
Inventing the Hussite Nation: Liberals, Catholics, and Protestants in Conflict over Czech National Identity

Peter Pabian

(Prague)

In this paper, I will focus on two aspects of the same topic: first, I will depict the uses of Bohemian reformation traditions in nineteenth-century Czech nation building, and second, I will analyse the consequences of these uses of “Hussite” traditions for religious practice among Czechs in the interwar period.

Correspondingly, I have two main aims. First, I want to challenge the currently prevailing view that there was only one version of Czech national identity available in the nineteenth century: the identity of the Czech nation as a Hussite nation. In opposition to this view, I propose an alternative version, which allows for a plurality of Czech national identities. I will concentrate on the religious dimension of this plurality and argue that there were at least three contending versions of Czech national identity: Liberal, Protestant, and Catholic. Viewed from this perspective, the Hussite identity of the Czech nation was constructed and circulated by the Liberal and Protestant parts of the national movement with the aim of strengthening their position within the nation. My second aim is to show that this invention of Hussite national identity profoundly influenced religious practice among the Czechs: following the establishment of independent Czechoslovakia in 1918 it led to one of the greatest religious changes in modern European history.

The paper is organised in four parts. In the first part, I give a brief overview of the religious situation in the Czech lands as a background to the following analysis of Catholic and Protestant national identities. Then I recount the predominant story of Czech-nation building focusing on the roles of Catholics and Protestants in this story. In the third part of this paper, I outline the three versions of Czech national identity together with their corresponding uses of Hussite historical traditions. Finally, I will look at the religious outcomes of this conflict over Czech national identity after the establishment of the Czech nation-state in 1918.

Religious Profile of the Czech Lands

In the nineteenth century, the population of the lands of the Bohemian crown were almost exclusively Roman Catholic with only small Protestant and Jewish minorities. In this respect, there were no significant differences between Moravia and Bohemia or between Czechs and other nationalities.

Denominations in the Czech Lands in the Nineteenth Century (census of 1900) ¹			
	Catholics	Protestants	Jews
Czech lands	95,0	3,2	1,6
Czechs in Bohemia	96,6	2,1	1,3
Czechs in Moravia	96,2	3,4	0,4
Other nationalities	92,8	4,3	2,4

However, after the establishment of independent Czechoslovakia in 1918, the Czech lands underwent sweeping religious change: the number of Catholics dropped considerably, the number of Protestants rose, some seven percent of the population joined the new Czechoslovak Church and about the same number left the churches altogether.

Interwar Period (census of 1930) ²					
	Catholics	Protestants	Jews	Czechoslovak Church	Not affiliated
Czech lands	78,6	4,7	0,7	7,3	7,8
Czechs in Bohemia	67,6	4,7	0,7	13,0	13,7
Czechs in Moravia	85,2	4,4	0,3	6,2	3,7
Other nationalities	89,1	4,9	1,0	0,0	2,6

Moreover, the extent of religious change differed significantly between Czechs and other nationalities and even between Czechs in Bohemia and Czechs in Moravia. Most of the change took place among the Czechs in Bohemia; almost one third of them changed their religious affiliation within some ten years after the end of the World War I. Almost one half of this third simply disaffiliated from the Roman Catholic church without joining any other church; the majority of the other half joined the newly established Czechoslovak Church and some two percent of Czechs converted to one of the Protestant churches.

All this switching amounted to one of the greatest and fastest religious changes in modern European history. The most important factor in this change was, in my opinion, the use of "Hussite" traditions in a conflict over Czech national

¹ Theodor Živanský, "Náboženská a církevní statistika Rakouska-Uherska," in Zdeněk Václav Tobolka, ed., *Česká politika, vol 1* (Praha, 1906) 678-718.

² *Náboženské vyznání obyvatelstva podle výsledků sčítání lidu v letech 1921-1991* [Česká statistika, 48] (Praha, 1995).

identity. Now, after setting the stage, I will turn to the predominant story of Czech-nation building.

The Inherited Story

According to contemporary Czech historiography, there was only one fairly homogenous Czech national movement, led by the politicians of the national-Liberal party, as well as only one national public disseminating single national identity. From the 1860s, national leaders increasingly employed “Hussite” historical traditions to underpin this Czech national identity.³

For example, Hussite traditions played an important role in the first mass mobilization of popular support for Czech political demands. At the end of the 1860s, Liberal leaders of the national movement organized a number of mass meetings, called *tábory*, in support of their calls for political autonomy for the Czech lands. Besides their name, these meetings widely employed Hussite symbolism of place because they often took place in localities linked to Hussitism (e.g. on Oreb or at Lipany). Furthermore, in 1868, several hundred Czechs undertook a national pilgrimage to Constance to commemorate the death of Jan Hus. One year later, mass meetings took place in Prague and Husinec to commemorate the 500th anniversary of Hus's birth. At the end of the nineteenth century, Czech Liberals initiated the best-known and the most lasting example of the deployment of Hussite traditions, the Jan Hus memorial on the Old Town Square in Prague, at the very heart of the national capital.

These examples, besides illustrating the importance of Hussite traditions in the predominant interpretation of Czech-nation building, provide an excellent opportunity to examine the roles Roman Catholics and Protestants play in this story. In brief, whereas Czech Protestants are supposed to accept the Hussite national identity and therefore to participate in the national movement, Czech Roman Catholics seem to have faced a dilemma: either to accept the Hussite traditions at the price of abandoning Roman Catholicism, or to uphold Roman Catholicism at the price of excluding themselves from the national movement. As a result, Czech nationalists remained Roman Catholic in name only while orthodox Roman Catholics ultimately left – and were forced to leave – the national movement and shut themselves away in the “Catholic ghetto”.⁴

³ All contemporary Czech historical works on the nineteenth-century Czech nation building either presuppose or explicitly articulate this story. To my knowledge, I am the first to challenge it and to offer an alternative.

⁴ Jiří Rak, *Bývalí Čechové... České historické mýty a stereotypy* (Praha, 1994); Jiří Rak, "Katolicismus v názorech české vlastenecké společnosti 19. století", in Roman Musil and Aleš Filip, eds., *Zajatci hvězd a snů: Katolická moderna a její časopis Nový život (1896-1907)* (Praha, 2000) 24-36; Jiří Rak, "Dělníci na vinici Páně nebo na roli národní?" in Zdeněk Hojda and Roman Prahel, eds., *Bůh a bohové: Církev, náboženství a spiritualita v českém 19. století* (Praha, 2003) 128-138; Martin C. Putna, *Česká katolická literatura v evropském kontextu, 1848-1918* (Praha, 1998).

The events cited above appear to give credence to this account. Protestants constituted a considerable portion of the participants in the 1868 national Hus pilgrimage and two of the four main speakers in Constance were Protestant pastors. In contrast, the leading Roman Catholic magazine, *Časopis katolického duchovenstva*, condemned the pilgrimage as anti-Catholic and urged all Roman Catholics to avoid it. In the case of Hus's memorial in Prague, the archbishop of Prague himself led the Roman Catholic deputation to the mayor of Prague with the aim of preventing the building of the memorial. On the other hand, Protestants vigorously took part in the fund-raising campaign for the memorial.

To summarise the argument so far, it seems that this version of Czech nation building has some merit. However, I will argue in the following section that it is completely mistaken when presuming the existence of a solitary Czech national identity. I will show that Protestants participated in the building of the Hussite nation even though they didn't accept the Liberal interpretation of Hussite traditions and that Roman Catholics, despite their rejection of Hussite traditions, maintained their own distinct version of Czech national identity. In due course, I will show that the interpretation of Hussitism was central to all these three versions of Czech national identity.

Protestant, Catholic and Liberal national identities

If we look in more detail on the Protestant participation in the two events mentioned above, the celebration of Hus's anniversary in 1869 and the campaign for building of the Hus memorial in Prague, we will discover some aspects of their participation that are absent from the dominant narrative. Pulling these pieces together, I will argue that Protestants constructed and circulated their own distinct interpretation of Hussite traditions as well as their own distinct national identity.⁵

In 1869, Czech Protestants participated actively in the public commemorations of the 500th anniversary of Hus's birth. To give just one example, one of the main speakers at the Prague meeting was a Protestant pastor. However, it was not enough for a Protestant to participate in these Liberal celebrations. Therefore, in addition to participation in these mainstream meetings, Czech Protestants organized their own. The anniversary was commemorated in many local congregations and a national commemorative Protestant meeting, attracting some fifty thousand people, took place in Čáslav. Similarly, at the turn of the century Protestants raised funds not only for the Hus memorial but also for the building of the organisational centre of the Czech Protestant churches, the so-called Hus House (*Husův dům*) in Prague. Even more telling were the oft-repeated appeals to non-Protestant Czechs to build a true Hus memorial, not one made of stone but a living memorial in heart. In other words, Protestants repeatedly invited their fellow Czechs

⁵ For a more developed account, see Petr Pabian, "Protestantská verze české národní identity ve druhé polovině 19. století," *Acta Facultatis Philosophicae Universitatis Ostraviensis: Historica* 11 (2004) 137-148.

to follow the Hussite traditions to their true conclusion: to a conversion to Protestantism.

These three aspects, that is, Hussite traditions, Czech nationality and the Protestant church, were in this conception so closely bound together that it was impossible to separate them without destroying them all. Therefore, Czech Protestants read the Czech history as a story of the indissoluble union of the Czech nation and the Protestant church. The Czech nation was great as long it was Protestant, i.e. in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while the extinction of the Protestant church during the Counter-Reformation brought the Czech nation to the verge of extinction as well. The lesson to be learned from this history is clear: the Czech nation must become Protestant again if it is to regain its past glory.

From this position Czech Protestants criticised the Liberal interpretation of the Hussite tradition. In their view, it was not enough to commemorate Jan Hus as a herald of the freedom of conscience, as did the Liberals; one must realise that he was above all a herald of Protestantism. Therefore, the Protestants decried the superficial Hussitism of the Czech Liberals who, despite their anti-clericalism, remained members of the Roman Catholic Church.

On the other hand, orthodox Roman Catholics criticized Liberal Hussitism from a completely different standpoint.⁶ For them, the Liberals were infidels masquerading themselves as neo-Hussites. Czech Roman Catholics stressed the religious character of the original Hussite movement against the Liberal interpretation of Hussitism as a fight against Rome and for the freedom of conscience. The Hussites themselves, as one famous Roman Catholic dictum said, would burn all the modern "Hussites" to death. In a similar way, Czech Roman Catholics refuted the Protestant interpretation of Hussitism: Jan Hus was not a Protestant, but a Roman Catholic priest – a mistaken Catholic priest, no doubt, but a Roman Catholic priest nonetheless.

Moreover, this criticism was not expressed in purely religious terms, as the historians propagating the dominant version would like to have us believe. Quite the contrary: Czech Roman Catholics developed a distinct version of Czech national identity coupled with a distinct interpretation of Czech history. This version of national identity may be easily summarized in seven words: the Czech nation must be Roman Catholic.

Orthodox Roman Catholics interpreted Hussitism against all attempts to build the Czech national identity on Hussite traditions. They saw Hussitism as the most tragic event in the history of the Czech nation, an event that destroyed the religious unity of the nation, led to a civil war as a consequence and finally to the revolt which brought the Czech nation to the verge of extinction. Fortunately, the nation was rescued from this lamentable state and had become Roman Catholic again. With this reading of Czech history in mind, Czech Roman Catholics denounced the neo-

⁶ For a more detailed account, see Petr Pabian, "Katolické ghetto, nebo katolický národ? České katolické vlastenectví na konci 19. století," *Kuděj* (2005) 131-137.

Hussites as the greatest enemies of the nation, those who were trying to break the unity of the nation and thus endanger its very existence once again.

Therefore, the Liberal version of the Czech national identity, which in the dominant narrative is the only national identity available, becomes in my alternative version only one of contending national identities. I therefore see the Liberal interpretation of Hussitism as facing opposition from both Protestant and Roman Catholic sides. In this struggle, all three camps used scholarly historiography to bolster their position; accordingly, the historiography of Hussitism became a battlefield on which the conflict over Czech national identity was fought.

In the end, I see the Liberal promotion of Hussite national identity as a strategy to strengthen the position of the Liberal camp within the nation because their interpretation of Hussite traditions placed the Liberal values of freedom of conscience and representative government at the heart of the Hussite movement. In this reading, the Liberals were the true inheritors of the great traditions of the Czech nation.

To sum up, in my version of the story all the three groups, Liberals, Protestants and Roman Catholics, employed their interpretations of Hussite tradition to construct their particular versions of Czech national identity. Furthermore, they all used these contending versions of national identity in their attempts at both symbolic and political dominance of the emerging Czech national society. In the nineteenth century this conflict remained unresolved: all the three groups worked hard to bolster their positions and believed in final victory. However, the establishment of an independent Czechoslovakia in 1918 brought about a radical change.

The Conflict over Czech National Identity in Independent Czechoslovakia

The new state was built emphatically on Hussite traditions. President Masaryk concisely summarized the state-building task in the slogan "*Tábor je náš program*". This Hussitism carried strong anti-Catholic overtones and the anti-Catholic wave culminated in the destruction of several Roman Catholic monuments across the country. The deployment of Hussite traditions bore important consequences for religious practice among the Czechs.

Czech Protestants tried very quickly to seize the mood of the times. Within less than two months after the establishment of the new state, the two largest Protestant denominations, Calvinist and Lutheran, united in a new church embodying their conception of the national church: the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren (*Českobratrská církev evangelická*). The creation of a national church constituted the first step towards the realisation of the Protestant national identity. However, the next step never followed: the Czech nation did not convert to this new church. The new church attracted some eighty thousand converts, a considerable

number given the original church membership of about 160,000, but the Protestant share within the nation remained below five percent of all Czechs.⁷

One year later, a group of Roman Catholic priests established another prospective national church, this time called simply the "Czechoslovak Church". This church employed the Liberal version of Czech national identity and enjoyed the support of the Czech Liberal party. The Czechoslovak Church followed a trajectory similar to the newly-merged Church of the Czech Brethren: the founders invited the nation to join but only some ten percent of Czechs actually became members of this new church.⁸ About the same number of people followed the Liberal interpretation of Hussite traditions to a different conclusion: they moved away from Rome without joining any other church.

However, three quarters of Czechs remained members of the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, the Czechoslovak state had to accommodate the Roman Catholic version of Czech national identity alongside the Hussite one. As a result, the new state adopted among its official public holidays both the day of Jan Hus and the saints' days of the Roman Catholic national patrons St. Wenceslaus and Sts. Cyril and Methodius.⁹ This constituted a remarkable success for Czech Roman Catholics, especially given the originally Hussite and anti-Catholic orientation of the new state.

Nevertheless, this compromise failed to satisfy many Roman Catholics who adhered to the Catholic version of national identity. While the anti-Catholic campaign persuaded them that the Czech nation was no longer Roman Catholic, they did not arrive at the seemingly logical conclusion that a Catholic nation was no longer possible. Quite the opposite: they started to speak openly about a new re-Catholicisation of the Czech nation.¹⁰

In short, the Roman Catholic version of Czech national identity survived even the establishment of the Czechoslovak republic, the nation-state of the Hussite Czech nation. Correspondingly, both attempts to establish a Czech national church failed despite the Hussite character of the new state.

Conclusion

The preceding argument leads me to three main conclusions. First, the Liberal vision of the Hussite nation was not the only existing version of Czech national identity, either in the nineteenth century or during the interwar period. I have

⁷ Rudolf Říčan, "Die Kirchenunion der tschechischen Evangelischen im Jahre 1918," *Communio Viatorum* 11 (1968) 265-276.

⁸ Martin Schulze Wessel, "Konfessionelle Konflikte in der Ersten Tschechoslowakischen Republik: Zum Problem des Status von Konfessionen im Nationalstaat," in Hans-Christian Maner and Martin Schulze Wessel, eds., *Religion im Nationalstaat zwischen den Weltkriegen 1918-1939: Polen – Tschechoslowakei – Ungarn – Rumänien* (Stuttgart, 2002) 73-101.

⁹ Radovan Suchánek, "Vývoj svátkového práva od vzniku ČSR po současnost", *Acta Universitatis Carolinae – Iuridica* (1999) 103-115.

¹⁰ Cynthia J. Paces, "The Czech Nation Must Be Catholic! An Alternative Version of Czech Nationalism During the First Republic", *Nationalities Papers* 27 (1999) 407-428.

documented the existence of at least two more alternative versions of the Czech national identity: the Protestant version of the Hussite identity on the one hand and the anti-Hussite Roman Catholic national identity on the other.

Second, the anti-Catholic interpretation of the Hussite national identity introduced a deep gulf between being a Czech and being a Roman Catholic. This led many Czechs to leave the Roman Catholic Church, either to join one of its national alternatives or to give up religious affiliation altogether. All this religious mobility in the 1920s amounted to one of the greatest religious changes in modern European history.

Third, contemporary Czech historiography, which presents the Liberal version of national identity as the only one existing in the nineteenth century, denies the plurality of national identities, eradicates them from historical memory, and therefore hinders the acceptance of the plurality of national identities in contemporary Czech society.