

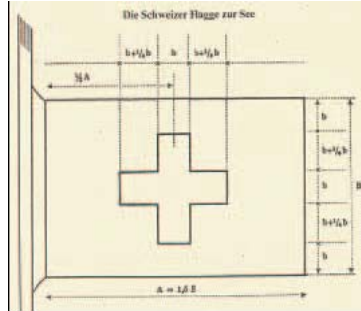


The origin of the Swiss flag



Swiss illustrated Diebold Schilling chronicle, 1513. Battle of Arbedo, 30 June 1422

Photo: Diebold Schilling chronicle, 1513, owned by Korporation Luzern



Picture 3: Original drawing of the flag in Appendix I, Art. 3, cl. 2 of the Federal Act of 23 September 1953 on Maritime Navigation under the Swiss flag

At the time of the Crusades in the early 12th century, a means of visually identifying individual warriors became a military imperative. In the thick of the battle, in hand-to-hand combat, armour and helmets made it difficult to tell friend from foe. Shields were painted with colourful signs, which quickly developed into coats of arms. Pieces of material, bearing the same image as that on the shield, were attached to lances. A symbol that could be held high and waved to and fro attracted attention. The first flags were born.

From the 12th century, Zurich, as well as Lucerne, initially had their own city flags (still familiar today), which were only later replaced by coats of arms. The same is true of Canton Schwyz, which had a simple red flag from the 13th century onwards. It was not until 1792 that a small white cross would feature in the upper corner of the red battle flag of Schwyz. Canton Schwyz gave our country its name and the red colour of its banner similarly influenced our national flag. However, the cross

on the Swiss flag does not come from Canton Schwyz.

A white cross

The first recorded use of a white cross on Confederate territory was at the Battle of Laupen in 1339, when the people of the forest communities of Waldstätten came to the aid of the Bernese and a common symbol was required for recognition. From then on and until the 16th century, the members of the Swiss Confederation added a small white cross to their gear and often to their own banners when they went into battle. In joint campaigns, troops served under a small red flag with a white cross (*picture 1*). In the 15th century, too, the war flag of Berne, the most powerful canton in the Confederation, was red with a “traversante” white cross.

Anchored in the constitution

Following the Napoleonic wars, the Federal Diet, or “Tagsatzung”, adopted a state seal featuring a short cross. After all, the white cross on a red background had been recognized as a symbol of the Confederation throughout Europe for centuries. The armed forces endorsed the use of the white cross on a red field and gymnastic associations, choral societies and rifle associations adopted it as their banner. In 1840 the Federal Diet ruled that this flag should be borne by all infantry battalions. The Swiss Federal Constitution of 1848 prescribes the use of the federal flag by all troops in federal service. When the ugly equilateral cross (*picture*



Picture 2: Swiss national flag 1848-1889, with equilateral cross

Photo: Fahnenfabrik Sevelen AG

2) met with increasing disapproval, the Federal Assembly of 12 December 1889 changed its design from the five equal squares to one in which the arms were one sixth longer than they were wide. This is how our national flag still looks today.

Vertical flag (“Flagge”) or horizontal flag (“Fahne”)?

As a result of the flag’s military origins, in German-speaking Switzerland use of the maritime term Flagge, indicating a flag hoisted vertically, has never caught on.

People tend to use the word Fahne, which refers to a flag hoisted horizontally.

Swiss ships have used a square national flag with a 2:3 ratio since 1941 (*picture 3*). This flag, correctly named “Swiss flag at sea” is found not only on the oceans of the world but also on the Rhine, Lake Constance, Lake Geneva and most Swiss lakes.