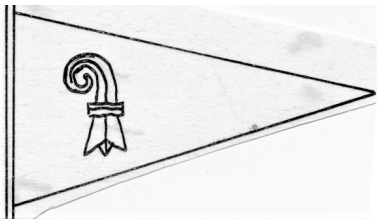
Flags of Switzerland and its cantons during the French Revolution and Napoleonic era

Günther Mattern

The French Revolution not only destroyed the political and social structure of the Netherlands, the Holy Roman Empire and Italy, but also of Switzerland. One of the states which fell into the hands of the revolutionaries in the early 1790s was the **Prince-Bishopric of Basel**.[1] On 27 November 1792 the princely banner (Fig. 1) – on a white ground a red crosier, head facing the fly – was hauled down, and the French tricolour was hoisted instead.

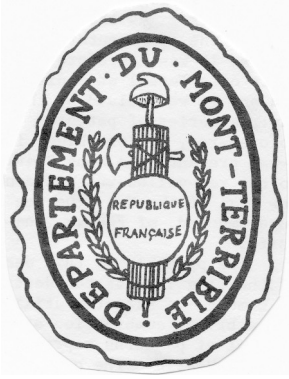


1 Flag of the Prince-Bishopric of Basel

As a seal (Fig. 2) the new rules used an oval shield with lictoral fasces, surmounted by a Phrygian bonnet of liberty, and the inscription *VIVRE LIBRE OU MOURIR*. But on 23 March 1793, the Rauracian Republic was integrated into the French Republic as the 86th department, Mont-Terrible. (Fig. 3) In 1815, most of this territory was given to the canton of Bern, with some further territory divided between Basel and Neuchâtel.



2 Rauracian Republic, seal, 27 March 1792–23 March 1793

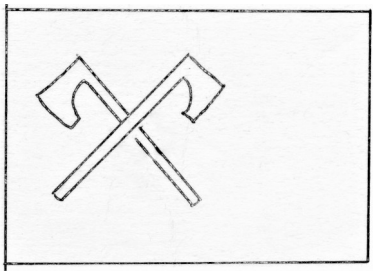


3 Department of Mont-Terrible, seal,

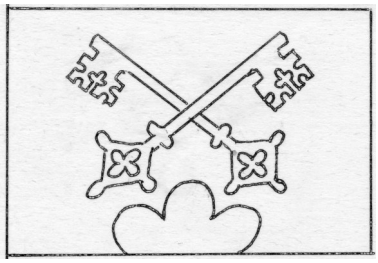
1 Mattern, Günther. 'The symbols of the Rauracian Republic' in: *Flag Bulletin* 10 (1971) pp. 242–3, and Mattern, Günther. 'Notices sur le drapeau et les insignes de la République rauracienne' in: *Pays d'Alsace* 81 (1973) pp. 33-4.

23March 1793–17 February 1800

Nevertheless, the Rauracian Republic did not include the whole bishopric, but only the northern parts. Acting as buffers, the former seigneuries of Erguel, Biel (Bienne), La Neuveville (Neuenstadt), Moutier-Grandval (Münster-Granfelden), Bellelay, Orvin (Ilfingen), and Tessenberg enjoyed a semi-independence up to the Treaty of Campo Formio (17 October 1797) and flew the banners of their capitals as their symbols of sovereignty. (Fig. 4 and 5)



4 Flag of Biel / Bienne, white on red



5 Flag of La Neuveville (Neuenstadt), yellow keys over a green mound on a red field

Inspired by the French Revolution, the citizens of **Geneva** fought at the end of 1792 for the democratisation of their constitution. Some weeks later the constitution was revised. During the fighting the insurgents bore, apart from other symbols, a red, yellow and black cockade whose wearing was obligatory after 7 November 1792.[2]

Burnet[3] assumes that between 1792 and 1794 a blue, white and red flag was used by Genevan ships, because two reports of the time mention this colour combination. But how the colours of that flag were arranged is unknown.

From that period a flag is preserved which was probably used up to the summer of 1794: per fess red and yellow, charged with a red medallion with a black eagle, and in its claws a golden key. The medallion is encircled by a green oak-wreath, entwined with gold ribbons with a red bow beneath. Above the medallion is a red scroll bordered yellow. On the reverse, the arms of Geneva are on a grey-violet cartouche, from its ornaments emerge some laurel leaves, above it is a blue scroll with the motto in gold: *POST TENEBRIS LUX.*[4]

After new uprisings in the early spring of 1794 the colour combination of the cockade was changed to red, black, yellow, and the eagle disappeared from the flaG.[5] Instead of the eagle, the flag which was then used had red over yellow stripes with a black bar.

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2 Burnet, E. L. 'Les cocardes révolutionnaires genevoises' in: *Étrennes genevoises* (Geneva: 1926), pp. 100ff.

3 Burnet, E. L. 'Note sur les couleurs et drapeaux portés par les bateaux genevois à l'époque de la Révolution 1792–1798' in: *Étrennes genevoises* (Geneva: 1929), pp. 73–9.

4 Bruckner, Albert Théophile & Berty. *Schweizer Fahnenbuch* (Sankt Gallen: Zollikofer, 1942), p. 13.

5 Blavignac, J. D. *Armorial genevois* (Geneva: n.pub., 1859) pp. 60ff, 115ff, 120ff; Gauthier, A. *Les armoiries et les couleurs de la confédération et les cantons suisses* (Geneva: Georg, 1879).

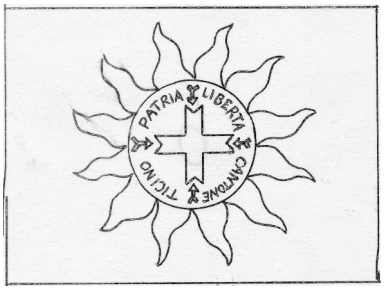
The revised article 616 of the constitution of 5 February 1794 was modified on 6 October 1796 to say that the colours of the flags and ensigns of the ships should have the arms and colours of Geneva. But on 5 August 1797 this issue was further discussed with the following results:

1 The Council, in execution of Article 616 of the constitution, stated that the flags used on ships should be those of Geneva.

2 The flags should have the following proportions: 7/16 red, 7/16 yellow and 2/16 black.

But on 18 January 1798 Geneva was occupied by French troops and the republic was integrated into the French state on 22 April 1798 as the department of Léman. On 31 December 1813 Geneva regained its independence and from that time has used a flag of per pale yellow and red.[6]

In 1798, after some unrest, the canton of **Tessin** was created by uniting the numerous bailiwicks (*ennetbergische Vogteien*). In 1797 a flag of the subsequently formed Tessin (or Ticino) showed a plain red field with a white sun of twelve rays. (Fig. 6) It is charged with a red disc on which is a white cross; four golden arrows are directed against the branches of the cross, the ends are couped double fitchy. Around the circle is the motto *PATRIA / LIBERTA / CANTONE / TICINO*. The flagstaff is blue.



6 The flag of Tessin, 1797

Many city seals of 1797 still bear the old coat of arms, for example **Lugano**: gules a serpent argent. But some towns of Ticino had already begun to use revolutionary symbols, especially the lictor's fasces, for instance **Chiasso**, **Muzzano**, **Meride**, **Locarno**, etc.[7]

In 1797 the flag of the Cisalpine Republic was hoisted in the southern parts of Ticino, but after the victory of the 'Voluntaris' against the 'Cisalpinis' on 14 February 1798, the Italian colours disappeared.[8]

The days of the Helvetic Republic is still preserved in a flag in green, red, and yellow stripes bearing *REPUBLICA ELVETICA* in gold letters on the red stripe.

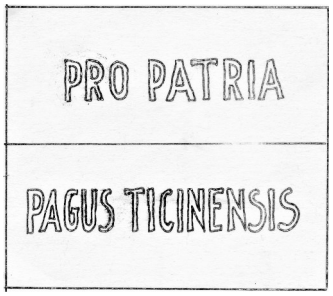
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6 Bruckner, *op. cit*. fig. 70.

7 Cambin, Gastone. *Armoriale del commune ticinesi* (Lugano: Edizione Istituto araldico e genealogico, 1953).

8 Mattern, Günther. 'Das Flaggenwesen Italiens zur Zeit der französischen Revolution und der napoleonischen Ära' in: *Archivum Heraldicum*, 84 (1970) pp. 34-42; Ziggioto, Aldo. 'Flags in Italy (part II): from the Cisalpine Republic to the Italian Kingdom' in: *Flag Bulletin*, 7 (1968) pp. 56–64.

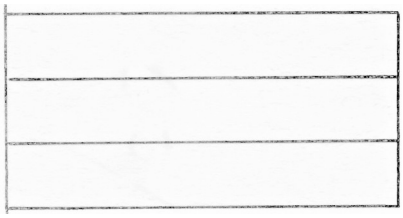
On 26 March 1803 the Council of State accepted the arms: per pale gules and azure. Contrary to the arms, the flag is horizontally divided red over blue, as is shown, for instance in a flag made shortly before 1815. In the upper red part a golden inscription *PRO PATRIA* in the lower blue field the words *PAGUS TICINENSIS.*[9] (Fig. 7)



7 Flag of Tessin, made shortly before 1815

Today it is impossible to determine exactly why the colours red over blue were chosen. Apart from three other theories, Mäder[10] gives a more plausible one, saying that the colours of Paris might have been the origin of the Tessin colours, chosen in honour of Napoleon.

On 20 January 1798 a charter issued by the Council of State of **Basel** proclaimed the freedom of the people of its territory (*Landschaft*). This event was celebrated two days later with the painting of liberty trees and hoisting of tricolours horizontally striped red, white and black. (Fig. 8)



8 City of Basel, revolutionary flag, January 1798

These colours were probably a combination of the black and white colours of the city of Basel and the red and white colours of the Land of Basel (the Bishopric of Basel as the former ruler, and the bailiwick (*Amt*) of Liestal used this colour combination in their arms and banners.[11] Minister Ochs, for example, used a distinctive flag on each side of his coach, one side a plain green flag, on the other the new Basel colours, red, white and black.[12]

In the region of **Zürich** the supporters of the revolution used another tricolour, adding to the old Zürich colours white and blue a third colour, red. In a letter of the town-clerk of Zürich, Herr Escher, dated 5 February 1798, it is noted that '... in some places in the Zürich territory the reading of the state proclamation was hindered by force. At Horgan the liberty tree was planted with all the bells ringing, and

9 Lienhard-Riva, A. 'La bannière cantonale tessinoise' in: *Schweizer Archiv für Heraldik*, 45 (1931) p. 127.

10 Mäder, R. *Fahnen und Farben der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft* (Sankt-Gallen: Zollikofer, 1942) pp. 124–6.

11 Mattern, Günther. 'Das Entstehen der Standesfarben von Basel-Landschaft' in: *Baselbieter Heimatblätter* 38 (1973) pp. 372–80

12 Strickler, J. *Die Helvetische Revolution* (Frauenfeld: n.pub., 1898), p. 14.

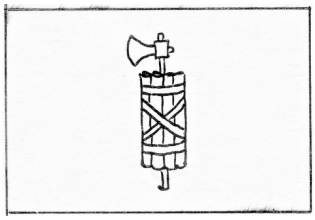
everyone, even the children, bearing these white, blue and red cockades ...'[13]

But the bearing of the cockades was not unanimous, the people also wore another cockade of black, yellow, and red: 'At Horgan the people planted three liberty trees (3 February 1798) with the ringing of bells, also at Stäfa and other places the trees were planted with great ceremony. On some of these trees the people fixed pictures of William Tell, and everywhere they had begun to wear cockades in the three colours of black, yellow and red. For every Swiss they are the holy colours of the founders of Swiss liberty, they said. When you tell them that blue and white are the correct colours, they answered that in no case do they want to have white anywhere.'

For the former mayor of Zürich bore the surname Wyss, and in dialect *wyss* means white. It may be noted that the colours of black, yellow, and red, are derived from the colours of the original cantons of Uri (yellow and black), Schwyz (red) and Unterwalden (red and white).[14]

On 17 March 1798, after the fall of the old government of Zürich, the assembly of the Canton of Zürich decreed that the national colours were to be red, black and orange, but there was little time for practising this decree because of the law on the Helvetic colours, which was proclaimed on 14 April 1798.[15]

On 14 February 1798 the Republic of the State of **Saint Gallen** was created at Gauss; people accepted a white, red and light blue tricolour, but no law exists referring to the colours. (Fig. 9) Two flags in these colours are still preserved in the Museum of History at Saint Gallen, but nowadays we have no explanation for this choice of colours.[16] It may be that they were derived from the white and red of the city of Saint Gallen, and the third, the light blue, was added as a symbol of fidelity to or reverence for France. This colour combination was annulled by the law regarding the Helvetic colours issued on 14 April 1798 and the decree of the canton of Saint Gallen on 12 May 1798.



9 Flag of Saint Gallen

The cantons of **Säntis** and **Linth**, founded in 1798 did not possess their own flags as these territories were subjects of the Helvetic constitution. The Helvetic cockade and the seal depicting 'Tell and his Son', in various forms, were used. in 1803 those cantons were dissolved, and on 5 April 1803 by law of the government commission of Saint Gallen the new colours and arms were described as follows: 'The colour of the canton is white and light green'. The unheraldic form ‘light green’ as a symbol of the new political order of 1798 was introduced in the constitution of some further

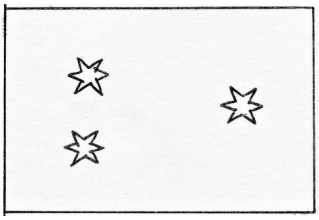
13 Wartburg, W. von. *Zürich und die Französische Revolution* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhain, 1956) p. 423. Duster, A. *Die Züricher Untertanen und die Französische Revolution* (Zürich: dissertation, 1942).

14 Wegman-Hess, B. (ed. O. Hunziker). *Darstellung der Übergangszeit, Quellen zur Schweizergeschichte* vol. 17 (Basel: 1897) p. 160.

15 *Wochenchronik der Zürcher Zeitung*, no. 17. Supplement to *Nette Zürcher Zeitung*, 1898.

16 Martin, P. *Sankt Galler Fahnenbuch*.

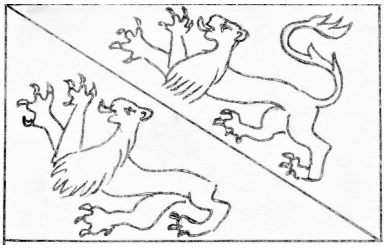
newly founded cantons, such as Thurgau, Vaud, and Neuchâtel.[17] Perhaps the term 'light green' was to indicate the difference between the 'dark green' of the sharpshooter and rifle battalions. The arms of Saint Gallen show: vert a lictoral fasces argent bound by a wide plain green ribbon. The fasces – a symbol of concord and sovereignty – contain eight bound rods, representing the districts, and surround a silver axe.



10 Flag of Sargans, 1798

After having proclaimed the liberty of the people of **Sargans** on 12 March 1798 on the Landsgemeinde-Square of Mels, a government was quickly established. It is known that at that time the banner of the 'Sarganser Land' – three golden stars on a blue ground – (the banner of the former County of Sargans) was flown. (Fig. 10) Peter mentions that at the battle of Wollerau on 30 April 1798 the banner was carried on the battlefield.[18] But after some weeks the state of Sargans was integrated into the canton of Linth as the district of Mels. Five years later it belonged to the newly founded canton of Saint Gallen.

The canton of **Thurgau**, founded on 1 February 1798 at Weinfelden as a republic, accepted at first the old emblem: Gules a bendlet between two lions or, but two month later the colours of the Helvetic Republic were introduced.[19] On 13 April 1803 the commission of the government of Thurgau proclaimed that the old emblems should be the new state's arms. But some weeks later the same commission declared that the state colours were to be white and light green; according to the text: 'The arms of Thurgau are per bend argent and vert, in both fields a lion rampant; and the shield is supported by a woman who wears a wreath of oak leaves – the symbol of patriotism'. (Fig. 11)



11 Flag of Thurgau, 1803–24

Mäder assumes that the choice of the colours was influenced by the decree of Saint Gallen issued shortly before.[20] However, the law concerning the arms of Thurgau does not mention the colours of the lions, so that one may find between 1803 and 1824 per bend argent and vert, two lions counterchanged. From 1824 the lions are tinctured or. The flags, however, always have white and light green.

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17 Mäder, *op. cit*. p. 108.

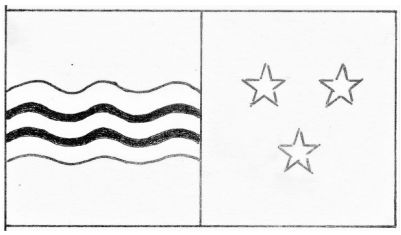
18 Peter, W. *Werdenherger*, no. 101 (30 August 1902).

19 *Wappen, Siegel und Verfassung der Schweizerischen Eidgenossenschaft und der Kantone*, edited by the Swiss Chancellor (Bern: 1948), p. 1080; letter from the Archives of the State of Thurgau, dr. B. Meyer, dated 8 August 1973.

20 Mäder, *op. cit*. p. 122.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to find any information on the colours of the canton of **Aargau**, founded in 1803, and whether at the beginning of the revolution the different counties and districts Fricktal, Baden and Freiamt, later united into the canton of Aargau, had used their own cockades or flags. It may be that for a short period the regions flew the banners of their capitals or their regional banners.

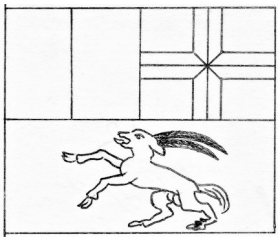
No flags are documented from the early days of the founding of the canton of Aargau. Bruckner notes that a flag of the cadets was in use in 1798 showing quarterly black and blue.[21] However, the state flag was probably the same as the coat of arms accepted by the government on 20 April 1803: Sable a fess wavy argent impaling azure three mullets (2-1) argent. The black is nearest the flagstaff. (Fig. 12)



12 Flag of Aargau, 20 April 1803

It is also open to question whether the short-lived canton of **Oberland** used a flag of its own. Research in this case has brought no results, although one may assume that the Helvetic colours were used relatively quickly.[22]

The **Grisons** which were unified as a canton in 1803 were up to that date a confederation, consisting of the **Gotteshausbund** (argent a goat rampant sable), the **Zehngerichtebund** (quartered azure and or, a cross counterchanged), and the **Obere Bund** (or 'Grauer Bund') (per pale sable and argent). Apart from these federations there were other seigneuries such as Haldenstein, Tarasp, Razuns, Reichenau, Maienfeld and the Bishopric of Chur, but all these small states were mediatised or secularised in 1803.



13 Flag of Grisons

On 21 April 1798 the union of the Helvetic Republic was accomplished but dissolved only a month later. In July 1800 a new union was accepted, but also for a relatively short time. By law the council of State, on 5 May 1803, the state colours were determined either as grey, white and dark blue or as black, white and dark blue, each of the three colours symbolising one of the federations. Grey stands for the Grauer Bund, white for the Gotteshausbund and blue for the Zehngerichtebund.[23] (Fig. 13).

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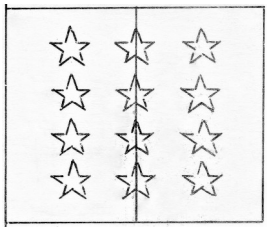
21 Bruckner, *op. cit*. p. 3.

22 Letter from the Archives of the State of Bern, dated 30 October 1967.

23 Salis, P. von. *Wappen, Fahne und Flagge von Graubünden, wie sie von Rechts wegen sein müssen* (Zürich: n.pub., 1936).

Until 1798 **Valais** consisted of seven rather tiny independent republics, called *Zehnden*, as well as of the French-speaking part, subject to the Zehnden. The political changes in 1798 had the effect that the French-speaking region was divided into five districts (*dizains*), accepted in the Great Council as equivalent members. Between 14 April 1798 and 4 September 1802 the Helvetic colours were in use even in Valais; until 1798 the flag was per pale white and red charged with the Valais arms: per pale argent and gules, seven mullets counterchanged (3,1,3).

In 1802 the Valais became an independent republic outside the Swiss Confederation. The decree of the Council states that the colours of the free state were white and red. since no flag of that time exists today, it is to be supposed that the flag was the same type as the former one: per pale white and red, charged with twelve mullets counterchanged (4,4,4).[24] (Fig. 14)



14 Flag of the independent Republic of Valais, 1802

Between 1810 and 1814 Valais belonged to the French Empire as the department of Simplon. After its liberation in 1814 the state continued to fly the same flag used between 1802 and 1810. In 1815, the arms and flags were changed by the constitutional law of the canton (art. 58) and now bear 13 mullets, because in 1815 a 13th district was created.[25]

On 14 January 1798 the **Lemanic Republic** broke away from Bern and as a sign of sovereignty it adopted a dark green flag with a white inscription *REPUBLIQUE LÉMANIQUE*. The colour of green symbolises freedom and hope. In the *Moniteur Universel*, dated 3 February 1798, is written *in expressis verbis*: 'The green colour was, as everyone knows, the colour of William Tell'.

Already on 30 March 1798 the Lemanic Republic was replaced by the new-born canton of Léman, from which early time a flag in the Helvetic colours is preserved to this day.

On 16 May 1803 the Great Council of the canton of **Vaud** declared that as a flag should be chosen one per fess argent and vert, in whose upper white field *LIBERTÉ ET PATRIE* is inscribed in golden letters. (Fig. 15) In an old flag from the beginning of the 19th century *CANTON DU VAUD* is additionally written in the lower light green field in dark green letters. The decree of 1803 expressly states that 'the colours of the canton of Vaud are light green and white'.[26]

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24 *Walliser Wappenbuch*, (Zürich: Orell Füssli, 1946), p.xx shows a seal with the new arms; letter from the Military Museum of Villa (Sierra), Mr H. Gaspoz, dated 31 July 1973.

25 Biollay, E. 'Le Valais en 1813 à 1815 et sa politique d'indépendence' in: *Bibliotheca Vallesiana*, 7 (1970).

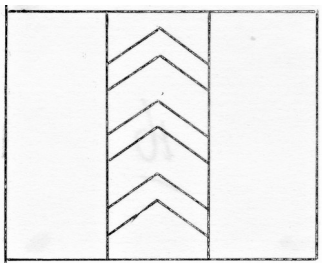
26 Bruckner *op. cit*., Catalogue, p.57.



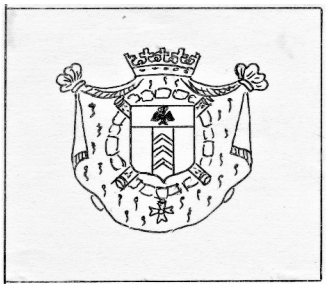
15 Flag of Vaud, 16 May 1803

A flag from 1846 of the ship *Léman* shows a very interesting combination of the symbols of the canton and the confederation: the Swiss flag appears in the upper left corner of a flag of Vaud without inscriptions.[27]

The original flag of the Principality of **Neuchâtel** shows or on a pale three chevrons argent. (Fig. 16) In 1806, after occupation of Neuchâtel by French troops, Marshal Berthier became Prince of Neuchâtel. As state flag (Fig. 17), the government chose a white flag with the state emblem: Or on a pale gules three chevrons argent and on a chief azure an imperial eagle of the first, surmounting two blue marshal's batons in saltire, the whole encircled by the collar of the Légion d'honneur, and placed upon a mantle doubled ermine, edged and corded or, ensigned with a Duke's coronet.[28] Nevertheless, the people and soldiers of Neuchâtel had to wear the French cockade.[29]



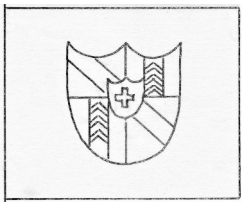
16 Flag of Neuchâtel, pre-1806



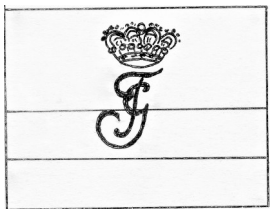
17 Flag of Neuchâtel, 1806–14

After the entry of the allies in 1814, the Prussians became owners of that principality. As a flag (Fig. 18) they used on a white field the state emblem: quarterly: 1 and 4: Baden-Hochberg (Gules a bend or); 2 and 3: Neuchâtel (or, on a pale gules three chevrons argent), over all an inescutcheon with the arms of Switzerland. Between 22 May 1836 and 1848 (up to the revolution on 2 March 1848) the government under the rule of Friedrich Wilhelm IV of Prussia flew a state flag tierced in fess orange, sable and argent (2, 1, 1), charged with a blue shadowed monogram "FG" surmounted by a crown.[30] (Fig. 19)

27 Illustration from *Les artisans de la prospérité*, vol. 3 (Lausanne: 1970).
28 Bruckner, *op. cit*., Catalogue, pp. 86–7.
29 Perrochet, Ed. 'Les cocardes neuchâteloises' in: *Musée neuchâtelois*, 39 (1902) pp. 175ff.
30 *Wappen, Siegel und Verfassung der Schweizerischen Eigenossenschaft und der Kantone*, edited by the Swiss Chancellor (Bern: 1948), p. 1214.

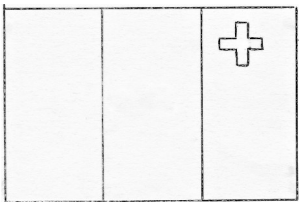


18 Flag of Neuchâtel, 1814–22 May 1836



19 Flag of Neuchâtel, 22 May 1836–1848

On 11 April 1848 the Constitutional Council declared the state emblems as tierced in pale vert, argent and gules in the canton of the gules field a white Greek cross. (Fig. 20)



20 Flag of Neuchâtel, from 11 April 1848

After the fall of Bern and the dissolution of the old state, Switzerland was to be divided according to the French planning committee into three regions (decree of 16 March 1798):

1 The **Rhodanic Republic** was to consist of Tessin, Valais, Oberland, Vaud, Freiburg and Marten as well as Nidau, with Lausanne as the capital.[31]

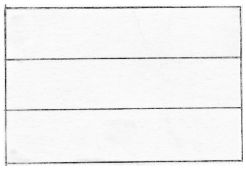
2 **Tellgau** was to include the old cantons of Uri, Schwyz, Unterwalden as well as Zug and the Grisons.

3 The **Helvetic Republic** was to comprise the cantons of Aargau, Basel, Baden, Schaffhausen, Zürich, Thurgovia, Saint Gallen, Appenzell, Sargans, Glarus, Luzern, Bern and Solothurn.

Of these, only the Helvetic Republic was founded on 19 March 1798, as a unitary republic to which all the other regions except the Grisons were joined. Aarau became the capital.

On 14 March 1798 the Constitutional Council passed the following resolution that 'the cockade should be tricoloured and the colours should be green, red and straw-yellow, green above, red in the middle and yellow below'. This decree was proposed to the Council by Hans Conrad Esther (1743–1814), a delegate of Zürich. He moved that a common and equal colour should be chosen for the whole of Helvetia and that it should be determined whether the cockade was to be uni-or tri-coloured. Another member proposed that as a mark of respect for the canton of Vaud, which was the first to declare the new republic and accepted green colour as the symbol of freedom, one of the colours should be green.

31 Letter from the Archives of the State of Vaud, dated 24 July 1973, mentioning that there is no document regarding the emblems of the Rhodanic Republic.



21 Flag of the Helvetic Republic: green, yellow and red

This motion was finally accepted. So it is to be assumed that the choice of the colours was influenced by the new colours of Zürich, black, yellow and red, or red, black and orange, while changing the black to the green of the canton of Vaud. On 12 May 1798 the decree was issued that 'William Tell, to whom his son is handing over the apple with the arrow should be the symbols of the Helvetic Republic'.[32] On 11 June 1798 it became obligatory for every Swiss to bear the national cockade.[33]

In 1803, after the fall of the Helvetic Republic, the unitary constitution was replaced – on the intervention of Napoleon – by a federative one. On 16 May 1814 the Permanent Council of the Swiss Confederation proclaimed by article 41 of the new constitution the following: 'The seal of the Confederation is the emblem of the old Swiss, gules a Greek cross argent'.

Gersau, a tiny republic since the middle of the 15th century, situated on the border of Lake Lucerne, used, up to 1798, a banner in the typical old Swiss manner: a white cross with blue-red flamed fields. The arms are per pale azure and gules. The banner was also flown on a boat bringing the Gersau soldiers to the neighbours helping against the attacks of the oppressors.[34]

In 1798 Gersau was incorporated into the canton of Schwyz, but on 7 February 1814 Gersau again became an independent republic using its former banner. On 22 July 1817, after a decree of the Diet, Gersau was once more unified with Schwyz.

Author biography



Dr Günther Mattern (1940–2024) was a founder member of the Swiss Vexillological Society, the Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Fahnen- und Flaggenkunde, and edited and produced his own journal *Flaggenmitteilungen* between 1975 and 1990. He wrote extensively on heraldry and vexillology, serving as Chief Editor of *Archives héraldiques suisses* (1999–2008), and as a member, Treasurer and Councillor of the Académie internationale d'héraldique.

32 Stack, R. 'Die Entstehung der helvetischen Trikolore' in: *Anzeiger für Schweizer Geschichte*, N. F. 8 (1898) pp. 69–70.

33 'Couleurs et emblèmes de la République helvétique' in: *Archives héraldiques suisses*, 2 (1888) p. 194.

34 Gauthier, A. *La République de Gersau* (Basel: 1888).