

Why the Flag? Podcast

Episode 7, Part I: The German Flag: The Fall & Rise of the Bundesflagge

August 16, 2020

Show Transcript

Hi there, this is Simon Mullin, host of Why the Flag? Today, we're kicking off a special two-part series on the history of the flags of Germany, from their origins at the Coronation of Charlemagne to the Holy Roman Empire, and from the Weimar Republic to Nazi Germany, and to black-red-and-gold *Bundesflagge* that you would recognize today.

In this episode, we'll dive into the wild history of the flag of the German Empire, it's unlikely origins, and how it evolved from the flag of a small fraternity in Israel nearly 1,000 years ago to become one of the most feared tricolors in modern world history. And in part II, we'll explore the fall of the German Empire after WWI, the rise of the revolutionary pan-German black-red-and-gold tricolor, and its brief halt as the flag of Germany during the Nazi regime. We'll also be joined by the one and only Michael Green, a professional vexillographer and founder of Flags for Good, who can open our eyes to the psychological power of the Swastika and how this one flag transformed the world forever. I promise you; you won't want that discussion.

So, without further ado, this is Part I of The German Flag: The Fall & Rise of the Bundesflagge.

BREAK

Welcome back to another episode of Why the Flag? The show that explores the stories behind the flags, and how these symbols impact our world, our histories, and ourselves. I'm Simon Mullin.

In the last episode, we told the story of the *Rojigualda*, the flag of the Kingdom of Spain, and the history of the four ancient kingdoms on its coat of arms – and the symbol of the Bourbon Dynasty squarely at its center. We explored the origins of the Spanish State, from the destruction of the Visigoths and its medieval conquest by the Moors to the Reconquista and the unification of Spain under the Catholic Monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand – and how their ancient totems transformed into the flag of Spain we see today. We also dove into the history of Spain's struggle for independence from foreign control and their fight for democracy, from the first and second Spanish Republics to the eventual fall of Francisco Franco's fascist Spain in 1975. Every step of the way, we saw how the flag was altered, transformed, even distorted, used not only as a symbol of the state and its politics but as a weapon of heraldry and history, often wielded against its own people from the Inquisition against Muslims and Jews to the bloody and tragic Spanish Civil War. You'll remember that in 1936, Francisco Franco adopted the coat of arms of Isabella and Ferdinand to rally his nationalists behind an imagined past of glory and empire, a flag that – with a few well-placed splashes of red and gold – would legitimize the end of constitutional democracy for a generation of Spaniards. That is the inherent power and danger – and yes, sometimes beauty – of vexillology. As you know, the thesis behind this entire series is that, when the authority of national symbolism is wielded for

evil, its influence on our collective psyche and its impact on world history cannot be understated. And on the flip side, on the all-too-rare occasions that this power has been used to rally a nation to freedom and liberation – as we’ve explored in the stories of Wales and France and Hawaii – it can also remind us of our collective good. This is the contradiction behind vexillology. And the more I learn, the more I research, the more episodes I make – I come to realize that flags, the very symbols I dedicate so much of my time to understanding, are not inherently *good* things. Too often, they tell us who’s in and who’s out, who won and who’s lost, who’s in power and who’s been left in the ashbin of history. But we love them because they represent us, our history; they tell us where we come from and why we belong. This is the struggle and contradiction.

And the story we start telling today on part I, this story of the German flag, is a story of these very contradictions. In fact, it’s not even a story of one flag but of two – it’s a history of the tug-of-war between the black-white-and-red flag of German imperialism and conquest and the black-red-and-gold flag of modernity, liberalism, and hope. Over the past two hundred years, these two flags – the symbols of these two German destinies – have simultaneously coexisted in the streets and in the minds of the German people as they’ve fought to find their true place in the history of nations. And both of these flags have been exploited by those who seek control over their populace – the black-white-red of course by the Nazis and fascists, and the black-red-and-gold by communists and even by American occupiers. But one symbol of Germany has always outlasted them all – the one national flag that transcends history, party, and ideology – and that is the flag of the German eagle. And this is what will connect our two flags from the beginning.

The story of the German flag is one of petty kingdoms and expansive empires, imperial wars and beautiful revolutions, Jewish death-camps – and liberal democracies. It’s a tale of the German people’s clash between imperialism and fascism, communism and capitalism, tyranny, and freedom. But this is also a story of redemption and forgiveness – however hard that forgiveness is to give – and the immense sacrifices of a new, young German nation, carrying the torch of democracy in Europe while still cast in the long, dark shadow of Adolf Hitler’s Swastika flag, and his anti-Semitic and genocidal regime. At times, this will not be an easy story for me to tell. I am a Jewish man – and the legacy that all Jews have been forced to carry is the burden of Germany and its crimes against us and their outright destruction of our ancient tribe. We did not ask for that legacy, but we have no choice. The German flag will always be our burden.

It’s a hard story for me to tell because while most of my immediate family would listen to the news of the war on the radio, whether my father’s family in Chicago or my mother’s in Sweden, a few members of my family were still living in the ghettos of Riga, Latvia at the time the Germans came marching in under their imperial flag. For my uncle Reuven and aunt Hannah and their families, their lives would be snuffed out at the hands of German boys – unknown, faceless, nameless German boys, boys who were rallied to the red-white-and-black flag of nationalism, who marched Reuven and Hannah and countless others into the dark woods of the Rumbula forest in the cold winter and shot them dead into a pit – left under the thick brush of pine trees. Just thinking about the utter horror and dread and terror they must have felt makes

my stomach turn and my blood boil – a fit of righteous anger that just scratches the surface of how many others must feel as well. And that’s what I think about when I see the old German flag.

But this anger is not the point. You see, this will also be a cathartic history for me to tell at times because this is also the story of the German’s hard-fought redemption and newfound legitimacy; their black-red-and-gold flag of forgiveness, a flag that represents inclusiveness and freedom and the most successful liberal democracy in all of Europe – a Europe they once held under the thumb of imperialist terror. At times, it’s a story of immense contradictions – of a free and industrial nation turned to darkness, imposing a once-in-a-hundred generation terror one cannot fathom or imagine. This will also be a story of history – a living history that impacts the lives and politics and functions of almost every nation and every government and every people on earth today. In fact, the story of the German flag may just be the most important story we’ll ever tell.

Over the course of these two episodes, we’ll ask, what do the colors of the two German flags really mean, and where do they come from? What is the power of the German eagle – the eagle that first emerged from Rome – and how has it survived as the symbol of the German nation for nearly 1,200 years? How has the flag of Germany transformed, altered, and updated its meaning over the years – and what does it represent today? And also – what does it represent to you? As always, we’ll ask why the flag? And today, why the flag of Germany?

Stick around – we’ll be right back after this.

BREAK

On September 15, 1935, at a government rally in the German city of Nuremberg, Germany’s new Reich Flag Law was announced. Under a statue of a massive eagle holding the Swastika in its talons, it was broadcast to the nation and to the world that the imperial colors of the third German Empire are once again black-white-and-red, but that the new imperial banner would be a red flag with a white disc at its center – and inside the disc would be the black Swastika of the NDSAP, the National Socialist German Workers’ Party – better known as the Nazi party. The law was unanimously passed in Reichstag the following day, making the Swastika the new national flag of Germany – and Germany’s third national flag in less than three years.

Just two-and-a-half years earlier in 1933, the flag of Germany and its Weimar Republic was the black-red-and-gold tricolor that you would recognize as Germany’s flag today. But mere weeks after the Nazi party came to power and thrust the 43-year-old party leader, Adolf Hitler, into the Chancellorship, the German president, Paul von Hindenburg backed a March 12 ruling that suspended the old flag and established two new national flags – one would be the resurrection of the black-white-and-red imperial tricolor of the old German Empire – a flag that was quickly retired when the German Empire fell after WWI, and the other, the Swastika flag of the Nazis. So, on Part I we’ll ask, where did these imperial colors come from, and what do they mean? Why was it so important to to reject the black-red-gold tricolor of the German republic and

replace it with a new flag? And what's the meaning behind the German eagle, which firmly grips the Swastika in its talons? To answer these questions, we have to go all the way back to the fall of Rome, the rise of the Byzantine Empire in the 6th Century AD, and the consolidation of the Holy Roman Empire in central Europe during the early middle ages. Let's begin where we so often do: Ancient Rome.

If you recall the story from episode 1, we explored the origins of European proto-flags and symbols, and we focused on the significance of the Roman eagle – or *Aquil* – that topped the vexilla and standards of the elite Roman legions. The eagle would become the preeminent symbol of Roman authority in the “known world,” a winged symbol of courage, strength, immortality, and the messengers to the gods. And as we dove into on the first episode, bitter wars were fought for the return of these eagle-topped standards when they were lost in battle. The famous ancient Roman saying, “*aquila non capit muscas*” – the eagle does not catch flies – meant that people of high rank, these eagles, don't have the time or patience to deal with trifling matters of the people, the flies, and in 102 BC, Gaius Marius decreed that the eagle alone be the defining emblem of Roman power. So, with Roman emperors aligning themselves with the eagle, it grew to be the symbol of the highest authority in the empire – and as we'll often see in history, their Eurasian successors would claim the eagle as their own symbol to legitimize their imperialist ambitions.

Now let's put this into context. In 285 AD, Emperor Diocletian split the vast Roman Empire in two, creating the Western and Eastern Roman Empires. While the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 AD with the abdication of Romulus Augustulus, the Eastern Roman Empire – better known as the Byzantine Empire today, but simply known as the Roman Empire at the time – would succeed the tradition of the Romans and flourish as the most powerful economic, cultural, and military force in Europe for another thousand years. The Roman eagle would live on as the symbol of the absolute authority of the Byzantine Empire until the 11th Century, when Emperor Isaac I Comnenus modified the design by adding an extra head – so, a double-headed eagle – a symbol which was inspired by the ancient traditions of his native Anatolia, in modern-day Turkey.

While the Western Roman Empire was responsible for popularizing the eagle as the symbol of the highest power, the Turkish double-headed eagle was elevated by the Byzantines – and, as we'll discuss later on, by the Holy Roman Empire and the Prussians – but this double-headed eagle actually originated long before a single stone was ever built in Rome. In fact, this was the symbol of the Hittite Kingdom, an Anatolian people who built an ancient empire from around the 17th to 12th Centuries BC. The Hittites are even discussed in the biblical book of Genesis, where they're described as the adversaries of the Israelites and their god. And, as you'll find clear later on in the episode, the kingdom of the double-headed eagle described as the enemies of the Hebrews is an example of apt biblical foreshadowing I doubt anyone could have ever imagined. But let's get back to the story.

As the Byzantines ruled in the east, a new kind of empire was forming in the west. On December 25, 800 AD, Pope Leo III crowned the Frankish King Charlemagne as Emperor of the

Romans – the first emperor in Western Europe since the fall of Rome nearly three centuries earlier – marking a direct effort to transfer the succession of Rome from the east back to the west. And to prove his legitimacy upon taking the throne, Charlemagne would adopt the Roman eagle as a symbol of his imperial power over Western Europe. Now, Charlemagne would die in 814, and his short-lived Romanesque empire would dissolve by 888, but nearly a century later, an ambitious German king by the name of Otto I would reunite the German tribes, conquer the Hungarians, and capture Italy – and on February 2, 962 at St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, Pope John XII coronated Otto I as Holy Roman Emperor and as the true successor of the Roman Empire. Thus, the Holy Roman Empire – the First Reich – was born.

The Holy Roman Empire had significant differences from the old Roman Empire they said to succeed, as well as many differences from the Byzantines in the east. Namely, this empire was headed by Germans and Austrians, not Italians or Greeks. They had no senate nor governing institution that would be recognized as Roman by Augustus or Caesar if they had been alive to see it. Also, as the territory of the empire waxed and waned over its 900+ year history, the Holy Roman Empire largely had no dictating central authority. In fact, for much of its existence, and certainly in the second half of their reign, the Holy Roman Emperor was more of a figurehead at the top of hundreds of princely states, with the man holding the title of King of Rome been elected by a legislative body called the Imperial Diet – and, until 1558, one was only given the title Holy Roman Emperor when crowned by the pope. But there was one symbol they would carry that would tie their claims as successors to the Roman Empire – and that, of course, was the *Reichsadler*, the Imperial Eagle of Rome.

By the 14th Century, the symbol of the Holy Roman Emperor was the black imperial eagle with a red beak and red talons on a golden shield – the black eagle, of course being the symbol of imperial power, red beak for artistic effect, and the gold for his divine royalty. And as the Byzantine Empire in the east would decline and eventually fall in the mid-15th Century, the Holy Roman Emperors would start to integrate the heraldic symbols of the Byzantines into their own coats of arms, yet again using these totems to show the world that they were the legitimate successors of the Roman Empire.

Most notably, around the 1430s, the Holy Roman Empire would claim the ancient double-headed eagle for their imperial banners and battle flags. They would also attribute new meaning to this Byzantine icon – it was said that the crowned double-headed eagle of the Holy Roman Emperor represented one’s dual role of both King of their realm and emperor of Rome – a symbol that would be in continuous use on their flags until the fall of the Holy Roman Empire to Napoleon, and its dissolution on August 6, 1806. From the ashes of the Holy Roman Empire would rise the Austrian Empire – and they, along with the short-lived German Confederation and all the way through to the Austro-Hungarian Empire – would continue the tradition of the double-headed eagle flag until the end of WWI. But don’t worry – we can save the story of the Austrian and Hungarian flags for another time.

Now, Napoleon may have ended the Holy Roman Empire, but the imperial eagle – the eagle which had survived the fall of Rome and Byzantium, would live on as the immortal symbol of

the Germans, from the Teutonic Order to the Kingdom of Prussia, and from the German Empire to the Weimar Republic to Nazi Germany and to the current symbol of the Federal German Republic. But when we come back, we'll explore the unlikely origins of the imperial German flag – the same flag resurrected by Chancellor Hitler and President von Hindenburg in 1933. Stick around – there's much more to come after the break.

BREAK

Welcome back to the show.

Where we left off, we briefly touched on the history of Germany's eagle, from Roman Empire to the Byzantines, and from the Holy Roman Empire to the modern-day.

And now we want to ask, where did that black-white-and-red imperial colors of Germany come from? To answer that, we'll go back to the legend of Emperor Charlemagne, weave our way through the symbols of the Holy Roman Empire, and explore a few of the flags of the Christian knights and their crusades through Europe and to Jerusalem.

If you recall from episode 2, when we discussed the origins of the French tricolor flag, the red on their flag probably originated from the red of the *Oriflamme*, that long, orange-red banner that is said to have been the personal flag of Charlemagne that he carried to the Holy Land. Charlemagne certainly never actually went to the Holy Land, but that's beside the point. With the first iteration of the resurrected Roman Empire in Western Europe in the early 800s, which is usually called the Frankish or Carolingian Empire, Charlemagne would reign from Belgium and the Netherlands in the north to parts of Italy in the south, and from France in the west to Germany and the Slavic areas in the east. And whether or not we believe the legend of his Oriflamme flag, we can be almost certain that the significance of Charlemagne's mythical red banner was adopted not only by the French but by the German Holy Roman Empire, as well. And just as the Oriflamme, when flown in battle, meant that no man would see mercy, so would it's modern descendent – the red Swastika flag of the Nazis – for so many millions.

In the centuries before the black eagle on a gold shield became the most recognizable flag of the Holy Roman Empire, it was their *Reichssturmflagge*, their imperial war flag, that would inspire fear and awe from the Vikings of the Baltics to the Muslims of Jerusalem. This war flag was a banner of Charlemagne's red, overlaid by a holy white cross – a design nearly identical to the national flags this symbol has inspired, including the Danish *Dannebrog* flag, which we explored in-depth on episode 5, as well as the flag of Switzerland, who were granted the flag of the Holy Roman Empire in the early 1400s. This white cross on a red ground was a ubiquitous symbol in medieval Western Europe and became a very popular design during the crusades, most notably adopted by the Knights Hospitallers who would help the Danish King Valdemar in his crusades against the pagan Estonians, whereupon Valdemar would adopt their flag as the flag of Denmark in 1219. Yes, the history of flags in Europe is very complex – but the further down the rabbit hole you go, the more you see how they are all connected.

As the imperial eagle would slowly rise to become the most prominent flag of the Holy Roman Empire in the 15th Century, the legendary red and white colors of the *Reichssturmflagge* would continue to hold a significant place in the hearts, minds, and flags of the German people. In fact, even today, the state flags of Berlin, Brandenburg, Hamburg, and others carry on this ancient red-and-white tradition. But we can't talk about the red-and-white colors without touching on the flag of the powerful north-German Hanseatic League.

At the height of the Holy Roman Empire in the 12th Century, a small federation of northern German coastal towns and eastern Baltic communities formed a united trading bloc – an organization of German merchants who worked together to protect their mutual interests. If you recall from earlier, the Holy Roman Empire was very much a loose collection of hundreds of princely states with no real central authority, but within these states, the local nobles and the Catholic Church held a lot of economic power over the merchant class – so, while it was a direct challenge to the local authorities, this trading bloc was formed to improve the lives and the economic status of these sea-faring merchants and their communities. But no one could have ever imagined just how powerful this bloc would one day become.

The may have had their humble origins in the small fishing town of Lübeck in 1159, but by 1356, this trading bloc would emerge as the Hanseatic League, the undisputed rulers of northern Germany and the Baltics with a commercial and mutual defense empire that spanned from the merchant centers of London Riga, Latvia, and as far east as Novgorod in Russia. From their power center on the Swedish island of Gotland, the Hanseatic League would establish a dominating monopoly on Baltic trade and establish alliances and lucrative arrangements with kings and nations outside the realm of the Holy Roman Empire. And as their ensign, the merchants and mercenaries of the league would fly the Hanseatic pennant, the *Hanseatenwimpel*, a long bicolor banner of the divine white on top of Charlemagne's red. The Hanseatic League would be responsible for so much of medieval Germany's economic and cultural and architectural achievements, but for our purposes, we're just going to focus on the significance of their white-and-red flag, which became internationally recognized as the powerful symbol north German states for centuries, until their decline from influence in the 16th Century, and their final dissolution in 1862. And at around the same time that the Hanseatic League began to form in the 12th Century, a new German force started to gain power and influence, as well – not in Germany, but over 2,000 miles away in the Kingdom of Jerusalem. I'm speaking of course, about the Order of the House of St. Mary of the Germans in Jerusalem – but you'd know them better as the knights of the Teutonic Order, an order which introduced the black-and-white colors into German lore.

Around 1190, after the fall of Christian Jerusalem, a fraternal organization of German merchants – many from the Hanseatic towns of Bremen and Lübeck – founded a field hospital for crusaders during the Siege of Acre in northern Israel. These German merchants would dedicate their time to care for the sick and injured Christian crusaders who came to the Holy Land in the name of their god – and at the direction of their German Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick I – and they would name this place the Hospital of St. Mary of the German House in Jerusalem. And the series of events that happened next would change the history of Europe

forever. On June 10, 1190, their Emperor Frederick I died while on crusade, leaving the empire to his son, Henry VI. Now, Henry had big shoes to fill if he was going to make a name for himself, as his late crusader father was as legendary in Germany as he was hated in Europe because of his imperial power grabs and his squabbles with the church. So, Henry did what any good son would do to live up to his father, and in 1197, he amassed a major army in southern Italy to march to Palestine and continue his father's crusade. Unfortunately for Henry, a bloody rebellion broke out in Sicily against his rule, and he died of malaria shortly thereafter.

With Henry's death in 1197, many of the German crusaders who had arrived in the Holy Land found that they had no longer had emperor to fight for, and began heading back home to Germany in large numbers. Now, fewer Christian knights in Palestine meant it would be harder to protect it from Muslim invaders, so in 1198, King Amalric II of Jerusalem began militarizing the men of the fraternal orders – including the order of merchants from the Hospital of St. Mary – to help fill their ranks. So, in 1198, the Order of Saint Mary of the Germans of Jerusalem – or in Latin, *Domus Sanctae Mariae Theutonicorum* – *Theutonicorum* – from which we get the name *Teutonic* Order, meaning the German Order – was born.

In 1199, the Teutonic Order was officially recognized by the new Pope Innocent III, and in 1205, he granted the Teutonic knights the use of the white habit with a black cross – and this black cross on a white ground would become the de facto flag of the new Teutonic Order. By the early 13th Century, the now heavily-armed Teutonic Order started to shift their focus away from Jerusalem and on to the crusades of conversion and conquest against pagans in east and central Europe. They grew to become something of a mercenary force used by Christian kings to battle and colonize pagan strongholds in Romania, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, and Lithuania. On the one hand, the Teutonic Order would fight for their god and for gold, and on the other hand, they would be given extensive autonomy in these regions and be granted lands of their own. At first, this arrangement didn't go so well. In 1211, a group of Teutonic Knights was hired by the Hungarian King Andrew II to defend his Christian kingdom against pagan Cumans on his border, with the ultimate goal of colonizing their land and converting their people. The Teutonic Knights were ultimately expelled from Hungary in 1225; however, after it became clear that they were trying to build their own autonomous state in the regions they conquered. This would be a mere foreshadowing of what their true aims really were.

During their Hungarian campaign, the Teutonic Order quickly rose to prominence in Europe in the 1220s thanks to the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, who appointed a man by the name of Hermann Von Salza, the Teutonic Order's German Grand Master, as one of his chief diplomats, mediators, closest confidants, and top imperial counselors – even becoming a part of the royal household when attending court. With Emperor Frederick's close relationship with Hermann Von Salza, the Teutonic Order was trusted to take on a lot of Holy Roman Empire's dirty work, and in exchange, within the empire, they were trusted with the administration over several of their territories. But most importantly, and consequentially, they would become an ambitious and semi-autonomous mercenary force of the empire with one not-so-secret goal in mind: establishing a princely state of their own under the black-and-white flag of the Order. And they would finally get their opportunity just across the empire's border in Prussia.

By 1226, it was clear that the Christians in central Europe did not have the manpower or the military prowess to conquer the formidable pagans of Prussia on their own. The Polish duke, a man named Conrad of Mazovia, was becoming desperate after suffering withering attacks by Prussians that – like the Hungarian King Andrew II before – he turned to the Teutonic Order for their help. But this time around, Grand Master Hermann von Salza didn't rush to the opportunity – he wanted a guarantee that when he marched the black-and-white flag of his order into pagan territory, he could claim the land he conquered for the knights of the Teutonic Order. So, with a decree known as the Golden Bull of Rimini, this privilege of free territorial conquest and acquisition was granted to him by his friend, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, which was then reluctantly agreed to by Duke Conrad, and finally secured by divine right by Pope Gregory IX. And as these Prussian Crusades began, Emperor Frederick II granted von Salza's Teutonic Order the right to use the black imperial eagle of the Holy Roman Empire, a symbol of gratitude and cooperation, which the Teutonic Order would adopt and use alongside their black-and-white flag during their conquest of Prussia. Thus, the State of the Teutonic Order was established in Prussia in the 1230s, enjoying all of the princely and royal rights granted to the other states of the Holy Roman Empire – and as they expanded their territory through the Baltics, their bloody and uncompromising tactics of conquest can only be described in modern terms as a genocide against the native pagan peoples. And they did so while marching under the black and white flag of the now Teutonic State, as well as the black Imperial Eagle of the Empire – the same ancient eagle of Rome and Byzantium, and now the eagle of the Christian Teutonic State in Prussia and the Baltics.

About 300 years later in 1525, the Monastic State of the Teutonic Order was dissolved as the Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights at the time, a man named Albert of Prussia, was encouraged by the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, to renounce Catholicism and convert to Evangelical Protestantism. In effect, he was told by Luther that his Teutonic State would not survive the coming Reformation, so he better get on board or face the pitchforks. So, on April 10, 1525, Albert resigned as Grand Master and was named Duke of Prussia by his uncle, the powerful King Sigismund I of Poland, establishing the Duchy of Prussia – the first-ever secular Protestant state in Europe. And for their flag, the Duchy of Prussia would continue the black-and-white tradition of the Teutonic State, as well as the eagle granted to them by Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, choosing for their flag a black imperial eagle on a white ground. And on the eagle's breast was a crowned, golden "S" for King Sigismund I to whom the Duchy paid homage.

The Prussian Duke Albert was from the House Hohenzollern, a dynastic line of princes, kings, imperial electors, and even Holy Roman Emperors who ruled Brandenburg, a small German state of the Holy Roman Empire based around Berlin. And even though the Duchy of Prussia was a fief of the Polish Kingdom and no longer part of the Holy Roman Empire, a union between the two Hohenzollern realms – Brandenburg in the west and Prussia in the east – seemed inevitable, but it would take nearly a century to unify their states. In 1618, the Prussian Duke Albert Frederick died without an heir, leaving the Duchy of Prussia to John Sigismund, the ruler of Brandenburg, finally uniting the two geographically disconnected states into one:

Brandenburg-Prussia – however, the region in the east was still under Polish control. After surviving the brutal Thirty Years War between the Catholic and Protestant states of Europe, and following the Swedish victory over the Catholic Polish Kingdom, East Prussia was finally liberated from Polish control in 1657, aligning themselves with the Holy Roman Empire for the first time in nearly two centuries. And in 1701, the Hohenzollern ruler, Frederick Wilhelm I, crowned himself King and established the first Kingdom of Prussia – a kingdom that would greatly expand its territory and influence, swell its population by opening their arms to Protestant refugees from southern Germany and across Europe, and through war and immigration and conquest, Prussia – with their black and white flag – would quickly rise to become one of Europe’s greatest territorial and military powers.

When we come back from the break, we’ll explore post-Napoleonic Germany, the Revolution of 1848, and the rise of the German Empire and their imperial tricolor banner. We’ll be right back after this.

BREAK

Welcome back to the show.

To recap where we left off before the break, we discussed the red Oriflamme flag of Charlemagne and its transformation into the red flag and white cross of the early Holy Roman Empire, as well as the adoption of the red-and-white colors by the states of the Hanseatic League. We also explored the origins of the white-and-black flag of the Kingdom of Prussia with the imperial eagle at its center – a flag which was developed in parallel with yet in isolation from that of the Hanseatic League. But in 1867, the destinies of these two flags would collide, and the red-and-white flag of the Hanseatic League and the white-and-black flag of the Kingdom of Prussia would finally come together to create the black-white-and-red tricolor banner of imperial Germany. And to understand how that happened, we’ll go back to 1815 with the fall of Napoleon’s empire and the establishment of the German Confederation.

From November 1814 to June 1815, the Congress of Vienna brought together an international conference of all the great powers in the region with the goal of redrawing the map of the continent in order to create a sustainable balance of power in Europe. Napoleon’s Empire had just destroyed centuries-old kingdoms and dynasties, including the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, and by the grace of god – or just the grace of a Russian winter – he was stopped just short of conquering all of Europe, if not the world. In Napoleon’s wake, he left the nearly 300 German Kingdoms that made up the disbanded Holy Roman Empire in political and economic ruin, beyond hope of restoring their previous governments. So, one of the Final Acts of the Congress of Vienna was to create the German Confederation, an association of thirty-five monarchies and four independent cities to replace what was once the nearly 1,000-year reign of the Holy Roman Empire. For all intents and purposes, this German Confederation was not a nation in itself, but a mutual defense and political coalition of German-speaking states – each with their own autonomy and governments – who would send legislative delegates to pass laws and debate policy at the *Bundestag*, or the Federal Assembly. But this was far from a power-sharing

union – the *Bundestag* was dominated by conservative Prussian aristocrats, and decision-making power was mostly under the control of the equally conservative Austrians. However, while the aristocrats and monarchists were comfortable returning to the autocratic status quo of the old Holy Roman Empire, many of the German people – mainly the intelligentsia and the industrial working class – were eager to unite Germany as a modern European republic. You see, Napoleon’s French troops didn’t just leave German territory disbanded and disunited – they also planted the seeds of French revolutionary ideology, like the republican ideals of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. And these seeds would blossom into a national movement – and with a new pan-German national flag.

In May of 1832, as many as 30,000 liberals, radicals, and republicans from across the German Confederation descended on Hambach Castle within the German Kingdom of Bavaria for what they dubbed the Hambach Festival. Defying the Bavarian laws against public demonstrations, this festival was a public demonstration to demand social reforms, democracy, and the national unification of Germany as a single republican state. And for the first time, the demonstrators unveiled the flag of this new national movement: the revolutionary black-red-and-gold tricolor banner of a pan-German republic. The very German flag you would recognize today.

We’ll get into the pan-German flag a bit more in Part II, but it’s important now to understand a bit about the significance of these colors and where they came from. In 1813, as Napoleon’s army was retreating back into the continent after his fatal defeat in Russia, a volunteer force of the Prussian Army called the Lützow Free Corps, was organized by nationalists across German lands to fight the weakened Napoleon and kick him out of Germany. Unlike the Prussian Army, the Lützow Free Corps was loyal to the whole of Germany, not just Prussia, and they were made up of students, republicans, nationalists, and pan-German revolutionaries to free Germany from foreign – well, French – control. They also had unique uniforms: they wore a black uniform with red trim and gold buttons. And as the national heroes of Germany who fought off Napoleon, the colors of their uniforms became the colors of a new democratic, nationalist movement, ultimately becoming the black-red-and-gold tricolor banner of the 1848 German Revolution.

By the time the 1840s came around, the rise of industrial manufacturing had moved huge numbers of traditionally rural Germans into large, concentrated cities to eke out a living in the new factories. Unsafe working conditions, fourteen-hour days, child labor, and squalid living conditions were common. In 1845, a harvest failure across Europe led to widespread hunger among the working classes, and in 1846, an economic recession would force businesses and factories to close, leaving the already poor and hungry German workers without the meager salaries they depended on to survive. The German workers had had enough – revolution was in the air.

While revolution was also sweeping across France, the German workers, students, nationalists, and liberals took to the streets themselves to demand political and economic reforms – and like in France, they were met with extreme force and violence by the armies of the fearful conservative rulers. From Vienna to Frankfurt to Berlin, cobblestone barricades turned the

streets into fortresses, and bloody fighting raged in the urban centers. At the same time, from their exile in England, the German expatriates Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published the Communist Manifesto, decrying the plight of German proletariat class and encouraging them to unite against the exploitative bourgeoisie. So, on the one side of the revolution you had the workers, students, and communists demanding economic reforms, and on the other were the middle-class republicans and the nationalists fighting for their dream of a unified, constitutional German state – and these two factions would unite in the streets in common cause and under a common flag: the black-red-and-gold tricolor, first unveiled at the Hambach Festival fifteen years earlier.

The 1848 revolution led to the creation of the Frankfurt Parliament – the first freely-elected national assembly – with the ultimate goal of crafting a modern constitution that would lay the foundations for a unified Germany under the black-red-and-gold tricolor flag of pan-Germanism. The parliament even went so far as to offer the Prussian King Frederick William IV the seat of Emperor if he would only support German unification and lead the constitutional monarchy. As tempting as it may have been, the King declined because, as a traditionalist, the crown could only be offered by the consent of his peers. And these rabble-rousers were not his peers, and he would later write privately that he could never accept the crown “from the gutter...disgraced by the stink of revolution.” Without a king, the Frankfurt Parliament grew weak and toothless by political infighting and indecision. And with revolutionary fervor dying down across Germany, King William IV sent his Prussian troops back into the streets of Berlin and Baden to put an end to this republic once and for all. And by summer 1849, the last bastions of revolutionaries had laid down their arms. In the end, their resistance had proven to be no match to the might of the German monarchies, and by 1850, the Prussian and Austrian-dominated German Confederation was back to its old ways, and many of the disaffected German patriots made their way to the United States – an emigration known as the “48ers,” an allusion to the 48 states of the American union. But back in Germany, the revolutionary tricolor banner of their own unity would just have to wait.

As the revolution cooled down, the rivalry between Prussia and Austria was just heating up. While their public dispute was over the administration of the small northern state of Schleswig-Holstein, a state that they had conquered together from Denmark, privately, many historians argue that the real issue was over who should have hegemony over the German Confederation – and if Austria should have any role in German affairs at all. In fact, Prussia saw the dispute over this small state as the perfect opportunity to become the dominant power in the German Confederation, and they quietly began preparing for war with Austria. This all came to a head in June 1866, when Prussia, the northern German states, and their Italian allies invaded Bohemia and went to war with Austria and the southern states of the German Confederation. With Prussia invading from the north and Italy attacking in the south, the Austrians were forced to fight on two fronts. And while they were able to keep the Italians in a stalemate and stop the Prussians from making it too far south, in the end, the Austrians didn't stand a chance. The Seven Weeks War would end in an armistice on July 22, 1866, and the Peace of Prague would be signed on August 23, with Austria utterly defeated by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck and the might of his Prussian army. Austria would hand over the states of Schleswig-Holstein, Hesse,

Bavaria, and Hanover to Prussia, and Venetia, once occupied by Austria, would be returned to Italy. And with this victory, the Austrians were out of the picture, and the Prussians were in complete control over Germany's destiny. Prussia would unite with the twenty-one north German states who aligned with them against Austria in the Seven Weeks War, and in early 1867, they established the first unified German state: The North German Confederation. And in their new constitution, the Prussian Prime Minister Otto von Bismarck would declare that the flag of the North German Confederation was to be a black, white, and red tricolor – black and white for Prussian dominance, and white and red for the state of Brandenburg and the old colors of the Hanseatic League. Otto von Bismarck was a shrewd, if ruthless politician and the Prussian King Wilhelm was a battle-hardened veteran. They knew the power that this simple yet deeply symbolic flag of German unification could have over its divided populace. Even though many German nationalists were tied to the red-and-orange pan-German colors of 1848, the Prussians rejected this flag for three highly-political reasons:

1. The pan-German flag was too connected to the ideals of republicanism and revolution – and these Prussian men were imperialists, through and through.
2. They had just finished a war with Austria, who at the time flew a bi-color flag of black and gold – so any flag with yellow or gold or any connection to their enemy was out of the question.
3. Many of the southern states which sided with Austria in the Seven Weeks War used the black-red-and-gold pan-German flag to show their allegiance against the Prussians in the North German Confederation. Any flag that stood up to Prussian power had to be removed.

So, what exactly is the significance of the black-white-and-red flag they adopted?

Well, with the black-and-white colors of Prussia, they would give the people the strength and backing of the mighty Prussian army. And with the old German white-and-red, they could unite the German people under the seductive colors of Charlemagne, and promise them the old glory of the thousand-year reign of the Holy Roman Empire. Just as Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne King of the Romans a thousand years earlier, Germany was ready to unite under a single crown and take back its rightful throne as the rulers of Western Europe. But this time, they would coronate themselves.

While many Germans were celebrating their hard-fought and historic unification, others in Europe looked at it with grave concern. In 1815, the Congress of Vienna was very clear about establishing a balance of powers in Europe. So, with Prussian dominance on the rise and their consolidation of German states, the leaders of Europe were rightfully afraid that it was just a matter of time until the Prussians gobbled up the southern German states – states no longer under Austrian protection – and tip the scales of power in their favor. They were right, this was exactly what Bismarck had in mind – and no one was wari-er of Germany's imperial ambitions than their neighbor next-door: the emperor of France, Napoleon III.

By the late 1860s, both Napoleon and Bismarck knew that war between their two powers was inevitable. Prussia was going to unite Germany and expand to border with France – and France, eager to maintain their sphere of influence and maintain the balance of powers, was at least

going to try to stop them. You see, both sides wanted a war, and both sides, boiling with patriotic fervor, were convinced that they would win. But neither side wanted to start the war. On the one hand, France didn't want to be the aggressor and draw other European powers, like Russia and England, into the fight against them. And on the other hand, Bismarck needed France to be the aggressor in order to galvanize the southern German states against a common enemy and bring them into the Prussian fold under the black-white-and-red flag of imperial Germany. And in June of 1870, an unlikely event in Spain gave Bismarck the opportunity he was waiting for.

So, get this. If you recall from the last episode, the ineffective Spanish Queen Isabella II was deposed in the Glorious Revolution of 1868 and officially abdicated the throne while in exile in France in 1870. And while you'll remember that the Spanish crown eventually went to the Italian Duke of Aosta, Amedeo Ferdinando Maria, the military junta in Spain first reached out to the Prussian Prince Leopold to offer him the crown. If he were to be installed, the Prussian House of Hohenzollern would control both Germany and Spain – one family in power and surrounding France on two sides. Now, Bismarck was a staunch realist and knew that Leopold would never be installed King of Spain, but he would publicly push for this in order to prod France into war. Always the shrewd politician, Bismarck saw the opportunity to both push on France and gain an ally in Spain, so he convinced Leopold to accept the invitation to the Spanish Crown. Desperate and furious, Napoleon demanded that King Wilhelm stop Leopold from assuming the Spanish crown, and Wilhelm did so to prevent a premature war. But then Napoleon overplayed his hand – he sent a diplomat to Wilhelm, who demanded that Prussia stay out of Spanish royal politics forever. But Wilhelm was King of one of the fastest-growing powers in Europe, and he refused to be told what to do by what he saw as an old, weak, and declining France. And what happened next was a stroke of political genius. What would be dubbed the “Elms Dispatch,” Wilhelm sent Bismarck a letter outlining this very conversation between the diplomat and himself. Bismarck then took this letter and published it in the press – but he edited the letter to make it appear that the King and the diplomat were much more insulting to one another and their respective nations than they had actually been. With French honor at stake, this letter inflamed public opinion in France to the point that on July 15, 1870, the French Parliament approved of military mobilization in preparation for war with Prussia. And in response, the princes of the southern German states who were previously wary of Prussian hegemony turned almost overnight and vowed to use their militaries in defense of Prussia and the new German tricolor flag. Bismarck would finally get his war – and the fate of the new German nation hung in the balance.

On July 19, 1870, France officially declared war on Prussia. But before the fighting began in earnest, it was clear that the French were totally outmanned and outgunned. While Napoleon's French Empire was able to muster about 1.5 million troops, Bismarck raised a pan-German army from Prussia and the North German Confederation – as well as from the southern German states – topping his forces at nearly 2 million soldiers. The Germans quickly pushed their armies into France, taking battle after battle on their eastern front. And barely two months after hostilities began, Napoleon found himself and nearly 104,000 men completely surrounded by the German army at the Battle of Sedan. On September 2, 1870, in order to escape with his life,

Napoleon III and his entire army surrendered to the Germans, putting an abrupt end to the Second French Empire. Then, Bismarck pushed his forces into Paris where they laid siege to the city, and the new republican French government – utterly defeated in the war – would ultimately sign a treaty that ceded the German-speaking regions of France, Alsace, and Lorraine, to the Germans. But most importantly, the French would recognize King Wilhelm as not just the King of Prussia, but the Kaiser – the Caesar – of the new German Empire. As the third iteration and resurrection of the ancient Roman Empire, the Roman symbolism here is striking.

You see, on January 1, 1871, the southern states officially joined the North German Confederation, putting the entirety of Germany under the rule of the Prussian King Wilhelm I. And on January 18, just days before the armistice with France, the Proclamation of the German Empire was announced to the world from the Palace of Versailles just outside of Paris – and not Berlin – an overt symbol of German militarism and conquest that would foreshadow what was to come in Europe. And from the steps of the French palace, the banner of the black-white-and-red was reborn as the imperial flag of the Kaiser and the new German Empire. The Second Reich was born.

As we wrap up Part I of the German flag, let's look back and answer the question we posed at the beginning of this show: where do the black-white-and-red colors of the German imperial flag come from – and what is the significance of the German imperial eagle?

The black and white come from the crusading knights of the Teutonic Order, who returned home from the Holy Land to conquer and convert the pagans of the Baltics, ultimately establishing their own state in Prussia, which, after their conversion to Protestantism, would rise to become the powerful Kingdom of Prussia, with their black-and-white eagle flag representing one of the fiercest military and territorial forces in post-Napoleonic Europe. And the red and white come from the red Oriflamme of the legendary Emperor Charlemagne, which was transformed into the white cross on a red ground – the first flag of the Holy Roman Empire, and the flag that inspired the crusades the Hospitallers and of Denmark, who took the flag as their own national cloth. And of course, the red-and-white would become the banner of the powerful Hanseatic League, the dominant north German trading bloc who would rule commerce and trade from London to Sweden to Russia, inspiring the flags of the North German states to this very day. The destinies of Prussia and North Germany would collide in the 19th Century, with the black-and-white Prussian colors combining with the Hanseatic white-and-red to create the first flag of a unified Germany – and the black-white-and-red tricolor of the German Empire.

And for the German eagle, it was born in the Roman Empire and adopted by the Byzantines where it got an extra head in the 1100s, as was the ancient tradition in Anatolia for thousands of years. It was then embraced by Holy Roman Empire who then gave the eagle flag to the Teutonic Order as a sign of friendship and cooperation – and when the State of the Teutonic Order became the Kingdom of Prussia, the eagle would rise once again to become the symbol of the highest power in all of Europe.

That's it for Part I of our two-part series on the German Flag: The Fall & Rise of the Bundesflagge. On Part II, we'll explore the expansion of the German Empire and their rise to a colonial power; the fall of the empire in 1918 and the resurrection of the black-red-and-orange flag of 1848 during the Weimar republic; and we'll be joined by professional vexillographer, Michael Green, to discuss their flag from 1935 to 1945: The Swastika flag of Nazi Germany. You won't want to miss this interview.

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