

Flags in Italy under Napoleon's rule

Roberto Breschi

Abstract

At the beginning of March 1796 a shabby French army of 30,000 headed by a 28-year-old general, crossed the Alps toward Italy and rapidly went from one victory to another. The recently adopted French tricolor soon replaced the dusty flags of old principalities, though several new flags were also hoisted. The latter did not last more than a few months, but one of them would have a very long history. More new flags would appear later, as Napoleon's imperial ambition progressively choked off its earlier Jacobin spirit.

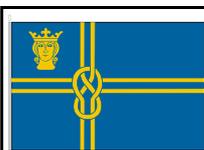
*We must not pass through this world without leaving
traces that may commend our memory to posterity.*
Napoleon

First part

It is rather mysterious what induced a 28-year old French general, Napoleon Bonaparte, to leave his newly married wife Josephine and to lead a ragged and hungry army toward an apparently desperate offensive in Italy. Did he want to challenge himself? Or to recover his faraway Tuscan roots? On the other hand, he was born in Corsica and understood Italian better than French. Or rather it was the madness of the genius? The fact is that at the beginning of March 1796 little more than 30,000 ragged troops were poised to attack Piedmont.

The Kingdom of Sardinia, that in 1793 had been forced to cede Savoy and Nice to France, was in that period allied to Austria. The two nations had an army of about 100,000 men, but less than half were drilled in fighting. So there were 45,000 true soldiers facing the enemy. The French were badly equipped, hungry and distant from their supply bases; many men were even ill. They had about 4,000 horses and no more than twenty-five guns. But Napoleon, moving from Nice, inflamed his soldiers in this manner: "You are naked and hungry now, (...) but I shall lead you to the most fertile fields in the world; great cities and wealthy countries are at your hand. Over there you shall get glory and wealth!"

The French troops, urged on by such a speech, rushed into Piedmont, surprising the Austro-Sardinian army. Around the middle of May, Napoleon was already able to impose a humiliating armistice on the king of Sardinia (Treaty of Cherasco).



Jan Oskar Engene (ed.): *Proceedings of the XX International Congress of Vexillology, Stockholm, 27th July to 1st August 2003*, Bergen: Nordic Flag Society, 2004. ISBN 82-996983-1-6

© 2004 Nordic Flag Society and the author



Figure 1

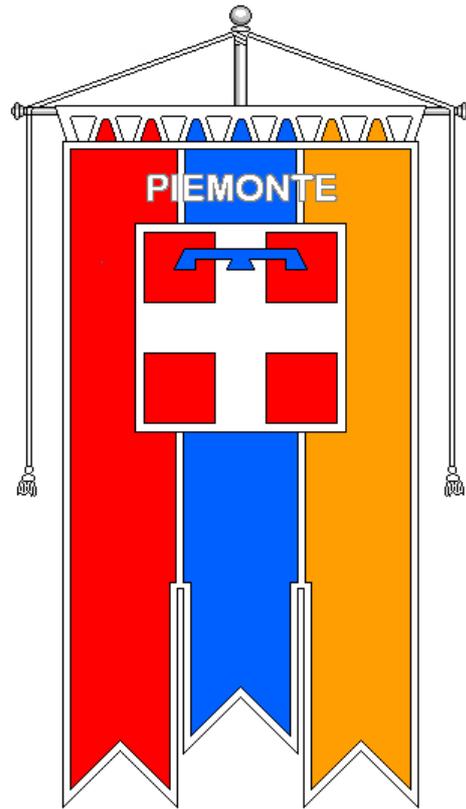


Figure 2

Actually, the common people did not look favorably on the newcomers. They were violent, overbearing and, most of all, irreverent toward religion. Napoleon promised liberty from tyranny but in the meantime obliged the occupied territories to victual his troops and allowed his soldiers to sack and plunder. On the contrary, several intellectuals, who had absorbed the new revolutionary ideas, welcomed the French with open arms. They hoped for a great help in building a free and independent government in Italy, and Napoleon gave them hope. But as we shall see, that hope was often short-lived.

It was particularly short-lived for the patriots of Alba. Their Jacobin leader Giovanni Antonio Ranza proclaimed in April 1796 the people's sovereignty and the end of tyranny. A manifesto inciting the Piedmontese to rebellion was released. Ranza himself drew a coat-of-arms and a flag for the new Republic – a red, blue and orange tricolor (Fig. 1). The red and blue derived from France, while orange, symbolizing kindness, was taken from the orange tree that appeared on the state coat-of-arms. But it was the powerful who were leading the game. This Piedmontese Republic never became completely stable and even if on 9 July 1800 the republican Council officially adopted the flag and a cockade of the same colors, it was only a formal decision. In 1801 Piedmont was united directly to France and the Kingdom of Sardinia was reduced to the only Sardinia island. The Jacobin flag, the first appeared in Italy, was not forgotten. The same colors are still present on the gonfalon of the Piedmont Region (Fig. 2).

Victory by victory, Napoleon's army passed from Piedmont to Lombardy. On 14 May 1796 in Milan, he was given the city keys, while the inept Archduke Ferdinand was running away. He accepted the keys and declared himself bearer of "liberty,

Flags in Italy under Napoleon's rule



Figure 3

equality, fraternity,” but in the meantime he cleaned the coffers of the State, levied taxes and removed from churches and museums hundreds of masterpieces. He justified himself in this way: “We conquered Italy to improve the condition of its people, a tribute is a right indemnity for our country and a well deserved prize for brave soldiers. But France never allowed any abuse and any shameful plunder. Several joint agents in the army are the real culprits”. So he was laying the blame on infiltrated war profiteers, who were in fact present.

The following facts were very important for the history of the Italian national flag. In Milan the Transpadane Republic arose. The new state had no flags, only military ensigns: Italian patriots who followed Bonaparte were granted a green-white-red vertical tricolor, derived from the French one. It is possible that the uniform of the Milanese militiamen whose nickname was *remolazzitt*, that is a sort of turnip, because of their green and white dresses, with red lapels and cuffs added when the militia became National Guard, inspired such a flag. It was a military ensign. Not yet a national flag, but the prelude to it.

By the second half of June 1796, the French invaded Emilia and Romagna, which were territories of the Church, giving rise to Jacobin Councils in various provinces. Because of these victories, the number of pro-French *novatori* increased, also driven by the common hostile attitude to Austria, which was strong in that region. In fact, by the end of summer 1796, an insurrection against the Austrians broke out in Reggio. In this case the popular support for the French was stronger than elsewhere. Liberty trees were raised anywhere. These structures were inspired by the trees under which American settlers of New England, in their struggle for independence, were used to meet, and attach their proclamations to. At first these were actual trees, sometimes uprooted and carried into the squares (Fig. 3). The poplar was preferred, because in Latin it has the same spelling of “people” (*populus*). Later, they became fabricated structures (Fig. 4), bearing such republican symbols as Phrygian caps, fasces and tricolor flags. But let us track back to Napoleon’s troops.



Figure 4

On 13 October 1796 the French occupied Modena and the independence of this duchy came to an end. On October 16 Napoleon organized in Modena a meeting of delegates from the four provinces of Emilia – Bologna, Ferrara, Modena and Reggio. During it the Cispadane Republic was established. On 7 January 1797 in Reggio, this Republic was granted a true national flag, which was confirmed on 25 February (Fig. 5). The first Italian tricolor had horizontal stripes of red, white and green, and a central badge bearing the initials of the Republic, R and C, along with a quiver containing four arrows representing the four original provinces of the Padane Federation. Actually, there were five provinces, for in the meantime Massa-Carrara (or Maritime Apennines department) had joined the Republic, but as far as we know, the number of arrows did not change.

In 1997, marking the bicentennial of the Italian tricolor, January 7 was proclaimed “Flag Day” because as we saw, on that day of 1797 the tricolor was hoisted for the first time as a symbol of the Cispadane Republic in Reggio. A few months later the Cispadane Republic merged into the Transpadane Republic to form the Cisalpine Republic, and the following year the tricolor had vertical stripes, as today (Fig. 6).

The following years were anything but quiet for the new Republic. The absence of Napoleon, who was on the Egyptian campaign, favored a counteroffensive by Austria and allied States. As quickly as it had arrived, the French army was forced to with-

Flags in Italy under Napoleon's rule



Figure 5

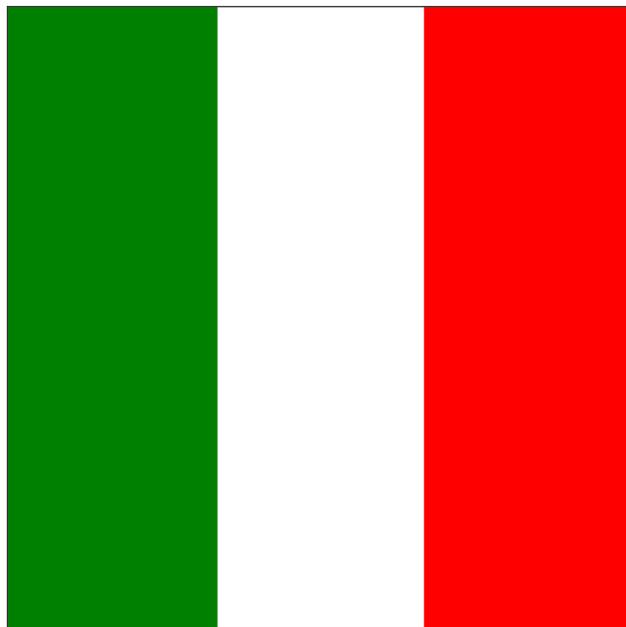


Figure 6

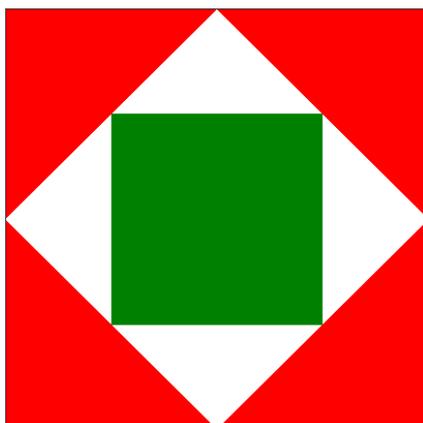


Figure 7

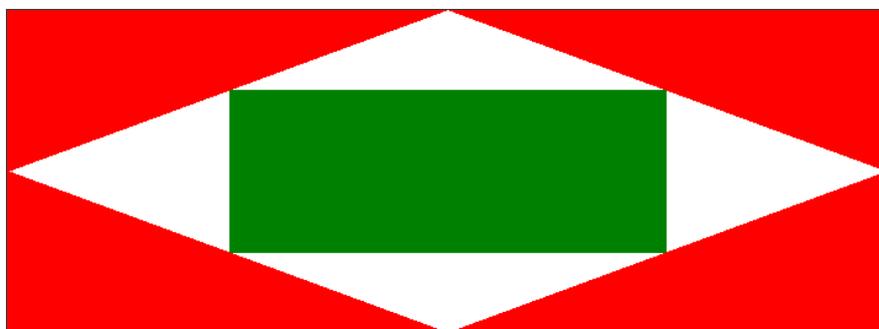


Figure 8

draw from the Italy. By the end of April 1799, after the battle of Cassano, general De Melas entered Milan, welcomed by the people as a liberator. Napoleon was forced to intervene in person. With the victory of Marengo (14 June 1800) and the Peace of Luneville (9 February 1801), the French rule was restored. Toward the beginning of 1802 Napoleon elected himself President of the Cisalpine Republic and changed the name of the state into Italian (or Italic) Republic, in order to awaken Italian hearts. However, shortly afterwards even the shape of the flag was changed. The new tricolor was red with a green square in a white lozenge (Fig. 7). For use at sea it maintained the same colors and design, but had a lengthened form (Fig. 8). Italian patriots were very disappointed by this decision taken in Paris; in fact they suspected that the revolutionary meaning of the original version were deliberately abolished. In 1805 the Republic was transformed in a Kingdom, more about which later.

While the French troops were arriving, it often happened that some municipalities declared their independence before merging into Cisalpine Republic and in some cases hoisted a flag, not necessarily a tricolor. The case of Republic of Crema (*Repubblica Cremasca*) was quite curious. The town of Crema and its surroundings had been an enclave in Lombardy since the middle of the 15th century, belonging to the Maritime Republic of Venice. Toward the end of March 1797 it was occupied by a

Flags in Italy under Napoleon's rule



Figure 9

small troop of French soldiers. A group of aristocrats and notables, disguising themselves as ordinary people, quickly declared a free Republic of Crema. A Liberty tree was raised just in front to the bishop's residence and a flag was hoisted (Fig. 9). It was not a tricolor, and as a Jacobin symbol it was quite peculiar: a white flag, bearing a coat-of-arms in silver and gold, diagonally striped and surmounted by a crown (!), and the inscription *Repubblica Cremasca* embroidered in gold. These features are taken from an original surviving flag (as far as we know) now belonging to a heraldist and collector in Crema. It is quite certain that the stripes of the coat-of-arms were white and red. They were embroidered by silver and golden thread to impart richness to the cloth. Actually, this flag showed the less-than-common origin of the State's fathers. The Republic lasted about a hundred days, from 28 March to 9 July 1797, when it merged into Cisalpine Republic.

The plundering of Venice and its territory has rare equal in history. It was carried out in a deliberate manner with help and advice from artists and scientists. State coffers were cleaned out, thousands of ancient books and hundreds of masterpieces (including the four winged horses of the Basilica and the winged lion on top of the column) were taken to France. At Louvre Museum, on little plates near paintings or sculptures, one can frequently read: "Acquired in 1797" ... probably from Venice or Italy. The treasure of Saint Mark was melted, and the *Bucintoro*, the Doge's ship, was heated to extract the metal from the gilding. Besides all that, the glorious flag of the *Serenissima* (Most Serene Republic) was derided (Fig. 10). On the pages of the book held by the winged lion, in place of the phrase *Pax tibi, Marce Evangelista meus*, the French wrote *Diritti dell'uomo e del cittadino* (*Rights of man and citizen*).

In Zara, a Dalmatian town among the most loyal to Venice, while the French troops were just round the corner, the Saint Mark flags were collected and carried to the cathedral by the people, in the hope of saving them from desecration and keeping them for better days. The same was done in several other Dalmatian villages, and Venetian flags walled up inside the altars were found by chance much later. A new flag even did not honor Venice, because by the treaty of Campoformio (17 October 1797) – one of the most inglorious episodes of Napoleon's time – it was transferred to Austria,



Figure 10



Figure 11

which occupied Venice by the beginning of 1798. A reported blue-and-yellow flag never existed: perhaps there has been a misunderstanding due to some cockades, with the colors of the Venetian coat-of-arms, which appeared in that period (Fig. 11). Some years after these events, Napoleon himself visited Venice, which in the meantime had gone back under French ensigns. He was aggrieved to see the devastated city and sincerely wanted to do something about it, but was soon urged on by his campaigns.

By mid-1797 Genoa, the other surviving Maritime Republic, came to an end, but in a less dramatic way. The Jacobins *novatori* declared the dissolution of the government and proclaimed the new Ligurian Republic. After some troubles, the French arrived. In this case the State was maintained, and even its flag, that is the St. George's cross (Fig. 12). However, the Republic was only a French protectorate, and in 1805 Liguria merged into the French Empire and the flag was abolished.

Going back to the beginning of 1797, we find the French troops in the Papal territories moving toward southern Italy along the Adriatic sea. By March they were in Ancona; for the moment nothing changed, because of the treaty of Tolentino signed on 19 February by Napoleon and the Pope. But the Jacobins were pressuring and by 17 November of the same year, encouraged by Napoleon himself, they declared the independent Republic of Ancona and hoisted a horizontal blue-yellow-red tricolor, combining the colors of France and Ancona. On the central stripe appeared the name of the state (Fig. 13). Similar events happened in Perugia where the ephemeral Republic of the Tiber was declared, about which little is known. Probably it had no symbols if a cockade in the French colors.

Flags in Italy under Napoleon's rule

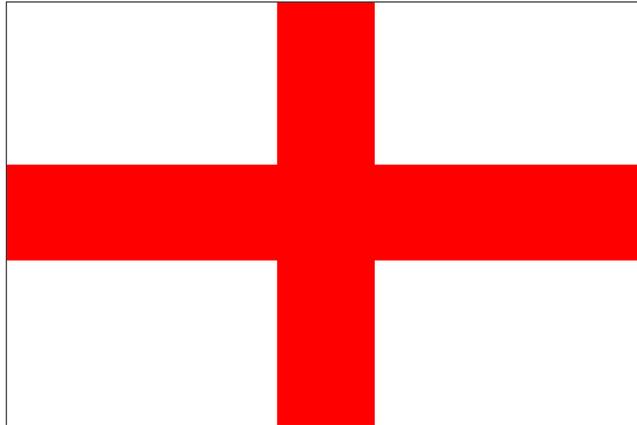


Figure 12



Figure 13

In February 1798 the French were at the gates of Rome, but initially they did not dare to depose Pope Pius VI. With the help of Roman Jacobins, they raised a Liberty tree on the Capitol and proclaimed the Roman Republic, which incorporated those of Ancona and Tiber. A French-style black-white-red tricolor, and a cockade of the same colors were adopted (Fig. 14). It is not clear why blue was replaced by black. The Pope was driven away and died in exile. On 29 September 1799, Neapolitan troops occupied Rome and returned the throne to new Pope Pius VII. The French retook Rome in 1809, and the Papal States merged into Italian Kingdom.

By the end of the 18th century, the Kingdom of Naples was under the obscure and ineffective rule of the Bourbons. The people were hungry and illiterate, yet far removed from thought of rebellion. The middle class was absent or spineless. Jacobin ideas found fertile soil only in a group of intellectuals of high social and moral value – men of letters, doctors, lawyers, officials, aristocrats and even some clerics. Hoping for help from the coming French army, on 22 January 1799 these patriots proclaimed the

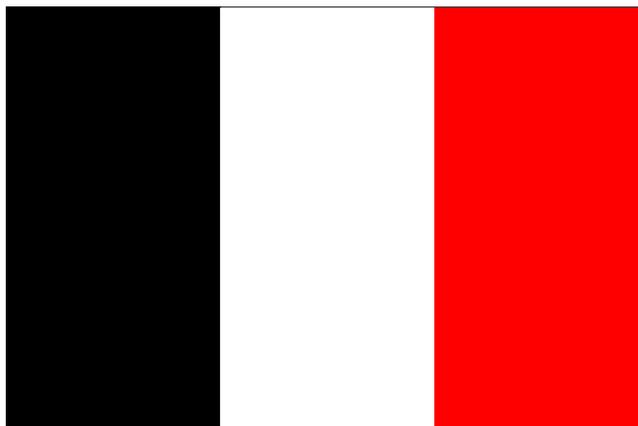


Figure 14

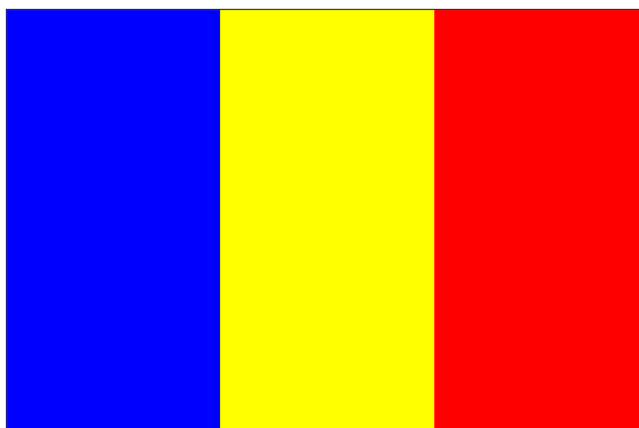


Figure 15

Parthenopean Republic. Its vertical blue-yellow-red tricolor (Fig. 15) joined the French blue to the Neapolitan yellow and red. A cockade of the same colors was adopted.

The Republic lasted only six months. In July of the same year the French retreated, opening the way for the restoration, which was to be particularly cruel and violent. King Ferdinand came back from Sicily, where he had taken refuge, and the best minds of Naples were executed. The case of the noblewoman Luisa Sanfelice was touching indeed. Her pregnancy even was of no use in saving her life. As we shall soon see, in 1805 the French were back in Naples and Ferdinand IV went back to Sicily.

On the last days of 1798 the French arrived, under some pretext, at the doors of Lucca, and despite of all attempts by local government to avoid their entry, by early 1799 Lucca was occupied. The people of Lucca did not understand what yoke the rav-

Flags in Italy under Napoleon's rule



Figure 16



Figure 17

enous French soldiers had come to remove from the back of their flourishing state, free and independent since the Middle Ages. For centuries Lucca had had two flags: the white-and-red flag (Fig. 16) of the commune and the blue flag with the golden inscription LIBERTAS, which was hoisted both on land and at sea by the government (Fig. 17). Sometimes both flags were arranged on a single cloth, and in time they acquired a meaning somewhat similar to today's national flag. The French allowed to re-establish the Republic in Lucca that hoisted its bicolor until 1805. It has remained the civic flag until today. But the blue flag was lowered, perhaps because the word "liberty" referred to an occupied republic was in fact a mockery. In 1803 a new maritime flag was introduced: a red lozenge in a white rectangle within a blue border (Fig. 18). It was abolished in 1805 and was the last republican flag. In fact in that year Napoleon transformed Lucca into a principality and gave it to his sister Elisa. We will speak about it soon.

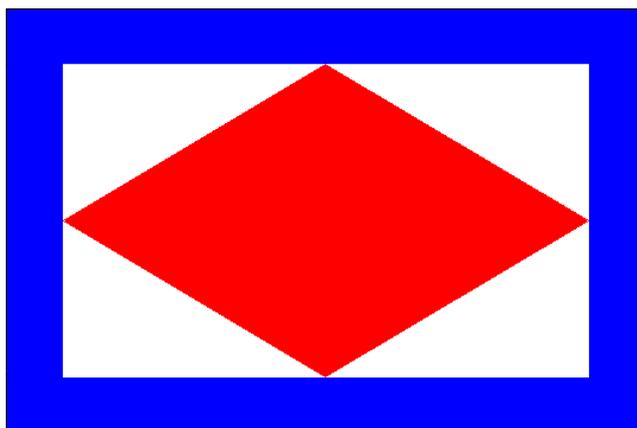


Figure 18



Figure 19

Tuscany, a grand duchy under the rule of Hapsburg-Lorraine, was occupied by the French during 1799. After repelling the counteroffensive of Austria and its allies, Napoleon reluctantly established a vassal State – unusually not republican – the Kingdom of Etruria, and gave the throne to Ludwig I, a young relative of the king of Spain, at that time an ally of France. By 1803 this new kingdom had some flags with similar shape but different colors from the grand-ducal ones. The flag of Etruria had blue-and-white stripes, variable in number, depending on the usage. The state flag (Fig. 19) as well as the war ensign had five stripes, three blue and two white and was charged with a coat-of-arms showing the *fleurs-de-lis* of France and the Medici balls, placed on the cross of St. Stephen, usually without ornaments (crown, trophies, collars). The merchant flag, or civil ensign, had only three stripes and bore the same coat-of-arms (Fig. 20). However, the civil ensign for small boats was plain (Fig. 21). In 1807 the Kingdom was integrated into the Empire.

Flags in Italy under Napoleon's rule



Figure 20



Figure 21

Second part

In 1804 a new constitution was presented to the French. It gave Napoleon the title of First Emperor of the French. Thus, from the very breast of the Revolution, which had broken out to sweep away the monarchy, a new empire was born. Actually, it was not a restoration because by that time the feudal system was dead and buried. On 2 December 1804 in Paris, in the cathedral of Notre Dame, a man from Corsica, that is, a kind of Italian, was crowned Emperor of the French.

The new order soon reverberated in Italy. The Italian Republic became a kingdom and on 26 May 1805 in the cathedral of Milan, Napoleon, as a modern Charlemagne, was crowned with the iron crown of the Longobard kings. Basically the flag did not change, but the golden Napoleonic eagle with the state coat-of-arms, following the rather confused heraldry of that period, was added to it (Fig. 22). The flag (ratio 2:3) was valid for all uses. It lasted until 1814.



Figure 22

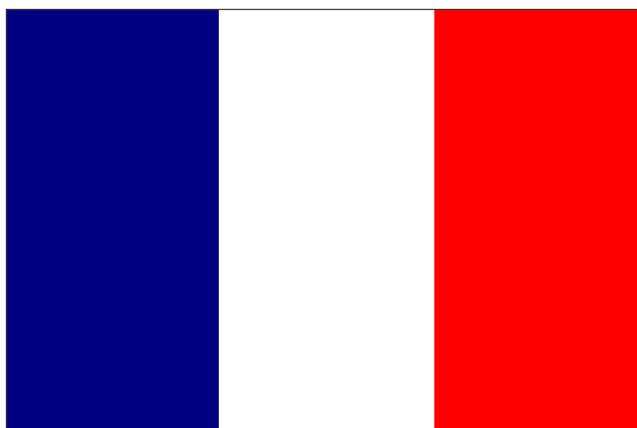


Figure 23

Other Italian territories were parts of the empire. Piedmont had been incorporated into France in 1801. Parma, the last surviving duchy was annexed in 1804, Ligurian Republic in 1805 and the kingdom of Etruria in 1807. The Papal States, at the time a sort of French protectorate, disappeared and were absorbed by France in 1809. In all these countries the old flags were lowered and the French tricolor hoisted (Fig. 23). The territories of the old Republic of Venice, with the addition of the Trentino-Alto Adige, which had been reconquered by Napoleon rushing toward Vienna, passed under the flags of Italian Kingdom in 1805 (Fig. 22).

Lucca, the last surviving republic in the peninsula (except for San Marino, which once again was respected as an independent State) was converted into a principality, which included Piombino, and given to Felice and Elisa Baciocchi, brother-in-law and sister of Napoleon's, respectively. A horizontal tricolor was adopted, light blue, white and red (Fig. 24); it lasted until 1809, when the state was united with Tuscany, which by that time was part of French Empire.

The French reconquered the Kingdom of Naples quickly. In 1805 Ferdinand IV was again forced to take refuge in Sicily, which along with Sardinia, where the Savoy

Flags in Italy under Napoleon's rule



Figure 24



Figure 25

family had taken refuge, was never occupied by Napoleon. The Kingdom was not annexed to France or Italy. It was maintained and the throne was given to Joseph Bonaparte, the Emperor's brother. The Napoleonic kingdom used French flags; however, it seems that during the reign of Joseph Bonaparte (1806-1808) a different state flag was introduced (Fig. 25), derived from military ensigns. It had a simplified version of the state coat-of-arms (with cornucopia, dolphin, *triquetra* and imperial eagle), within a white lozenge placed in a black-and-red field. In 1808 Joseph ascended to the throne of Spain and was replaced in Naples by Joachim Murat. The new King waited until 1811 to decree a new flag – sky-blue with a white-and-red checkered amaranth frame (Fig. 26). It was inspired by the conjectural banners of Normans, who by tradition were regarded as founders of the realm. Within the frame and displaced toward the hoist, there was the state coat-of-arms, bearing the French imperial eagle, the horse of Naples and the *triquetra* of Sicily. The civil ensign did not bear any symbol (Fig. 27). By October 1815, when Murat was arrested and shot, the flag had already disappeared.

Within the kingdom of Naples there were two small enclaves, which had been part of the Papal States, Benevento and Pontecorvo. In 1806 Napoleon transformed



Figure 26

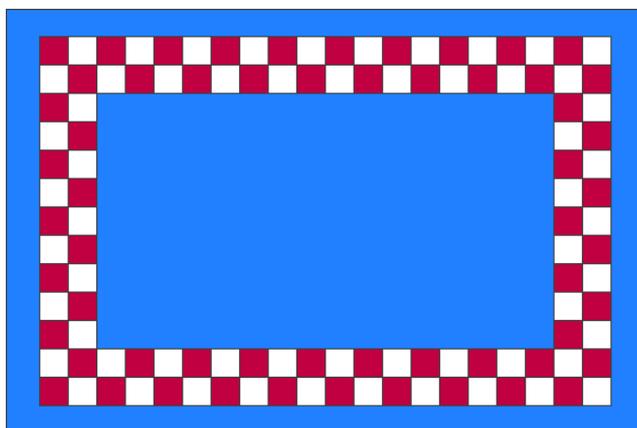


Figure 27

then into a couple of principalities. Benevento was strategically given to the Talleyrand, who never visited it. The principality did not hoist any flag, but it was granted a state escutcheon (Fig. 28) bearing the coat-of-arms of the Talleyrand family (three golden lions in a red field) and those of the city of Benevento (a black boar in a golden field), in chief the imperial eagle. Marshal Charles Bernadotte, a quiet, docile and understanding man was given the principality of Pontecorvo, probably because Napoleon had some strictly personal faults to be forgiven. Pontecorvo had no flag, only a coat-of-arms (Fig. 29), showing a bridge surmounted by a raven (later changed into an eagle) and by seven silver stars, in a blue field. In fact Pontecorvo means “bridge and raven”. Marshal Bernadotte was much beloved by his subjects, yet he left to succeed Charles XIII to the throne of Sweden. He maintained the Pontecorvo coat-of-arms, which still appears on the great escutcheon of Sweden.

In the meantime, the end of Napoleon’s era – twilight of gods – was approaching. In 1814, after disastrous campaigns in Spain and Russia and successive defeats on

Flags in Italy under Napoleon's rule

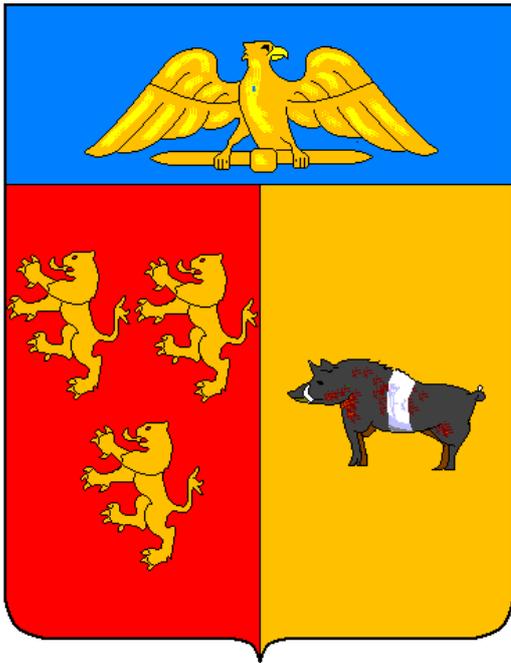


Figure 28

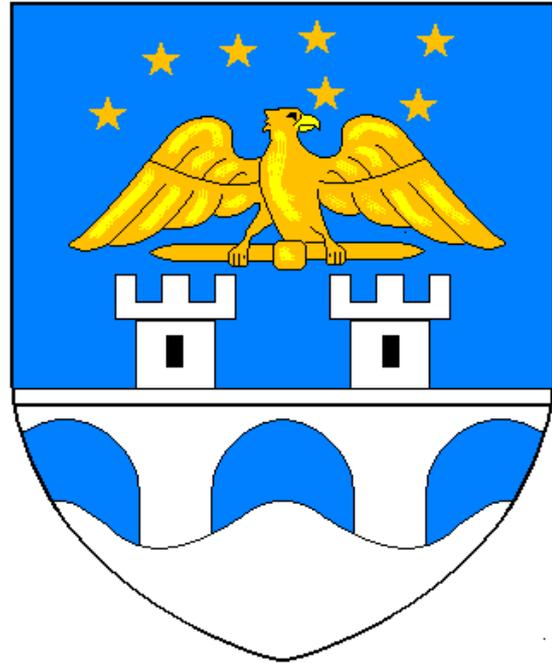


Figure 29

the battlefield, the Emperor was forced to sign the treaty of Fontainebleau (11 April), to abdicate and to be satisfied with a life annuity of a couple of million francs, with a little garrison and the sovereignty on the Elba island, which was purposely elevated to a principality. Worrying about hostile reaction from local people, Napoleon, who had arrived at the roads of Portoferraio on May 3 aboard of the British ship *Undaunted*, preferred to be preceded by a proclamation and by a new flag, white, with a red band bearing three golden bees (Fig. 30). Why did Napoleon choose such a flag? Several stories were told, but most likely he wanted a symbol as different as possible from the French tricolor. The bees were a sort of Napoleon's signature. He had a mania for bees, which he considered the seal of his imperial dignity. He was convinced that this symbol could be ascribed to the ancient Merovingians kings, and that France's *fleurs-de-lis* derived from bees, owing to a graphic distortion. After all, it was true the bees were an imperial sign – they had been since the era of ancient Greece – but the relationship to France's *fleurs-de-lis* was pure imagination.

In addition, merchant and war ensigns were adopted. They were derived from the red-white-red Tuscan (and Austrian) triband, and bore Elba's national flag in a small canton (Fig. 31). When Napoleon was on board, this same ensign became the Prince's standard at sea and bore a large centered golden "N" surmounted by a crown. On February 1815, Napoleon, dodging the discreet English guard, slipped away from Elba, landing at Cap d'Antibes near Cannes, toward the desperate adventure of the so called hundred days. In the meantime the Congress of Vienna had started, aiming to restore Europe to its status quo ante the Napoleonic hurricane. Fortunately, nothing was to be as before.

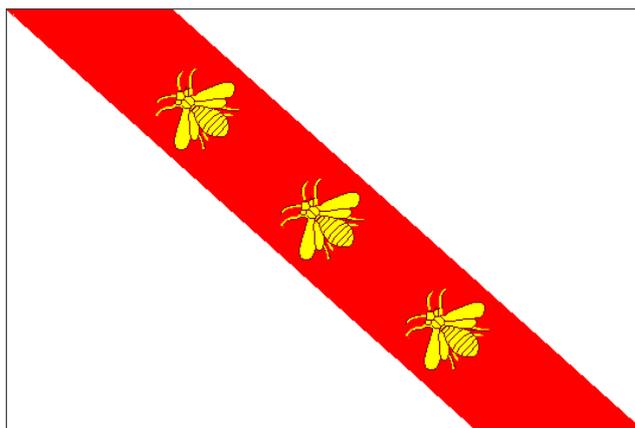


Figure 30

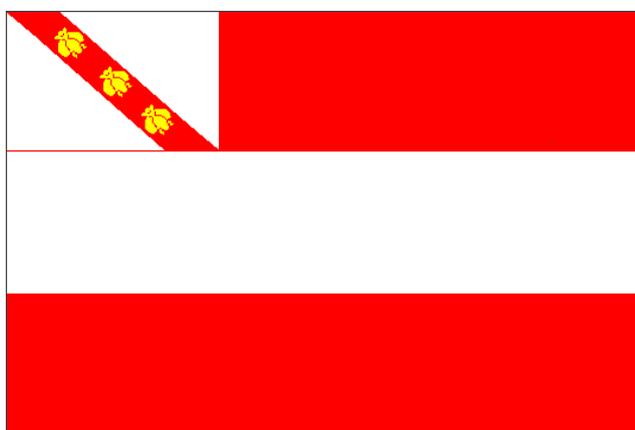


Figure 31

References

Bellocchi, U., “Il tricolore duecento anni”, Artioli, Modena, 1997 e “La storia d’Italia narrata dal tricolore”, Reggio Emilia, 1986.

Breschi, R., “L’ultima bandiera della Repubblica di Lucca”, *Vexilla Italica*, XXVI, 2, 1999 e “Bandiere sull’isola d’Elba”, *Vexilla Italica*, XXIX, 2(54), 2002

Brunon, J., “Le pavillon de l’Empereur à l’île d’Elbe”, Le Sabretache, 1932

Flags in Italy under Napoleon's rule

Ferguson, F.K., Bruun, G., "A Survey of European Civilization", Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1964.

Gruppo Cremasco Ricerche Storico-Ambientali "L'Araldo", "Gli stemmi delle Dominazioni di Crema", Bollettino, December 2000.

Montanelli, I., "L'Italia giacobina e carbonara", Rizzoli, Milano, 1969.

Spadolini, G., "L'Italia repubblicana", Newton Compton, Roma, 1988.

Ziggioto, A., "Le bandiere degli stati italiani", *Armi Antiche*, 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971, 1981/82, 1986/87.

About the author



Roberto Breschi was born in Tuscany where he lives. Breschi graduated in chemistry, and works in the field of the environmental science. He has been interested in flags since he was a child. Currently he is president of the Centro Italiano Studi Vessillologici (CISV) and co-editor of the Italian vexillological periodical *Vexilla Italica*.

Author's address: Roberto Breschi
Via Mammini, 66
I-55100 Lucca
Italy
E-mail: <breschirob@libero.it>

Vexillological website
Bandiere passato e presente:
<<http://www.rbvex.it>>

