

# #327: THE NORWEGIAN FLAG

1660-1814



1814\*



1821



1844-1898



1905



A national flag is a symbol that represents a country and its people. Every flag has a meaning and a story. The Norwegian flag is a symbol of honesty, peace, justice and strength. These principles resonate with the beliefs of the Norwegian people and their culture. It is only just recently that Norway has been flying their flag so prominently and proudly. Due to political circumstances the Norwegian flag has only been in existence since 1821.

Norway's oldest known flag is a banner of a lion standing on its hind legs and carrying an ax in its forepaws. This was a royal banner that was first recorded in 1318. "It is probable that medieval kings flew flags based on the Norwegian coat of arms – the golden lion holding the axe of St. Olav on a red field," says Jan Oskar Engene, a political scientist at the University of Bergen. The national flag was adapted from Norway's long 400-year union with Denmark. Denmark turned out to be a stronger player in the union with Norway and it was the Danish flag that Norway adopted as their own (red flag with white cross). The Norwegians however wanted an end to this union and in 1814, after 400 years, Denmark was separated from Norway and the history of the true Norwegian flag commenced.

The separation from Denmark was in fact bittersweet. Norway was able to quickly write and endure their free constitution but a union with Sweden was inevitable. Norway's new flag was inspired by the Danes but included an axe wielding lion in the upper left hand corner. It wasn't until 1821 that the pure Norwegian flag was designed. Fredrik Meltzer, a member of the constitutional assembly presented the new flag. He

added a blue cross to the Danish flag to symbolize liberty. The red, white and blue colors were inspired by the flags of countries which he believed exemplified freedom: the UK, the Netherlands and the US.

Norway was proud to finally have their own flag yet the political situation did not allow their flag to fly without complication. Norwegian ships were obligated to fly the Swedish flag so as to avoid capture by pirates. In 1844 the Swedish King introduced a new flag to signify Scandinavian unity. Norway could keep their flag but in order to identify with their Swedish leaders a badge was added to the upper left corner. This badge is often referred to as "the herring salad" because of its various shapes and colors.

"When the union badge was introduced to the national flag, this was actually welcomed as a sign of Norwegian equality with the Swedes and was initially quite popular," says Engene. "In the last quarter of the 19th century, however, the union with Sweden grew ever more unpopular and the union badge became contested." Tensions grew in Norway. The Norwegian romantic nationalist movement was on the rise and a need for a national identity was at an all-time high. Finally in 1899 a vote was passed to override the king and the badge was removed from civilian flags. That momentum soon led Norwegians to their victory for independence. In 1905 the badge was removed from all military flags and the Norwegians could welcome back their flag.

Today the official symbol of Norway waves proudly from government buildings, homes, businesses, sporting venues, and military vessels. Norwegians share a strong national pride which is most evident on Norway's national day, Syttende Mai. The complicated story behind the flag has ultimately given the Norwegian people a shared sense of pride in their history and culture.

