Flags of nineteenth-century republics in South Africa

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It is well known that the flag of the 17th and 18th-century Dutch Republic was orange-white-blue, although already at an early date, and probably for various reasons, red started to supersede orange as the top colour.[1] In 1927 the Union of South Africa adopted the orange version or *Princevlag,* now being called *Van Riebeeck Flag,* but placed in the middle of a combination of the Union Jack (for the Cape Colony and Natal) and the former Orange Free State and South African Republic (Transvaal).[2] In 1962 this *Union Flag* became unchanged the flag of the new Republic of South Africa which today it still is.

However, it was not the orange but the red variety of the Dutch flag which played an important role in the history of 19th-century republics in Southern Africa because most of them adopted their own version of the flag of the old motherland, or just its colours, as their national symbol.



The flag of the VoC, the Dutch East India Company



The flag of the Netherlands

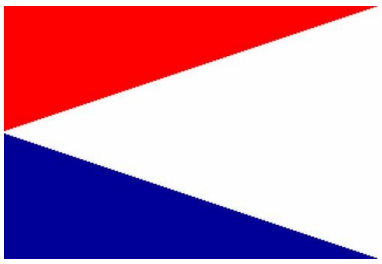
The movement had already started in 1795 when the inland districts of Swellendam and Graaff-Reinet rebelled against the authority of the Dutch East India Company and elected their own quasi-independent 'governments'. At these rebellions no flag other than the traditional Dutch colours of red-white-blue was hoisted and when in 1836 the movement across the boundaries of the Cape Colony into the far interior started, these so-called *Voortrekkers* were similarly minded. This should not create the impression that they moved north under a display of such

1 For recent research on the Netherlands flag, see P.J. van Winter and Kl. Sierksma, 'De Nederlandse Vlag' in: *Spiegel Historiael,* 5 (1970) p. 602 ff. and the bibliography on p. 639.

2 For a more detailed history of flags in South Africa, I refer to C. Pama, *Lions and Virgins: State Symbols in South Africa 1487 to 1962* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau, 1965) and R. Gerard, *Flags over South Africa* (Pretoria: Pretoria Technical College, 1952).

flags; the contrary is true.[3] It was only when the trekkers settled down to form republican governments that the question of a flag became a point of discussion. Before that time it hardly arose at all.

The first republic was **Natalia** (1837–42) and it is perhaps characteristic of our lack of knowledge that there has long been doubt as to what flag was actually hoisted.[4] The answer came when in 1925 the Union Government acquired the papers of the 19th-century Dutch Professor G. Lauts, who wrote of the flag: 'in adopting a flag, the Commonwealth of Natalia has thought of the Netherlands flag and chosen the same colours in the same order. However, the white begins at a point in the middle of the staff and at the end of the flag it occupies the whole width of the fly'.[5] In 1956 another source came to light in Holland, a picture of the flag, sent to the King of the Netherlands. It was as described by Professor Lauts.



The flag of Natalia

This flag shared the fate of the Natalia republic. After the occupation, the British hauled it down and sent it to the Cape. What happened to it there has never been discovered.

It is clear from various accounts that the *Voortrekkers* attached great value to the idea of a flag, but notwithstanding their great attachment to the old red-white-blue, they realised that they could not just adopt the flag of the mother country, which was now a foreign nation anyhow, and that even if the old colours were maintained they should be put together in such a way that they formed a new flag. This understanding was no mean achievement for a trekker community in the midst of what was at that time 'the wilds of Africa'.[6]

We meet the same consideration in the **Orange Free State** (1854–1902). It seems that there had been a local flag, probably consisting of the Dutch colours, with a star in the middle, but whether this was meant as a president's flag or a national flag, or merely an official flag is uncertain.[7]

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3 I have found no reference in literature on the Great Trek to the hoisting of flags, any flags, but Jacobus Groenendaal writes in his diary that in 1852 it was still usual that during Holy Communion (four times a year) *de Hollandsche vlag der Boeren en Handelaars* was hoisted on top of a tent (*Hertzog Annale,* December 1960). For the popularity and use of the Netherlands flag, see also S. P. Engelbrecht, *Thomas François Burgers: a biography* (Pretoria: de Bussy, 1946) p. 145.

4 Detailed account in *Lions and Virgins,* p. 59 ff.

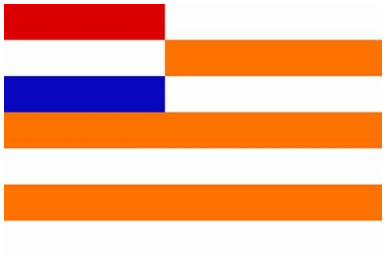
5 Ms Lauts, *De Kaapsche Landverhuizers* (No. 1336, Lauts Collection, Transvaal Archives).

6 W. C. Holden, *History of the Colony of Natal* (Cape Town: Struik, 1855), p. 109.

7 President Hoffman describes the flag in a letter dated 29 March

On 15 May 1854 the Government Secretary wrote to Professor G. Lauts in Holland, the appointed consul for the republic, asking whether William III, King of the Netherlands, would be willing to grant the Orange Free State a coat-of-arms and a flag.[8]

The history of this request and what happened subsequently is a fascinating piece of flag history.[9] For our purpose it is enough to say that on 15 July 1855 the king signed the letter which was to accompany the Dutch design and which was not 'granted' to the Orange Free State, but simply presented to the government by a special royal envoy, Mr Cornelis Hiddingh, who arrived in Bloemfontein on 12 January 1856.



The flag of Orange Free State

In the original Dutch design the flag consisted of three orange stripes between four white, all of equal width or, in other words, white with three orange stripes and a red-white-blue canton over three widths. However, on a lithographic print of the original arms as given by King William III, made between 1910 and 1913, there are four orange stripes. The original drawing has disappeared, but on a mid 19th-century woodcut there are also four orange stripes. The official version, however, has always been three orange stripes and not four. This flag remained unchanged until the end of the republic.

On 2 February 1858 the **South African Republic** (Transvaal) appointed a committee and the next day this committee resolved that the flag of the republic should consist of three horizontal colours of equal width: red, white and blue, and a green one vertically along the pole, on which should be placed the words *Eendragt Maakt Magt* (Unity Is Strength) This was confirmed by *Volksraad* resolution on 18 February 1858 and is the only official description of the famous Transvaal *Vierkleur.*[10] The motto *Eendragt Maakt Magt,* however, never appeared on the flag but was, quite rightly, placed underneath the state coat-of-arms.

1854 as 'white, red and blue'. It is assumed (but not proven) that he meant 'red, white and blue'. *The Friend* (8 September 1855) mentions 'a tricolour flag, with a star in the middle' which flew from the entrance of the Council building.

8 Regarding the correspondence with Holland, see J. Ploeger, 'Die brifwisseling tussen Prof. Lauts en die Goewernementsekretaris J. Groenendaal' in: *Historiese Studies,* Vol.II (1940), pp. 1–24.

9 For a detailed description of what happened in Holland, see E. C. Godée Molsbergen, 'Hoe de Oranje Vrijstaters hun vlag en wapen kregen' in: *Onze Eeuw* (1911) pp. 72–88. For some of the designs, see E. C. Godée Molsbergen & J. A. Visscher, *Zuid Afrika's Geschiedenis in Beeld* (Amsterdam: van Looy, 1913) p. 87. See also *Lions and Virgins,* p. 62 ff.

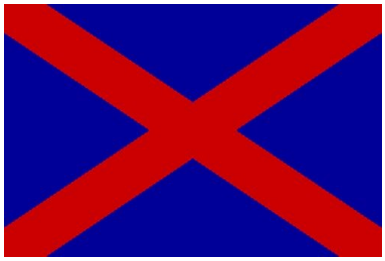
10 See C. Beyers, 'Die wapen van die S.A. Republiek' in: *Argief Jaarboek vir S.A. Geskiedenis,* Vol. 13, part 1 (1950).



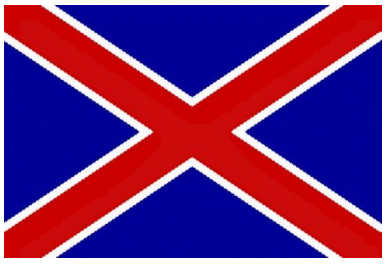
The flag of the South African Republic (Transvaal)

The districts in which the republic was divided had in the past been independent and in the beginning the leader of the Zoutpansberg district refused to have anything to do either with the new republic or with the flag. Only in the next year was a basis for a more or less permanent basis for co-operation found and this finally led to the official adoption of the flag by all concerned.[11]

It seems that one of the reasons why Zoutpansberg was not interested in the new flag was that they had already a kind of flag tradition of their own. We have no direct proof of this except that President Burgers, in 1874, revived a blue flag with a red saltire which was called the *Old Voortrekker Flag,* and that this was supposed to have been the flag of those Voortrekkers who had settled in Zoutpansberg.



The 'Old Voortrekker' flag



The suggested amendment by President Burgers, briefly adopted by the South African Republic

When **Lydenburg** was united with the South African Republic in November 1859 it was agreed that, although the *Vierkleur* would be the general flag, Lydenburg would retain a district flag, and if other districts asked for the same privilege it would also be granted to them. Evidently, as we have already seen, the 'districts' were the former small republics and it is not impossible that in this way Zoutpansberg retained its red saltire on blue. Whether this privilege was in fact given to any other districts seems doubtful. In any case, the Lydenburg flag was none other than the old Dutch Tricolour.[12] In view of all this G. S. Preller is of

11 For the ceremonies connected with the flag hoistings, see A. N. Pelzer, *Geskiedenis van die Sud-Afrikaanse Republiek 1: Wordingsjare* (Cape Town: Balkema, 1950) pp. 230–3.

12 Adopted by the Lydenburg *Volksraad,* 13 December 1858.

the opinion that in 1860, after the Treaty of Union was approved by the *Volksraad* (parliament), three different flags were flown in the Transvaal: the *Vierkleur*, the Lydenburg tricolour and the Zoutpansberg saltire; but only the Vierkleur was the National Flag of the South African Republic as a whole.[13]

For some reason or other Thomas François Burgers, who became President in 1872, wanted to restore the 'Old Voortrekker Flag', the red diagonal cross on a blue ground, but suggested separating the one colour from the other by a fimbriation of white.[14] The V*olksraad* accepted this design on 23/24 October 1874, but as soon as the President sailed for Europe, the matter was discussed again and on 10 May 1875 the *Vierkleur* was restored as the National Flag and the flag with the saltire cross declared the State President's Flag, to be hoisted next to the *Vierkleur* wherever the President happened to be. Both flags were abolished during the first British annexation of the Transvaal 1877–80. The President's Flag was never restored, but the *Vierkleur* flew again after independence was restored until it was finally taken down on 31 May 1902, when the South African Republic ceased to exist.

Besides Swellendam, Graaff-Reinet, Natalia, Orange Free State and the South African Republic (Transvaal), which incorporated the former republics of Zoutpansberg and Lydenburg, there were some other small republics which, although of short duration, also had forms of state symbols. In a way these republics followed the example of the Transvaal and adopted variations of the *Vierkleur.*

The republic of **Goshen** (1882–5) had come into being when Boer volunteers came to the assistance of the Barolong Chief Machabi of Polfontein and founded a republic in the land assigned to them by the chief. After the British annexation Goshen became part of the crown colony of Bechuanaland until 1895 when it was annexed by the Cape Colony. They flew a *Vierkleur* in which the red, white and blue horizontal stripes were replaced by black, white and red (the old imperial colours of Germany). The green vertical stripe remained the same.

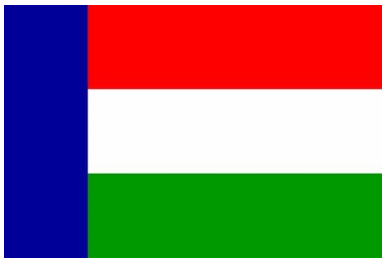


The flag of the Republic of Goshen

The **Nieuwe Republiek** (New Republic) (1884–8) was established in Northern Natal in August 1884, on a territory covering approximately 3 million acres, ceded by the Zulus to a group of Boer volunteers who had supported the chief Dinizulu. The settlement was established in Vryheid, which became the capital. After a difficult existence, the New Republic became part of the South African Republic (Transvaal) as the district of Vryheid.

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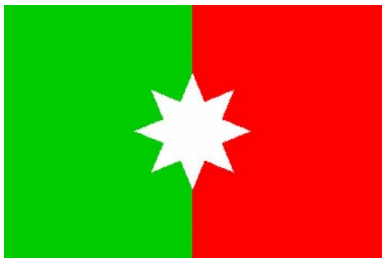
13 G. S. Preller, 'Onder drie vlae vyftig jarr gelede' in: *Ons Vaterland,* 13 July 1926.
14 *Die Volkstem,* 24 October 1874.



The flag of the New Republic

The New Republic adopted a *Vierkleur* but with the green stripe running horizontally and the blue vertically. The *Volksraad* at Vryheid resolved on 13 November 1884 to place a Union Jack on the blue stripe, the Transvaal flag on the red stripe, the Orange Free State flag on the white stripe, and Cape Colony flag on the green stripe. Although this resolution was never implemented, it is interesting as a forerunner of an idea later realised in the National Flag of the Union of South Africa, the present flag of South Africa.

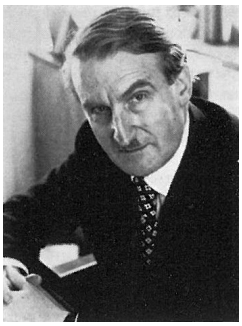
The republic of **Stellaland** (1883–5) is outside the flag tradition of the republics. The territory was granted to Gerrit Jacobus van Niekerk and his followers after these Boer volunteers had supported the chief Massouw in a war against his rival Mankoroane. The republic was absorbed into Bechuanaland in 1884. In memory of the great Halley's comet of 1882 they placed a white eight-pointed star on a flag of two colours vertically green and red. A green flag with a yellow star is also to be found. The first flag was taken to England after the British annexation, from where it was returned in 1934 and given to General J. Chr. Smuts. His widow presented it to the Transvaal Museum in Pretoria.



The flag of Stellaland

Besides the Boer republics there were, in the 19th century in Southern Africa also a few so-called Diggers' republics as a consequence of the diamond rush, but their history is too confused to be taken seriously and vexillological evidence too meagre to draw worthwhile conclusions.

Author biography



Dutch bookseller, publisher, heraldist and genealogist Cornelis Pama (1916–94) emigrated to South Africa in 1955. In 1956 he helped to set up a national heraldry authority, acted as a consultant to the new body (1959–63), and in 1961 designed official insignia for the new Republic of South Africa. He was a member of the Heraldry Council (1963–89) and in 1993 served on the Commission for National Symbols, whose recommended designs for a new national flag and coat of arms were rejected. He was chairman of the Heraldry Society of Southern Africa (1957–94) and editor of its journal *Arma* from 1977. He designed coats of arms and flags for dozens of schools, corporate bodies, municipalities and private individuals.