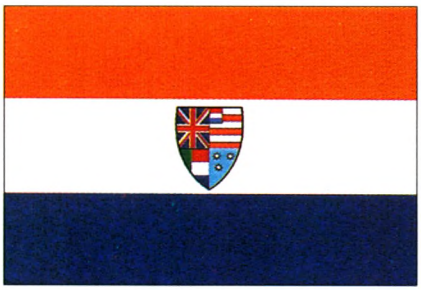

Figure 9

Figure 10

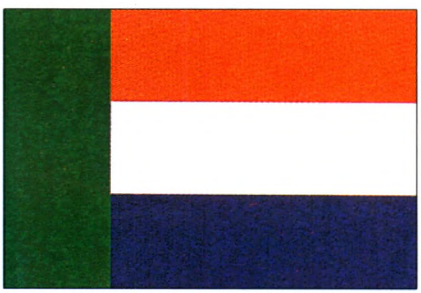

Figure 11