The Biggest, Baddest, Most Comprehensive Icon Guide
By Clef

Part 1: Introduction and Stuff You Will Need

Icon making can be complicated to learn for newcomers, but this guide is here to help demystify the process of icon making, the rules and expectations for making TNO icons, and all of the different parts of making a damn good icon.

To start, for this guide to even be useful to you, you're going to need Paint.NET:

https://www.getpaint.net/

You will also need some custom plugins for Paint.Net:

https://www.dropbox.com/s/pso1jl9de6lqeq8/Effects.zip?dl=0

Install these in the effects folder which can be found here: C:\Program Files\paint.net\Effects

And you'll need the artist resources folder (included within are some of my assets and icons):

https://www.dropbox.com/s/p4byafsph4mqpmo/FOCUS%20ICON%20STUFF.zip?dl=0

We have everything we need now (hopefully), but there are some sites you will be using quite often in the process of making icons, those being:

https://www.remove.bg (self explanatory, it removes backgrounds from images)

https://tomato.to/ (removes watermarks, ask an artist if you have questions about it)

Before we begin, some ground rules for TNO icons need to be laid out:

- Most assets should be beveled. Assets that are exempt from beveling will be covered later. There are two beveling plugins I included in my effects pack, bevel, and object bevel. I'll explain the difference later, but you'll use both at different times depending on the type of asset you're making.
- Shading, **<u>EVERY SOLID ASSET NEEDS TO BE SHADED.</u>** Exceptions to this are things in overlay layers, and generally transparent things.
- Frames should always be shaded.
- You should almost always be "breaking the frame" meaning you have an asset that goes outside of the frame. This will be explained in more detail later.
- Do not use flat images as backgrounds. This means don't just grab a picture from google and stick it behind a frame.
- If you have multiple objects in an asset, bevel them separately. This will be explained later.

- Do not make icons that are too big or too small. Generally, icons should be around 100x100 to 150x150. Contribs may request larger icons, which is an obvious exception to the rule.
- If you are making a national spirit icon, they should be 64x64, slightly over (eg. 67x64 or 66x69) that is alright, but try to keep them to 64x64 or smaller.
- Generally, assets in icons should have a decent amount of contrast, and be somewhat desaturated.
- NO GOLD FRAMES. Generally, TNO uses gray frames with overlay layers to give the frame color. This will be explained later.

Part 2: Asset Making

The most important part of icon making is making assets. A good asset can make the difference between a bad icon and a good icon. I'm going to guide you through making a few different kinds of assets.

Let's cover the basics, I'll guide you through making an asset of a tank.

Step 1: You can do two things here, look through the lilicons folder and see if you find an asset you like, or make your own. I will be making my own, so I will look up images of a Tiger tank and find a clear example.

This is the image I chose:

The image is clear, there is plenty of detail, it looks interesting, and it's a decent resolution so it should scale nicely. All of these are important factors in selecting a source.

Step 1.5: Quickly run the image through remove.bg.

Oh no! Remove.bg fucked up my tank! Do not fret, this is pretty easy to fix. Open up both the image you put through remove.bg and the source image in paint.net. Go to the source image, open up a new layer, then copy the image with no background over it and scale it while holding shift until it lines up with your original image. After you do that, use the magic wand tool and click on the transparent area outside of the fucked up tank, and then hit CTRL+I to invert your selection. Then, using the lasso tool while holding control, carefully trace around the source image so you have the rest of the turret selected, along with any other missing details. Once you have that done, delete the layer that has no background and hit CTRL+Shift+X to crop it down. If you did all of that correctly, you should come out with something like this:

This method applies to every asset that remove.bg doesn't *tremendously* fuck up.

Step 2: Hit CTRL+N to open a new image and set the size of it to 150x150, and remove the background (you don't necessarily need to open a new image to do this, but it's what I do to get a good frame of reference for how big the asset should be). Then copy the image you'll be turning into an asset into this and start scaling it down while holding shift so it keeps the correct aspect ratio. **REMEMBER, BEFORE SCALING THINGS DOWN TO SET THE SCALING OPTION TO BICUBIC INSTEAD OF THE DEFAULT BILINEAR.** This makes it so that when you scale down the image it doesn't get all crusty and pixelated. I continued scaling down my asset until it was 74x48 which gave me this:


As you can see, it's still pretty clear what it is, which is the most important part.
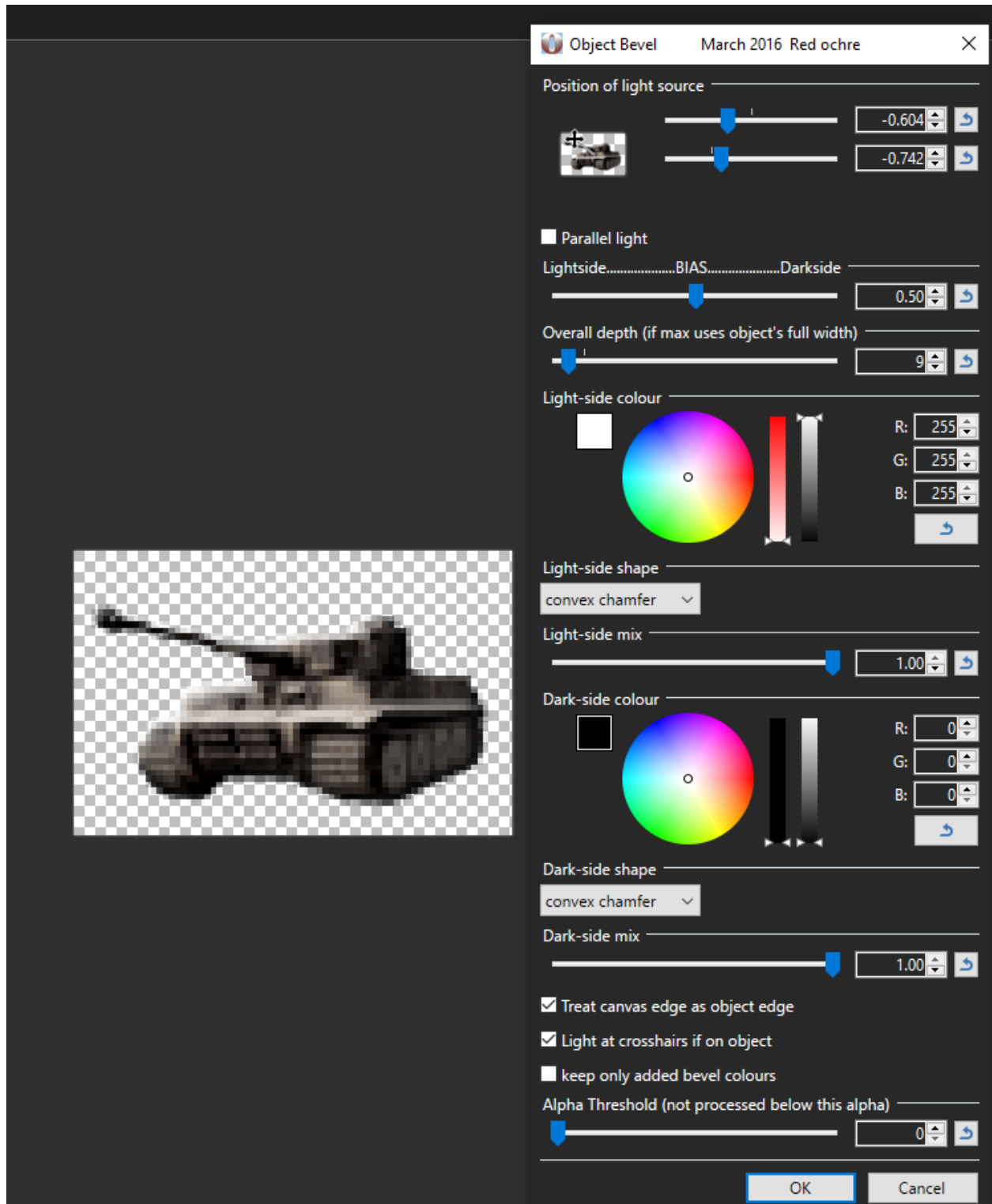
Step 3: Now that we've got the asset the size we want it to be, we need to adjust the contrast and saturation. First, hit CTRL+Shift+U to open up the hue/saturation adjustment menu and adjust the saturation bar to whatever extent you think necessary.
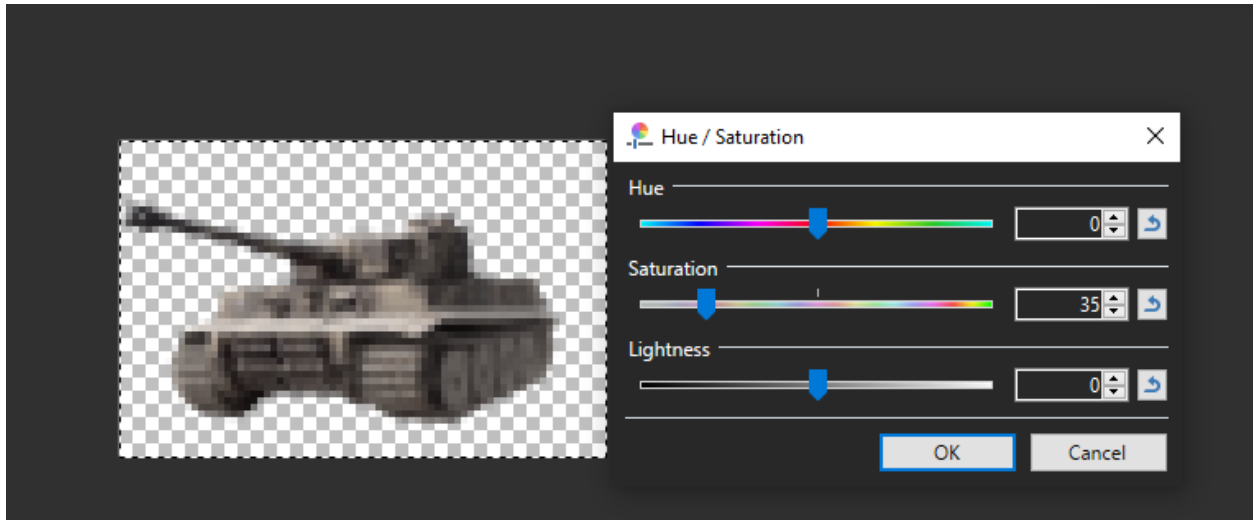
Now that it's desaturated, we can move on to contrast. Hit CTRL+Shift+T to open the contrast adjustment menu and make it so the asset is darker and has more contrast, giving you this:
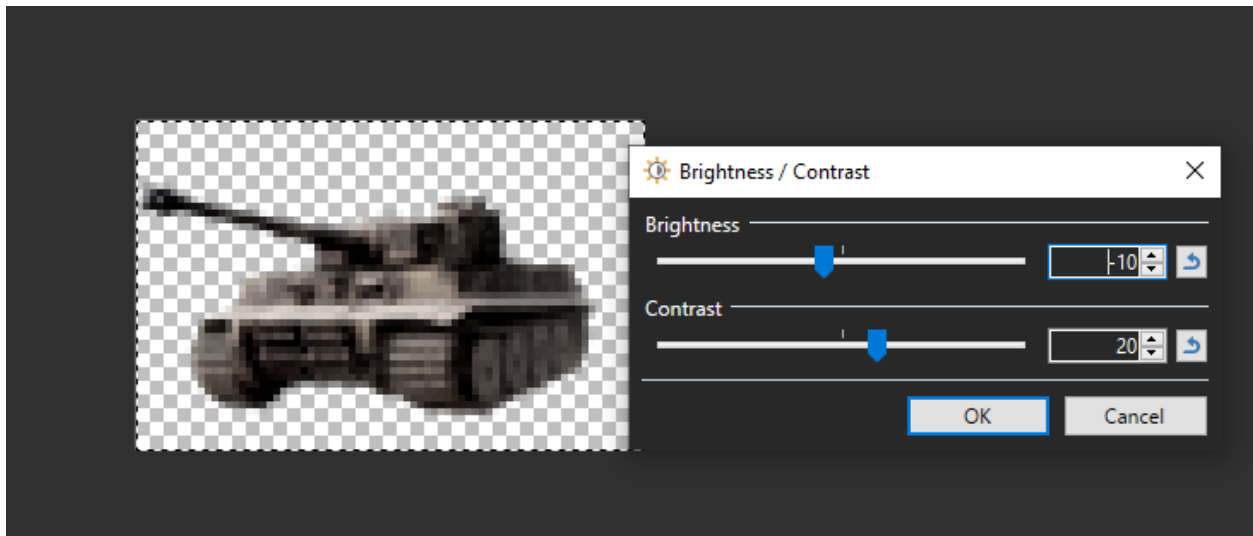

Step 4: We've got it scaled down, and we've got it with the correct contrast. Now, we should bevel the asset using the Object Bevel tool. Go to the effects menu, and find the object tab. There you should find the Object Bevel tool.

Object Bevel   March 2016 Red ochre   ✕

Position of light source

-0.604
-0.742

☐ Parallel light

Lightside.................BIAS...................Darkside

0.50

Overall depth (if max uses object's full width)

9

Light-side colour

R: 255
G: 255
B: 255

Light-side shape

convex chamfer ∨

Light-side mix

1.00

Dark-side colour

R: 0
G: 0
B: 0

Dark-side shape

convex chamfer ∨

Dark-side mix

1.00

☑ Treat canvas edge as object edge

☑ Light at crosshairs if on object

☐ keep only added bevel colours

Alpha Threshold (not processed below this alpha)

0

OK   Cancel

Set the depth to an appropriate level for whatever asset you're making. Now, set the position of the light source to whatever approximately matches up to where you think the light source of the source image is. You may have noticed there is another bevel tool, it works the same way as Object Bevel but does some things differently. Namely, it has fewer options than Object Bevel,

and is generally less useful (in my opinion) than Object Bevel for most assets. Exceptions to this will be covered later.

Step 5: Now to the easy part, we have to shade the asset. Now, a lot of the artists shade things in different ways so this is just my preferred way of doing it. Open up the objects tab under effects again and click on the Object Shadow tool. Set the offset to 0, shadow strength to 1, and shadow radius to whatever you think is right, in my case, 3. You should get this:
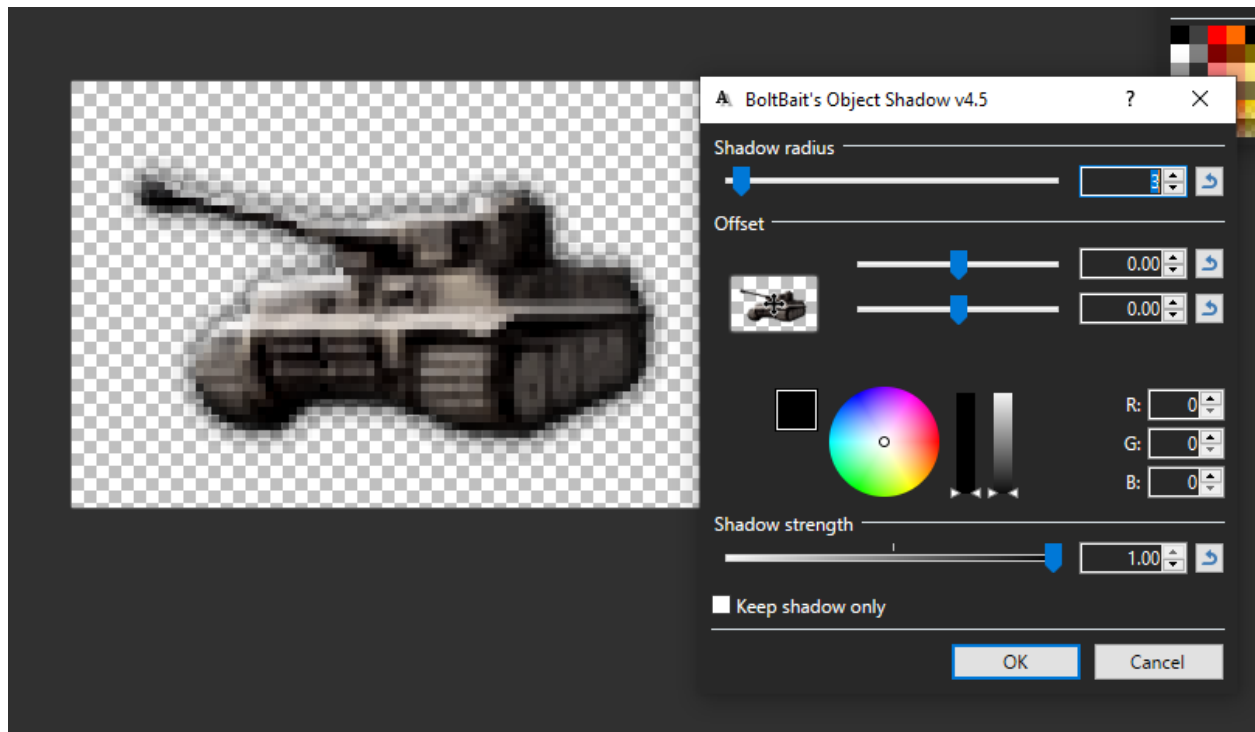

This isn't enough shading, so hit CTRL+F to repeat the action. I'm going to hit CTRL+F twice for extra shading, resulting in this:

We are now done, we have our complete asset.

Now, this isn't the only kind of asset you'll be making. Some assets will be things like emblems or maps. Basically, we make these the same way we do the previous one with a few exceptions, so explanations will be shorter on parts you should now know. This time we'll be making an asset of a country, in this case, England.

Step 1: Get a picture of the area you want to make the asset of. I prefer to open up TNO and take a snip of the area I want to make a map of.
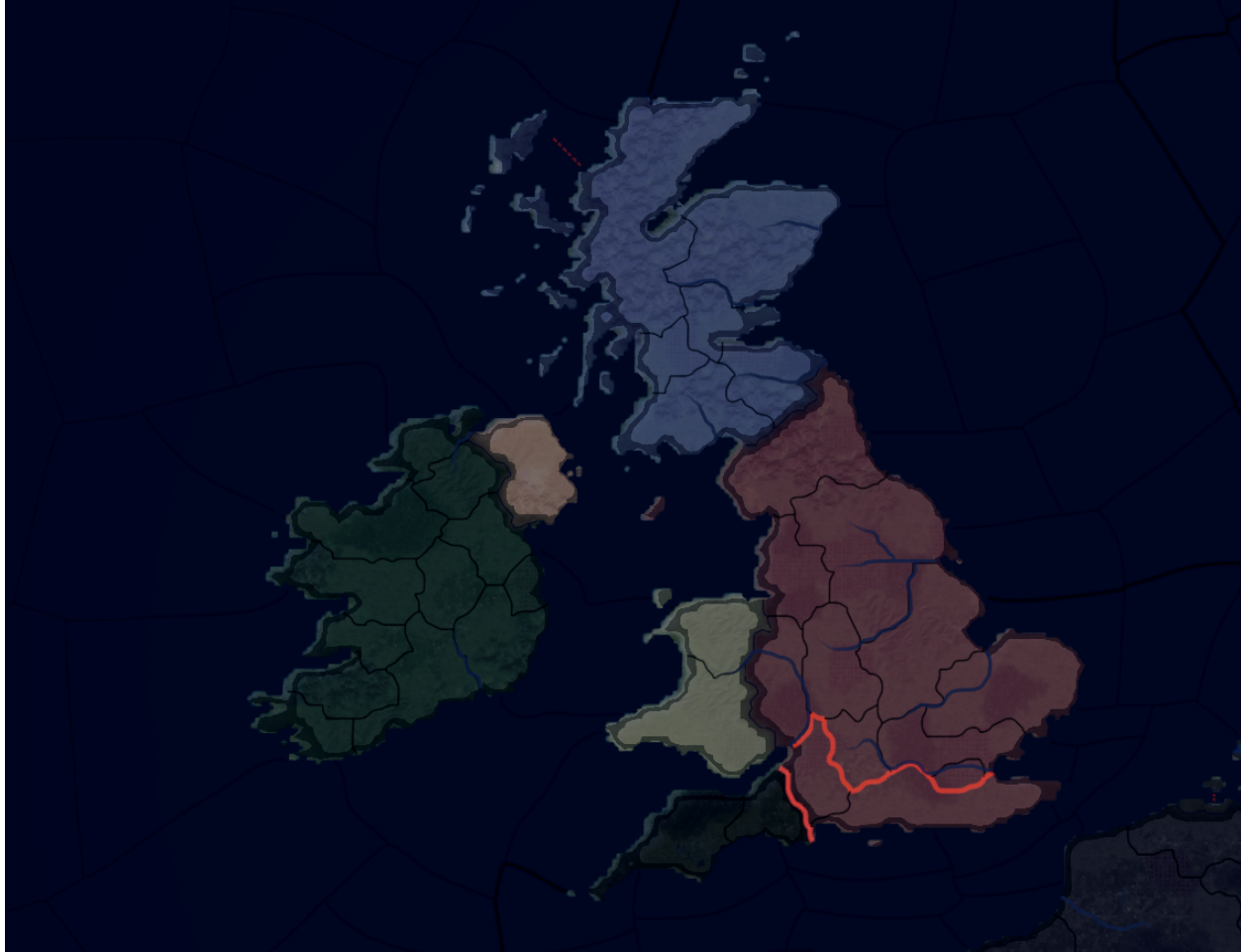
Next, use the lasso tool to trace around the borders of the country you'll be making an asset of. Once you're done doing that, crop the image so that it's just your selection. Now you should have just an image of England.

Step 2: Now that you have your country, use the color picker tool to get the color of the country OR get a gray color. Now use the magic wand tool to select the outside of the asset and hit CTRL+I to invert your selection. Get the brush tool, and paint over the country. Until you get something like either of these:

Step 3: Find the concrete texture image in the Focus Icon Stuff folder I gave you at the beginning of this guide (it should be called 00_10415). Adjust the brightness and contrast on it, you'll see why in a minute. Now, make the layer with the concrete texture on it an overlay layer, you can do this by just clicking twice on the layer and finding it in blend mode. After that, create a new layer underneath it and paste your outline of England into it.

Now you have this:

Now I'm going to explain why you might get the color gray instead of the light red that England uses. Find an example of whatever flag you want to use, I'll be using the English flag.

Create a new layer over the outline of gray England, and set it to overlay. Then paste the English flag into the overlay layer and move it until it's right over the outline. After you're done with that, select the layer with the gray outline and use the magic wand tool outside of the outline. Now go to the overlay layer again, and erase everything in the selection, leaving only the part of the flag that was over the outline remaining. Now you can merge the layer down onto the gray outline and then do what was described above with the concrete texture, make sure that you adjust the brightness, contrast, and saturation after you do that. You should have something like this now:

Step 4: Now, select outside of the outline and then invert your selection. Merge your outline layer with the concrete layer and make sure you keep your selection of the outline and copy the selection of the merged concrete and outline and paste it into another canvas the same way we did earlier with the Tiger tank. Now you should have this:


Step 5-6: You're going to bevel it and shade it, you should know how to do this now. The only difference is that you will probably need to feather the asset, just set the radius of that to 2. Now you can decide if you want to use the other bevel effect I mentioned earlier, I will be using it. Make sure you give the asset a decent level of beveling, this kind of asset can have a bit more.
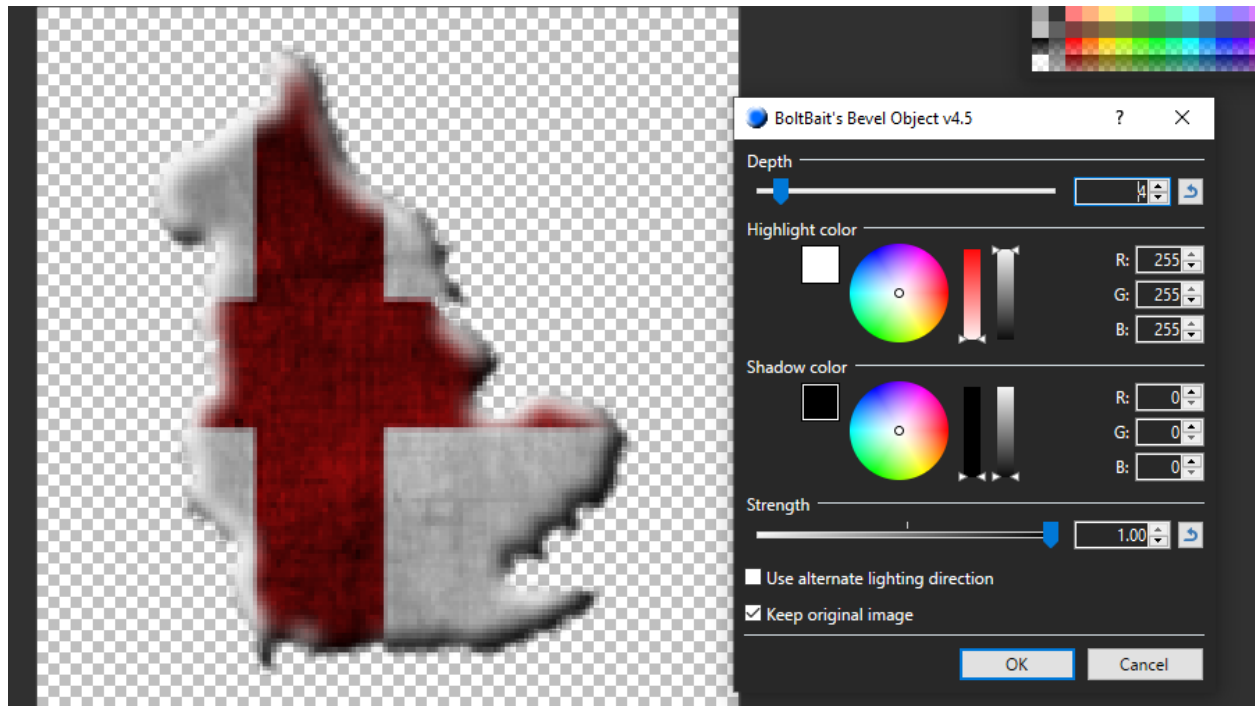
Now do the rest, shade it like you would any other asset and then you're done with that asset. We're not quite done with orthographic maps, however. Occasionally, you'll be asked to map out entire regions, including the different borders within them. This process needs to be done differently from the one I showed you above.

Step 1: You're gonna need to get a map of the area you'll be making. I usually just boot up TNO and take a screenshot of the area I'll be messing with. I'll be using bohemia and slovakia because it's simple.
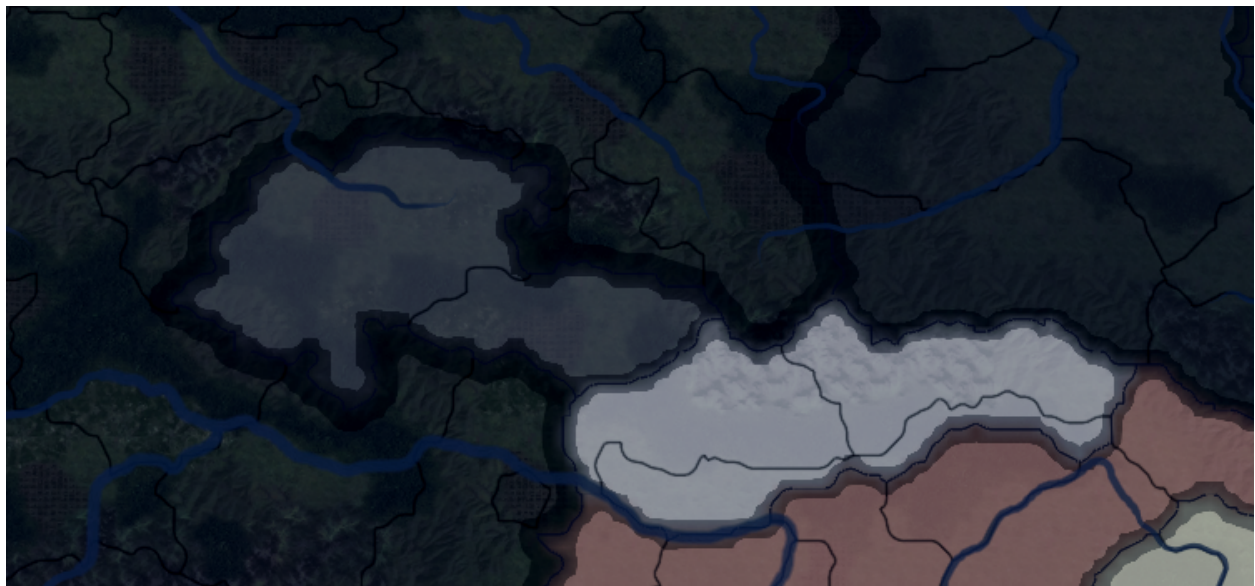
Once you have the region, do what I told you earlier and trace around it. Do the ENTIRE region you want to use, don't just do slovakia and cut it into a new layer, and then bohemia and cut it into a new layer and piece them together. You should get something like this:
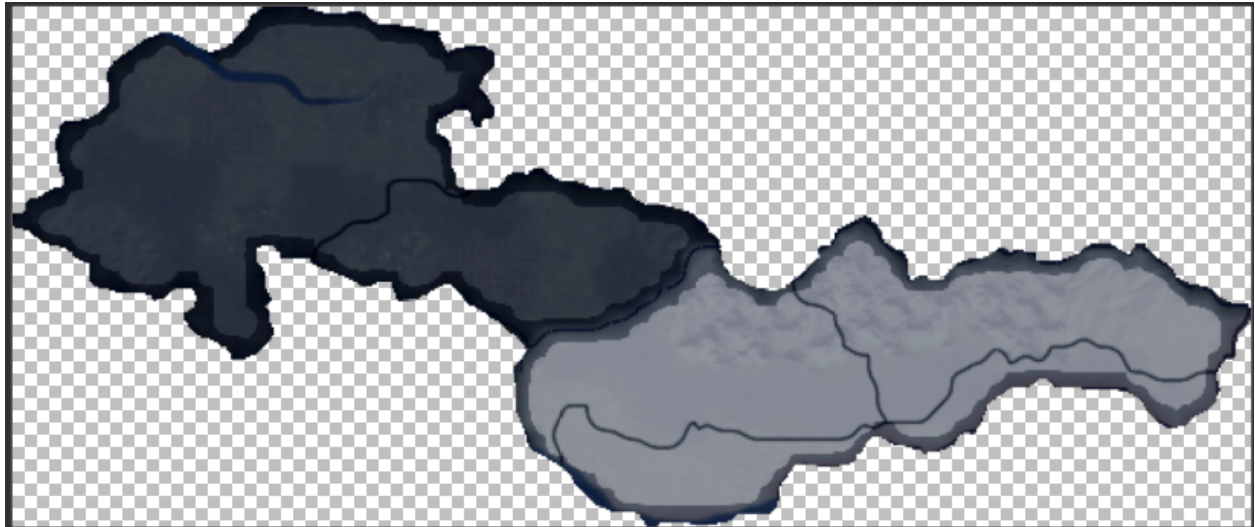

Step 2: Use the magic wand tool to select the outside of the map and then invert the selection so you have all of the countries selected. Then using the lasso tool, hold alt and deselect one of the countries.

You should now have something like this. Don't separate them yet, make sure you've only got one layer here. Now, scale it down so it looks right


Finally, we're now going to cover flags. To be honest, I loathe making flags because it can be a bit tedious. There are several flag templates to choose from in the folder I gave you in the beginning, find one you like and open it in paint.net.

Step 1: Making flags isn't a long process, find the flag you like. I'll be using this one:
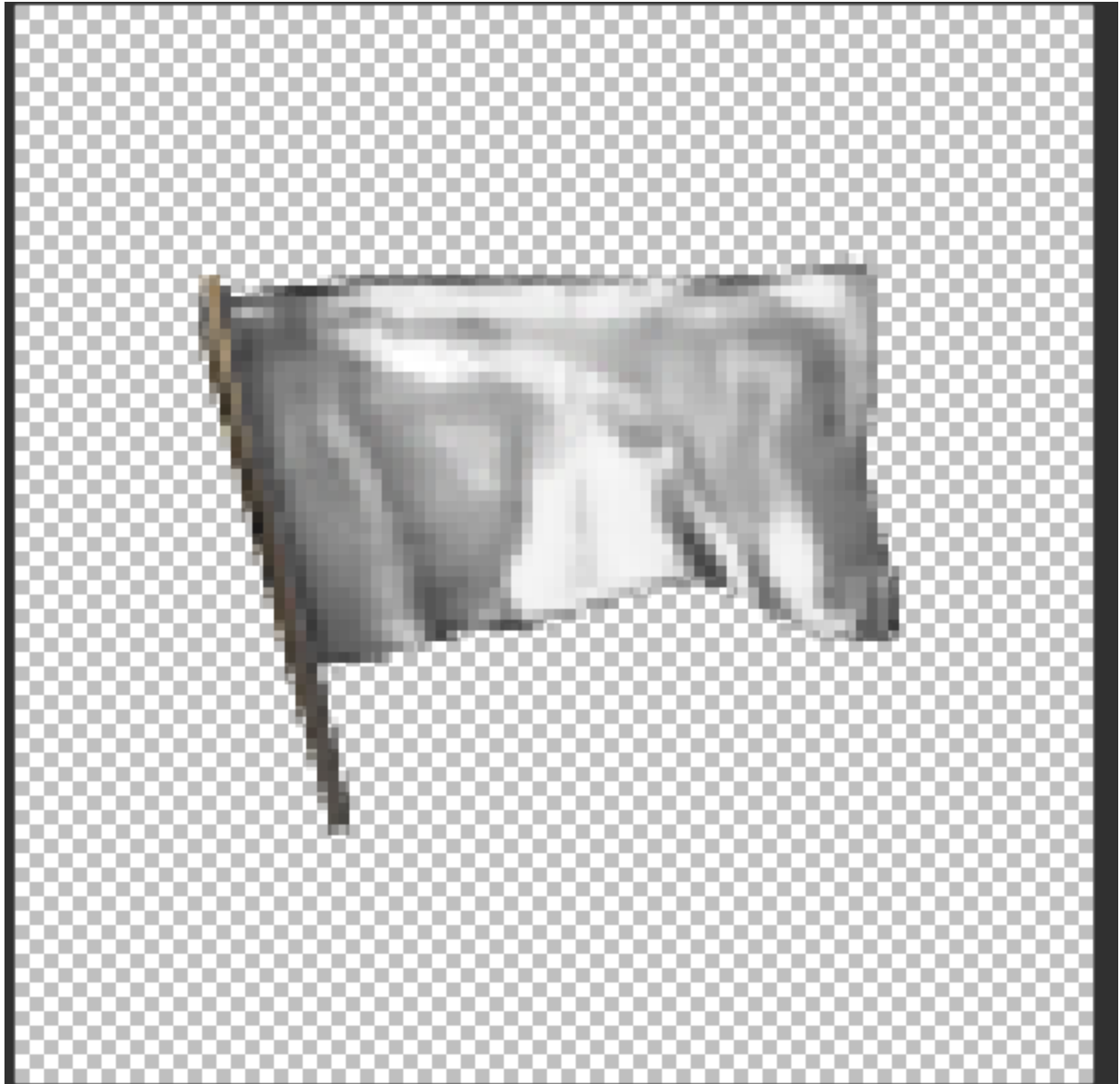

Create a new layer set to multiply in the blend mode settings over the flag one and then find the flag you want to use and open it in paint.net.

Step 2: Onto the tedious part, open the flag you'll be using and then go to the effects menu, find the tools tab and select the grid warp tool. You'll be presented with a new menu that will look like this:
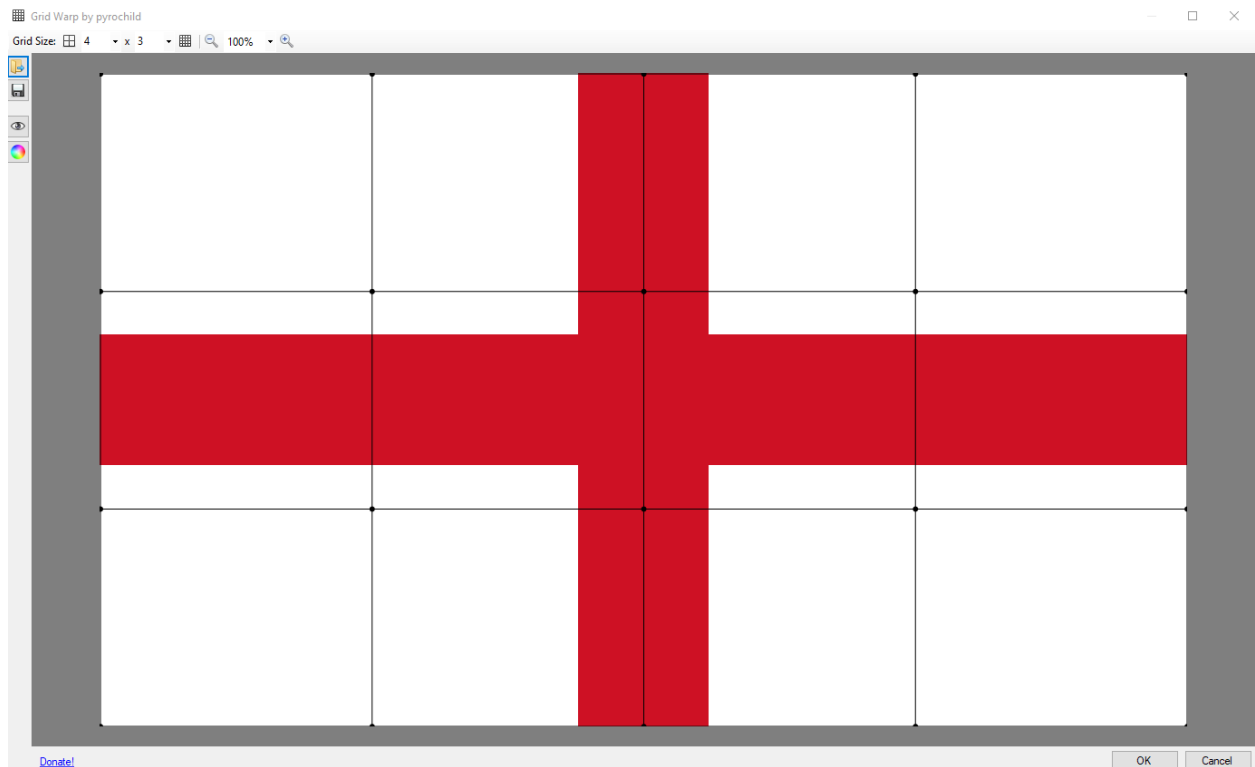
Click on the points and move them until the flag looks like it would fit over the template you're using. Mine looked like this, it doesn't need to be exact, just needs to be close. Mine looked like this:
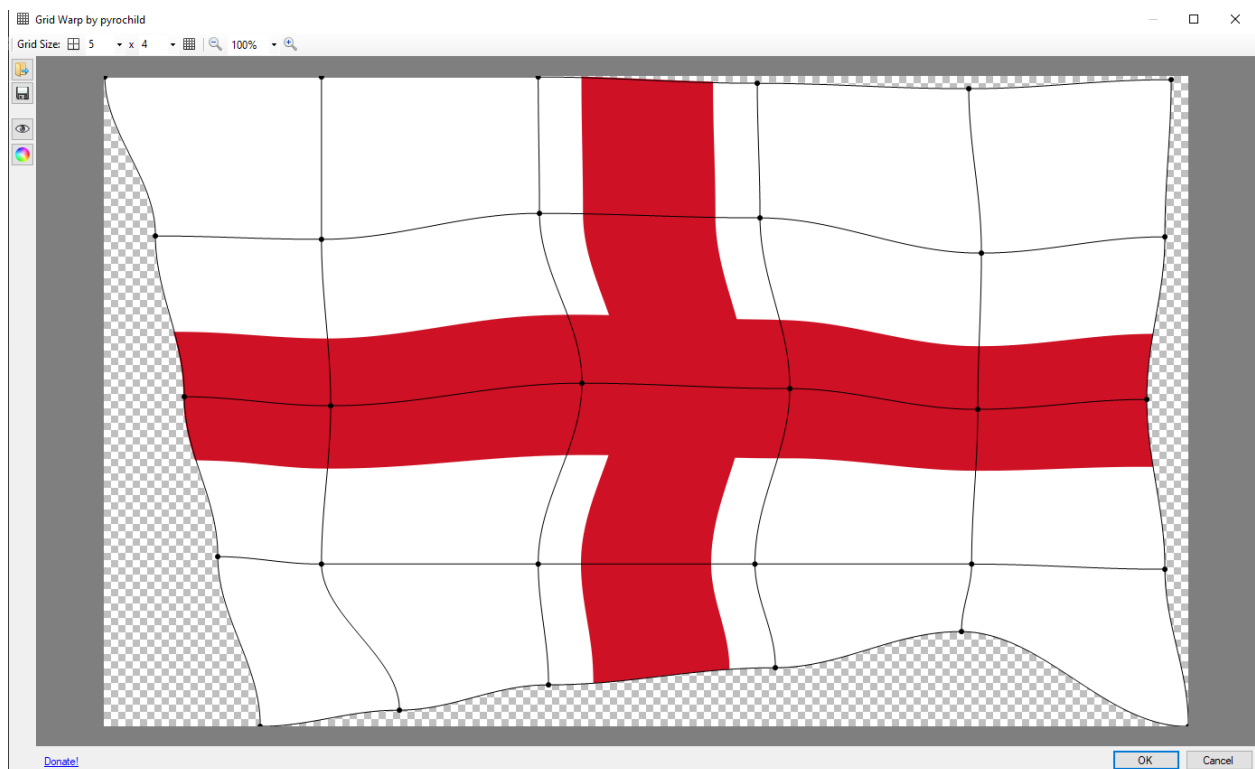
Hit OK, and then copy the flag into the overlay layer over the flag template.

Step 3: Adjust your flag over the template until it fits, and get rid of the parts of the flag overlay layer that go outside the lines of the flag template. After you do this, shade it. Flag assets under most circumstances should NEVER be bevelled. If all went well you should now have this:

Now, there is one thing I have not yet covered with asset making, and I mentioned it at the very beginning of this guide. Complex assets are essentially multiple different objects of focus in one asset, each of these objects needs to be separated from each other and beveled for clarity. Here's an example that I used in my first guide:

You see this asset? Notice how only the outside is beveled, and all the dogs just kinda blend together into one doggy blob. This issue gets compounded when it gets scaled down. So what we do to keep it clear is carefully use the lasso tool to separate each dog from the other dogs. Once you get one dog separated from another, you put it into a new layer and bevel it. However, you need to flatten the asset down again before you shade it. Do not shade the different dog layers individually, it just ruins the asset.

Now, you can see how clear the different dogs are from each other after they've been beveled separately from each other. Now, you probably won't be dissecting dog pictures for assets usually, but if you have to make your own custom asset of marching soldiers for example, you probably will
Voila, we're now done with the asset making part of this guide.

Part 3: Frame Making
(To be added) (You'll have plenty of frames to choose from in the background folder anyway)

Part 4: Overlays and Making Stuff Look Extra Nice

So, we've covered asset making, we've covered frame making, but we need to cover the extra little fun parts of icon making before we can move on to actually making one. One of my favorite parts of making icons is using overlay layers. To put it simply, an overlay layer allows you to put color over something without changing the original texture of the image beneath it. Here's an example:

  and with an overlay

Most of the time you'll be using it to make gray frames look better, but sometimes you'll need to make something more interesting with one. For example, when working with assets involving fire you can get a really cool effect on all the other assets and on the frame by using an overlay layer with some sampled colors from the fire. I'll show you how that works.

Step 1: Get a good fire asset, and put it in a frame somewhere. In the folder I gave you earlier, I gave one of my fire assets, so I'll be using that. In order to even have this work well, you're going to need other assets and a frame, so I'll be making a quick icon just to demonstrate how it works. Here's the icon I'll be using as an example:

Step 2: Open up two new layers above the other ones, and set the one on top to glow, and the one on the bottom to overlay. We're going to be making the flames reflect on the rest of the icon with

these, so get one of the darker oranges and brighter yellows from the fire asset using the color picker tool. Once you're done doing that, set both brush colors to be at 5 brush width 50 opacity and 0% hardness, you're going to be tracing over things several times with these brushes to get the lighting looking right.

Step 3: Switch to the normal overlay layer, and start tracing over areas where the fire would be lighting things up. Do it slowly and carefully, and trace over certain areas multiple times with both the yellow brush and orange brush colors you got from the fire. After a little tinkering you should have something that looks like this:

Now, as you can probably tell, this doesn't quite look right, does it? We've got to tinker with the overlay more, so get the eraser tool and keep it set to a brush with 50% opacity and slowly go over the areas that shouldn't be as bright a few times until everything starts blending together better. After some tinkering you should have something like this:

This is better. You could probably tinker with it more and make it look even better, but I think it looks fine.

Step 4: Now that we're done with the overlay layer we can move on to the glow layer. Simply paste everything from the overlay layer to the glow layer. It won't look right at first and we'll need to tinker with it some like we did with the overlay layer. Now we should have something that looks like this:

As you can see, it is WAY TOO FUCKING BRIGHT. Not hard to fix, we can do a few things, mess with the brightness, saturation, and opacity for example. I'll be starting with the brightness and saturation.
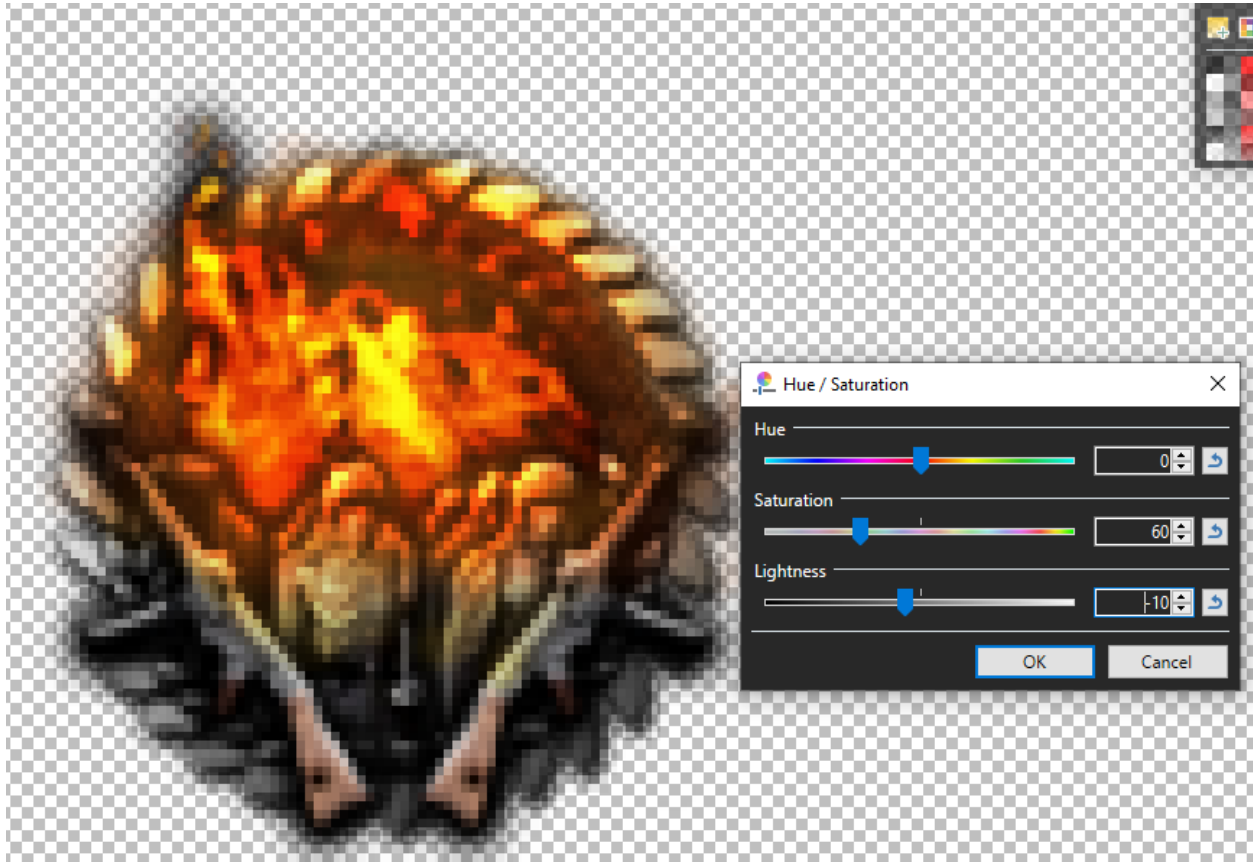
Now it is a *little* better, but we still need to do more. Go to the opacity settings of the layer and adjust it down some. I set it all the way down to 100 opacity, which makes for a much better fire overlay. Here's what we have at the end of all this:

I think this looks pretty nice. Generally overlay's aren't too hard to figure out, they just take some patience and plenty of tinkering to get looking right. Feel free to experiment with them.

Now that this section is over, we can finally get to the fun part, actually making icons.

Part 5: Making a Damn Good Icon

Now that you know how to make assets and frames, we can start making our own icon. For this, I'm only going to make one example, you can look through the completed icons in the folder I gave you earlier if you want to see some other examples, or just look through the gfx-artists channel.

Step 1: Find a request on the GFX doc or icon on the icon redo doc that you want to do. I'll be redoing this icon:

There are numerous problems with it, the frame is not shaded enough, there is a flat image in the background, nothing breaks the frame, and in my opinion, it's just really boring. I think it needs a full redo, so that's what we'll be doing.

Step 2: Select a frame, I really like the diamond frame in the backgrounds folder, and it's similar to the one above, so we'll will be using it.

Now that we have selected our frame, hit CTRL+Shift+G to make it gray. This is a burgundy icon, so after this you'll need to open a new layer above it and set it to overlay. Use the color wheel to find a nice burgundy purple and set your brush width to 5 and just color the frame with it. After you're done coloring it in, it's a good idea to mess with the saturation and brightness to make sure you don't have a frame that's too saturated. We now have this:

Shade it a bit and then unless you feel like editing parts of the frame, you should be done with this step.

Step 3: Next we need to find a bunch of good assets to make this icon look nice. Since you know how to make assets now, I'm just going to show you the end products.

(Note: the soldier asset is not mine, someone on the art team gave it to me, but I forgot who. Thanks to whichever artist made this!)

Step 4: Now we need to arrange these assets in and around the frame that looks good. With reworks, you want to stay close to the original, but you can still get a bit creative if you want. This is how I arranged them:

We're not quite done though, as you can see, the soldiers assets juts out from under the frame, and the alarm goes behind the frame. After I clean up the soldier asset by erasing the part that sticks out from the frame, I'm going to demonstrate what "breaking the frame" means.

First, what you need to do is get the lasso tool and select just under the area below the frame and everything above that and then cut and paste it into a new layer that is above the frame.
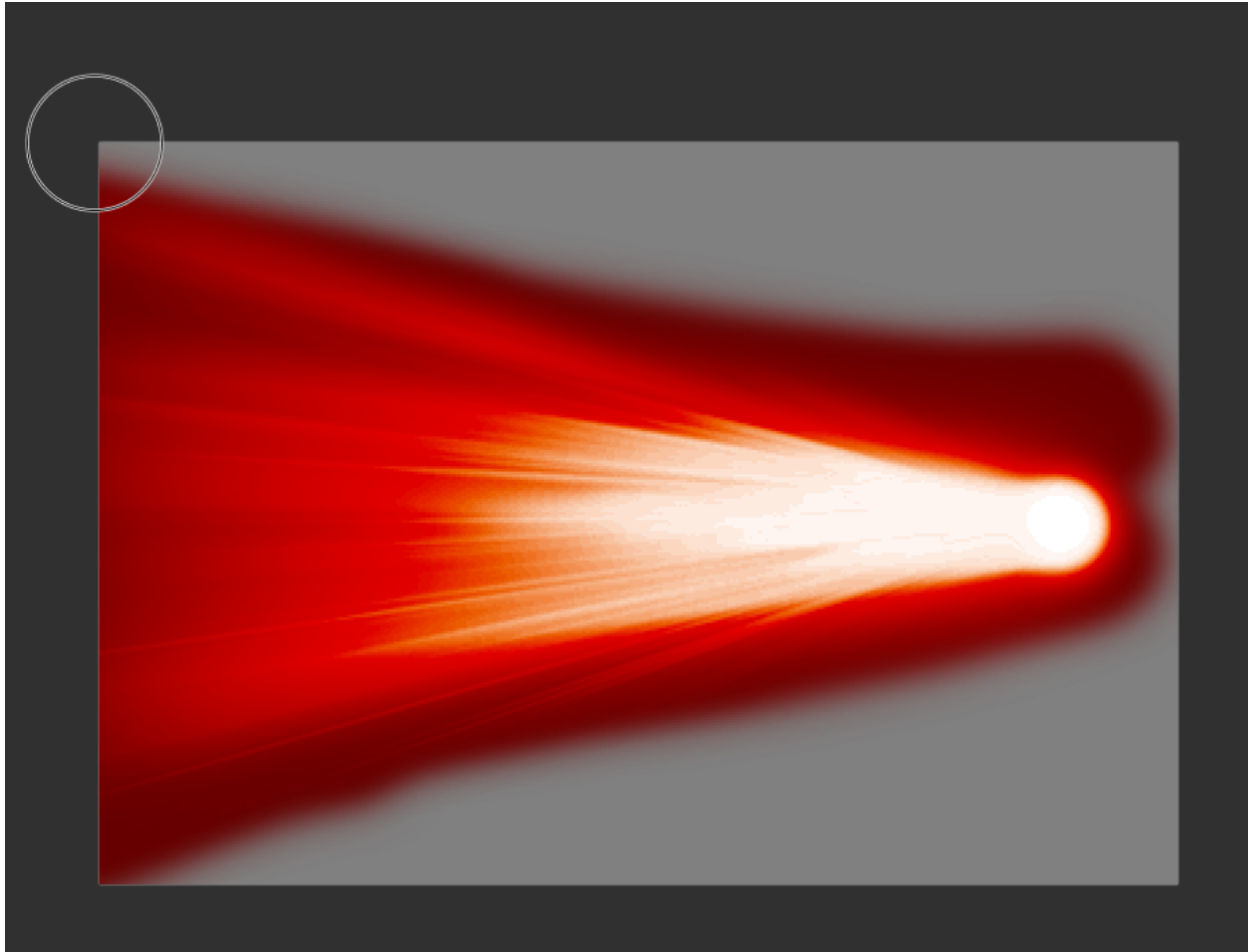
Now we should have this:

Step 5: Now it is time to make it look fucking **_COOL_**. Find a light asset like this:

(This is included in the folder I gave you earlier, it is named light_PNG14418)

Make an overlay layer with the blend setting set to color burn over the layer with the light asset and find a nice red that matches with the alarm. Then, on the overlay layer, start coloring over the light asset until you have something like this:


Now, you just need to clean up the overlay layer until it looks nice, which means erasing the areas where the red goes far outside the actual light asset. We should have this now:
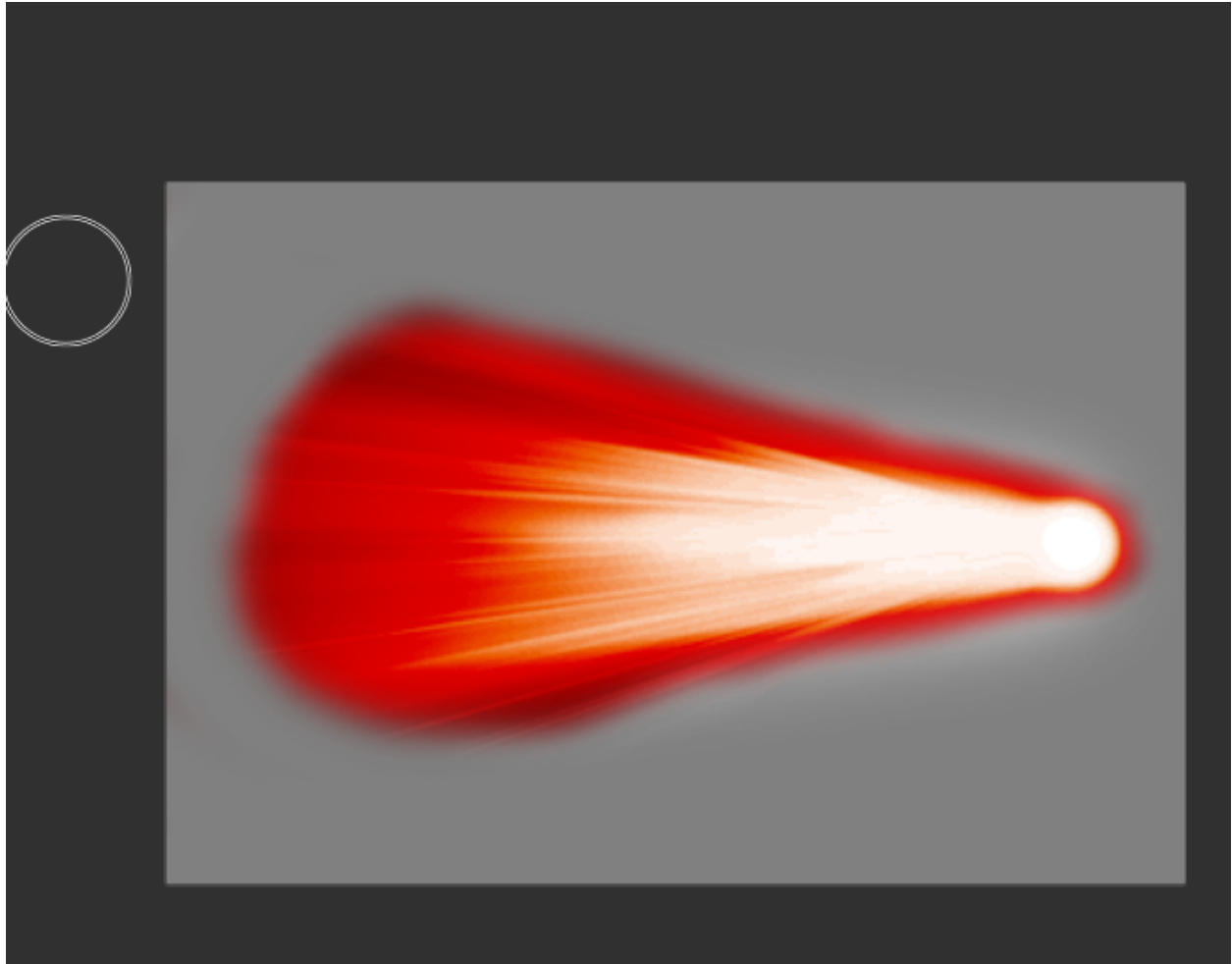
Now, we merge the light layer with the overlay, and copy it over to the icon and place it next to the alarm. I had to fiddle with the saturation and contrast as well as the opacity of the layer to get it to look right with the rest of the icon. Now we have this:

This still isn't quite right though, so copy the lights and make a new layer set to the glow blend mode and paste the lights into the new layer. Now we have this:
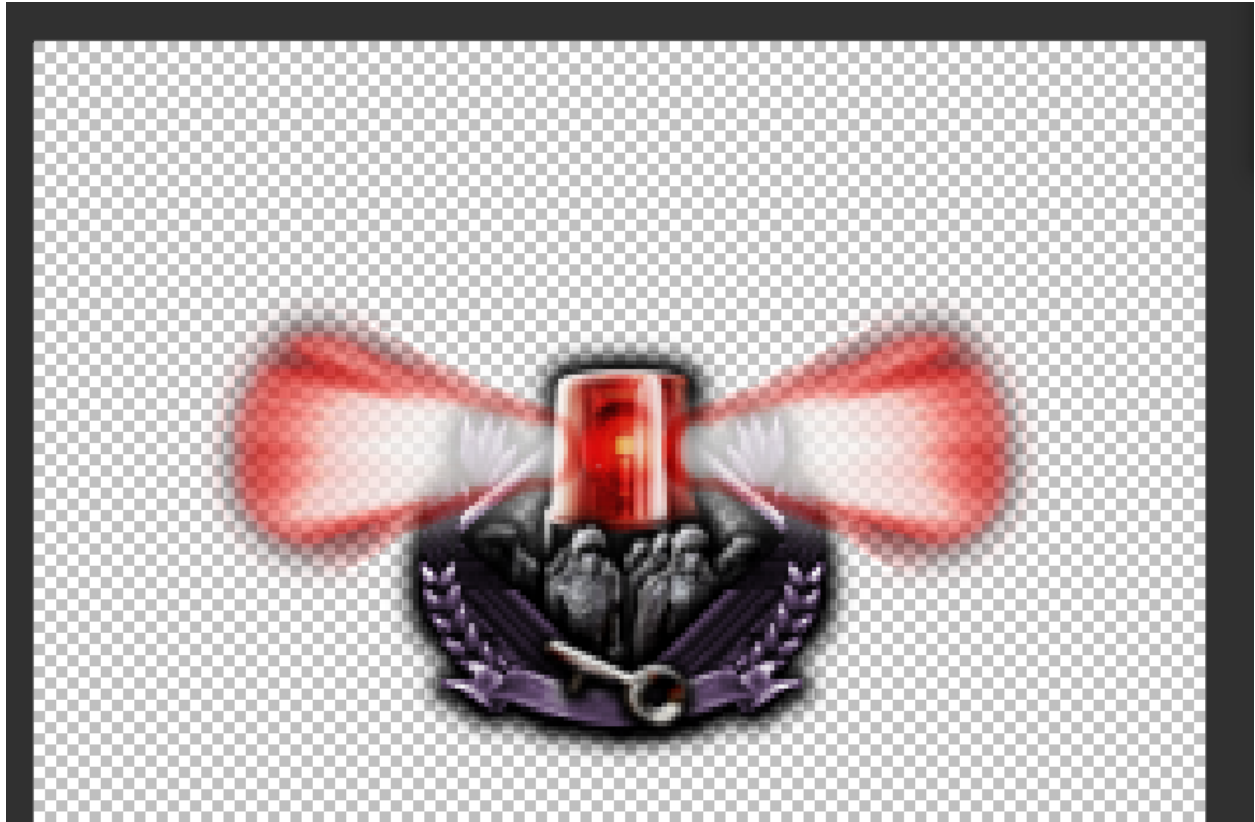
It's all starting to come together, we just have a few more things to do. After cleaning up the light asset some more, I'm going to make it actually reflect onto the frame, like it would do in reality. So using a 50 opacity 0% hardness red brush I'm going to go over the areas around the lights to make it illuminate the frame. Now it looks like this:

Step 6: We're almost done, now we just need a background. Get the concrete asset from earlier, and on the layer the concrete is on, use the ellipse selection tool and get a big round selection over the concrete and color it in with the same purple you colored the frame with. Once you do that, copy it, paste it in a new layer below every other layer, and erase the areas that go above the frame. Finally, we have a complete icon:

Now, post it in the smokepit if you have access, or DM an artist and get some criticism if you think you need it. After I got some advice on how to improve the icon, I now have this:

Now that it's done, it needs to be saved as a dds so it can be implemented by contributors.
MAKE SURE YOU SAVE THE DDS WITH THESE SETTINGS:
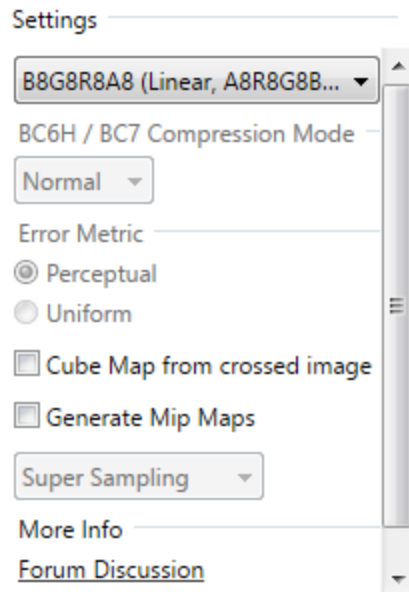
Now, there is one type of icon we have not covered, national spirits. These are much simpler than icons, so this part will be short. The most important part of making a natspirit is scaling everything down to 64x64 and still having it look intelligible. These are made just about the same way that normal icons are made, so there will not be a fully fledged tutorial on them.

- National spirit assets should be shaded and beveled less.
- You do not need a frame when making them.
- Do everything else the same way you would a normal icon, be creative, and make it look nice.