

God's Warriors from the Czech Kingdom – the Terror of Central and Eastern Europe in the First Half of the 15th Century

Doc. PhDr. David Papajík, PhD.
History Department
Palacký University in Olomouc
Na Hradě 5, Olomouc, Czech Republic
&
History Department
Catholic University in Ružomberok
Hrabovská cesta 1, Ružomberok
Slovakia

Abstract

This study is aimed at presenting an interesting phenomenon of Medieval European history, the Hussites, who occupied the attention of Central and Eastern Europe for a significant period of time in the first half of the fifteenth century and who could not be defeated by a number of crusader campaigns. This was the first time, and for a major period of time, the last instance when Czech history had become a subject of interest for a major part of Europe.

Keywords: Hussites, Czech Kingdom, 15th century, Europe, crusader campaigns, Sigismund of Luxemburg

1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to point out a distinct phenomenon in the history of Central And Eastern Europe wherein part of the population of a fairly small kingdom in Central Europe invoked justified fear throughout the majority of Europe. Czech history is not all that popular a theme of study within the framework of European history. One of the few exceptions is the period of the first half of the 15th century in particular.¹

1.1 Basic concepts

One should begin by clarifying several basic concepts. Undoubtedly, not every inhabitant of the Czech Kingdom viewed themselves as God's warrior and not even all of those who lifted arms against foreign enemies considered themselves in these terms. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the majority of these warriors perceived themselves in the position of people fighting for the rights of God with an interest in establishing the order of God on earth. These included the most renowned commander of the time in Czech history, Jan Žižka of Trocnov, originally a minor nobleman, who viewed himself as the extended arm of God, as a man chosen by God to enforce divine law on earth.² The fact that Žižka rode on a white horse can also be interpreted in light of the text of the Book of Revelation where the victorious army of Jesus Christ (God's warriors) arrives on white horses. Žižka thus portrayed himself in the position of a knight of the Apocalypse, God's knight leading an army of God's warriors.³

Their enemies, understandably, did not view the Czechs as God's warriors, but as the exact opposite, as heretics. The word heretic (Latin *haereticus*, German *Ketzer*) was a term employed by the Roman-Catholic Church for a person who held beliefs which were inconsistent with the Bible; with the individual additionally publicly avowing these views and stubbornly defending them. He who stands in conflict against the teachings of the Church, based on the authority of the Pope, is a heretic. In addition, according to the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, heretics should be excommunicated from the Church and killed by right. The word heretic was additionally employed for those who found themselves in conflict with the teachings of the Church and the injunctions of the Pope. In accordance with generally established views, heretics should be punished by worldly powers thereby shifting the original religious content of the word to the sphere of government and politics. The word heretic also became an insult. An intense antagonism arose in Medieval society to all those labeled as heretics. Everything which originated from a heretic was abominable. Czechs were labeled as heretics by the Roman-Catholic Church thereby making the Czech Lands a heretical region.

The military campaigns led against the Czech Lands, starting in the year 1420, were carried out in the name of a battle against heretics. Czechs, of course, held a completely opposite position than the official Church circles, viewing themselves as the authentic sons of the Church and vehemently defending themselves against accusations of heresy.⁴

Czechs were also labeled with additional terms apart from merely heretics in the first half of the 15th century. The most common included the label of Hussites and Wyclifists. The Church hierarchy referred to the Czechs as Hussites in accordance with the name of the most celebrated Czech reformer Master Jan Hus who was sentenced by a Church council in Constance for his views in 1415 and consequently burnt at the stake. The Hussites were consequently followers of Jan Hus. When the official Church hierarchy and enemies of the Czechs referred to the inhabitants of the Czech Kingdom in this manner, the reference was far from a neutral label. This reference was a synonym for a degenerate, criminal and heretic. One should add here an explanation that the Czechs did not actually refer to themselves as Hussites in the first half of the 15th century. Only later authors began to apply this term to them, at this point, however, without the pejorative tinge. The term Wyclifists was employed for Czechs as they shared the views of the English theologian John Wycliffe. The ideas and works of this English thinker were brought to the Czech Lands by Czech students and teachers who had spent time in England. John Wycliffe (cca 1330-1384) taught at Oxford University and was later forced to leave and work in a rural parish in Lutterworth. The death penalty was established for the spreading of Wycliffe's teachings in England in 1401.⁵

The Hussites (we shall continue to make use of this term for the followers of Hus) were not an uniform group by any means, as they were further divided into several parts. Two groups were the most significant amongst these: the Taborites and the Orphans. Both of them will be briefly introduced here. The Taborites obtained their name from their centre of activity, the town of Tábor actually established by the Hussites. The inhabitants of the town of Tábor and their followers formed the Tábor Union. The town of Tábor was supposed to become the centre of a new world standing on the threshold of the kingdom of Christ in accordance with Chiliastic beliefs. In order to ensure a smooth entrance into Christ's kingdom, the first inhabitants of Tábor rejected all property placing their possessions in a tub upon entering the town. The extreme radical branch of the Hussites accumulated in Tábor. Over the course of time, the belief in a shared commune without differences in terms of property was abandoned in the community. Tábor, however, became the head of a movement of associated towns which consequently became the strongest military unit in the country in the ensuing battles within the Czech lands as well as against the enemies from abroad.⁶

The label the Orphans is connected with a noble-burgher association which had its roots in the region of East Bohemia. The Hussite commander Jan Žižka of Trocnov, who had earlier lived in the town of Tábor, had a falling out with the Taborites and left with his followers for East Bohemia. Here he formed a Hussite Union which included various Hussite groups in the region. Upon Jan Žižka's death in 1424, his fellow warriors began to refer to themselves as the Orphans having lost a father figure and in order to honour his memory.⁷

One should not give, however, the impression that all of the Czech Lands were Hussite. The contrary was actually true with a number of groups in the country who were strongly antagonistic towards the Hussites, such as for example, the Plzeň Catholic Landfriede in West Bohemia, the followers of the powerful noble magnate Ulrich von Rosenberg in South Bohemia or the so-called Opočno Party in West Bohemia. The Czech historian František Kavka, with his interest in the layout of the power bases in Hussite Bohemia in the first half of the 15th century, has demonstrated that there was numerous opposition to the Hussites in the Czech Lands. They were recruited from the ranks of Czech Catholics, the higher nobility (lords) and followers of the Roman and Hungarian King Sigismund, Emperor of the House of Luxembourg and heir to the Czech throne. The above-mentioned F. Kavka has come to the conclusion, through an extensive analysis of the preserved sources, that the opponents of the Hussites, which Kavka refers to as the so-called Sigismund party, were much more numerous than previous historiography has estimated. 75 percent of the higher nobility (lords, high-born) stood on Sigismund's side in the country. There were also lower nobility (knights) against the Hussites in the areas ruled by the lords on the side of Sigismund, Emperor of the House of Luxembourg. Sigismund's supporters controlled approximately 200 castles in the country, while the Hussites only had fifty. The situation was, of course, the opposite in the case of the towns where 80 percent of the towns were controlled by the Hussites. Sigismund's party was as powerful as all of the Hussite groups put together and was capable of defending the weakening position of Sigismund in the country, although unable to actually defeat the Hussites.

They were typified by a lack of unity and an unwillingness to lay down their lives for Sigismund. His supporters usually only fought against the Hussites in their home region, making it practically impossible to coordinate their military formation along with the other supporters of Sigismund in additional regions. Despite the fact that Sigismund would continually send out orders to initiate battle against the Hussites, they would often declare a truce under pressure in order to at least preserve their domain from invasion by Hussite armies.⁸

1.2 Causes

How could some of the inhabitants of the Czech Kingdom stand up against the legitimate heir to the throne (Sigismund, Emperor of the House of Luxembourg), the Roman-Catholic Church and the majority of the surrounding European nations? Czech historiography in the 1950s sought out the reasons for this uprising in the worsening social conditions of the vassals. According to Czech Marxist historians of the 1950s Josef Macek and František Graus, the social and living conditions of the vassals worsened, at the end of the 14th and at the beginning of the 15th century, to such an extent that the vassals had no other recourse but to rise up against the nobility, against their lords and consequently also against the King.⁹

These Marxist dogmatic views on the part of historians tended to interpret the historical accounts in line with their fixed dogmatic views. These interpretations have been countered by detailed analyses of the sources by the historian František Šmahel in the 1990s. When examining the sources regarding the history of the people in the country, F. Šmahel has come to the conclusion that the position of the vassals in the Czech Kingdom at the end of the 14th century and at the beginning of the 15th century not only did not worsen, but actually somewhat improved. F. Šmahel is aware of the fact that the country was hit by a wave of inflation at the given time. The fealty paid by the vassals to the nobility had been established at the time of the founding of the villages in the 11th-13th centuries. These established amounts were viewed as a fixed tax and unchangeable. The stated opinion was respected by both sides, the nobility and the vassals. The majority of the village population in the country paid their financial payments to the nobility. Generation after generation of villagers had the same amount levied within the framework of one village or one estate. At the moment when inflation began to play a factor, the vassals were still nominally paying out the same amount of money to the nobility, however, they were actually continually paying less due to the drop in the value of the coins. If we took this idea further, it would actually mean that the nobility, the lords, actually experienced a decrease in the actual value of money during the pre-Hussite period, not the vassals. The historians J. Macek and F. Graus have also made mention of the increase in work by the vassals. The research by F. Šmahel has not served to confirm this. The economic reasons can be ruled out behind the upheaval by the Hussite movement amongst the vassals.¹⁰

There is a lack of source accounts regarding strikes or minor uprising by wage labourers during the pre-Hussite period. The poor were also not so badly off socially in the towns so as to necessarily lead to a revolt against the rulers. It should be taken into account that the poor were spread out in various towns throughout the country without any strict organisation or ability to act in unison. There is no record of any rebellion against the nobility during the reign of King Wenceslaus, King of the Romans (ruled from 1378-1419).¹¹

It should also be clearly stated that the vassals and poor were by no means the driving force behind the Hussite movement. Many of them did participate in the consequent wars, but they did not rank among the organisers or the leading figures in the events. The reform preachers and Prague university masters were the driving forces behind the events from an ideological perspective, while members of the lower nobility (knights), who stood at the front of practically all of the Hussite streams, were in charge militarily. In light of lack of space to analyse the situation in more detail, suffice it to say that there is source material indicating that the small (lower) nobility in the Czech lands in the pre-Hussite period, or better said the majority of them, were particularly badly off both socially and in terms of property. Four fifths of the lower nobility in the Czech lands owned property of such a small size that their land holdings did not provide a sense of economic security.¹² Although it was earlier assumed that one lower nobleman commonly owned property to the amount of one village or something larger, newer research had completely called into question this view. Historians have come to the conclusion, based upon studies of the preserved sources, that the average lower nobleman in the pre-Hussite period owned 0.6 to 0.8 of a village. In light of the fact that the smallest property can not be seen in the sources, the actual average property of one lower nobleman was undoubtedly even smaller. A typical feature of the majority of the villages in the Czech lands in the pre-Hussite period was their fractured character, in other words, they were divided up between several owners, often even up to five or six.

If there was anyone poorly off economically in the Czech lands from an economic perspective, it was specifically the lower nobility.¹³

A group of reform preachers who criticised the existing conditions in the Church began to gradually form in the second half of the 14th century and at the beginning of the 15th century in the Czech Lands. There was an enormous excess of priests in the Czech Lands at the given time with no places for them to work. Prague was the locale with the largest presence of clergy in all of Europe after Avignon, Florence and Rome. A number of them actually had to beg in order to make a living. It is consequently understandable that a situation with a surplus of priests, unable to find a suitable position, opens up the possibility of the priests consequently becoming critics of the situation within the Church. What was criticized the most? A number of Church offices were accumulated by one person, so-called pluralism. If and when one person held more Church offices, it was apparent that the work would suffer in the long run.

There were cases when under-age individuals or persons without the appropriate education were named to Church offices due to favoritism. Reform preachers also criticized the luxury of the Church of the day arguing that the original Church was poor and needed to return to this original poverty in order to make it viable once again in the eyes of believers. People were aware that a number of the clergy were living a scandalous lifestyle and failing to maintain celibacy. The visitation protocols by the Prague archbishopric indicate that approximately 20 percent of the priests maintained a concubine. The clergy owned extensive property and extracted fees for their Church related duties. It was fairly common that the clergy would purchase Church offices for money. The sales of pardons evoked considerable dissatisfaction among the population in the Czech Lands. The development of the Church in the Czech Lands exceeded the economic possibilities of Czech society. The Church became the main guilty party in the eyes of the public in relation to all of the negative phenomenon which were occurring around it (often even unfairly).¹⁴

Dissatisfied people sought the correction of the poor state of affairs in society in the rectification (reform) of the Church. The corrected (reformed) Church was to consequently become the basis for rectification of all society. These ideas by reform preachers were met with increased responses within society, not only amongst the vassals and the poor, but also with the nobility. In order to understand the following events, one must grasp that these reformers were not merely interested in carrying out corrections to the Church and society in the Czech Lands, but also throughout Christian Europe. The preachers were convinced that Czechs were the chosen nation which would carry out the reform of the Church in all of Europe. And if the Church in the Czech lands or Europe will not be willing to reform itself, it would be have be carried out by force. Property was viewed as the biggest obstacle preventing the Church from fulfilling its primary function. If the Church will not be willing to relinquish its property, it will have to be taken away through the use of violence. Only a poor Church (a Church without property) will be capable of providing believers with assistance and salvation. This idea of confiscating Church property (so-called secularization) was particularly attractive for the members of the nobility.¹⁵

2. Jan Hus

The symbol of the Hussites became Jan Hus (approximately 1371-1415) who had been a reform preacher with a university education. Hus obtained the degree of Master of liberal arts at university in Prague in 1396. Two years later he began to lecture at Prague University consequently becoming the most vocal critic of the conditions in the Church at the time. Hus preached at Bethlehem Chapel in Prague gaining the attention of a wide range of listeners with his fervent sermons. His sermons were popular not only with the ordinary believers but also with people connected up with the King. Hus employed a number of the views of the English theologian John Wycliffe, who had been banned by church authorities, in his teachings making it only a question of time when the Church hierarchy would begin to take steps against Hus as well. In 1408 the Prague Archbishop Zbyněk Zajíc from Hazmburk spoke out against Wyclifism (the teachings of John Wycliffe which influenced Jan Hus – authorial note) and ordered the confiscation of all of Wycliffe's works. The Archbishop had Wycliffe's works burned publicly and anathematized Hus in 1410. Hus, however, ignored the anathema and continued with his teachings. A papal curia declared Hus a heretic and anathematized him once more. Hus came out publicly against the selling of pardons in Bethlehem Chapel in Prague and at Prague University in 1412. This resulted in the loss of the previous meek support from the person of Wenceslaus, King of the Romans. The papal anathema was also expanded to those who associated with Hus.

After Bethlehem Chapel was attacked in the autumn of 1412 by his opponents, Hus decided to leave for the country in South Bohemia where, however, he continued with his preaching.¹⁶ Hus decided to resolve his conflict with the Church at the ecclesiastical Council of Constance. Prior to his trip to the Council, it was apparent that both sides, Hus and the Council, were approaching the affair from completely different perspectives. Hus wanted to lead a learned debate regarding the problems of the Church with the members of the Council, while the latter wanted Hus to renounce his views with no interest in discussion. These divergent starting positions served to determine the results of the entire affair.

Research concerning the trial of Hus at the Council of Constance is complicated by the fact that the court documents from the trial in front of the Council have not been preserved. Hus was originally a marginal issue at the Council with no one attributing, on the side of the Council, much importance to it. Only gradually did the trial against Hus begin to gain in importance.¹⁷ Hus achieved several partial victories at the Council having been granted a public hearing three times, something which did not commonly occur during trials with heretics. Hus complicated matters for himself in Constance through his advocacy of the views of Wycliffe and the fact that he appealed to the court of Christ in opposition to the papal court. According to canon law one cannot appeal against a decision of the Pope or the papal court. Hus appealed to a court instance which canon law was unfamiliar with. This was consequently understood as a rejection of the papal court. His appeal to the court of Christ amounted to an attack on the Church hierarchy which was completely unacceptable and dangerous in the eyes of the Roman-Catholic Church it being based on a strict hierarchical structure. Hus argued that the Pope was not the head of the Church, but Christ alone. Hus gave preference to the law of God over any form of Church law. Also worthy of mention is the fact that Hus claimed that those who live in mortal sin should be forced to withdraw from their function or office. Concretely, this would mean that a priest who was living in mortal sin is actually no longer a priest, a king living in mortal sin is no longer a king. These consisted of truly dangerous ideas in the eyes of society of the day.¹⁸

Hus had received a so-called 'Geleitrecht' from King Sigismund, King of the Romans, an accompanying document guaranteeing a safe trip to Constance and back. The fact that this had not protected him in the ensuing events evoked indignation in the Czech Lands. One of the paradoxes of history is the fact that Hus had received the promise of a 'Geleitrecht' from King Sigismund, but had only received it several days later upon arriving in Constance. Thus Hus went and arrived at the Council without the protective document and could have been captured and imprisoned on the trip having already been from a legal perspective declared a heretic. An essential factor regarding the issue of Sigismund's 'Geleitrecht' was the fact that any kind of protective document by a secular ruler (such as Sigismund) could not protect the holder from a decision by a Church institution (the Council). The 'Geleitrecht' could not protect the heretic from a Church trial. Canon law recognized the principle that all forms of commitments to certain heretics need not be acknowledged. Of additional importance is the fact that Sigismund at a later point declared his 'Geleitrecht' for Hus invalid.¹⁹

The members of the Council initiated court proceedings against Hus who apparently was not aware for a significant period of time of what was actually at stake. He was still of the opinion that he could convince the members of the Council of the validity of his views. The Council fathers, however, were not interested in discussing matters with Hus, but only wanted him to recant his beliefs which they viewed as heretical. The Council here was functioning in the role of a judge which understandably would not enter into specialised discussion with the accused. Hus claimed that he was unable to recant his heretical views because he had never declared anything heretical. Despite the fact that the Council was convinced of the guilt of Hus, they were not interested in having to pass judgment on him. It would have been a far greater victory for the Council to force Hus to recant his views. The Council did not want to condemn Hus, however, according to the canon laws of the day eventually had to or risk betraying their role as authorities in questions of the Church.

This reality is confirmed by the recorded fact that the Council actually prepared two sentences for the culmination of the proceedings against Hus, depending on whether he recanted or not. Hus refused to recant his beliefs despite the enormous pressure and was therefore sentenced by the Council as an obdurate heretic. The Council verdict stripped Hus of his priestly status, ordered the burning of Hus' books and handed Hus over to secular authorities for punishment. Master Jan Hus was publicly burned at the stake in front of the Constance town fortifications on 6th of July 1415.²⁰

A view has prevailed in the Czech Lands from that time up to the present that Hus' sentence was unjust or even illegal consisting of an act of despotism on the side of the Church against Hus and the Czech nation. What was the reality, however? The Czech legal historian Jiří Kejř recently carried out a careful analysis of the Hus trial in Constance. Based on his findings, the legal trial against Hus did not infringe any valid canon rules of the time despite the fact that the judges allowed certain false witnesses as evidence and delivered a sentence in connection with certain views which Hus did not actually espouse. Hus placed Christ at the head of the Church as opposed to the Pope and the cardinals, this being a completely unacceptable position for his judges. The theological and moral position which Hus took was not compatible with the legal angle which the judges stood behind. The moral perspective was the concluding factor for Hus in a conflict between morality and the law.²¹

3. Period of violent solutions of the ensuing problems

The burning at the stake of Jan Hus evoked major dissatisfaction primarily amongst the nobility in the Czech Lands who were offended by the burning of Hus and by the labeling of the Czechs as heretics. This tension was enhanced by traveling preachers declaring that the end of the world was at hand. These voices began to meet with substantial responses among the wider population. The period of the Hussite wars or Hussite revolution was begun with a premeditated event on the 30th of July 1419. After a sermon by the radically minded Premonstratensian monk Jan Želivský in the Church of our Lady of the Snow in Prague a group of plotters marched to the Church of St. Stephen in Prague where a Catholic mass was taking place. The followers of Hus led by Jan Želivský forcibly made their way into the locked church and drove the participants out. They consequently set out, with the nobleman Jan Žižka of Trocnov at the forefront, for the New Town Hall in Prague where they voiced demands for the release of earlier imprisoned followers of Jan Hus. The armed plotters consequently attacked the Town Hall without waiting for a response to their demands. The attackers found ten to thirteen individuals in the Town Hall (the sources differ as to the numbers) who were consequently thrown out of the windows. Since the Town Hall windows were not sufficiently high, additional plotters stood under the windows with raised weapons which the victims were impaled upon. Those who survived the fall were beaten to death on the ground in front of the building. The event has since become known as the first defenestration of Prague (this being a Latin term formed from the preposition *de* which means from in English and *fenestra* which means window in English).²²

The leaders of the defenestration were not planning on starting a revolution in the Czech Lands, but merely wanted to gain control of the New Town Hall in Prague in order to spread Hussite beliefs. Over the course of the revolts, the initially furious Bohemian King Wenceslas IV of Luxembourg quickly reverted to his usual apathy and lack of activity. His already weak health could not sustain the mental stress. He died on the 16th August 1419 at the age of fifty eight. A day later the Hussite supporters began to destroy churches and monasteries around Prague which they viewed as symbols of the corrupt Church. The period of the radical Hussites had just begun.²³ The main programme of the Hussites was the so-called Four Articles of Prague which were formulated at gatherings of Hussite priests and scholars under the leadership of Jacob of Mies. They discussed their programme involving reform of the Church and Christianity. The first article: the celebration of the Lord's Supper in both kinds, both bread and wine (the so-called chalice), the second article: punishment for mortal sins (in other words, punishment for all kinds of transgression which are against God's laws), the third article: freedom to preach the Word of God, the fourth article: no secular power for the clergy (priests cannot hold the office of a worldly authority).

The chalice became one of the symbols of the Hussites expressing the acceptance of the Lord's supper in both kinds (in Latin *sub utraque specie* which also explains the origin of the references to the Hussites as Ultraquists or Calixtines). It was common practice in the Roman-Catholic Church in the High Middle Ages that only the priest received both the communion bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ while the other participants in the mass only received the communion bread; the Hussites granted equal status to all the participants in the church service. The Hussites believed that all of the participants in the service were equal in the eyes of God, thus everyone should receive the communion bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ, not merely the officiating priest.²⁴ There is not sufficient room here to analyse the dramatic fates of the particular phases of the period of the Hussite Revolution in the Czech Lands. The goal of this paper is instead to demonstrate how the rest of Europe responded to the situation in the Czech Lands.

3.1 Crusading campaigns

The legitimate heir to the childless, deceased King of Bohemia Wenceslaus IV was his step-brother, Sigismund the King of Hungary and the Romans. The moderate Prague Old Town burghers and representatives of the Czech nobility negotiated with Sigismund in December 1419 in Brno regarding the conditions for ascending the throne as King of Bohemia. Sigismund was not willing to accept the moderate conditions presented to him. He considered himself the legitimate heir to the throne and viewed the delegation which had come to negotiate with him as his vassals who should obey him. In addition, as the King of the Romans who had based his political career on close cooperation with the Catholic Church, there was no room in his eyes for negotiation with heretics. A period began in the history of the Czech Lands where crusading armies were employed in order to subdue and defeat the resistance of the Hussite followers. The consequent conflict acquired the atmosphere of a holy war with a personal interpretation of faith at stake without any room for tolerance of the enemy.²⁵ Armies representing Christian Europe carried out five crusades in all against the Hussites. Without going into too much detail, the individual crusades are presented and described here.

The first crusade took place in 1420. Pope Martin V declared a crusade against the Hussites in March 1420 with King Sigismund King of the Romans at the forefront. The crusaders proceeded from Moravia through Silesia into Bohemia which they entered at the end of April 1420. Sigismund's crusader army received the task of occupying Prague or better said the town of Prague, since Prague was made up of several independent urban units. Of a certain paradoxical nature is the fact Sigismund occupied Prague as the centre of the Czech Kingdom although already having under his control Prague Castle; the supporters of the Hussites had the town of Prague under their control. Sigismund could consequently enter into the grounds of Prague Castle on the 28th of July 1420 while leaving his actual party behind on the left bank of the Vltava River. The largest army to ever appear in front of the town in the Middle Ages was situated in front of Prague. The crusader armies were divided into four camps which roughly respected the regional origin of the divisions. One of the camps consisted of the core of Sigismund's army, the so-called Sigismund divisions from Hungary and the Czech Lands, while the second camp was made up of soldiers from South Germany and the Rhineland region. The third camp was made up of soldiers from Meissen, Thuringia and North German regions, while the final camp consisted of an army from Austria.²⁶

The crusader army consisted of approximately 30,000 men while the Hussites amounted to around 10,000. While the Hussites were situated in the Prague conurbation with sufficient food, the large intervention army of Sigismund, although having brought food with them, began to rapidly suffer from a dearth of supplies. Sigismund realised that a siege of fortified Prague would be extremely demanding. In addition, if they did succeed in occupying the town the threat of plundering of the town from the side of his soldiers would be an issue which would not improve his reputation as the future Czech King. He consequently decided for a different plan, surrounding the town, cutting it off making it impossible to supply the defenders of the town with supplies, with the intention being to eventually force the Hussites to surrender unconditionally to Sigismund. He succeeded in practically hermetically closing off Prague with the only connection between the surrounding world and the defenders being across Vítkov Hill. The Hussites were also aware of the strategic importance of Vítkov and consequently built provisional fortifications on the hill which consisted of two log cabins, stone walls, three moats and an old vineyard tower. The smaller part of the crusader army attacked the Hussite fortifications on Vítkov on 14th of July 1420. Although the problematic and rough terrain made it difficult for the crusaders to form a powerful frontal attack, it nevertheless seemed that the Hussite fortifications manned by merely several dozen men would rapidly fall into the hands of the attackers. The Hussites within Prague soon realized what was at stake on Vítkov Hill, involving their basic survival, and therefore set out from the town and attacked the crusaders from the side. Sigismund's army began to retreat under the onrush and the result of the military clash was decided.

A maximum of 150 crusaders fell at the battle of Vítkov. Although it may seem paradoxical, the result of this short hour long conflict at Vítkov served to determine the entire fate of the crusades. Sigismund no longer risked another attack on Vítkov nor another direct attack on Prague. The only minor positive note for Sigismund was that he had himself crowned as Czech King at Prague Castle, which he continued to control, on the 28th of July 1420 (the Hussites, of course, did not recognise his enthronement). Sigismund ordered the dissolution of his army since the large crusader forces had begun to scatter as a result of lack of food and squabbles between the individual commanders. The first crusade ended in a fiasco. Sigismund failed in his attempt to occupy Prague.²⁷

The second crusade against the Hussites was carried out in 1421 with, however, King Sigismund not being the main force behind it this time. The initiators of the crusade were the Prince Electors of Rome who in this fashion aimed at strengthening their positions within the Holy Roman Empire. The direct organiser of the crusade was Cardinal Branda who gathered a crusader army against the Hussites in the name of Pope Martin V. The crusaders put together an estimated army of from 20,000 to 30,000 men. The town of Cheb was chosen as the meeting point for the crusader army. The crusaders began their march into Bohemia in two streams at the end of August 1421. Both groups united in front of the town of Kadaň and consequently occupied the locale defended by the Hussites. The crusaders consequently captured the additional Hussite town of Chomutov and continued toward the town of Žatec which they besieged around 10 September 1421. Thus siege, however, failed to lead to the sought-after result. The entire crusade ended in a particularly interesting manner. When the crusaders received an alarming report that the Hussite army was approaching, they took to their heels immediately. The fleeing crusaders were consequently only pursued by the Hussite garrison of the town of Žatec as no Hussite army had actually been deployed against the crusaders. The second crusade culminated in a complete failure and fiasco on the part of the crusaders.²⁸

The disaster of the second crusade served to discourage for a number of years any attempts at carrying out another campaign in the name of the Cross against the Hussite Czechs. The question of a campaign against the Hussites was once again discussed by the Imperial Diet in Nuremberg in May 1426. The Diet approved an agreement to organise an army of a size of 24,000 to 30,000 men against the Hussites. This agreement was not carried out, however and in the end only 11,000 men, assembled by Margravine Katherine of Saxony, set off for Bohemia. The soldiers primarily hailed from the regions of Saxony as well as from Lusatia and the Cheb region. The army invaded Bohemia on 14 June 1426 and a day later camped in front of the town of Ústí nad Labem which they had come to lend aid to (it was being sieged by the Hussites). The crusaders attacked the prepared Hussite positions on Sunday 16 June 1426. The crusaders were thoroughly defeated in the consequent battle, historically viewed as the bloodiest military conflict between the Hussites and the crusaders. The elite of the Saxon, Thuringia and Meissen nobility fell in the battle.²⁹

Pope Martin V issued a papal bull in May 1427 declaring a fourth crusade with the aim of annihilating the Czech heretics. The Pope chose the Bishop of Winchester Henry Beaufort, who he had recently named Cardinal, to lead the campaign. The main figure of the campaign against the Hussites became the Brandenburg Prince Elector Friedrich. The beginning of the crusade was established for the end of June 1427. A decision was made to have the crusaders attack Bohemia from several sides at once thereby dealing the Hussites a fatal blow. The crusader army from the Rhine and the Franks was to assemble in Nuremberg, while the armies from Saxony, Thuringia, Hesse and Brandenburg were to meet in Freiberg. This main crusader attack was to be supported from the south by the armies of Albert of Habsburg and from the north and the north-east by armies from Silesia and Lusatia. The main crusader forces were estimated at 25,000 men in all. Mutual quarrels between the commanders of the particular military contingents took place from the beginning of the crusade regarding the aims of the campaign. A decision was finally made on the part of the crusaders to lay siege to the Hussite controlled town of Stříbro (Mies). Upon hearing the news of the Hussite army moving forward to meet them at Stříbro, the crusaders fled the field without striking a blow. Cardinal Henry Beaufort fruitlessly attempted to appeal to their responsibility to defeat the heretics. The fourth crusade ended in catastrophe in similar fashion as with the earlier campaigns.³⁰

Pope Martin V decided, after these series of failures, to organise a new, major anti-Hussite campaign in the autumn of 1427. He ordered the clergy to hand over another tithe specially designated for the war with the Hussites in order to finance the operations. The head of the campaign was to be Cardinal Henry Beaufort. Although substantially less financial resources were gathered than the Pope had expected, the campaign began to nevertheless prepare. Henry Beaufort used the money to hire 250 lancers and 2,500 archers from England. Paradoxically, these units were finally never sent into battle against the Hussites, as Beaufort made them available for the Hundred Years' War after defeats by the English in battles against the French.³¹ Of interest is the fact that the issue of the Hussites actually drew the interest of the arch enemy of the English, Joan of Arc. It is known that in March of 1430 she dictated a threatening letter addressed to the Hussites to her father confessor. The renowned Maiden of Orléans wrote to the Hussites in Bohemia that if she had not been employed in battle with the English, she would immediately set off against them. If they refused to repent of their heresies after receiving the letter, she would interrupt her battle with the English and head with her army to Bohemia (she did not manage to carry this out).³²

The main figure in the final crusade against the Hussites became Cardinal Julian Cesarini. The Cardinal arrived in Nuremberg for the Imperial Diet in March 1431 where he began to convince those present of the need to organise a great crusade against the Hussites. Those present at the Diet held a sceptical position regarding a major campaign expressing a preference for a minor border war with the Hussites. King Sigismund of Luxemburg held a similar view. The persuasive Cardinal, however, succeeded in convincing all present of the need for the campaign while additionally promising to provide the financial backing. King Sigismund agreed in the end to the crusade refusing, however, to participate personally. He named the head commander the Brandenburg Electoral Prince Friedrich. This crusade campaign was also influenced by quarrels among the commanders of the individual Imperial units. The crusader army crossed the Bohemian border on August 1. They laid siege here to the important Hussite town of Tachov. After a week of a fruitless siege, the crusader army moved their forces onward to another town held by the Hussites, Domažlice. The Hussite army numbering approximately 20,000 men set off to meet the crusaders on 12 August 1431. Panic spread in the crusader camp near Domažlice upon hearing the news of the approaching Hussite army. Period reports record that the crusaders immediately took flight in cowardly fashion upon catching sight of the approaching Hussite troops who marched while singing a Hussite war chorus. Cardinal Cesarini was no exception fleeing so quickly from the military camp at the approach of the Hussites that he left behind the bull regarding the declaration of the crusader campaign. Once again, as in the previous cases, no major military clash between the crusaders and the Hussites actually took place.³³

3.2 Causes of the failure of the crusades

How was it possible that not one of the five crusades nor one of the other armies were able to defeat the Hussites? This undoubtedly amounted to a combination of reasons, both on the side of the crusaders as well as on the side of the Hussites. It would seem, however, that the decisive blame for the failure of the crusading campaigns lay on the side of the crusaders. The crusader army never made up a unified or even firmly organized whole. Their international composition in particular was a major obstacle in terms of effective leadership. Despite the fact that the Hussite army was composed of several different parts (for example, the Taborites, the Orphans, the Praguers, the Hussites from North Bohemia and others), they were much more compact than the crusaders. While the crusaders had somewhere to retreat to, the Hussites fought for their lives themselves, knowing that if they lost they would be liquidated. The inability to agree on a shared and unified approach against the Hussites was the deciding factor in the lack of success of the crusader armies.

Major rivalries and jealousies existed between the particular commanders in each campaign against the Hussites with each leader wanting to demonstrate his superiority over his ally. In contrast, the Hussites succeeded in suppressing these ambitions amongst their individual members. The crusaders were not willing to lay down their lives in the struggle against the heretics, while in contrast the Hussites were convinced that they were leading a holy war for the success of which they were ready and willing to die. The crusaders felt superior to the Hussites and tended to underestimate their military abilities for a long period of time. Over time, of course, a fear of the Hussites on the part of the crusaders began to prevail. There was never actually a major military battle between the crusaders and the Hussites, with it either amounting to a minor skirmish as in the year 1420 or a situation whereby the crusaders fled the field upon catching sight of the Hussites.³⁴

4. Conclusion

Catholic Europe, or at least part of it, experienced additional conflicts with the Hussites above and beyond the crusader campaigns. Soon after the Hussites stabilized their position within Bohemia, they began from the middle of the 1420s to carry out military campaigns abroad, so-called raids. The aim of these raids was to attack the enemy within their own territory, inspiring fear amongst them and obtaining booty. The Hussites carried out several dozen of these, from attacks by smaller diverse groups up to the deployment of large parts of the army. Their attacks were most often aimed at Moravia, Silesia, Austria, Hungary and the German parts of the Empire. The raids were carried out most often in September and October when the enemy had already harvested their crops which the Hussites consequently confiscated. Apart from money, the Hussites sought out supplies of grain, wine and herds of cattle.³⁵ Worthy of mention at the end of this study is the fact that the Hussites were never defeated by foreign intervention. The period of the Hussite wars in the Czech Lands came to an end when part of the moderate Hussites united with the Czech Catholics and defeated the radical Hussites at the battle at Lipany on 30 May 1434.³⁶ The moderate Hussites wanted to bring an end to the war period as it had brought great deprivation to the land, while in contrast the radical Hussites wanted to continue with the warfare.

When the moderate Hussites were unable to reach an agreement on ending the battles with the radicals, they made the decision to unite with the Czech Catholics and defeat the radicals militarily. The period of the Hussite wars consequently came to an end with a bloody clash between former allies. The victors at Lipany consequently came to terms with Sigismund of Luxemburg who was acknowledged as Czech King and who, after negotiations with representatives of the Council of Basel officially permitted the Utraquist confession of faith. As of the year 1436, two faiths were thus allowed in the Czech Lands, Utraquism (the Hussites) and Catholicism. This, however, is another stage of history. This study has been aimed at presenting an interesting phenomenon of Medieval European history, the Hussites, who occupied the attention of Central and Eastern Europe for a significant period of time and who could not be defeated by a number of crusader campaigns. This was the first time, and for a major period of time, the last instance when Czech history had become a subject of interest for a major part of Europe.

Notes

- ¹ There is English literature dealing with this topic: Howard Kaminsky, *A history of the Hussite Revolution*, Berkeley, 1967 (hereafter, Kaminsky, *A history*); Matthew Spinka, *John Hus. A Biography*, Princeton, 1968 (hereafter, Spinka, *John Hus*); Frederick Gotthold Heymann, *John Žižka and the Hussite Revolution*, New York, 1969; John Martin Klassen, *The nobility and the making of the Hussite Revolution*, New York, 1978; František Michálek Bartoš, *The Hussite Revolution 1424-1437*, New York, 1986; John Martin Klassen, Hus, the Hussites and Bohemia, in: *The New Cambridge Medieval History VII, c. 1415 – c.1500*, Cambridge, 1998, pp. 367-391; Thomas Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride. The First Reformation in Hussite Bohemia*, Aldershot, 1998; František Šmahel, The Hussite movement: an anomaly of European history?, in: *Bohemia in History*, ed. by Mikuláš Teich, Cambridge University Press 1998, pp. 79-97; František Šmahel, The Hussite Revolution (1419-1471), in: *A History of the Czech Lands*, Praha 2009, pp. 140-169; Thomas Fudge, *Jan Hus: religious reform and social revolution in Bohemia*, London, 2010. There is also a work in German František Šmahel, *Die Hussitische Revolution I-III*, Hannover 2002.
- ² Petr Čornej, *Velké dějiny Země koruny české V. (1402-1437)*, Praha and Litomyšl, 2000, p. 322, 329, 333 (hereafter, Čornej, *Velké dějiny*).
- ³ Ibid., p. 342. About the personality of Jan Žižka of Trocnov in detail František Šmahel, *Jan Žižka z Trocnova*, Praha, 1969; Heymann, *John Žižka*; Josef Pekař, *Žižka a jeho doba*, Praha, 1992.
- ⁴ Igor Němec et al., *Slova a dějiny*, Praha, 1980, pp. 202-05.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 199; Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 90-91.
- ⁶ The history of Tábor in detail Kaminsky, *A history*; František Šmahel, 'Organizace a skladba tábořské strany v letech 1420-1434', *Husitský Tábor*, 9, 1986-1987, pp. 7-90; František Šmahel et al., *Dějiny Tábora, I. 1. (do roku 1421)*, České Budějovice, 1988; František Šmahel et al., *Dějiny Tábora, I. 2. (1422-1452)*, České Budějovice, 1990.
- ⁷ Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, p. 352. About this also J. B. Čapek, 'K vývoji a problematice bratrstva Orebského', *Jihočeský sborník historický*, 35, 1966, 1-2, pp. 92-109.
- ⁸ František Kavka, *Poslední Lucemburk na českém trůně. Králem uprostřed revoluce*, Praha 1998, pp. 112-20.
- ⁹ The authors presented these views in following works: Josef Macek, *Husitské revoluční hnutí*, Praha, 1952; František Graus, *Chudina městská v době předhusitské*, Praha, 1949; František Graus, *Dějiny venkovského lidu v Čechách v době předhusitské*, 1.-2. Praha, 1953 and 1957.
- ¹⁰ František Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, I. Doba vymknutá z kloubů*, Praha, 1993, pp. 433-53.
- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 392, 403, pp. 450-55.
- ¹² Miloslav Polívka, 'Mikuláš z Husi a nižší šlechta v počátcích husitské revoluce', Praha, 1982, p. 19; Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, p. 55.
- ¹³ Jaroslav Mezník and David Papajík, 'Proměny feudálního majetku na Moravě ve 14.-16. století. Bilance dosavadního zkoumání', *Český časopis historický*, 99, 2001, pp. 49-53; David Papajík, *Majetkové poměry na střední Moravě ve 14.-16. století*, Olomouc, 2003, p. 145.
- ¹⁴ Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 58-62.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., p. 64.
- ¹⁶ There is a large amount of literature about the life and work of Jan Hus, I mention here at least: Jan Sedlák, *Mistr Jan Hus*, Praha, 1915; Václav Novotný and Vlastimil Kybal, *Mistr Jan Hus. Život a učení. I/1-2, II/1-3*, Praha, 1919-1931; Josef Macek, *Jan Hus*, Praha, 1963; Spinka, *John Hus; Jan Hus. Mezi epochami, národy a konfesemi. Sborník z mezinárodního symposia*, ed. Jan Blahoslav Lášek, Praha, 1995; Jiří Kejř, *Z počátků české reformace*, Brno, 2006 (hereafter, Kejř, *Z počátků*); Jiří Kejř, *Jan Hus známý i neznámý*, Praha, 2009 (hereafter, Kejř, *Jan Hus*).

- ¹⁷ Jiří Kejř, *Husův proces*, Praha, 2000, pp. 145-47 (hereafter, Kejř, *Husův proces*).
- ¹⁸ Kejř, *Jan Hus*, pp. 50-57, 71.
- ¹⁹ Kejř, *Husův proces*, pp. 147-52.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-77; Kejř, *Z počátků*, pp. 255-56; Kejř, *Jan Hus*, p. 88.
- ²¹ Kejř, *Husův proces*, pp. 205-12.
- ²² About this in more detail Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 210-13; Petr Čornej, *30. 7. 1419. První pražská defenestrace. Krvavá neděle uprostřed léta*. Praha, 2010 (mainly pp. 117-26), (hereafter, Čornej, *30. 7. 1419*).
- ²³ Čornej, *30. 7. 1419*, pp. 147-51.
- ²⁴ František Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, 2. Kořeny české reformace*, Praha, 1993, pp. 94-113 (hereafter, Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, 2.*); Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 250-54.
- ²⁵ Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 245-49.
- ²⁶ Battle of Vítkov described based on the following literature: Petr Čornej, 'Bitva na Vítkově a zhroucení Zikmundovy křížové výpravy v létě 1420', *Husitský Tábor*, 9, 1986-1987, pp. 101-52; Petr Čornej, *Tajemství českých kronik. Cesty ke kořenům husitské tradice*, Praha, 1987, pp. 111-48; František Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, 3. Kronika válečných let*, Praha, 1993, pp. 44-48 (hereafter, Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, 3.*); Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 259-65.
- ²⁷ Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, 3.*, pp. 46-49; Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 260-65.
- ²⁸ František Michálek Bartoš, *Husitská revoluce. 1. Doba Žižkova 1415-1426*, Praha, 1965, pp. 148-51; Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, 3.*, pp. 98-100; Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 303-05.
- ²⁹ Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 355-56.
- ³⁰ Partial victory of Silesians at Náchod has nothing changed on that. Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, 3.*, pp. 191-98; Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 486-89.
- ³¹ Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 492-93.
- ³² The letter with commentary published by František Michálek Bartoš, *Husitsví a cizina*, Praha, 1931, pp. 218-19.
- ³³ Vladimír Bystrický and Karel Waska, *O vyhnání křížáků z Čech roku 1427. Husitské vítězství u Stříbra a Tachova*, Plzeň, 1982; Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, 3.*, pp. 233-43; Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 551-57.
- ³⁴ In detail Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 437-39. About the Hussite warfare in general Otakar Frankenberg, *Husitské válečnictví*, Praha, 1938; Jan Durdík, *Husitské vojenství*, Praha, 1953; Petr Klučina, *Jak válčili husité*, Praha, 1982.
- ³⁵ Josef Macůrek, 'Tažení husitů k Baltu r. 1433', *Slezský sborník*, 50, 1952, pp. 177-86; Josef Macek, *Husité na Baltu a ve Velkopolsku*, Praha, 1952; Gerhard Schlesinger, *Die Hussiten in Franken. Der Hussiteneinfall unter Prokop dem Großen im Winter 1429/30, seine Auswirkungen sowie sein Niederschlag in der Geschichtschreibung*, Kulmbach, 1974; Hans-Joachim Beeskow, 'Husité v braniborské marce roku 1432', *Husitský Tábor*, 4, 1981, pp. 127-30; Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce, 3.*, pp. 172-209; Werner Perlinger and Milada Krausová, 'Husitské výpravy do okolí pohraničního města Furth im Wald', *Západočeský historický sborník*, 6, 2000, s. 105-116; Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, pp. 498-524; Miroslav Lysý, 'Vpády husitů a ich posádky v Uhorsku v letech 1432-1435', *Historický časopis*, 55, 2007, pp. 633-57.
- ³⁶ Petr Čornej, *Lipanská křižovatka. Příčiny, průběh a historický význam jedné bitvy*, Praha, 1992.