THOUGH COWARDS FLINCH: THE HISTORY OF THE RED FLAG AS A SYMBOL OF REVOLT AGAINST OPPRESSION

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History teaches us that injustice and oppression have been a feature of human society from time immemorial. When conditions have become unbearable, their victims have rebelled.

According to the website of a Trotskyist group called the Revolutionary Communist Party USA, *"The red flag has historically been raised by classes in revolt. In the struggles which rocked the rule of Rome, ultimately bringing it down, the red flag was the battle standard held high by slaves who had no way out but rebellion."* Unfortunately, the party offers no supporting evidence for this statement, although when the film industry found inspiration in such events, the colour it chose for its promotional posters was probably not coincidental.
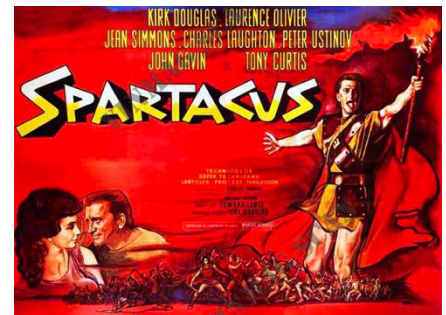
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What we do know is that from the fourteenth century onwards, a plain red flag had been used militarily as a "flag of defiance", initially in naval battles but also later during siege warfare on land – for example, at Edinburgh Castle in 1573 and the Alamo in 1836. It signified that *'no quarter would be given'*. In his classic work of 1922 on *British Flags,* Perrin refers to the *"bloody colours"*, whose descent he suggests might lie in *"the scarlet cloak which the ancient Greek navy seems to have borrowed from the Phoenicians*." In the 18th century, the first edition of *Chambers Encyclopedia* asserted that *"the red flag is a signal of defiance and battle."*

Lafayette at the Champ de Mars
orders to shoot the people, 17 July 1791

But it was in the course of the first French revolution that it acquired its contemporary meaning. When the revolution broke out in 1789, the Tricolore quickly became the symbol of the new regime. When a mass meeting was held at the Champ de Mars in Paris in July 1791 to demand the deposition of the King, the Mayor of Paris hoisted a red flag which was intended as a sign that the crowd should disperse. The historian Carlyle described in *The French Revolution – a History* (1838) how a *"Howl of angry derision rises in treble and bass from a hundred thousand throats at the sight of Martial Law; which nevertheless, waving its Red sanguinary Flag, advances there*." The national guard under Lafayette's command then fired without warning, massacring up to 50 people.

In its use on this occasion, the red flag had a counter-revolutionary purpose. But in his *Socialist History of the French Revolution,* published in 1904, Jean Jaures records that in the following year:

"The red flag, which was the bloody symbol of bourgeois repression, was taken over by the revolutionaries… They made it the signal of revolt, or rather the emblem of a new power… It signified that: "It is we the people who are now the law." *And so, it was more than a symbol of vengeance. It was the splendid flag of a new power conscious of its right, and this is why since then, whenever the proletariat was to affirm its strength and its hopes, it would be the red flag it would unfurl."*

According to a work of 1899 entitled *Robespierre and the Red Terror*, the Jacobins met during the later stages of the revolution in a club which occupied a former chapel. Above the entrance hung the red flag.

The Hall of the Jacobins at Paris, 27 July 1794

Red flag of mutiny raised aboard
HMS Sandwich at the Nore, 12 May 1797

In 1797 when t0e sailors of the British navy mutinied at the Nore, they hoisted the red flag on several ships in defiance of their officers. This could have been because of the red flag's newfound revolutionary symbolism, or because of its traditional naval origins or, quite possibly, both.

With the rise of Napoleon to power in France, the Tricolore returned to use as the national flag. It was not in France but in Britain that the red flag of rebellion made its next appearance, during the Merthyr Rising of 1831, when Welsh miners and ironworkers joined local tradesmen in protesting against cuts in wages, and took over the town for a week. A flag bathed in a calf's blood was raised, with a loaf of bread impaled on its staff to represent the protestors' needs.

Soldiers were sent to suppress the uprising, and more than 24 people were killed. The Home Secretary, Lord Melbourne, was determined to send a message to anyone minded to act in a similar manner, so a 23-year-old miner called Dic Penderyn was framed for stabbing a soldier and hanged at Cardiff. His death is now commemorated annually both in Merthyr Tydfil and at his graveside in Aberavon.

The Merthyr Rising, June 1831

Commemorating the Merthyr Rising

The short-lived Paris Uprising of June 1832 was triggered when a member of the crowd waved a red flag bearing the words *"Liberty or Death"* at the funeral of the popular liberal politician Jean Lamarque, and shots were exchanged with troops commanded once again

by Lafayette. This uprising provides the historical backdrop to the climax of Victor Hugo's great novel *Les Misérables,* and red flags feature prominently in both the film and stage versions of the musical which is based upon it.

Les Misérables – film (2012)

Les Misérables – musical (from1980)

The revolution of 1848 brought about the final overthrow of the French monarchy, and the poet Lamartine was elected as the president of the Second Republic. A crowd assembled outside Paris's town hall, the Hotel de Ville, demanding that the red flag be reinstated. Henri Philippoteux's painting shows Alphonse de Lamartine's defence of the *Tricolore*. In his own account of the event, Lamartine claims to have said

"Citizens, you can do violence to the government. You can order it to change the flag of the nation and the name of France, if you are so ill inspired and stubborn in your mistake as to impose on it a party's republic and a terror's flag. I know that the government is as determined as myself to die rather than to dishonour itself by obeying you... Because the red flag that you have brought back here has achieved nothing ... whereas the Tricolore *flag went round the world along with the name, the glory and the liberty of the homeland!"*

Philippoteux's painting of 1848 declaration of 2nd Republic

Vernet's painting
"On the barricades on the Rue Soufflot"

For the moment at least, his appeal to some supposed national interest transcending class interests seems to have succeeded, though the red flag reappeared on barricades during street fighting later in the year, as Horace Vernet's painting of the Rue Soufflot shows.

1848 is commonly known as the Year of Revolutions, because of the political upheavals which occurred in many parts of Europe. In Cologne the co-author of The Communist Manifesto, Karl Marx, was charged with incitement to revolt through the pages of the newspaper, the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*. Marx appealed to the political conscience of the jury and was acquitted, whereupon the government decided to suppress the paper and expel its staff. It is recorded that they marched out of the building and into exile with a band playing and the red flag flying from the rooftop.

In Vienna, Johann Strauss (the younger) composed a march in honour of the 1848 revolutionaries, and the red flag appears on the front of the score.

Score for Strauss' 1848 Revolutions March

The Paris Commune, 1871

The red flag briefly flew over the streets of Paris once more during the Commune of 1871, when the citizens' militia formed to defend the city during the siege that followed France's defeat by Prussia, and in defiance of the Government took over the administration of Paris and elected its own Communal Council. Writing about the Commune in *The Civil War in France,* Karl Marx asserted that *"the old world writhed in convulsions of rage at the sight of the Red Flag, the symbol of the Republic of Labour, floating over the Hôtel de Ville."*

In a matter of months, the Commune was violently suppressed by the army, but thereafter its memory became a source of inspiration for progressive thinkers and radical polemicists around the world, and its flag became a universal symbol of the socialist cause. Red flags were prominent on stamps and posters issued in China to celebrate its centenary, though in France this anniversary passed officially unmarked.

Anniversary of Paris commune celebrated with Chinese stamps (90th 1961) and poster (100th 1971)

The first May Day parade took place in Chicago in 1886, when 80,000 people marched in support of a demand for the 8-hour day, with red flags prominently displayed. Their demand was joined by workers at 1,200 factories across the USA, and on 3 May a demonstration took place outside an agricultural machinery plant. The police arrived and opened fire, killing four people and wounding many more.

A rally to protest against this violence was held the following day at Haymarket Square. At the end, an unknown person threw a bomb at the police. They opened fire, killing dozens of demonstrators and eight of their own officers. The police deaths resulted in a show trial and the hanging of four activists. Seven years later the Governor of Illinois granted them full pardons asserting they had been the victims of *"hysteria, packed juries and a biased judge".* In 1889, the first congress of the Socialist International called for worldwide demonstrations on the anniversary of the Chicago protests in 1890.

The Haymarket massacre, Chicago, 1886

May Day was formally recognized as International Workers' Day at the International's second Congress in 1891, and since marked by parades and celebrations in cities around the world, often with red flags prominent. Following are examples of May Day parades internationally.

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May Day in Belfast

May Day in Budapest

May Day in Dhaka

May Day in Helsinki

May Day in Kathmandu

May Day in London

May Day in Moscow

May Day in Portland, Oregon

May Day in Prague

May Day in Tel Aviv

But it is not only in great cities that such marches are held. There is also one in the tiny Irish village of Crossakiel in County Meath, for a reason to which we will return.

A red flag has flown continuously over the imposing façade of the Victorian Trades Hall in Melbourne for more than 100 years.

After the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia in the October Revolution of 1917, it became a standard element in Soviet-era propaganda posters:

Similar symbolism was used in official Chinese propaganda posters in the 1950s.

This kind of imagery may be enjoying a revival, possibly in a spirit of irony, if the front page of this British trade union's journal in 2013 is any indication (the article is about the renaissance of trams).

It was (and is) also a favourite subject of artists working in the Socialist Realism genre.

Picking up the Banner: Gely Korzhev-Churelev   *Agitator*: Ivan Vladimirov

Lenin at the Tribune: Alexander Gerasimov   *A Night Full of Treasure*: Kathrin Longhurst

When the Soviet Union was created in 1923, the red star and the crossed hammer and sickle were placed on the red flag to form the new national flag, and variants of this were used by all of the constituent republics of the Union.

Flag of the Soviet Union   and the   Soviet Republics

Red has often been the dominant colour in the national flags of other officially Marxist states, past and present

People's Republic of China.   Socialist Republic of Vietnam   Democratic People's Republic of Korea

Peoples Republic of the Congo (1970–1991)   Pridnestovian Moldavian Republic (Transnistria)

In some of these countries, the red flag has lent its name to a variety of other applications. A Chinese poster from 1950s asserts that the Three Red Flag Policy will succeed. This policy encompassed the Great Leap Forward, the Communist Village Foundation, and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. More recently, the red flag has been used in China to name an irrigation canal, a range of luxury cars, and a brand of cigarettes.

Poster promoting Three Red Flags policy

Red Flag canal

Red Flag cars

Red Flag cigarettes

In the DPRK it is used to cover the corpse of the deceased Dear Leader as well as appearing in the name of the elite military school at Mangyongdae and in heroic statuary. According to the Korean Friendship Association, *"In the crucible of the Three-Revolution Red Flag Movement people's mode of thinking and manner of working have changed, the revolutionary enthusiasm of the masses has become greater and the revolution and construction have made steady headway"*.
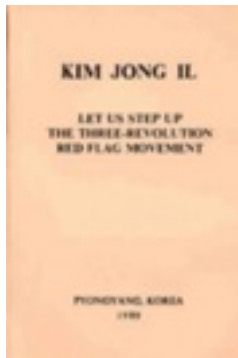

Lying in state of Kim Jong-Il

Pupils at Mangyongdae Red Flag military school

Manu Hill war memorial

The Three-Revolution Red Flag Movement

The red flag has served as the title of Marxist newspapers in a number of countries, both past and present.

Variants of the red flag are used by Leninist parties around the world with the addition of various distinguishing emblems – including, in at least one case, a smaller red flag.

German Socialist Workers Party

Communist Party of India

Korean Workers Party, DPR

Communist Party of Kurdistan

Awami Workers Party (Pakistan)

Philippines Communist Party

Rumanian Communist Party

Swiss Labour Party

In the United States, during the so-called Red Scare of 1919-20, triggered by the Russian revolution followed by such events as a general strike in Seattle and a police strike in Boston, 26 states passed laws forbidding or regulating display of red flags, with fines ranging from $1,000 to $5,000 and prison terms of five to ten years. In the case of _Stromberg v California_ in 1931, the Supreme Court held that such laws violated the first and fourteenth amendments to the Constitution, and were therefore invalid. But the first flag of Oklahoma, which identified it as the 46th state, was replaced in 1925 lest its colour should imply some association with socialism.

State Flag of Oklahoma
(1911 to 1925)

The Red Scare was echoed in a more modest way in Australia, where the _War Precautions Act_ was extended in 1918 to ban the flying of the red flag because of its perceived association with Bolshevism.   One correspondent of the Brisbane _Courier_ warned that it stood for _"blood, fire, destruction and devil worship."_ There was a sizeable Russian émigré community in the city, and the "Red Flag Riots" of March 1919 occurred when (following a march organised by various radical groups in defence of civil rights, at which red banners were displayed) loyalist elements (many of them unemployed ex-servicemen) clashed with police attempting to prevent the crowd from attacking the headquarters of the Russian Workers Association.

Returned soldier's challenge to Bolshevism: "This is Australia and here is its flag. That one you wave at your peril."

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It would be wrong to imagine that use of the red flag has been limited to the Leninist and Maoist tendencies in the global socialist tradition. Most social democratic parties have red as their party colour, and many of them – including the British Labour Party – use some variant of the Socialist International's own logo, the red rose clasped in a fist. Some have used the red flag - this, for example, was previously used by members of the Norwegian Labour movement – and some have combined both, as in this Belgian case.

Labour Party
(Norway)

Norwegian labour
organisations (former flag)

Belgian Socialist Party
(former flag)

Labour Party
(United Kingdom)

In Italy there is a long tradition of flag waving at party rallies, with parties of the left commonly displaying their badges on flags with red fields, a practice continuing to this day (and shared in the political culture of its diminutive neighbour San Marino).

Italian Socialist Party

Sammarinese Socialist Party

Flag of Syriza (Greece)

This tradition is mirrored in Greece, where supporters of Syriza (the "Coalition of the Radical Left") carry a red flag bearing smaller flags emblematic of its various constituent groups.

But as far as I know there are now only four social democratic parties which still have a red flag incorporated within their official emblems. These are found in Armenia, Aruba, El Salvador and Peru.

Armenian
Revolutionary Federation

People's Electoral
Movement of Aruba

Farabundo Marti National
Liberation Front (El Salvador)

American Popular Revolutionary
Alliance (Peru)

In the mid-1980s, the British Labour Party adopted a logo which clearly alluded to the red flag (**right**). It appeared on party literature and on various merchandise. But unlike either earlier or later emblems used by the party, images of this one are very hard to find. It seems almost as though its current leaders have sought to airbrush it out of the Party's history.

Nevertheless, Labour retains a seemingly indissoluble connection with the red flag in the form of the Party anthem, which is sung with gusto by many delegates at the conclusion of its conference each year, to the apparent distaste of some on the platform. The same song is also used by the Labour Parties in both parts of Ireland.

The lyrics of *The Red Flag* were composed by Jim Connell, an Irish radical journalist born near the village of Crossakiel (which we saw earlier) in 1852. He was blacklisted for attempting to unionise the Dublin dockworkers and moved to London in 1875. He wrote *The Red Flag* in 1889 on a train journey in south London after attending a lecture on socialism. It was inspired by the London dock strike happening at that time, as well as by the activities of the Irish Land League, the Paris Commune, the Russian nihilists and Chicago anarchists.

The song quickly became popular as an anthem of the labour movement, and the leaders of the Rand miner's strike in South Africa went to the gallows singing it in 1922. Although the British Labour Party held a competition in 1925 to find a replacement, none of the 300 entries was accepted. Red flags have occasionally been hoisted over Labour-controlled town halls. The anthem was sung by the newly elected contingent of Labour MPs as they entered the chamber of the House of Commons after the Party's victory in 1945, and it was sung again in Parliament in 2006 to mark the Labour Party's centenary.

Students of the lyrics of national anthems will be aware that although many of them contain references to flags, very few are primarily about them, and very few bear quotation in cold print. But Jim Connell's words pass both these tests with what might appropriately be called flying colours. So here, in conclusion, is the full text of his stirring song.

The lyrics of *The Red Flag*

The people's flag is deepest red,
It shrouded oft our martyred dead,
And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold,
Their hearts' blood dyed its ev'ry fold

> Chorus:
> *Then raise the scarlet standard high.*
> *Within its shade we'll live and die,*
> *Though cowards flinch and traitors sneer,*
> *we'll keep the red flag flying here.*

Look 'round, the Frenchman loves its blaze,
The sturdy German chants its praise,
In Moscow's vaults its hymns are sung
Chicago swells the surging throng.

It waved above our infant might,
When all ahead seemed dark as night;
It witnessed many a deed and vow,
We must not change its colour now.

It well recalls the triumphs past,
It gives the hope of peace at last;
The banner bright, the symbol plain,
Of human right and human gain.

It suits today the weak and base,
Whose minds are fixed on pelf and place
To cringe before the rich man's frown,
And haul the sacred emblem down.

With heads uncovered swear we all
To bear it onward till we fall;
Come dungeons dark or gallows grim,
This song shall be our parting hymn.

BIOGRAPHY:

John Cartledge lives near London, and is a long-standing member of The Flag Institute. His vexillological interests include national and political flags.

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NOTE:

This lecture is not original. Mr Cartledge presented a lecture that was almost wholly the same at the Flag Institute's spring meeting in May 2013. The ICV26 Call for Paper conditions included a requirement that lecturers lodge a statement confirming that the lecture is the original work of the lecturer and has not previously been published. Mr Cartledge's original lecture was published by the Flag Institute as "Though Cowards Flinch" (https://www.flaginstitute.org – in members area: Research notes and Presentations).