Why the Flag? Podcast
Episode 9, Part I: The Russian Flag: Tsars and the "Third Rome"
August 22, 2021

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 – and this is Part I of a special two-part series on the history of the flags of Russia.

On the last episode, we told the incredible story of the Albanian flag with its black double-headed eagle on a red ground. We saw the banner's rise on the battlefield, as Skanderbeg Kastrioti led the Albanians in a war of independence against the Ottomans and established the first unified – if short-lived – Albanian state. And as we traced the origins of the Skanderbeg flag, we explored nearly 3,000 years of Albanian history – from the ancient Illyrians to Alexander the Great; from the Byzantine Empire to the Ottomans; and all the way to the Republic of Albania of today, which flies nearly the same black and red, double-headed eagle flag of 600 years ago.

As we unraveled the mystery of the Albanian flag, we discussed the inseparable link between national mythology and national flag – and how our imagination and our nostalgia for our national past can become the physical symbols of our validity in a threatening world. In Albania, their nationalist identity is wrapped up in the banner of their medieval king, Skanderbeg, who used the double-headed eagle of the Byzantine Empire to rally his people around an imagined past of Christian glory and Roman legacy.

And today, we'll follow the double-headed eagle from the tiny Albanian nation to the Russian Empire, an Empire that also laid claim to the Byzantine legacy, using Roman symbolism as both an anchor of legitimacy and a weapon of imperial power when they dubbed themselves the Tsars, the Caesars of the Third Rome.

In this episode, we'll tell the story of how Russia came to be – how it rose from a Viking colony in the 9th Century to a vast empire – and we'll explore the first four flags of Russia and the role each one plays in shaping the narrative of Russian history.

We'll discuss the Banner of the Most Gracious Savior introduced by the fanatically religious Ivan the Terrible and how it was used as a symbol of divine conquest in the early 16th Century. We'll explore Tsar Peter the Great's Imperial Standard with its black, double-headed eagle that forever tied Russian heritage to the legacy of the Byzantine Empire. We'll examine the political and psychological importance of the black-yellow-and-white banner of Alexander II's Russian Empire unveiled during an age of European nationalism. And, of course, we'll tell the real story of the white-blue-and-red tricolor that is flown as Russia's national flag today.

In part 2, we'll witness the collapse of the Russian Empire under Tsar Nicholas II, and from its ashes, we'll see the rise of a new world power: The Soviet Union, with its red hammer and

sickle flag of international revolutionary communism – and its false promises of a proletariat utopia.

So today, we'll ask, why is the Russian flag white, blue, and red – and what do these colors mean? How could Moscow claim the legacy of the Byzantine Empire's double-headed eagle and declare themselves Caesars of the Third Rome? What is the significance behind the black, yellow, and white imperial flag of Alexander II, and what can it teach us about the dangers of national mythology? As always, we'll ask, why the flag? And today, why the flag of Russia? We'll answer that and so much more when we come back.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

As we've tracked the development of European flags over the course of this season, it should be no surprise that the origins of Russia and its national symbols don't actually begin within Russia itself. No, we won't be starting from the Roman Empire this time like we so often do because this tale begins centuries after the fall of Rome – and on the eastern coast of Sweden in an area called *Roslagen*.

The name Roslagen comes from the ancient Swedish word *rodslag*, which means "rowing warriors" – an appropriate name for the Swedish Vikings from the area who spread terror across the Baltic Sea.

At the height of the Viking Age in the ninth and tenth centuries, many Norwegian and Danish Vikings sailed west to Britannia and the New World to search for land and gold – with these Vikings famously sacking monasteries in England and France for their easy loot. But many of the Swedes chose a different path to fortune. The Swedish traders and Vikings from Roslagen – who were called the Rus' – sailed East instead of West, lured by the silver coins minted by the Islamic Abbasid Caliphate and the vast treasures of the Byzantine Empire with its gilded capital at Constantinople.

The story of Russia begins with a mythical Rus' Viking by the name of Rurik, the legendary father of the Rurik Dynasty that would rule as Russian Tsars for nearly 800 years. The official legend says that in 862 A.D., Rurik was invited by the Eastern Slavic tribes to reign as their prince and help them establish order during a time of civil unrest. Rurik agreed and brought all the Rus' with him and settled in Novgorod, in modern-day Russia, where he established a Rus' state and brought the land law, order, and glory. But of course, that's just a legend. In reality, Rurik was probably a typical Rus' conqueror who had sailed east to raid Arab traders of their silver and the Byzantines of their gold. He established a settlement in Novgorod, strategically placed on the Volkhov River, a river which flows south to north, making this spot the perfect trading post to easily send spoils from the East up into the Baltic Sea and back to Sweden in the West.

But the truth about Rurik and the Rus' invasion of ancient Russia is irrelevant. Much of what we know about the early Rus' comes from a compilation of texts called the *Primary Chronicle*, a somewhat glorified and political history written in Kiev in 1113 A.D. by a friendly monk named St. Nestor. So, while experts debate its value as a reliable historical source, I love the Primary Chronicle as a source for our story of the Rus' – because, oftentimes, understanding the mythology of national history is equally if not more important than historical fact when studying national symbols and national flags. Because, in the end, they're all just stories. So, let's get back to the story of the Rus'.

Prince Rurik died in 879 after 17 years of expansion and conquest. On his deathbed, he handed his young Rus' kingdom over to his brother-in-law Oleg, who moved the capital city from Novgorod to the newly captured town of Kiev. And it was from there that Kievan Rus' – the large princely state known in Latin as Russia – was born.

The first proto-flag to emerge from the Kievan Rus' was a two-pronged trident, the royal seal of Rurik's grandson, Sviatoslav I. The two prongs of his trident are thought to represent the wings of a bird – a familiar icon from pagan Viking culture – so this early Rus' seal most likely evolved from the old falcon iconography brought to Kiev from Viking-age Sweden. And what a hell of a Viking he turned out to be. Ruling as the Grand Prince of Kiev from 964-972 AD, Sviatoslav I oversaw the violent expansion of the Kievan Rus' state, conquering the Khazars and the Bulgarians, the Alans and local Slavic tribes, carving out the largest state in all of Europe at the time, and collecting huge taxes from those he conquered.

But when Sviatoslav was killed in 972 A.D., the young Kievan Rus' state was abruptly thrown into a civil war between his three sons. The eldest son Yaropolk murdered his brother Oleg and chased his youngest brother Vladimir all the way back to Sweden in 976, conquering the entire realm under his sword and trident seal. But back in Sweden, Vladimir would find a friend in the Norwegian king, and he returned a year later with a massive army of Norse warriors to avenge Oleg's death and strip the crown from Yaropolk. By 978, Vladimir and his Viking army had conquered Novgorod, Smolensk, and finally Kiev, where he wasted no time executing his older brother and crowning himself the grand ruler of all the Rus'. And this man would forever be known to history as Vladimir the Great.

It can't be overstated that the reign of Vladimir the Great was one of defining eras of early Russian history. Not only did Kievan Rus' continue to expand its vast borders in Eastern Europe and reach its zenith of military and cultural power, but it was under Vladimir the Great that the Rus' shed the old world of Norse and Slavic paganism and converted to Greek Orthodox Christianity – bringing them ever closer to the Byzantine Empire, for whose flag and legacy they would one day claim as their own.

Vladimir the Great was a Viking conqueror by birth – but he was also a prudent politician. Like his father and his Swedish ancestors before him, Vladimir went to war to expand the Rus' state through violence and conquest against the native tribes. But what separated Vladimir the Great from his predecessors was that he realized that conquest through violence and wealth through

exploitation was not sustainable if he wished to remain in power and keep the Rurik dynasty alive. In other words, he knew that he needed friends in the neighborhood. And even though Vladimir was a staunch pagan who worshipped Perun – the Russian version of the Norse god Thor – he saw early on that the rise of Abrahamic religions in Europe would be the future of the continent and that conversion was the key to lasting power.

Legend has it that in 986, Vladimir sent envoys across Europe to study these Abrahamic religions, so he could choose his conversion wisely.

First up was Islam, the religion of the neighboring Bolgars. The rich and powerful caliphates of the Muslims certainly caught his attention, but their prohibition of alcohol and pork was simply out of the question. "Drinking is the joy of all Rus'," he said. We cannot exist without that pleasure." Islam just wouldn't do.

Next on his list was the Catholic Church. Unfortunately, he felt that the Catholicism practiced by the Germanic peoples of the Holy Roman Empire lacked the pomp and circumstance that this pagan wished to find in religion, and all the guilt and original sin that the Church taught was far too bleak for his tastes, so he rejected that one as well.

Then came Judaism, the religion of the Khazars who his father had conquered years earlier. Vladimir was a man of tradition and was intrigued with the ancient rites and customs of the Jews. Still, he saw the fall of Jerusalem and the Jewish diaspora from their native land in Israel as a sign that God must have abandoned his chosen people. Ever superstitious, this was a risk he was not willing to take, so Judaism was off the table.

But then, when his emissaries returned from Constantinople with stories of festivals, wine, revelry, gold, and riches, Vladimir was very intrigued – but not yet convinced. According to a very clumsy story in the Primary Chronicle, a year goes by – and without any explanation as to why – Vladimir sacks the Greek city of Kherson and threatens the Byzantine Emperor Basil, saying that if he doesn't send his sister to Kiev to marry him, he was going to conquer Constantinople. Emperor Basil agrees to his terms, but only if he first converts to Orthodox Christianity. Because this was his favorite of all four of the religions anyway, Vladimir decides to get baptized, marries the princess, and converts his people to the faith of the Byzantine Empire.

Let's take this story with a grain of salt. This is an abbreviated tale from the Primary Chronicle, which reads sort of like a Goldey Locks story for the official books. Islam was too hard, Judaism was too soft, but Orthodox was just right. While it's a good story for setting up the legend around the Russian conversion – which is crucial to understanding their national mythology – what really happened had much less to do with finding God than securing a practical trading partner and a convenient ally. And here's why.

At the time this story takes place, around 987, the Byzantine Emperor Basil II was fighting a rebellion against two generals of his army. Faced with a crisis, Emperor Basil desperately turned

to his historical enemies, the Rus' – the same Vikings who would raid their ships and cities – and asked the Rus' for their help. While the Rus' and the Byzantines were often at each other's throats, they were also lucrative trading partners, so each had a stake in keeping the other afloat. Vladimir was also enchanted with the Eastern Roman Empire and saw this war as an opportunity to ally his kingdom with Constantinople. So, they hammered out a deal. Vladimir agreed to send 6,000 soldiers in exchange for Basil's sister's hand in marriage. In order to secure the deal, Vladimir converted to Orthodoxy, Christianized the Kievan Rus', and in the end, spared the Byzantine Empire from revolt – and saved his best business partner from going under. So, the Russian conversion to Christianity probably had less to do with God than with gold and with glory.

This moment of conversion also ushers in a new proto-flag for the Rurik Dynasty of Kievan Rus'. Vladimir the Great added a third spike to his father's trident seal, said to represent the holy trinity of the Christian religion. And in the early 20th Century, Vladimir's trident was adopted as the coat of arms of Ukraine, where it remains as the state symbol to this day.

Vladimir the Great is regarded as the father of the modern Ukrainian, Belarussian, and Russian nations, and through his marriage to Emperor Basil's sister and his conversion to Orthodox Christianity, tied the Rus' to the Byzantine Empire through their shared faith. But Vladimir's rule was also the beginning of the end of a unified Kievan Rus' state. Due to political infighting, the gradual decline and breakup of Kievan Rus' followed with the death of Vladimir's son, Yaroslav the Wise, in 1132 – and by the end of the 12th Century, Kievan Rus' was divided into at least a dozen warring duchies and principalities, with only the Grand Duchy of Vladimir and the Novgorod Republic surviving into the middle ages.

But political infighting and territorial division was child's play compared to what history had in store for these ancient Rus'. The empire of Genghis Khan was coming ever closer to their borders, and soon, all the Rus' would bend the knee to the great Mongolian Empire – that is, if they were lucky enough to survive. And it was from the centuries of Mongolian occupation, the first true Russian state would emerge under a new symbol of nationalism, conquest, and revenge. We'll be right back.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

The Kievan Rus' took nearly four centuries to build – and only about five years to wipe completely off the map.

In November of 1237, Batu Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongolian Empire, entered Kievan Rus' territory with a simple but ominous demand: submit to the empire or else. Unaware of who these people were or from where they came, many of the Rus' made the fateful decision to fight – and, for lack of a better term, they were slaughtered. The capital of the Grand Duchy of Vladimir, Vladimir-Suzdal, was burned to the ground – along with nearly

the entire royal family inside. Moscow and Kiev were almost entirely destroyed. Between 1237-1242, about 500,000 Rus' – roughly 7% of the entire population – were put to the sword under Batu Khan. However, the Novgorod Republic in the north was spared because they pre-emptively submitted to the Mongols and were allowed to flourish as a vassal state in relative peace and prosperity.

For much of the next 250 years, the Khans of the Mongolian Empire in the West, known as the Golden Horde, ruled much of what we know today as Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and the Caucuses. And the medieval principalities across Mongolian-occupied Europe, including the old Kievan Rus', survived as vassal states under the Mongol Khanate. But this wasn't a simple autocratic system. For the most part, these states could maintain their religious customs, rule as princes over their lands, and even clash with one another on occasion as they jockeyed for position in the eyes of the Khan. They were pretty much left to their own devices as long as they paid taxes to their Mongolian overlords and did not try to rebel.

And one of the vassal states that thrived under Mongolian rule was the Grand Duchy of Moscow – the predecessor of the modern Russian state and the birthplace of the first Russian flags.

The Grand Duchy of Moscow was established in 1263 by Alexander Nevsky, the patriarch of the old Rurik Dynasty and the powerful Grand Prince of Kiev and Vladimir. Moscow was first ruled by Nevsky's youngest son, Daniel I, who is credited with transforming Moscow from a backwater duchy into a political force by the early 1290s. But it was Daniel's sons, Yury and Ivan I, who were the political masterminds behind Moscow's rise to power.

So, how did they do it? How did Moscow thrive under occupation? In short, collaboration, extortion, and debt collection.

Both Yury and Ivan I consolidated their power by ensuring that high taxes and tributes were collected from the Rus' principalities on behalf of the Khan. History is pretty clear about this one: Moscow secured their status by collaborating with the occupiers. In fact, Yury got so close to the Golden Horde that he even married the Khan's sister, who, in return, granted him the title of Grand Duke. When Yury died in 1325, Daniel's youngest son, Ivan I, took the crown and followed in his brother's footsteps, rising to Grand Duke by collecting tribute from the Rus' lands for the benefit of the Khan. But then Ivan took it a step further. He became very wealthy through his loyalty to the Mongolians, and he used his wealth to buy lands around Moscow and expand his realm, even becoming something of a loan shark to the poor Rus' states – and when they fell into debt and defaulted on his loans, Moscow could annex their land in return. So, it's no surprise that under Ivan I, a man nicknamed Ivan Moneybag, Moscow rose to become the richest principality of all the Rus'.

By 1340, Moscow was in the best position of all the Rus' states to control the future of Russia – and while money played a key role in its rise to power, there were three reasons behind Moscow's dominance of the Rus'. First, as we said, Moscow was ruled by the Rurik Dynasty,

who earned their wealth and status through their loyalty to the Khan. And in return, the Mongolians gave Moscow power, prestige, and security. Second, we have to look at Moscow's geography. Moscow was centrally located – essentially guaranteeing that no Swedish army from the West or Mongol rival from the East could reach them in strength without getting bogged down in the borderlands. And third, because of their geographical good luck and great wealth, Moscow attracted workers and immigrants from all over Kievan Rus' to grow their population and pay their taxes in peace. So, geography, immigration, wealth, and security – this is how Moscow came to rule. And today, historians will often credit the Mongolian Empire with creating the conditions that Russia needed to take off as a significant player and eventually as a permanent entity in Europe and Asia. And because of the Mongolian Empire, we get the first coat of arms of Moscow, a symbol of self-determination and independence from the yolk of occupation.

By the mid-15th Century, Mongolian power in the Rus' was hanging on by a thread. But at the same time, Moscow was at the height of its power and no longer needed the Khan's protection. So, in 1476, Grand Prince Ivan III – known to history as Ivan the Great – stopped paying tribute to the Khan, and then four years later, led all the Rus' lands in a war against the Golden Horde, driving them back and ending Mongolian occupation once and for all. After 250 years, the Rus' were finally free – and Ivan the Great was their autocratic ruler. He took the title, Grand Prince of all the Rus', and styled himself, unofficially, as the Tsar – a word deriving from the Latin term, Caesar.

With their liberation from the Golden Horde, Ivan's first coat of arms for the Grand Duchy of Moscow was the triumphant image of Alexander Nevsky, the first Grand Duke of Moscow, riding a white horse and wearing a blue cape while spearing a serpent over a red background. White, blue, and red – to state the obvious, these colors will be significant later on in the show. His coat of arms was a symbol of good over evil, of the Defender of the Motherland, and of victory over their occupier. But then, in 1497, Ivan the Great replaced the coat of arms with a new seal that would forever live on in the mythology of Russian national identity: the black, double-headed eagle of the Byzantine Empire.

So, what exactly is the significance of the double-headed eagle? Let's do a quick recap.

The symbol of the eagle that topped the standards of elite Roman legions grew to become the symbol of the highest authority in the Roman Empire. By 102 BC, the eagle became the defining emblem of Roman power. In 285 AD, the Roman Empire split in two, creating the Western and Eastern Roman Empires. While the Western Roman Empire fell in 476 AD, 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 continued to be the symbol of absolute authority in the Byzantine Empire until the 11th Century when Emperor Isaac I Comnenus modified the design by adding an extra head – thus creating the double-headed eagle, the most famous and prominent symbol of the Byzantines that we see used across Europe to this day.

The next question is then, how did Moscow come to inherit the double-headed eagle and claim the legacy of the Eastern Roman Empire? Well, it's actually not as far-fetched as it might sound.

In 1325, nearly 135 years before Ivan came to power, the Metropolitan of Kiev – who is essentially the head bishop of the Orthodox Church in the old Kievan Rus' – moved the Church from Kiev to Moscow following the Mongol invasion. And when the Orthodox capital of Constantinople fell to the Muslim Ottomans in 1453, many religious and legal scholars looked to Moscow as the new center and protector of Orthodox Christianity – meaning that both spiritually and quite literally, Moscow became the religious and cultural successor of the Byzantine Empire and its Church. But it was Ivan the Great who made this claim to the Byzantine legacy official – and he did it with the unsuspecting help of his adversaries – the Catholic Church.

In 1469, Ivan got a surprising offer from his Catholic rivals in Rome. Pope Paul III proposed that he marry Sophia Palaiologos, the niece of the last emperor of the Byzantine Empire, Constantine XI Palaiologos. Sophia was born Orthodox, but was raised Catholic in Rome after she had fled Constantinople during the Ottoman conquest – and Pope Paul III had secretly hoped that this marriage between the Grand Prince of Moscow and the Catholic heir of the Byzantine Empire could create a resurgence of Catholicism among the Rus' and boost Roman Catholic power in Russia. But Ivan wasn't stupid, and he saw right through the plot – but he also saw this as an opportunity to forever tie his dynasty to the glory of the Roman Empire. Ivan happily accepted her hand in marriage in 1472, but to the horror of Pope Paul III, Sophia rejected Catholicism and embraced the Orthodox religion of her ancestors. And as the Grand Princess of Moscow and the heiress of the Byzantine Empire, Sophia gave the double-headed eagle and all the weight that comes with it to her new husband and to Russia.

The second Rome was Constantinople when Emperor Constantine moved the capital of the Roman Empire and dedicated the city as Nova Roma, the New Rome, in 330 AD. And in 1497, when Ivan the Great elevates the double-headed eagle to the symbol of the state with the blessing of Sophia, the Grand Duchy of Moscow became the heir and successor of the Roman-Byzantine Empire and the protector of the true Orthodox faith. Moscow, The Third Rome, was born.

We'll be right back.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

In the summer of 1552, the young Tsar, Ivan the Terrible, led an army of 150,000 Russian soldiers toward the city of Kazan. This was the capital of the Kazan Khanate, a Muslim state east of Moscow and ruled by Tatars, the descendants of the hated Golden Horde. For six weeks, Ivan

put the city under siege, and when the walls finally fell on October 3, Ivan stormed the capitol and slaughtered the population inside – 110,000 men, women, and children were cut down in the streets. Those lucky to survive the horror were either forcibly baptized or exiled to faraway lands in the east. Mosques were replaced by Orthodox churches, and homes were resettled by Russian colonists. And as Ivan marched triumphantly into Kazan, he brought with him a flag of faith and conquest – the Banner of the Most Gracious Savior – the first flag of imperial Russia.

Ivan the Terrible was born Ivan IV, the grandson of Ivan III, and became the reigning patriarch of the Rurik Dynasty at an early age. In 1533, when Ivan was only three years old, he inherited the title of Grand Prince of Moscow. And in 1547, he declared himself the first Tsar of all the Rus', establishing the Tsardom of Russia – a Rus' empire that would call themselves for the first time, the Russians.

As a devoutly religious ruler, Ivan the Terrible introduced the Banner of the Most Gracious Savior as the flag of his Tsardom. This medieval and curious-looking flag was a crimson-red, bifurcated banner with none other than the face of Jesus atop the eight-pointed cross of the Orthodox Church. While we don't know for sure, it's widely believed that military banners under Ivan III were also dark red, so we can assume that the color red was a natural choice for this imperial flag. The Banner of the Most Gracious Savior would be the flag of the Tsar for nearly 150 years, marching alongside soldiers during the Russo-Swedish Wars of the 15th & 16th Centuries, and flew during the conquest of Siberia, as the banner reached the Pacific Ocean in 1639.

Under Ivan the Terrible, we see the emergence of the Tsardom of Russia, a vast expansion of Russian territory, and the first Russian flag with the image of the Most Gracious Savior. Ivan also combined the state seals of Moscow, placing a shield with the triumphant horseman Alexander Nevsky to the chest of the double-headed eagle, which would become the coat of arms of the Russian Empire and then the Russian Federation as it exists today.

However, Ivan the Terrible was just that. He was a paranoid, ruthless, and violent ruler who would lead the Tsardom into political and economic ruin. Cracks in Russian power became clear in 1582 when the Poles and Swedes defeated Ivan in the Livonian War, which forced Russia to cede Estonia and Lithuania to the Swedish Empire, cutting off Russia's access to the Baltic Sea for more than a century.

To make matters worse, in that same year, Ivan murdered his eldest son and heir to the throne in a fit of rage. So, when Ivan the Terrible died in 1584, the Tsardom was left in the hands of his son, Fyodor, an intellectually disabled man who would be repeatedly mocked for being feeble-minded and unfit to rule. Fyodor died without an heir in 1598, and with his passing, the Rurik dynasty would die along with him – putting an end to more than 700 years of Rurik supremacy and ushering in an era known as the Time of Troubles.

With the death of Fyodor, 15 years of anarchy, famine, disease, and occupation followed. The famine of 1601-1603 alone killed roughly 2 million Russians – nearly 30% of the entire

population – leading to mass starvation and plague that decimated the countryside. Russia's Catholic rivals, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, took advantage of the chaos and went to war against Russia, occupying the country and installing a handful of puppet Tsars who were friendly to Catholicism and the aims of the Papal States. These Tsars became known as "False Dmitry's" – young men who claimed to be Dmitri Ivanovich, the long-lost, youngest son of Ivan the Terrible, and heir to the throne. But while the real Dmitri died when he was eight years old, many Russians held out hope that, like the Christ, he would one day return to save Russia. But that day never came. One by one, these False Dmitry's were either assassinated or chased out in just months of their coronations. In fact, during the 15 years of Troubles, there were no less than five Tsars who claimed the crown, three of whom were murdered or executed.

By 1611, uprisings against the occupying powers grew more common. And in turn, the uprisings were met with extreme violence at the hands of the Poles and their German and Mongolian mercenaries. But finally, in November of 1612, a native rebellion succeeded in retaking Moscow, driving out the last of the Polish kings from the Kremlin. And from the chaos of war and occupation, Mikhail I from the House of Romanov would emerge as the Tsar of Russia – the patriarch of the Romanov Dynasty that would rule the nation with an iron fist for the next 304 years.

When the Romanovs came to power in the early 17th Century, the Tsardom of Russia did not have a national flag. While they had the banner of the Most Gracious Savior, the double-headed eagle, and the coat of arms of Moscow, these were only banners that symbolized the Tsar's personal power, his legitimacy, and his faith. While Western European states had adopted and used national flags centuries before the rise of the Romanovs – including states which they regularly fought, like Poland, Sweden, and Denmark – Russia wouldn't have a flag that represented the whole nation until the middle of the 19th Century.

Russian's slow adoption of modern flag use is pretty easy to understand: Russia was not a Western European nation and thus, didn't follow the same vexillological timeline that we've come to expect with other countries we've covered on this show. You see, while ancient states and empires in the West were traditionally connected to Catholicism, along with all the rites, customs, and trade associated with it, Russia – from its founding – had always followed the Orthodox tradition of the Byzantine Empire and had cut themselves off from much of Western European influence, including Western social and political systems, modern science, and of course, the use of flags as tools for national identity.

But this would all start to change with one of the most famous and revolutionary Russian Tsars in history: Pyotr Alekseevich, Peter the Great – the reformer Tsar who introduced the white, blue, and red imperial tricolor flag that Russia flies as its national banner today.

Peter Alekseevich was born in Moscow in 1672, and he took the crown at age 10, sharing the Tsardom with his senile and blind younger brother, Ivan V. But when Ivan died in 1696 without an heir, Peter was proclaimed the one true Tsar of Russia at age 24 – and he wasted no time executing his vision for a new Russia. Unlike his predecessors, Peter was a reformer, and he

sparked a sort of cultural revolution in Russia to try to move it from being a backward and medieval Orthodox nation to one that was more modern, Western, and European. He introduced modern European fashion in his court, encouraged the royal family to marry royals from other European powers – something totally unheard of until Peter – and brought industrialization to the urban centers. In essence, Peter believed that by emulating Western Europe, he could transform Russia into a modern state. One of his most ambitious goals, however, was to establish the Tsardom as a naval power, so he could fight his Swedish enemies on the seas, expand Russian influence, and be taken seriously as a major player on the European stage. And it was from these ambitions of naval power that we get the white, blue, and red tricolor flag of imperial Russia.

But building a modern navy was easier said than done. Historically, Russia had a pretty tough time building their own ships to match the fleets of their European rivals – they just didn't have the skills or the history of being a real naval power. The first Russian-built warship, named the Oryol, was launched in 1668 – but after only two years, the Oryol was captured and destroyed by a group of rebel Cossacks. However short-lived and ill-fated the Oryol was, it gave us the very first Russian naval flag, which would ultimately play a role in the creation of the tricolor. According to a few old historical records, when the Oryol first set sail, it flew a quartered flag of white and red with a blue cross at its center – colors adopted from the Moscow coat of arms. But when the Oryol was burned and its white, blue, and red flag captured by Cossacks, the Russian fleet was left with mainly small and flimsy trading vessels – nothing that could truly compare to the modern world. So, Peter knew better than trust Russian shipbuilders with his new navy – and instead, he turned to the most powerful naval and colonial empire in the world to help him bring his nautical dreams to life: enter the Dutch Empire.

In 1693, Peter commissioned an expensive new warship from his powerful Dutch friends. He even spent years in Amsterdam learning the craft of shipbuilding and Western naval warfare, which he knew was essential to defeating the pesky Swedes who made his life in the Baltic a living hell. Legend has it that when the first ship arrived, his Dutch engineer asked Tsar Peter which flag he would like to fly on the stern. The Tsar quickly realized that he had no naval or national flag to fly – and he certainly wasn't going to top his modern ship with the strange and medieval banner of Ivan the Terrible, nor would he use the unlucky flag of the Oryol. So instead, the Dutchman flew the red, white, and blue tricolor of the Dutch Empire – which gave Peter a very interesting idea. If he was going to be seen as the Tsar of a great, modern Russian empire, he had to follow the playbook of Western Europe – and he decided it was easiest just to copy the Dutch. So, Peter took the Dutch flag design and made it his own, simply rearranging the colors to create a white, blue, and red tricolor banner. And that's it. That's where the Russian flag comes from – simply from Peter emulating the flag of the powerful Dutch Empire.

But of course, that wasn't the official story. Even though the colors were arbitrary and just the Dutch flag rearranged, Peter associated the colors of the flag with the old white-blue-and-red seal of Moscow as well the first naval ensign that flew on the Oryol. Taking it even further, the

Tsar would proclaim that the band of white represented God, Blue was for the king, and red for the Russian people and the country.

And that's not all. Peter the Great so wanted to be seen as a European-style monarch, that when Western travelers remarked that the seal of the Moscow resembled the scene of St. George slaying a dragon, Peter declared that yes, of course, in fact, this was St. George after all, – pushing aside the Russian hero Alexander Nevsky just for a minor political gain in the eyes of his Western guests. Craving the legitimacy and respect of the Western world was his top priority. And soon enough, St. George would become the patron saint of Moscow, where he is revered to this day on the shield of the city.

From 1693 to 1700, the official flag of the Tsar was the white-blue-and-red tricolor banner with the double-headed eagle at its center and the Moscow coat of arms on the eagle's breast. And for his navy, their official ensign was the simple tricolor design taken from the Dutch.

But Peter still wasn't done bringing flags into his ream. In 1700, he adopted a new flag for the Tsar – a golden-yellow banner with a black, double-headed eagle at its center. This flag was used to represent his personal power, his connection to the legacy of the Byzantine Empire, and to Russia as the center of Orthodox Christianity. Remember, if Moscow was the Third Rome, then the Tsar – the Caesar – would need a bold flag to back up his claim. While Peter would adopt this yellow and black flag as his personal banner, the naval tricolor would remain the de facto flag of Russia at sea – and the white, blue, and red would soon become the fearsome symbol of Russian imperial conquest, revenge, and bloodshed, all the way from the Ottoman Empire in the south to the Tsar's Swedish enemies in the West.

Tsar Peter wasted no time rolling out his Dutch-built fleet – albeit with mixed results. The Russians may have had a new navy, but they had lost access to the Baltic Sea to the Swedish Empire a half-century earlier – and the Black Sea was firmly controlled by the Ottoman Empire. But in Peter's eyes, it was time to put his new navy to the test and prove that Russia was, in fact, a European power.

In 1695, Peter sent a flotilla and 200,000 men to capture the Azov Sea – a small body of water connected to the Black Sea – where he devastated the Ottomans and secured a warm water port for the first time in modern Russian history. Confident with his victory, Peter then turned his sights to the West to take back the Baltic and put down his Swedish enemies. But defeating the Swedes would prove to be very costly. For 21 long years, the Great Northern War pit the anti-Swedish coalition of Russia, Denmark, Norway, and Poland against the mighty Swedish Empire. More than 600,000 men would die, and countless civilians would starve and be displaced in a war that decimated the peoples of Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine – but in the end, the exhausted Swedish Empire would fall, and the Russians would recapture their old northern territories on the Baltic Coast.

At the height of his power, Tsar Peter put an end to the Tsardom of Russia and established the Russian Empire, with the imperial tricolor dominating the seas from St. Petersburg to the Pacific

Ocean. And by the end of the Century, the banner of empire would reach all the way to the Americas, from Hawaii to Alaska and even to the coast of California.

The Russian colonization of North America is another fascinating and tragic story, with its history well-represented by a banner that we often forget about: and this is the Flag of Russian America.

It is pretty well-known that throughout the 18th Century, European powers like the British, Spanish, and French were setting up colonies in the Americas to enrich the aristocracies back home. But, while the Europeans sailed West, the Russians went East – first conquering Siberia and then quickly setting their sights across the Pacific Ocean and into North America. In 1741, a Danish navigator working for the Russian Empire sighted the Alaskan coast while on expedition – his name was Vitus Bering, for which the Bering Strait is named. And by the 1780s, permanent Russian settlements were popping up all across Alaska – with Russian explorers, uninterrupted by any other European power, claiming vast territories for Empress Catherine the Great under the imperial tricolor flag. The Tsarist colonization of Alaska was extremely brutal – but it was also exceedingly profitable. The Russians dominated the fur trade from Northwestern America – and even built a monopoly castrating seals and selling their penises back to China, which were in high demand as an aphrodisiac. However, the flag of this fur-skinning, seal-castrating Russian Empire that swept across Northern America was a different imperial banner – it was the flag of the Russian-American Company. The Russian-American Company was the colonial business that did a lot of the dirty work of the Tsar, and their flag was the white, blue, and red tricolor but with a black double-headed eagle its canton and emblazoned with the words *Russian American Company Under His Imperial Majesty's supreme protection*. You see, Russia had paid close attention to other countries' government commercial enterprises – like the British East India Company, which had the Union Jack on its flag, as well as the Dutch East Company, which bore a resemblance to the Dutch imperial flag. Like we said before, Russia was always jealous of the West and emulated the other European powers, so their Russian American Company flag would follow a similar design. And under this flag, the Russians would conquer Alaska and massacre the indigenous people through war, slavery, and disease. The last major conflict between the Russian American Company and the Alaskan natives was in 1804 at the Battle of Sitka, a southern island where the Kiks.ádi and Tlingit clans had lived for more than 11,000 years. The natives fought valiantly and rejected offers of peace for their land, but within four days, the imperial forces decimated the natives and completed their conquest of Sitka – and the flag of the Russian American Company would fly on American soil for the next six decades, as the Russian's raped and pillaged their way through Alaska.

But while victory and conquest were unfolding in the Americas, dark clouds were gathering over the skies of Moscow and St. Petersburg. A terrible war back home would bring the Russian Empire to its knees, and from their defeat, a new flag would guide the empire into an era of reform and modernity under the tyrannical Tsar Alexander II.

We'll discuss all that when we come back.

[BREAK]

Welcome back to the show.

With Russia's victory over Napoleon in 1812 and the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire in 1815, all the major European nations signed the Treaty of Vienna – a pact that would ensure a stable balance of powers on the continent. But trouble started brewing in the 1840s and 1850s, with the decline of the Ottoman Empire – Russia's mortal enemy in Europe. As the Ottoman's receded, Russia started snatching up the territory and regional influence they left behind – which made Britain, France, and the nations in the Treaty of Vienna very nervous.

Throughout the early and mid 19th centuries, as the Russians and Ottomans were consistently at war, Britain and her allies propped up the Ottoman Empire in Eastern and southern Europe, supplying Russia's enemies with money and weapons all in the name of keeping Russia at bay and maintaining this fragile balance of power. Russia was becoming too powerful – and Britain and France would do everything they could to rein them in.

This, of course, infuriated the Tsar. How dare the West interfere in Russia's destiny? Russia saw itself as the Third Rome, the protectors of the Orthodox Church and the true faith, destined by God for greatness – and no Catholic or Protestant or – god forbid – Muslim nation would stand in their way. Only a great war would settle the matter once and for all.

The power struggle between Russia and the West came to a head in 1853, when the rights of Christians living in Ottoman-controlled Palestine became the subject of nationalist fervor across Europe. The French promoted the rights of the Roman Catholics, while Tsar Nicholas I sought protections for Orthodox Christians in the Holy Land. The conflict reached a boiling point when Nicholas declared that all Orthodox Christians living in the Holy Land were under his protection and could no longer be subjected to Muslim rule and Ottoman taxes, or else they would face his wrath. So, when the Ottomans refused his ultimatum, the Russians prepared for conflict with the Ottoman Empire – and ultimately, with Britain and France as well, who were eager to finally put the Tsar in his place.

Now, while I hate to find common cause with their brutal and anti-Semitic regime, I can't help but feel like the Russian's were constantly getting screwed by the West. From the Russian's perspective, they felt as if they were constantly being mistreated and dismissed by Western European powers. Like we've said this entire episode, ever since Peter the Great, all Russia ever wanted was to be treated as an equal in Europe and to be held to the same standard as every other expansionist empire on the continent. But don't just take it from me: there is a quote in a letter from a college professor to Tsar Nicholas in 1853 that perfectly sums up Russia's frustration with this lack of parity. The professor writes:

France takes Algeria from Turkey, and almost every year England annexes another Indian principality: none of this disturbs the balance of power; but when Russia occupies Moldavia and Wallachia, albeit only temporarily, that disturbs the balance of power. France occupies Rome

and stays there several years during peacetime: that is nothing; but Russia only thinks of occupying Constantinople, and the peace of Europe is threatened. The English declare war on the Chinese, who have, it seems, offended them: no one has the right to intervene, but Russia is obliged to ask Europe for permission if it quarrels with its neighbor. England threatens Greece to support the false claims of a miserable Jew and burns its fleet: that is a lawful action, but Russia demands a treaty to protect millions of Christians, and that is deemed to strengthen its position in the East at the expense of the balance of power. We can expect nothing from the West but blind hatred and malice.

And yeah, he was right.

In 1853, the Ottoman Empire, Britain, and France declared war on the Russian Empire – known as the Crimean War. While Russia started off strong by occupying some Ottoman territory, within three years, the Western European powers brought the Russian Empire to its knees. In defeat, the Russian Empire – once thought to be invincible after their victory over Napoleon – had proven to be nothing more than painted rust. Their façade of power was symbolized by a tricolor flag – a flag that itself wasn't even Russian – but a symbol adopted from the Dutch to try to prove that they too were a great European power. But a great power they were not. Their European-style flag was a cheap illustration of the power they wanted to portray to the West – a flag of modernity that hid the reality of backwardness, corruption, military weakness, mass illiteracy, and a feudal state with a serf economy that could never sustain a real war against modern armies. Don't get me wrong – the Crimean War devastated the British army, bankrupted the Ottoman Empire, and killed nearly 140,000 French soldiers. Still, in the end, the Russian's were crushed, their military decimated, and their army forced to disarm. And it was because of this war that the Tsar lost his colony in North America. In order to keep the British away from their Pacific borders, the Tsar felt forced to sell Alaska to the United States instead of risking losing it to Britain if another conflict broke out. In 1867, the flag of the Russian-American Company was lowered for the last time with the sale of Alaska to the young United States, ending Russia's foothold in America forever.

It took their defeat in the Crimean War for the new Tsar, Alexander II, to see the dire situation in Russia for what it was. So, he decided to take direct action to reform some of the backward policies that kept Russia from being a truly modern state. For example, Alexander II ended the feudal economy and emancipated the serfs from their lords, granting them civil and economic rights as full citizens. He also began universal conscription to the military for all classes – something that was once only reserved for the peasantry – and reorganized the judiciary to more modern standards. And, even though Russian law was terribly anti-Semitic and restricted Jewish land-ownership and travel, Alexander II eased the special taxes on Jews and even allowed some Jews to live and work in major cities. What a mensch.

Early on, Tsar Alexander II enacted an era of top-down reform not seen since Peter the Great. And as such, his reign demanded a new symbol for a modern and resurgent Russian Empire. So, by decree of the Tsar on June 11, 1858, Alexander II introduced the black-yellow-and-white tricolor flag – the first official flag of the Russian Empire to be used on land by both the

government and its people. Since 1705, the white-blue-and-red banner had only been the flag of the Tsar and his navy – but the new black-yellow-and-white flag was to represent the entire nation for the first time in Russian history – making this banner Russia's first real flag.

So, what was the significance of the black, yellow, and white? Where did these colors come from – and what do they mean? Well, the official answer was that it was a new banner to represent a reformed and resurgent empire for his people. But in reality, Alexander's flag was designed with ulterior motives in mind – motives that range from the deeply historical and psychological to the very practical and political. So, let's start with the history of the colors.

In 1700, Peter the Great created the Russian Imperial Standard – the royal flag of the Tsar – which was a golden-yellow banner with a Byzantine, black double-headed eagle at its center. And on the eagle's chest was the white, blue, and red coat of arms of the Grand Duchy of Moscow. So, on Alexander's new tricolor, the black band was to represent the black double-headed eagle of the Imperial Standard – and this color's position at the top of the flag was to show that the Tsar was the unquestionable head of state, ruler of the Third Rome, and heir to the Byzantine Empire.

The yellow band in the middle comes from the golden-yellow of the imperial standard, as well as the fact that gold was historically a color of European royalty.

And the white band on the bottom comes from the color of the horseman, St. George, the patron saint who appears as white on the Moscow coat of arms. White was also a prominent color of European monarchists, much like the white flag of the French Bourbon dynasty and the white and black flag of the Prussian King.

Psychologically, the black-yellow-and-white tricolor allowed Tsar Alexander II to tie his legacy to that of the very popular Tsar Peter the Great, the father of the Russian Empire. Alexander saw himself as a great reformer, like a modern Peter, so by adopting Peter's colors, he could exploit the people's imagination of this glorified Russian past. As we've discussed in several episodes before, flags have often been used as weapons of the imagination – tools used to exploit our basic human desire for a connection to a clan, tribe, or nation, and to the stories of our ancestral greatness that give us a place of purpose in the world. While this flag may have been unpopular at the time for a number of reasons we'll discuss shortly, it was a brilliant act of branding that continues to stir the worst nationalist impulses of the extreme right in Russia today. Just like the imperial black-red-white flag is flown by neo-Nazis Germany, and the Confederate flag by assholes in the United States, many on the right-wing in Russia have adopted this flag as a symbol of their xenophobic and racist world view, leaning on the imagined past and glory of Tsar Peter, Alexander II, the Romanov dynasty – a movement to make Russia great again under the flag of the old empire.

But outside of history and psychology, Alexander's flag was also used as a tool to serve Russia's geopolitical interests at the time.

Europe in the mid-19th Century was marked by anti-monarchist revolutions, political radicalism, and the rise of populist nationalism. 1848 alone saw a wave of revolutions and uprisings across Germany, Italy, and France, as well as a nationalist war in Spain and populist riots in Stockholm. These revolutions put the monarchies on edge, and many regimes – even historical rivals – looked to band together to maintain monarchist power and keep the status quo intact. So, when Alexander came to power, he was keenly aware of the need for strong monarchist allies in Europe to clamp down on liberal and radical ideas brewing across the continent. And at the same time, just like Peter and Nicholas before him, Alexander wanted Russia to be taken seriously as a first-rate European power. So yet again, like his predecessors, Alexander looked to emulate Western political reforms and Western symbolism as a way to achieve this goal and curry favor with other western monarchies.

OK – so what does that have to do with Russia's new flag? Well, if you look at the imperial flags of Germany and Austria at the time – the two powerful nations that Alexander sought political alliance – it becomes rather obvious. The German flag was a tricolor of black, white, and red, and the Austrian Hapsburg flag was the banner of black and yellow. So, when Alexander introduces the black, yellow, and white flag of his empire – the similarities become hard to ignore. This theory becomes even harder to dismiss when, in 1871, Alexander II got his wish was invited by Germany and Austria into a military alliance called the League of Three Emperors – an alliance between the Kaiser of Germany, the Kaiser of Austria, and the Tsar of Russia with a goal of mutual aid to clamp down on liberal elements in eastern Europe. So, looking at this flag in its historical context, its design was a stroke of political genius.

The black, yellow, and white flag of the Russian Empire was the shortest-lived, but I find it to be the most fascinating and terrible of the bunch because of the historical and political weight it carried at the time – and still does to this day. And while the flag has these competing narratives of history, imagination, and politics, it's important to point out that, like all flags, there is no single truth behind it: all three explanations are and can be true at the same time. You can see the flag for yourself in the show notes at flagpodcast.com.

While his flag and his reforms earned him the title of Alexander the Liberator, we can't forget that he was still a Tsar and an autocratic ruler hell-bent on absolute power. He was also deeply unpopular at the time. Alexander was hated by the conservative nobility for freeing the serfs and for his reforms, and he was equally hated by the people for being a bloody and tyrannical dictator. Following his first assassination attempt in 1866, he turned to far more reactionary policies against his perceived enemies. He replaced liberal ministers with hard-liners, clamped down on education and any semblance of critical thought, expelled Roman Catholic priests for minor offenses, and crushed separatist movements in Poland and Lithuania with extreme brutality. He was so paranoid of radicalism and populism that he even banned the use of non-Russian native languages, like Ukrainian, Lithuanian, and Polish in an attempt to strip these occupied peoples of any linguistic history that could plant a seed of nationalism and grow to threaten his regime. So, while he was a reformer in some sectors of society, Alexander II was really just a brutal tyrant like every Tsar before him and every Tsar who followed – and

his *new* flag for a *new* Russian Empire was just as empty and just as soaked with blood as those that came before.

And, unfortunately for Alexander II, the Russian people saw right through his attempt at rebranding the old autocracy with a new banner. Alexander and his flag were so unpopular that only two years after he was assassinated in 1881, his own son – the hardline, ultraconservative Alexander III – was forced to replace his father's flag with the old, white-blue-and-red Tsarist banner of Peter the Great to distance his regime from that of his hated father. When Alexander II died, the black-yellow-and-white banner – the first flag of the Russian Empire – was buried right along with him.

In 1896, Tsar Alexander III's son, Nicholas II, would succeed him on the throne, and for his coronation, he declared the white-blue-and-red banner was to be the official national flag of the Russian Empire. But little did Nicholas know at the time that he would be the last Tsar of Russia and that his flag would soon fall and be replaced by the red banner of revolution. And for nearly 70 years, the double-headed eagle of Moscow would give way to the hammer and sickle of international Soviet communism.

That's it for Part I of our two-part series on the Russian Flag: Tsars and the "Third Rome." On the next episode of Why the Flag, we'll explore the collapse of the Russian Empire at the height of WWI and the fall of the Tsarist tricolor flag during the brutal Russian Civil War. We'll also witness the rise of the Soviet Union and its red flag of socialism, proletariat revolution, and its false promises of a Marxist-Leninist utopia. You won't want to miss it.

You can read show notes and see all the Russian flags we talked about today at flagpodcast.com – and make sure you follow us on Instagram @flagpod. Don't forget to subscribe to Why the Flag on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Stitcher, and if you like the show, give us five stars in the app – it really helps.

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