



THE HUSSITES

Stephen E. Lahey

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Introduction

On his return from a meeting in Munich with Hitler in 1938, Neville Chamberlain famously said, “How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is, that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas masks here, because of a quarrel in a far away country between people of whom we know nothing.” He was referring to tensions between ethnic Germans and Czechs in what was then Czechoslovakia which Hitler had used as an excuse to annex the Sudetenland. Eighty years later, the comment continues to irritate the Czechs, in large part because it remains accurate for much of the Anglophone world. Bookstore shelves groan with histories of England, France, Germany, and other familiar countries of Western Europe, and there are always plenty of histories of Russia nearby. But there are very few, if any, on the lands in between, aside from histories of the horrific fighting in the Second World War. The Western world maintains an incurious attitude about “Eastern Europe” that would have been foreign to Europeans of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-centuries. Then, the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania was the most powerful in Europe, the Holy Roman Empire stretched from the Low Countries to Hungary, and Prague was its Second City. Bohemia was an important, centrally located kingdom within the Empire, a midpoint between German- and French-speaking lands on the West, and Hungarian- and Slavic-speaking lands on the East.

Bohemia was torn apart by the Hussite phenomenon between 1419 and 1435, and all of Europe reacted with hor-

ror as its violence spread into Bavaria, Silesia, Moravia, and the Baltic states. Such violence usually accompanied wars between crowns or powerful lords, but here it was waged by lesser nobles, theologians, and commoners. In many histories of the Hussites, it has been common to push aside the theological justifications for the fighting as secondary, masking nationalist or economic issues that are the “real movers” in politics. This is due to the secularism that continues to define Western civilization, separating it from societies in which religion continues to dominate, notably the Muslim world. It is almost impossible to believe that common people would take up farm implements to meet mounted armoured knights in combat for access to the consecrated wine of the Eucharist. Surely there was more at stake than this?

This history, the briefest of overviews of the Hussites, is designed to show why theology was so important to all involved. Its two main chapters are about the events that occurred between 1419 and 1435, the period of main hostilities, and the ideas that animated the behaviour of the Hussites and their opponents. As in the Muslim world today, theology and politics are inextricably connected, and the final chapter will show how this connection has gradually been recovered in contemporary history. The two main parties in the Hussite movement, Prague and Tábor, regularly met in acrimonious attempts to iron out theological differences. The violence only came to an end when Prague recognized that Tábor’s refusal to compromise on theological issues was becoming insuperable. Other historians have cast this story in terms of Czech nationalism, or as a class struggle between the city bourgeois and the rural proletariat, or as the labour pains for the events that would produce the Protestant Reformation. These are all anachronisms, histories describing events of the fifteenth century in terms defined in the nineteenth century. The tendency among scholars and historians of the post-Soviet era has been to pay much more attention to the theology behind Hussitism, an approach that this work will attempt to reflect.

The great barrier to the study of the Hussites continues to be the lack of availability of instruction in the Czech language. As will become clear, the great renaissance of the Czech language and culture of the mid-nineteenth century centred on the Hussites, and especially Jan Hus himself, as the historical moment of Czech self-definition. The scholarship on the Hussite period is vast, and encompasses theology, politics, social history, church-state relations, economics, and has led to a wealth of editions of Hussite works—all in Czech. At a recent conference, some Anglophone scholars referred to the Hussite period as a veritable goldmine, rich with opportunities for groundbreaking work, within earshot of some Czech scholars, who were understandably nonplussed. On the other hand, Czech scholars continue to produce original and often brilliant scholarship in a language to which access remains notably difficult. Additionally, they have been heard to grumble that nobody who is not a Czech can really understand the Hussite movement, an odd sentiment for citizens of a country with the greatest proportion of atheists in the world. One might as easily wonder how anyone who is not a medieval priest can possibly understand medieval theology. The divisions that separated Bohemia from the West so dramatically as to give rise to Chamberlain's question continue to bedevil Hussite scholarship.

There is a very broad range of subjects relevant to the study of the Hussites that do not appear in this narrative. These include the development of vernacular Hussite literature, hymnody, and liturgy, the impact of the Hussites on contemporary theological discourse at the church councils of Konstanz and Basel, and in universities across Europe, the rich cultural and literary interplay between England and Bohemia, the economic relation of towns, villages, and manor farms in Bohemia, the relation of the kingdom of Bohemia to the rest of the Holy Roman Empire, and the manifold repercussions of the papal schism. I say nothing of religious iconography and Hussite iconoclasm, the role of Hus in the Reformation, and very little of hostile contemporary narratives, such as that of Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, regarding the Hussites. Recent important contributions to these topics have enriched contemporary

scholarship.¹ Readers may also be surprised to find Jan Hus playing a much smaller role in this narrative than is usual. This is because his later reputation has been used to elevate him above his contemporaries and successors with a hagiographic awe. More able theologians like Jakoubek and Rokycana remain in the shadows. One would think that it took the Bohemian reform movement four years to recover from his death before its leaders could work up their spirits to stage the Defenestration. His works continue to be read as though they alone encapsulate the Hussite theology, despite his having said almost nothing about *utraquism* (congregants taking Communion in both kinds, bread and wine, instead of bread alone), and the fact that most of what he had said on other topics had already been said by earlier Bohemian theologians like Matěj of Janov.

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Žádám ty, kteří vy, aby mi odpustili a udělat lépe, než jsem udělal.

¹ See Katarina Horníčková and Michal Sronek, *From Hus to Luther: Visual Culture in the Bohemian Reformation, 1380-1620* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), and Phillip Haberkern, *Patron Saint and Prophet: Jan Hus in the Bohemian and German Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Leading Figures in the Hussite History

Adalbert Ranconis	d. 1388	Theologian, trained in Paris
Aleš Vřeštovský	d. 1442	Orebite commander
Ambrož Hradecký	d. 1439	Priest, leader of Orebites
Čapek of Sany	d. 1455	Orebite commander
Čenek of Vartenberk	d. 1425	Burgrave of Prague, commander of Royalist forces
Charles IV	d. 1378	Holy Roman Emperor, father of Václav and Sigismund
Diviš Bořek	d. 1438	Moderate Hussite general
Jakoubek Stříbro	d. 1429	Theologian, mediated between conservative Prague and Tábor
Jan Hus	d. 1415	Theologian, preacher, condemned and killed at Konstanz
Jan Jensteyn	d. 1409	Archbishop of Prague, 1379–1396
Jan Milíč of Kromeríž	d. 1374	Preacher, model for Hussite ideal priest
Jan Papošek of Soběslav	d. 1454	Scholar, later opponent of Hussites
Jan Přebram	d. 1448	Theologian, conservative Prague master
Jan Rohač of Dubá	d. 1437	Orebite general, last military leader of Tábor
Jan Rokycana	d. 1471	Theologian, moderate Prague Master, Archbishop of Prague
Jan Želivský	d. 1422	Preacher, attempted Táborige coup in Prague
Jan Žižka of Trochno	d. 1425	Táborige general
Jerome of Prague	d. 1415	Theologian, influential associate of Hus
Jiří Poděbradý	d. 1471	King of Bohemia, the “Hussite King”
John Wyclif	d. 1384	English theologian, condemned for heresy

Leading Figures in the Hussite History (cont.)

Konrad Waldhauser	d. 1369	Austrian priest, influential in mid-fourteenth-century Bohemia
Laurence of Březová	d. 1437	Author of <i>Hussite Chronicle</i>
Luke of Prague	d. 1511	Leader of <i>Unitas fratrum</i>
Menhart of Hradec	d. 1449	Moderate Hussite noble
Petr Chelčický	d. 1460	Vernacular theologian, radical pacifist-anarchist
Peter Payne	d. 1455	English theologian, diplomat, prominent at Council of Basel
Prokop Holý	d. 1435	Hussite general, heir to Žižka legacy
Matěj of Janov	d. 1393	Theologian, influential for Hussite theology
Nicholas "Biskupec" of Pehlřimov	d. 1452	Táborite theologian
Nicholas of Dresden	d. 1417/19	German theologian, originated Utraquist position with Jakoubek
Sigismund of Luxembourg	d. 1437	Holy Roman Emperor, later King of Bohemia
Sigismund Korybut	d. 1435	Polish aristocrat, claimed Bohemian throne
Stanislaus of Znojmo	d. 1414	Wycliffite theologian, later opponent of Hus
Stepan Pálec	d. 1424	Wycliffite theologian, later opponent of Hus
Tomáš Střitný	d. 1401/09	Vernacular theologian, influential on Hussite reform
Václav IV	d. 1412	otherwise known as Wenceslas IV, King of Bohemia
Václav Koranda	d. 1453	Táborite theologian
Zbyněk Zajic	d. 1411	Archbishop of Prague, 1403-1411