
France

1. Flag

- Created in 1789
and adopted in 1848

Progress was slow for this French emblem: the tricolour already existed in 1789, but it only became the official national flag in 1848.



The idea of associating the three colours, and more precisely of adding the white to the red and the blue, stems from the days that followed the taking of the Bastille, a symbolic prison then situated in the heart of Paris, in July 1789. It is difficult to determine who was behind this initiative, but it would seem that Louis XVI, King of France for another few short years, General La Fayette, hero of the independence of the British colonies in America, and lastly Jean Sylvain Bailly, mayor of Paris, were involved. The blue and the red, the colours of Paris, were worn by the rioters while the white was the then colour of the French royalty. These three colours were combined to make the official badge of the Municipal Guard of Paris. In 1792, the French Assembly ordered for it to be worn by all citizens.

What reasons thus determined this choice? Did the white surrounded by blue and red represent the king, prisoner of the Parisians? Was it a reference to American independence? The fact remains that the white has never been called into question, undoubtedly because alluded to France as a State more than as a royal dynasty.

This tricolour gained ground gradually. It took the form of a banner, then a flag, whose current form was drawn by the painter David in 1794 but its use was limited as a maritime flag. The bands became vertical in order to distinguish them from the Dutch flag. It was then used by ground forces, especially under the Napoleonic Empire. It was abandoned and even hunted down between 1815 and 1830 during the restoration of the monarchy by Louis XVIII. During several periods, the white space was decorated with various motifs.

It was only during the Second Republic in 1848, that the emblem was formalised and became a national symbol in its own right, for all civil and military occasions. Today, the tricolour flag flies over all public buildings. During the national holiday on 14 July, the presentation of the flag to the armed forces is an important time and exalts the feeling of patriotism, which is heightened when the planes of the *Patrouille de France* paint tricoloured clouds in the Parisian sky.

This flag strongly inspired the national flags of other European countries, (Italy, Belgium, Romania, etc.), but also those of several Latin American and French-speaking African countries.

2. Anthem

- *La Marseillaise*
(The Song of Marseille)
- Written and composed
by Rouget de Lisle
- Composed in 1792
and adopted in 1879

Created and sung for the first time in Strasbourg in 1792, called “War Song for the Army of the Rhine” by its composer Rouget de Lisle, it was rechristened “The Song of the People from Marseille” by the Parisians who were enthusiastic about the chorus of volunteers from the South as they sang on their way through the capital, before joining the armies and thus answering the call of the National Assembly.

La Marseillaise

Allons enfants de la Patrie,
 Le jour de gloire est arrivé !
 Contre nous de la tyrannie,
 L'étendard sanglant est levé, (bis)
 Entendez-vous dans les campagnes
 Mugir ces féroces soldats ?
 Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras
 Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes !
 Aux armes, citoyens,
 Formez vos bataillons,
 Marchons, marchons !
 Qu'un sang impur
 Abreuve nos sillons !

The Song of Marseille

Arise, children of the fatherland,
 The day of glory has arrived!
 Against us tyranny
 Raises its bloody banner (x2)
 Do you hear, in the countryside
 The roar of those ferocious soldiers?
 They are coming right into your arms
 To cut the throats of your sons and
 women.
 To arms, citizens
 Form your battalions,
 Let's march, let's march
 Let impure blood
 Water our furrows!

In July 1792, the country was suffering the strains of the Revolution. France declared war on the Prussian and Austrian forces who were endeavouring to re-establish the sovereignty of the King of France. While these allies were threatening the territory of France, the President of the Assembly, Pierre Vergniaud, eloquently stood his ground against the King and declared that the “homeland was in danger”. This declaration caused to a mass movement of volunteers, from all regions of France, led to removal of the King in August and the Battle of Valmy in September, a decisive battle that would stop the advance of the enemy. In just a few months, the fate of France was decided, as was that of its future national anthem.

Both the French people and soldiers took ownership of this song, which had mobilised troops to defend the homeland. This song was called into question in 1804, but was nevertheless sung during all the revolts and revolutions in France. It only became national anthem in 1879, when the Republic fell definitively into the hands of Republicans.

Its success is not limited to the boundaries of France, however. The reason for this is probably because this song does not characterise the country concerned, or name the enemy or tyrant. In certain contexts the air takes on the role of a universal hymn to freedom that was taken up by opponents to the Chinese regime in Tiananmen Square, or the sailors in the battleship Potemkin, or during the welcoming of Lenin in St. Petersburg when he returned from his exile in Switzerland... It is also frequently sung, often adapted to the local language, by those fighting for freedom, independence or public revolt. This song, which became the national anthem of France expresses its revolutionary character even more so beyond French borders.

And yet, this song which is characterised by its harsh and often criticised lyrics, has been the subject of numerous attempts to modify it. Granted, the ideological charge remains strongly linked to the context of its creation (the “homeland in danger”), to which is added the idea of a France settled in the heritage of its revolution and the figurehead of freedom. As a national symbol endowed with secular and integrative power, a 2005 law makes it compulsory for primary school children to learn the national anthem at school.

