

# III

## *Against Everyone (The Hussite Revolution)*

Royal rule in Bohemia was interrupted by the Hussite Wars (1420–ca. 1434), which were both a religious movement and a sociopolitical revolution. In 1419 a procession of Hussites, militant followers of the reformist teachings of Jan Hus, led by a local priest, Jan Želivský, marched on the Prague Town Hall in Charles Square, demanding the release of Hussite prisoners. A stone was thrown at Želivský, and in the ensuing melee, led by Hussite captain Jan Žižka, the mayor, a judge, and several town council members were thrown to their death from the windows of the Town Hall. Some say that this first “Defenestration of Prague” was the tipping point into the violence of the Hussite Wars.

The wars were also a turning point in military history, because the Hussites introduced many military novelties, including an army in which infantry predominated, with hand-held weapons charged with gunpowder. They called their handguns “*píšťala*” (pipe or fife), from which the word “pistol” possibly entered the English vocabulary. Hussite mobile fortifications, made of wagons, were lethal weapons, invented by their chief commander, Jan Žižka. In a way they prefigured the defensive circling of covered wagons on the early American prairies. Hussite *wagenburgs* were used as bases for fierce attacks.

Jan Žižka, Jan Hus (John Huss), and the Hussites have a very special place in Czech history and culture. “Against Everyone” the title of this section, is borrowed from a novel by Alois Jirásek, who published in 1894 a whole series of historical novels celebrating the Hussite movement. Jirásek’s writing was important to the Czech national revival of the second half of the nineteenth century, where Czech history was presented in polarized terms of Czech-German antagonism. On the one side: Czechs, Protestantism, and truth; on the other: Germans, Catholicism, and falsehood. In reaction to unending Austrian political and cultural oppression, Czech patriotic circles hailed Hussites as bearers of progress and saviors of mankind.

In spite of later abuse of the Hussite tenets in communist Czechoslovakia,



Jan Hus is still a national hero, and the anniversary of his martyrdom is a public holiday in the Czech Republic. Jan Hus was also a European celebrity, chronicled in *Historia Bohemica*, which was written in Latin in 1457. Its author was an Italian, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II, and his book on Czech history immediately became a bestseller, as attested by the great number of manuscript copies in libraries all over Europe. The book is important because it became an authoritative source of information on the history of this country from its beginning to the time of the Czech king Jiří (George) of Poděbrady.

Professor T. G. Masaryk, future president of the first Czech independent state, regarded the Hussites as the key to Czech history, and discussion on this theme still continues in Czech academic circles. The Hussite movement was closely connected with Prague University from the beginning. By the Decree of Kutná Hora of 1409, Charles IV's son, the Bohemian king Václav (Wenceslas) IV, transformed Prague University into a national Czech University. As a result, German professors and students abandoned Prague to found new universities at Leipzig and Erfurt. While nationalization of universities became a pan-European trend, the consequences of the Decree of Kutná Hora for subsequent Czech history were far-reaching. Besides becoming Czech, Prague University fell into the hands of religious reformers headed by Jan Hus, who was soon elected rector. Hus was not only a theologian. He also suggested reforms of Czech orthography, such as canceling the interchangeability of *i* and *y*. We may say, therefore, that every Czech, when he begins to write, is a follower of Jan Hus.

Inspired by the teachings of English theologian John Wycliffe (1320s–1384), Hus abolished—a century before the Protestant Reformation—practically all aspects of Catholic religious practice. The most visible was the introduction of communion “of both kinds”; not only bread but also wine should be given to the laity in order to secure salvation of their souls. That is why the communion chalice became the emblem of Hussitism. In 1410 Jan Hus was excommunicated by Pope Alexander V because of his protest against the papal ban on John Wycliffe's books. Three years later he wrote, in Latin, *On the Church*, his most important theological work, declaring his opposition to the Roman ecclesiastic hierarchy. Finally, in 1415, Hus was condemned as a heretic by the Council of Constance and burned at the stake.

The highest representatives of the Bohemian kingdom sent to the Council a complaint from the Czech and Moravian aristocracy concerning the execution of Jan Hus. They protested against not only the condemnation of their compatriot but the accusation against the Bohemians of heresy. The Council in its turn condemned all who signed the letter as heretics. However, the



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*Meeting of Jiří of Poděbrady, King of Bohemia with the Defeated Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary, by Mikoláš Aleš, 1878. National Gallery, Prague. Jiří of Poděbrady stands on the right. Aleš belonged to the "Generation of the National Theater," a group of artists who devoted their talents wholly to the Czech national renaissance. Used by permission of ČTK.*

condemnation missed its mark completely, because the Catholic Church was unable to enforce it in independent Bohemia.

In 1420 conservative Hussites agreed upon the so-called Four Prague Articles, in which representatives of the new lords of Bohemia, the Hussites, formulated their ecclesiastical, political, and economic aims. The articles denied secular power to the clergy and secured freedom to preach the word of God and offer communion in both kinds. A year later, the all-Bohemian assembly declared the articles the law of the land in the Resolution of the Čáslav convention. The assembly also dethroned the heir to the Bohemian crown, the Roman and Hungarian king Zikmund (Sigismund), brother of Václav IV, accusing him of crimes against the state. The revolutionary feature of the assembly, a precursor of the republican parliament, was that it put itself above the king and the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but also that it gave the cities, above all the citizens of Prague, the same rights as the aristocracy. It could be said that this was the first European republic.

In the rest of Europe, respect and envy of Czech power was quickly replaced by an almost universal hatred, as the letter of Joan of Arc reproduced



below testifies. This was perfectly understandable, given the ideals of Hussite radicalism, which entailed a society in which the church would have no economic or political power. The military successes of the Hussites, however, forced the papal council—which in the meantime had moved to Basel—to negotiate with their delegates. The result, known as the *Compacta* and signed in 1433, was a compromise between the Roman Church and the program delineated in *The Four Prague Articles*; communion in both kinds was allowed to the population of Bohemia and Moravia. At the session of the Bohemian assembly in 1436, where delegates of the Basel council and King Zikmund were present, the *Compacta* was proclaimed the law of Bohemia. It was the first breach in the ideological and political hegemony of the Catholic Church in Europe.

The Hussite experiment brought political isolation and economic devastation to the Czech lands, but in its late stage the movement also produced projects that were ahead of their time by several centuries. There were attempts to set up a kind of parliamentary democracy, and prototypes of a United Nations, Security Council, and European Union. In 1458, the Hussite Jiří (George) of Poděbrady was elected king of Bohemia, under conditions that were a breakthrough in traditional medieval methods of rule; he was not unlike a modern president. In reaction to the Turkish threat, which had begun to endanger East-Central Europe, the Hussite king launched a pan-European campaign, proposing a permanent congress with legislative powers and an international court of law. The text of *The Project for a Peace Union of European Rulers* was formulated by King Jiří's political advisor Antonio Marini of Grenoble between 1462 and 1464, and the king dispatched Lev of Rožmítal to European courts to propagate it. As might be expected, in this organization there was no place for the Holy Roman emperor and pope; the project failed due to the counteroffensive of papal diplomacy.

## Letter

Jan Hu.

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