
The Social Background of the Hussite Movement

(Summary)

František Šmahel (Prague)

Why the Premature Reformation in Bohemia?

The reign of Emperor Charles IV (1346–1378) was a time of multifaceted flowering for the lands of the Bohemian crown. Although the Kingdom of Bohemia was a part of the Holy Roman Empire, it was in effect an independent state and its monarch, first among the seven electors of the Empire, ruled as sovereign in his own land. At that time, Moravia, Silesia, and Lusatia also belonged to the lands of the Bohemian crown. Thanks to the silver mines of Kutná Hora and to the foreign policies of the Luxembourg dynasty, the Kingdom of Bohemia was a major European power during the second half of the fourteenth century. Prague, as capital of the kingdom, residence of the Holy Roman Emperor, and seat of the first university north of the Alps and east of the Rhine, began competing with western European cities in cultural activity. Nearly everything which happened in Bohemia from the end of the fourteenth century onwards transcended the local framework and, to a greater or lesser extent, became a part of common European history.

The prime example was a religious revival movement named after its leading theologian, Jan Hus. Radicalized Hussitism in the years 1419–1434 led into a revolutionary conflict during which Bohemia became the target of four international crusades. The crushing defeat of the latter and the incursions of Hussite armies into neighbouring lands compelled representatives of the Council of Basel and the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund to grant extensive concessions, which guaranteed the legality of both Utraquism and Roman Catholicism in the Bohemian lands. Thus Bohemia became, *via facti*, the scene of the first phase of European reformations.

Rulers and Estates

The political geography of the revolutionary scene was already forming during the second half of the rule of Wenceslas IV (1378–1419), who lacked the leadership capabilities of his father Charles. The king represented the sole government institution common to the lands of the Czech crown, while the individual lands enjoyed political structures independent of each other, without even the unifying bond of a general assembly. The division of power which arose in Bohemia after the successful revolt of the upper nobility against the king at the

turn of the fifteenth century consisted of a balanced relationship which neither of the competing sides was able to exploit to its own benefit. Many leading representatives of the Bohemian and Moravian nobility united to become protectors of the reform movement, and against this influential association there formed an opposing league of Catholic magnates. Thus, shortly before the outbreak of the revolution, the feudal community together with other strata of the social pyramid had split into two parallel groupings clashing in their attitudes towards the reform doctrines of Jan Hus.

Interior instability reached its zenith in the critical months after the death of Wenceslas IV. While Hussite Bohemia stood in opposition to the legal heir to the throne, Moravia, Silesia, and Lusatia accepted the Holy Roman Emperor and Hungarian King Sigismund of Luxembourg as their sovereign heir and fulfilled their obligations to him. The cohesion of interest groups according to the estate principle waxed and waned during the Hussite Wars (1419–1436) without any major impact on the revolutionary activities. On the one hand the deep religious differences between the two leading cities of the rival Hussite factions, Prague and Tábor, fractured their class solidarity, despite their close association in military affairs. On the other hand, the revolution enabled not only utraquist burgers but also warrior barons to share significantly in the political life of the land. A time of supra-group coherence, self interest, and political activity of the gentry came along after the Emperor Sigismund was enthroned as King of Bohemia in August 1436. Demands by the lower gentry for seats in the High Court of Justice were rejected by the nobles of both utraquist and Roman Catholic confessions who hoped for a restoration of the pre-revolutionary status quo. The confessional split between the nobles deepened in the second half of the 1460s when Matthias Hunyadi, the King of Hungary, led a crusade against George of Poděbrady (1458–1471), then King of Bohemia. The Olomouc Reconciliation of 1478 opened the way for the re-integration of the Catholic nobles of Bohemia into a united political community. Attempts at a Catholic restoration by King Wladislaw II Jagellon (1471–1516) were foiled by an uprising of Utraquist Prague in September 1483. The nobility of both confessions were then quick to realize the advantages of a divided but balanced power and negotiated a religious peace in 1485.

The People in Town and Country

A special condition was quickly developing among the enfranchised population of royal towns as early as the second half of the fourteenth century, even though higher political consciousness among the townspeople emerged at first only in the budding "Prague" form. The splintering of society into two religious confessions also had its affect on townspeople. Only the towns of the Utraquist League secured full participation in the diets; Catholic towns did not claim this privilege until the second half of the fifteenth century. The deep social cleavage in towns as well as in the countryside separated an elite of town citizens and village magistrates from the bulk of the commoners. This elite, with its property,

privileges, and shared interests with the nobility formed a socio-political stratum between the upper and lower nobility. Feudalisation of the patricians left space for a relatively peaceful rise of the upper middle class and well-to-do artisans to the forefront of the urban communities, mitigating the political and social tensions in towns to a considerable extent.

The Czech peasant of the pre-hussite period was tied to his lords above all economically through the tenancy of cultivated land, involving not only monetary payments but also judicial subjection. Occasionally, village communities attained considerable autonomous powers, including lower judicial and police jurisdiction. Much evidence indicates that the actual motive for the radicalization of the reform movement in some rural areas was not the worsening of living conditions as much as the psychological stress generated by the collective and individual uncertainties of the times. The main cause often was not the feudal lordship which later could suppress the insubordination of Silesian warriors under the Hussite banner. In contrast to the utraquist townspeople, who gained more than they lost by the Hussite revolution, the rural population remained enserfed. Hussitism, however, brought freedom of faith independent of the religion of the lord even to peasants.

The Church

Attempts to improve the ecclesiastical organization and to revitalize religious life took various forms in the Czech lands. Emphasis on the inward experience of the individual in Bohemia, paralleling the *devotio moderna* movement abroad, had as one of its effects the demand for a Czech translation of the entire Bible. In this regard, Bohemia was ahead of the majority of European countries. In spite of the fact that even the Archbishops of Prague were trying to reform the life of the clergy and purge it of all scandalous lifestyles, the expenses of the papal schism had brought on a new wave of fiscal demands and various manifestations of simony. Independent of the strictly religious context, the disproportionately high concentration of land in the hands of the church, particularly monastic institutions, was a thorn in the side of both the higher and lower nobility who felt injured economically. The secularization of church property was clearly one of the central points of the Hussite reform programme which later turned to issues in which the Roman Church was seen as violating the commandments of the Bible and the practice of the primitive church. The structure of the Roman Church was shattered by the Hussite Wars. The hierarchy lost its political influence for two centuries, the See of Prague remained vacant until the year 1561, and the majority of monasteries in Bohemia and even in parts of Moravia were demolished or used for secular purposes. The shortage of priests resulted in a significant number of vacant village parishes. Even the utraquist clergy struggled in the face of considerable material difficulties, although towns and other communities undertook their support.