

THE VIERKLEUR AND THE UNION JACK IN THE 1880-1881 WAR BETWEEN THE ZUID-AFRIKAANSCH REPUBLIEK AND BRITAIN

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Introduction

The British occupation of the Cape in 1795 was responsible for the *Afrikaner's* first encounter with the British flag and all the ideas connected to it. The flag that was hoisted over the Castle in 1795 was however not the Union Jack.¹ The latter only came into existence in its present form in 1801, with the incorporation of Ireland into the United Kingdom, when it was described as follows in the Royal Proclamation of 1 January:

'... that the Union Flag shall be Azwe, the Crosses Saltire of St Andrew and St Patrick Quarterly, per Saltire counterchanged Argent and Gules; the latter fimbriated of the second, surmounted by the Cross of St George of the third, fimbriated as the Saltire'.²

The flag is composed of the crosses of England, Scotland and Ireland. This composition gave rise to certain complications. Adjustments had to be made because the width of the crosses of St Andrew and St Patrick was exactly the same, making it impossible to place the one over the other without obscuring the bottom flag.³ The Irish held themselves aloof from the matter whilst the Scottish as late as 1853 still objected to the fact that their St Andrew cross was placed behind the English St George's Cross.

The British Army and Navy interpreted the Royal Proclamation differently with the result that two different flags were taken into use. Due to the fact that the Navy was more influential than the Army, the design of the Navy was accepted. The composition of the Union Jack is thus not in accordance with the description in the Royal Proclamation.⁴

On the 13th of February 1858 the flag of the ZAR was decided upon by the 'Committee Raad'. It was approved as follows by the House of Assembly:

'Is besloten dat eene vlag voor de Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek aangenomen zal wor-

den, bestaande uit de volgende kleuren: Rood, Wit en Blaauw, Horisontaal, evenbreed boven elkander gesteld, en Groen perpendicular lang den stok. Daarop zullen de woorden geplaatste worde: Eendragt maakt magt'.⁵

The *Vierkleur* was designed by the Reverend Dirk van der Hoff. The design incorporated the colours of the National flag of the Netherlands, with the additional green as symbol of freedom. The slogan, however, never appeared on any *Vierkleur*.⁶

During the inauguration of the first President of the ZAR, M. W. Pretorius, at Potchefstroom on the 6th of January 1857, the flag was hoisted for the first time — followed by flag hoisting ceremonies on the 23rd of February in Pretoria and on the 9th of March in Rustenburg. The *Vierkleur*, was however not accepted in the Zoutpansberg. It was only in 1859 that the *Vierkleur* was accepted as National Flag in Lydenburg.⁷

In the 1870's the legitimate existence of the *Vierkleur* was interrupted. President T. F. Burgers was dissatisfied with it and wanted to substitute it with the Crossflag — a red cross on a blue background. The new flag was accepted on the 24th of October 1874, but was rejected again on the 10th May 1875.⁸

The *Vierkleur* remained the National Flag of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* until May the 31st 1902, when the *Peace of Vereeniging* was established.

The Role of the Vierkleur and the Union Jack in the 1880 - 1881 War between the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek and Britain

On January the 22nd 1877, Sir Theophilus Shepstone and 25 mounted constables arrived in the capital of the Republic. Their object: the annexation of Transvaal. His well devised tactics of persuasion caused a delay of three months so

that it was only on the 12th of April that the Union Jack was hoisted on Church Square by Shepstone's private secretary, Henry Rider Haggard. (Haggard later became famous as the author of well-known romantic novels such as *King Solomon's Mines* and *She* which appeared in 1885 and 1887 respectively).

Initially there was little reaction from the Transvalers. Although F. Wolmarans, a later chairman of the House of Assembly arrived in Pretoria with four hundred men to take the Union Jack down, the Executive Council persuaded him to abandon his plan because of the internal deterioration of the Transvaal.⁹

In Potchefstroom however, the sparks flew. There, Johannes C. Steyn, former judge and former supporter of Stephanus Schoeman during the political struggle between 1860 and 1864, took it upon himself to strike the British flag. The authorities would not allow this and Steyn was locked up in the local jail.

To the Transvalers, the Union Jack was the symbol of suppression, injustice and foreign domination and imperialism. The appearance of this flag in their Capital signified to them that the main object of the 'Groot Trek' was lost and in vain. Just as before, they were subject to British Imperial Rule.

On the other hand, the *Vierkleur* was the symbol of their independence, and their realised aspirations for freedom. The striking of the *Vierkleur* and the hoisting of the Union Jack, to them meant defeat. Their fervent desire to regain their freedom, was once more revived.

Attempts were made to settle the dispute in a peaceful manner but, when his aid was requested in their struggle for independence, Sir Bartle Frere, Governor of the Cape Colony and High Commissioner told the deputation that the Union Jack would always fly over the Transvaal; a remark to which Piet Joubert replied to the following effect: *Over the Country perhaps; over the people never!*¹⁰

On the 10th of April 1879 Frere received a *Boer Committee* consisting of 23 men, with M.W. Pretorius as Chairman, at Kleinfontein. Frere made several promises regarding the management and use of the *Vierkleur*. He however, fell out of favour with the Imperial Government and was replaced by Garret Wolseley as Special Commissioner in Transvaal and Zululand.¹¹

The *Afrikaner* national consciousness awoke and determined preparations for the ensuing struggle was made in silence. Weapons and ammunition were accumulated drop by drop.¹²

On December the 8th 1880, a meeting was held at Paardekraal, a *Stonelaying* was held and the *Vierkleur* was hoisted on the cairn.¹³ A Decree was promulgated whereby the *ZAR* was reinstated and a commando was dispatched with the instruction to besiege the British Garrisons in Pretoria, Potchefstroom, Lydenburg, Wakkerstroom, Rustenburg, Standerton and Marabastad.

On the 16th of December 1880 Heidelberg was sieged by the *Boer* forces, the *Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek* was formally re-instated and the *Vierkleur* was hoisted.¹⁴

The opening shots, marking the beginning of the war, were fired at Potchefstroom. Although the war of 1880 - 1881 is known more specifically for the battles of Bronkhorstspuit, Laing's Nek, Ingogo and Majuba, fighting also took place in other parts of the Transvaal, especially Pretoria, Potchefstroom, Rustenburg, Marabastad, Lydenburg, Standerton and Wakkerstroom.

These towns were occupied by British garrisons which were in turn besieged by the *Boer* forces, for the duration of the war. Although the two flags were involved in each of these instances, a few incidents can be singled out where the *Vierkleur* and the Union Jack played a more prominent and significant role.

The siege of Potchefstroom

On the 12th of December 1880 the *Boer* forces declared their intention to seize their old Capital, Potchefstroom and to hoist the *Vierkleur* there on 16 December.¹⁵

By the 15th of December the entire town, apart from the Magistrates Court and the jail, was in the hands of the Transvaal forces. On December the 16th, the skirmish between the British troops in the Magistrates Court and the jail and the *Boer* forces commenced. By the 18th of December, the British troops, trapped in the Magistrates Court found themselves in a critical situation and Maj Clarke took down the Union Jack and hoisted the White flag of surrender in its place.¹⁶

The British under Col Winsloe vacated the jail and

withdrew to the fort. The *Boer* Forces launched heavy attacks on this stronghold, but it was successfully repelled.

Since the surrender of the Magistrates Court, a Union Jack had not flown in Potchefstroom. The British Artillery Unit stationed in the fort decided to remedy this by making a Union Jack and hoisting it over the fort. By making use of the blue coat of an infantry officer and the red and white lining of two cloaks, a Union Jack was made and on the 23rd of January 1881, it was hoisted on the wall of the fort.¹⁷ This flag hung there for two months, after which it was taken back to England by N. Battery. On the 3rd of July 1882 this flag was displayed to the Queen during a ceremony at Windsor Castle.¹⁸

On the 20th of March 1881 an agreement was reached that the British detachment in the fort would surrender and that the Transvaal forces would render them fully military honour. On the 23rd of March the garrison, with their home-made Union Jack in the forefront, marched out of the fort.¹⁹

The Siege of Lydenburg

After having defeated the British 94th Regiment at Bronkhorstspuit, a *Boer* force advanced upon Lydenburg.

On January the 3rd 1881 this force with its flying *Vierkleur* in the forefront of the Commando, arrived at Lydenburg.²⁰ On the 6th of January they went over to the attack and captured the town. A ceremony was held during which the Republic was proclaimed and the *Vierkleur* hoisted.²¹

The British troops who withdrew to a fort, were not in possession of a Union Jack and so hoisted a British Naval flag over the fort in its stead. During the course of subsequent battles, the flag was much damaged and the besieged troops decided to make a Union Jack. By using an available Genevan flag and a blue dress belonging to Mrs Long, wife of the Commanding Officer, a Union Jack was made and hoisted over the fort where it remained for the duration of the siege.²²

After the termination of hostilities at Lydenburg, the Transvaal forces did not tarry long before they had the *Vierkleur* flying over the town. The British soldiers who defended Fort Mary in such a commendable manner, became embittered by

the course of events and decided to take matters into their own hands. A furious group tore the *Vierkleur* from the flagpole at the Magistrates Court and even the flagpole was not left intact. Despite his own personal feelings, Lt Long strongly disapproved of his soldiers' conduct, in view of the fact that he had received no instructions to take the *Vierkleur* down. He subsequently had a new flagpole made, personally hoisted the *Vierkleur* and had the trespassers court-martialled.

Laing's Nek

On the 28th of January 1881, the battle of Laing's Nek was fought. Smail, in *'Those Restless Years'* expresses the opinion that this was the last attack in which the British army participated, dressed in red coats. This was also the last time that a British regiment carried their regimental flag and the Queen's flag into the battle.²³ The Union Jack on the Queen's flag was however incorrect: there was a broad, instead of a narrow white line at the top of the fourth quadrant.²⁴

The crushing defeat suffered by the British on Majuba, indicated the end of the war. On March 23, 1881, a Peace Treaty was signed, officially making an end to the war. Transvaal regained its independence as well as the right to hoist the *Vierkleur* as national flag and symbol of freedom.

After the conclusion of the peace, two final and contrasting dramas still evolved round the Union Jack. The conditions for peace were unacceptable to the *92 Gordon Highlanders* and they regarded the Peace Treaty as humiliating. They accordingly buried the Union Jack in the graveyard of Fort Anriël, with ceremonial honour.²⁵

When the news of General Colley's death reached Pretoria, the besieged troops hoisted the Union Jack a half-mast, as a mark of honour.²⁶ The news of the Peace Treaty caused emotions in Pretoria to flare up. Disbelief and dejection reigned under the British loyalists, whilst the signing of the Peace Treaty was regarded as an act of treason. In a fit of despair and hysteria, a British group took down the Union Jack and dragged it through the mud.²⁷ The mood of dejection prevalent under the besieged, is illustrated very clearly by the fact that not a single British person objected to this behaviour wrt the Union Jack.²⁸

Despite this incident in Pretoria, it would yet appear that the two respective flags had a singular significance for both fighting parties. To the British soldier the Union Jack was the symbol of a glorious past. The traditions synonymous with the Union Jack, encouraged the British soldier to uphold his honour and that of his national flag. This is very clearly illustrated by the stubborn resistance they offered under most precarious circumstances.

In this war the people of the Transvaal regained their identity and the *Vierkleur* acted as a uniting factor in their fight against British imperialism. Any former dissatisfaction regarding the *Vierkleur* was removed by this war.

The people of Transvaal now identified with the *Vierkleur*; as is proved by S. J. du Toit's '*Transvaalse Vryheidslied*'.²⁹

'Die Vierkleur van ons dierbaar land,
Die waai weer oor Transvaal,
En wee die Godvergete hand
Wat dit weer neer wil haal!'

'Veul storms het hy deurgestaan,
Maar ons was jou getrou;
En nou die storm is oorgegaan,
Wyk ons nooit weer van jou.'

It can finally be said that both the Union Jack and the *Vierkleur* emerged from the war with honour, despite the blow delivered to British Prestige. The courage of the Transvaal forces and that of the British on the Battlefield made clear that both flags are symbolical of two proud and brave nations. The ultimate reconciliation of the *Boer* and British

aspirations was embodied in 1928 by the coming into being of a national flag for South Africa. The South African flag contains elements of both the Union Jack and the *Vierkleur* — combined with the flags of the Freestate and Holland — to display a vivid symbolism that has remained unscathed even after the country has become a Republic in 1961.

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Footnotes

1. Partridge, A. C., *Story of our South African Flag*, Purnell and Sons, Jhb, 1966, p 55.
2. Parna, C., *Die Unievlag — Oorsprong, Betekenis en Gebruik*, Nasionale Boekhandel, 1957, p 20.
3. *Ibid*, p 24.
4. Partridge, A. C., *op cit*, p 60.
5. Parna, C., *op cit*, p 17.
6. Partridge, A. C., *op cit*, p 55.
7. *Ibid*, p 54.
8. Parna, C., *op cit*, p 18.
9. Leyds, Dr W. J., *De Eerste Annexatie van de Transvaal*, Albert de Lange, Amsterdam, 1906, p 274.
10. Van der Walt, A. J. H., *Geskiedenis van Suid-Afrika*, Nasou Bpk, Derde Uitgawe, p 304.
11. *Ibid*, p 307.
12. *Ibid*, p 311.
13. *Ibid*, p 311.
14. Lady Bellairs, *The Transvaal War 1880 - 1881*, C. Struik, Cape Town, 1972, p 61.
15. *Ibid*, p 245.
16. *Ibid*, p 250.
17. *Ibid*, p 260.
18. *Ibid*, p 261.
19. *Ibid*, p 273.
20. *Ibid*, p 309.
21. *Ibid*, p 310.
22. *Ibid*, p 320.
23. Smail, J. L., *Those Restless Years*, Howard Timmins, Cape Town, 1971, p 36.
24. *Ibid*, p 36.
25. *Ibid*, p 32.
26. Lehman, J. H., *The First Boer War*, Jonathan Cape, London, p 287.
27. *Ibid*, p 289.
28. *Ibid*, p 289.
29. Opperman, D. J., *Groot Verseboek — 'n Bloemlesing uit die Afrikaanse Poësie*, Derde Druk, Nasionale Boekhandel Bpk, Kaapstad 1953, p 8.