

## Season 1, Episode 1: Pilot

February 3, 2020

Show Transcript

### Why the Flag

Welcome to the show about the most colorful four-letter word in the English dictionary: Flag.

We're a podcast that explores the stories behind the flags – and how these symbols effect the world, our history, and ourselves.

I've been interested in flags since I was a child. Growing up, I would spend a part of almost every summer visiting my family the Swedish countryside in a place called Myggsjön – or mosquito lake – and every June 21, we had a huge midsummer party in the center of the village. The place was always decorated with flowers and people dressed in traditional outfits and we got to run around in the forest – it was a really great place to just be a kid. But with all the head-dresses and songs and horse sausage and pickled herrings, I was always most intrigued by the abundance of the flag. On top of the midsummer pole and in front of every house and in every window, you would find the big, bright yellow cross splashed across the blue horizon – this admiration and celebration of Swedish flag was something that always captured my imagination.

And of course, like many kids from my elementary school, I spent the other half of the summer at a Jewish sleepaway camp in upstate New York. Every morning, rain or shine, we stood at attention, lined up by bunk, to first sing *O Say Can You See* as we raised the *Stars and Stripes*, then *O Canada* for our northern friends with their peaceful red maple leaf – and without fail, for the main course, we sang *Hatikva*, the national anthem for the state of Israel, as we raised the flag with our Magen David, the Star of David, to its place of honor.

This was always my favorite start to the morning because I would watch how campers and counselors alike were moved to their flag, were entranced by their anthems. These flag ceremonies meant that we were part of something, a community, an unbreakable bond that went beyond whatever happened in that year's color wars or who was caught kissing who behind the dugout. Raising the flag was that one moment, every morning, we all became equal – but sometimes, we were less than equal to the flags of the nation of which we were raising. This feeling of awe and confusion and possibly misplaced national pride has always stuck with me. And ever since, I just couldn't get enough of flags.

Anyway, you might ask yourself: why would we make a show about flags? Well, because this is a show about you. And it's a show about me – all of us, really. At the heart of it, the history of flags is about the stories we tell about our collective pasts – pasts that are both real and imagined – and more times than not, it's a little bit of both. What I love about the history of flags is that these are stories of gods and demagogues, new republics and fallen tyrants, battles for freedom and wars for slavery. They're also the stories of politics, theory, and revolution. It's

these flags that are the colors that ground our national identities, rally our masses, welcome us home, and send us to faraway lands to die.

Just look around: flags are a ubiquitous part of our everyday world. These ostensibly random collections of colors and shapes have become symbols that are a part of the daily experience – for better or worse – for people in every corner of the globe. Don't believe me? Just go outside. Walk down any small town or major city street or even open your closet and you'll come face-to-face with these emotionally and spiritually and historically charged symbols.

Flags are everywhere: We hang them on our office buildings and we fly them in our yards. We salute them on a pole and we use them to cover our dead. We write songs to flags, stick 'em to our cars, and wear them on our heads. And yes, we even print flags on our underpants.

So instead of asking why we should talk about flags, the real question is: how did these symbols take over our world? Where did they come from? What do these colors and symbols really mean? Why do the flags of Guatemala and Mozambique proudly display weapons of war, while the flag of Cyprus quietly flies the olive branch of peace?

This show will ask you to look inside of yourself and ask: Why do some flags make your blood boil while others make you proud? And why do we care about our flag – whichever flag you fly – and care about it so much to the point that we kill for it, lay down our life – and others lives – and die for it? Also, we want to ask, how do flags connect us? How do they divide us? And what can they teach us about one another? I might be asking a lot, but these are just some the questions I want to answer with this show – not just for you, but for myself – and understand once and for all: Why the Flag?

#### *Break*

Song: You're A Grand Old Flag

Artist: weyou

Source: [FreeMusicArchive.org](http://FreeMusicArchive.org)

Welcome to the first episode of Why the Flag, I'm Simon Mullin. For full transparency for those who don't know me, and there's no reason why you would, I am by no means an expert on the subject of flags. I am simply a flag enthusiast. I will, however, over the course of this series, speak to people and cite sources who can shed light on the history behind the symbols and help me tell their stories.

Being the first episode of my first show about flags, honestly, I've been struggling about where to begin. Because, where do you begin on a topic that could go in so many directions and veer in so many tangents and keep it interesting and on point? So, after weeks of talking to my girlfriend and my cat about this flag and that, I've decided that we're going to begin this series at the logical beginning: and that is, at the beginning of flags.

The history of how flags came to be is one that is still shrouded in mystery and intrigue and debate – but, there are some people who are much smarter than me who have some very good

ideas about where and when this flag craze started. We do know that the contemporary look of flags – this rectangular-ish cloth that symbolizes a nation, clan, or entity – most likely originated during the First Zhou dynasty in China around three thousand years ago as a symbol to represent the ruler. Others argue that this medium was first developed in ancient India to designate a king. But wherever flags really do come from, we have enough evidence to believe that the modern use of flags – national flags and battle flags that show heraldry and clan – first spread to Europe from the Muslim world during the high middle ages. Let me show you how.

Islam came to be in the 600s by a man named Muhammad in what is today Saudi Arabia. Islam is an Abrahamic religion, and similar to the other Abrahamic religions like Judaism and Christianity – Islam believes in one singular deity – *Adonei, Allah, God*. And like Judaism but unlike some Christian sects, Islam adheres to a form of what is called *aniconism* in their religious practice – that is, the absence of creating images of God or their prophet Muhammad in artwork and design, and of course, for the purpose of this show, their flags. Now bear with me because understanding this religious practice – understanding aniconism – is key to understanding how we got the modern flag.

Skipping a few centuries after the rise of the Muslim faith, as these kings, caliphs, sultans, and warlords would proclaim their faith, convert other nations, and signify their beliefs, their early flags were purposefully designed using plain colors, plain symbols, and plain text, in strict adherence to their aniconic beliefs. In other words, early Islamic national and heraldic flags were designed with simple colors and shapes in line with this aniconic system. So, these “seemingly random colors and shapes” as I called them earlier are not random at all – they derive from the medieval Muslim world as a way to show more than just nation and clan – but a fealty to God. And these are the God-fearing flags that poured into Europe through both trade and conquest in the middle ages – and these are the flags that shaped almost every modern flag you see today.

There is so much more to say about Islamic, pre-Islamic, and Byzantine flags than this, but we’re going to leave it there for now because this is just an introduction to the history of flags, and with your patience, I hope to dive deeper into those topics on episodes later on down the road.

Understand that this fun fact about medieval Islamic flags is, in the human historical context, relatively recent – we’re talking just 6-700 years ago. And that only covers how we modeled the modern flag. But what about the very first flags? What were they? How and why were they used?

Let me tell you now, because, unfortunately, the first answer is boringly simple: we don’t know. That’s right, we don’t totally where the first flags came from or when they were first used. It’s been speculated – and this is an educated guess – that the first flags were used to communicate over long distances when shouts and sounds were too far out of earshot. Maybe it was a branch flung atop a hill to designate water and game. Or a fox fir hung from a stick to indicate a hunt or an enemy. We may never know. And for the purpose of this show, it doesn’t really matter. Because it’s the exciting history of flags – flags of war and nations and battle and honor

and conflict – that I love and that this show is about. Because behind each flag is a story as incredible and beautiful as it is deadly.

Coming up after the break, we're going even further back in time to the Roman Empire to talk about their standards – these proto-flags – and tell a story about how three Roman proto-flags were the cause for centuries of death, destruction, and nearly 500 years of failed conquest. And quite possibly, the beginning of the long road to the end of the Roman Empire.

We'll be right back after this.

*Break*

*Song: Wide Eyes*

*Artist: Chad Crouch*

*Source: FreeMusicArchive.org*

Welcome back to the show.

As you may know, the contemporary study of flags is called *vexillology*, a word deriving from the Roman conquests when soldiers marched behind a vexillum – also called a standard – which among some things had a golden eagle sitting atop a horizontal rod at the end of a long pole. Thus vexillology, comes from the Latin root, vexillum.

I mention this because the first story we'll tell will take us on trip way back in time and across the globe to the one of the greatest and longest-lasting empires the world has ever known, spanning from the wilderness of northern Britain to the edges of Mesopotamia and the cradle of civilization – I'm speaking of course about the height of the Roman Empire over 2000 years ago.

This is the story about how three lost Roman standards on the battle field – the loss of these three Roman proto-flags – spelled disaster for thousands, proved that Rome wasn't invincible after all, and precipitated years of slaughter, failed conquest, and slaughter again. And for our purposes, this is the story about how Rome used the symbol of a national flag as a means to an end: a way to rally their subjects to a war of conquest cloaked in vengeance in the name of the flag and the nation it represented. So, without further ado, welcome to the nightmare that is the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9AD.

Senatus Populusque Romanus: Senate and People of Rome. The abbreviation *SPQR* could be found emblazoned on buildings and streets, on sewers and on banners, and of course on the military standards with which troops marched into battle. These standards – these proto-flags, whether topped with an eagle (*aquil*) or a serpent or wolf – began as a simple rallying point, a way to communicate to each other on the field of battle to say, either “move your troops this way or that,” or, “send in the next wave.” By the time of Emperor Augustus in 9AD, about 100 years before the height of the Roman Empire, these standards took on a greater meaning – they became a symbol of Rome itself, the representation of its proud citizens and its king, and an illustration of the values and the world they represent.

I want to quote a great article by author Joshua J. Mark, co-founder, editor, and a director of Ancient History Encyclopedia, that sums up this idea beautifully:

Quote:

*“The Standard was important as a rallying point, symbol of pride and, more practically, as a means of communication in battle. A trumpet blast would draw the attention of the troops to the Standard which would then direct which action should be taken on the field. The Standard bearer would lower, raise, wave, or make some other motion with the Standard to indicate what the next move was for the troops or to change some tactic or formation. So important was the Standard to the armies of Rome that battles were fought for their return. In the time of the Roman Republic the Standards were imprinted with the letters SPQR which was an abbreviation for Senatus Populusque Romanus (Senate and People of Rome). The Standard, then, represented not only the legion or cohort which carried it but the citizens of Rome, and the policies the army represented.”* End quote.

Alongside the serpent and eagle symbols were also an image called an Imago – the literal face of the emperor to remind the troops for whom and why they fought – and of course, the Manus – an open hand that flew atop the banner, representing the loyalty of the soldiers and of the leaders who send them into battle.

The Battle of Teutoburg Forest is precipitated by the appointment of the Roman politician and general, Publius Quinctilius Varus, as governor of Germania in 7CE. It’s important to note that Rome did not have military control over Germania, so this appointment of a non-German Roman to “rule” this territory was a big middle finger to the local tribes and chieftains of the Germany.

But no one took this offense more seriously than a German named Arminius.

Arminius was the son of a Germanic chieftain and from a tribe of proto-Germans called the Cherusci. Believed to have been raised as a hostage in Rome, Arminius’s skill in weaponry and leadership gained him a prominent position as a commander of a German auxiliary force in the Roman army – serving under the very man who insulted his tribe, Publius Quinctilius Varus.

So, in 9CE, furious with Varus’s appointment to governor and repulsed by the horrors he witnessed done to his people under his General’s thumb, Arminius plotted a brilliant and deadly revenge against Rome that would change the history of an empire, and the history of Europe, forever.

During the summer of 9CE, Arminius recruited and plotted his revenge with the Germanic tribes of the Lower Rhine where Varus’s army was stationed.

Quote:

*“With the approach of fall, the Roman army prepared to march back to their winter quarters on the Rhine. At this time news arrived – that is, from Arminius himself – of a tribal revolt to the*

*northwest. Arminius suggested that instead of taking the usual route to the Rhine, Varus should take a different route north of the Weser Hills. That way he could crush the insurrection on the way. Varus took the bait and marched his three legions, auxiliaries, and supporting staff into the Teutoburg Forest.” End quote.*

What happened next was a bloodbath.

I’m going to quote again from Ludwig Heinrich Dyck’s article,

Quote:

*“Arminius rode away from the plodding Roman column after he told Varus that he was off to gather more reinforcements. Reinforcements came, not just from the Cherusci but also from the Marsi, the Bructeri, and from other tribes as well. They did not come to aid the Romans, though, but to destroy them.” End quote.*

A day of heavy rain left the Roman army slow and stuck in mud, unable to restore order or counter-attack. And on the third day of the Roman march, with skirmishes and surprise attacks from all sides cutting them down with merciless cruelty, nearly the entire Varus army – 10-15,000 men, 8-10% of the entire Roman army – lay dead under the trees and brush of the Teutoburg Forest, including General Varus himself, who took his own life before the Germans could seize him. Every captured Roman soldier was tortured and murdered, and those who survived the horrors were enslaved and sent north, many never to be seen again. To add insult to injury, Arminius cut off Varus’s head, sending it to the King of Marcomanni, in the modern-day Czech Republic.

But it wasn’t just the head of Varus that Arminius took as his prize to insult Rome, it was the three Roman standards he seized in battle – these Roman proto-flags. And it was the loss of these standards that sent Emperor Augustus into mourning and madness.

I want to read a passage by author Karen Schousboe, a medievalist from the University of Copenhagen, that shows the horror and humiliation of the Romans after not just facing a massive military defeat to these Barbarians, but the shame of losing their proto-flags in the process.

Quote

*“The battle ended in the total annihilation of the Roman soldiers. Varus was said to have fallen on his own sword, while the victors kept the prized eagles of the Roman legions as visible signs of the triumph. Only two of those were ever recovered and that after seven years...No wonder, Suetonius reports to us, that Augustus cried out and banged his head against a door when he received news of the defeat.”*

End quote.

Augustus was so distraught over the loss, he mourned for several months, not cutting his hair or shaving his face. He would cry out, and I quote:

*“Quintilius Varus, give me back my legions!” And he observed the day of the disaster each year as one of sorrow and mourning.*

End quote.

As I mentioned earlier, the story of Roman defeat in the Battle of Teutoburg Forest emphasizes the importance placed on their flag – this Standard – the symbol of Rome. And the story doesn't end here. It's the devastating Roman response to the loss of their standard – of their flag – in this battle, which saw such a visceral reaction of shame and humiliation, that hundreds and thousands of people would have to die over many years trying to recover this lost totem from the hands of the Germanic tribes.

We'll end this episode with the devastating Roman response right after the break.

*Break*

*Song: Something Elated*

*Artist: Broke for Free*

*Source: FreeMusicArchive.org*

Welcome back to the show.

As I alluded to at the start of this episode, the history of flags is one that is often written in blood. Where we left off before the break, the Romans are decimated, Varus's head is halfway across Europe, the Roman flags are in the hands of Arminius's barbarian hordes, and Emperor Augustus – along with all of Rome – is in shock and mourning.

But if you know anything about the Romans, they will not take this loss of men and flags sitting down.

By 10 and 11 AD, Augustus was growing old and infirm, and after some minor skirmishes following the Battle of Teutoburg, he finally abandoned his conquest of Germania, and decreed that the Roman border will end at the Rhine river. Soon after, Augustus, the first emperor of Rome, died on August 19, 14AD, not living long enough to see the day that Rome lay waste to Germania – nor did he ever see the return of his legion's precious standards.

It took Rome nearly five years to rebuild their lost legions and get them ready to fight for the return of their eagle-topped Standards. The new emperor Tiberius came to power in 14CE, and in short order, rallied the Romans behind the cause of returning these standards. But it is the opinion of many historians that his true goal was to reopen the conquest of Germania that Augustus had disgracefully abandoned.

Caught up in this frenzy to recover the standards was a Roman general by the name of Germanicus. With bloodlust and vengeance, eager to prove himself a great warrior, Germanicus pushed his troops into the tribal regions of Germania in the year 16, laying waste to the land and cutting down anyone and everyone that stood in his way. So great was the shame of losing

these standards, he risked everything by going against direct orders and beginning a campaign of feverish slaughter that lasted years. But to his credit, his early campaign saw the restoration of Rome's honor – at least for a time.

Quote:

*In c. 16CE the Roman general Germanicus led his troops into Germania, in defiance of Augustus' dictate that the Rhine should be the boundary of Rome, to retrieve the Standards lost by Varus's defeat. Augustus was dead by then and Tiberius ruled Rome but, still, the previous boundary stood...Germanicus' campaign was driven by revenge, his desire to rally the troops around him and, as a symbol of their personal loyalty to him and to Rome, the retrieval of the Standards. He massacred as many of the indigenous people as he could in retribution for the Roman defeat and recovered two of the three Standards lost in the Battle of Teutoburg Forest. While the people of Rome applauded his victories, he was denied advancement by Tiberius for acting outside of the established policy and also, no doubt, for engaging in a campaign which would have contributed to Germanicus' popularity at Tiberius' expense.*

There's much more to the story that follows, but for the purpose of this being a show about flags, we're going to wrap it up here where the story of the Standards ends. While Germanicus was successful in retrieving two of the Roman standards, Pandora's box was opened. The fact remained that Rome was proven to be mortal in the Battle of Teutoburg Forest when they lost not just men but their precious proto-flags. The loss of these proto-flags was proof that this juggernaut could – and would – be defeated. Years of Roman incursions, squashed Germanic revolts, endless wars, and the mindless slaughter of countless tribespeople could not band-aid over the fact that Rome's weakness had been exposed. The Germanic tribes had strength not in numbers but in resolve and solidarity, and as a result, Rome would never get their full revenge, because Rome would never conquer Germania.

That's all the time I have for today. To learn more about the Roman Standard, the Battle of Teutoburg Forest, and the Germanic wars, and to stream this show, visit the show notes at [flagpodcast.com](http://flagpodcast.com), and of course, follow us on Instagram @flagpod.

Join me next time for the story of the Tricolor, the red white and blue flag of France, and how one of Europe's most recognizable and iconic flags was born from the one of the bloodiest revolutions the modern world had ever seen.

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