

SURVEY

John Klassen

THE DISADVANTAGED AND THE HUSSITE REVOLUTION

SUMMARY: The following survey regards the upper nobility, urban patricians and the clergy of medieval Bohemia as the more privileged, and groups such as the gentry, peasants and urban poor and women as the disadvantaged. There were exceptions within each group. The ethical and moral ideals of Hussite leaders addressed social and economic inequalities and gave hope that a society with greater benefits for the disadvantaged was possible. People from all groups participated in the revolution which in the end however did not produce the hoped for community. Economically, socially and politically Hussite society was not that different from the rest of Europe. Nevertheless, ideas such as religious toleration, popular sovereignty, the dignity of the common man and woman and the destructive powers of greed and violence all raised by the Hussites have survived within European civilization.

Revolutions imply radical change, usually characterized by a turnover in power. One or more groups with economic, social, political or cultural authority lose, and those without it, the disadvantaged, make at least some gains. This was true also of the Hussite revolution even though its original goals were not realized. The Church, the pre-eminent economic, religious and cultural body, lost its status. The spoils were shared by other groups in society, but the nobility was the big winner. The Hussite revolution was not a war between haves and have-nots, but the Hussites' understanding of the Christian faith meant caring for their disadvantaged brothers and sisters and therefore called for changes in economic, social and political structures of late medieval Europe.

Students of the Hussite revolution have tried to understand what values and principles associated with Western civilization it supported or undermined and what was its part in the overall course of European history. As part of the nineteenth-century national revival Czechs discovered the importance of the Hussite revolution. František Pálacký described it as a positive expression of the Czech's nationhood and culture. With its ideas of self-determination and freedom of conscience it was a gift to Europe. Reflecting nineteenth-century German–Czech tension, the Austrian, Constantine Höfler criticized Hussites for simply copying the ideas of others

and in their effort to apply these ideas, bringing tumult and chaos to much of central Europe. Much of German-language historiography has been critical of the Hussites, as was the Czech Josef Pekář, of one of its heroes, John Žižka.¹

The work of students of Jaroslav Goll in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century laid the basis for a thorough study of the revolution by cataloguing and publishing sources and describing the events and ideas of the revolution. F.M. Bartoš, one of the last of this line, characterized Hussitism as a struggle for spiritual freedom and justice. In numerous articles and three major books² he provided a wide range of mostly intellectual sources and detailed narratives of events from 1380 to the 1430s. He described, among other things, political and religious developments within Bohemia as well as Bohemia's relations with and impact on the rest of Europe.

In 1934 the Czech writer, Jan Slavík described the Hussite revolution as primarily a social and economic movement and tried to place it into the context of late medieval popular uprisings. As a revolution it could rightfully take its place among European revolutions. His ideas were not picked up immediately but Hussitism's place in the wider stream of European history has since been adopted by most historians. In Czechoslovakia František Graus's³ groundbreaking examination of the material life of the rural population of pre-Hussite Bohemia provided the basis and model for those seeking to understand social and economic conditions.⁴

In the post-war period three major authors helped place the revolution into the wider perspective of European history. Josef Macek's two-volume work on the revolution and its social, economic and political ideas at Tabor is a classic interpretation from a Marxist perspective. Ferdinand Seibt's focus was Prague and the moderate Hussites. He clarified the nature of the political and ethnic community of the Hussites and their impact on their German neighbours. In his extensive research Seibt has shown that Slavic

¹ *Žižka a jeho doba*, 4 vols (Prague, 1927–1933).

² *Čechy v době Husově 1378–1415* (Prague, 1947); *Husitská Revoluce 1415–1437*, 2 vols (Prague, 1965–1966). Volume 2 is translated into English as *The Hussite Revolution 1424–1437* (Boulder/New York, 1986).

³ *Dějiny venkovského lidu v době předhusitské*, II (Prague, 1957) predates George Duby's similar classic, *L'Economie Rurale et la Vie des Campagnes dans l'Occident Médiéval* (Paris, 1962).

⁴ For example R. Nový, "K sociálním postavením farského kléru v Čechách v době předhusitské", *Sborník historický*, IX (1962), pp. 137–192, and his "Poddání v husitské revoluci", *Husitské Tábory*, 4 (1981), pp. 93–100; Jaroslav Mezník "Der ökonomische Charakter Prags im 14. Jahrhundert", *Historica*, 17 (1969), pp. 43–92, and Miloslav Polívka "A Contribution to the Problem of Property Differentiation of the Lesser Nobility in the Pre-Hussite Period in Bohemia", *Hospodářské Dějiny*, 2 (1978), pp. 331–360.

culture belongs alongside the Latin and Germanic when one considers the total picture of European civilization and that the Hussites deserve to be placed alongside Europe's other revolutions.⁵ The American historian, Howard Kaminsky saw the revolution most fully expressed among the radicals in Tabor.⁶ His definitive study shows it as the culmination of medieval heretical movements and that the people of Tabor fulfilled the revolutionary promise of popular sovereignty expressed as an idea by people such as Marsilius of Padua.

The work on economic history has enabled scholars such as František Šmahel⁷ and Jiří Kejř⁸ to measure the goals of the revolution against actual trends in the church, the economy, the polity and society in post-revolutionary Bohemia. Other scholars have examined the impact of the revolution on popular piety, culture and the family. The most recent Czech literature is characterized on the one hand by a greater appreciation for the religious roots and character of the revolution and on the other hand, by the need to know the material conditions of life and popular attitudes and mental worlds of both common and noble people. The challenge is to examine all sources of knowledge about the past in order to appreciate the fears and hopes of fifteenth-century Bohemians. Their efforts to bend stubborn material life to ethical values can continue to inform us in beneficial ways.

Social and economic conditions

The social, economic, religious and political make-up of Bohemia at the beginning of the fifteenth century was similar to that of the rest of western Europe.⁹ The fundamental fact of economic life was its subsistent character. For most of the population a surplus of material goods was unknown. Most people lived from day to day. Life was hard and people were almost defenseless before the enemies of darkness, cold, hunger and sickness. Bohemia was spared the worst effects of the mid-fourteenth-century Black Death which in the rest of Europe resulted in a calamitous drop in the

⁵ *Hussitica. Zur Struktur einer Revolution* (Köln/Graz, 1965) and *Hussitenstudien* (München, 1987).

⁶ See especially his *A History of the Hussite Revolution* (Berkeley, 1967).

⁷ *La Révolution hussite, une anomalie historique* (Paris, 1985). The first volume of his *Dějiny Tábora*, Pt. I, 1 (Česká Budějovice, 1988) measures even more meticulously the developments in the revolution.

⁸ *Husité* (Prague, 1984). See also Noemi Rejchertová "Dětská Otázka v Husitsví", *Československý Časopis historický*, 28 (1980), pp. 53–77, and John Klassen "Gifts for the Soul and Social Charity in Late Medieval Bohemia", forthcoming in *Medium Aevum Quotidianum*.

⁹ John Klassen, *The Nobility and the Making of the Hussite Revolution* (New York, 1978), pp. 5–26, and Jiří Kejř, *Husité* (Prague, 1984), p. 34.

population. Hence, while the rest of Europe at the beginning of the fifteenth century lived in an economy that was in many ways expanding, Bohemia faced a recession with fewer economic opportunities for its people.

The economy was also hurt by the struggles for power in the land between king and archbishop, within the royal family and between king and the nobility. As a result the monarchy and Church declined in prestige and the violence and destruction interrupted commerce and production. In 1400 King Wenceslas was removed as head of the German empire. This meant that the imperial court and its members left Prague and no longer patronized its entrepreneurs and artisans.¹⁰ Any growth in the economy depended on internal trade since very little of what Czechs produced was exported. To pay for what they imported Czechs sold the silver mined at Kutná Hora. To make the silver go further, the rulers added base metals, cheapening it for Bohemian consumers. In the first two decades of the fifteenth century the value of the Prague groschen declined by twenty percent in comparison to the currency of their neighbours, the Hungarians.¹¹ Devaluation of the heller, the coin with which most day laborers and peasants were paid, was even more rapid.¹² The poor accepted coins at their older value but when they wanted to use the same coin to purchase something from the merchant, master craftsman or pedlar, or if they wanted to pay a debt they were told the coin was not worth as much as they thought and that they had to add a heller or two to the bill.

When the nobility curbed his power and King Wenceslas lost the imperial throne, he tried to compensate for his loss of revenue through taxation. In the decades before the revolution, tax burdens on royal and church lands rose relentlessly and since they were not progressive the poorer people paid a larger part of their incomes than did the better off. One of the worst years for taxation was 1418 as the residents of New Town Prague were asked seven times for their contributions. The tax collector was accompanied by a porter paid to carry the clothes taken from the backs of those who could not pay the tax.¹³ Although there were economic trends that affected all classes, privileged groups such as nobles, town patricians and the Church enjoying political and military power were able to protect their economic advantages.

¹⁰ Miloslav Polívka, *Mikuláš s Husi a nižší šlechta v počátcích husitské revoluce*. *Rozpravy Československé Akademie Věd. Řada Společenských Věd*. 92 (Prague, 1982), pp. 6–7. Recently in English in *Historica*, 28 (1988), pp. 75–121.

¹¹ Kejř, *Husité*, p. 69.

¹² František Graus, *Chudina městské v době předhusitské* (Prague, 1949), pp. 179, 189.

¹³ Kejř, *Husité*, p. 51, and Graus, *Chudina*, p. 96.

*Privileged groups**Clergy*

The Church, at least those clergy, who held office, was one of the most privileged groups. It was almost a state within a state. Of Prague's 40,000 residents, some 2200 or just over five percent were clergy. Overall the Church owned about twenty-eight percent of the property and around Prague it owned close to fifty-four percent. Positions within the Church were highly sought after but the material rewards were reserved for an employed elite within the clergy. From 1395 to 1416 over 20,000 men were ordained into a variety of offices ranging from acolytes to parish priests but fewer than 4000 of them got confirmed into a prebend.¹⁴ Through the Church's legal system and powers of excommunication it controlled intellectual life. Its law penetrated all aspects of life. Issues relating to marriage formation and disputes with the family were within its jurisdiction. It was both a secular and spiritual power. Clergy acted as land lords collecting rents, as government officials keeping the peace and as confessors and priests. Common people encountered the church in their daily lives both as spiritual guides and secular lords.

Nobility

The nobility, founded on military skills, ownership of castles and land, dominated medieval social and political life. It controlled most of the realm's wealth. Nobles and members of the gentry held patronage rights to most of the land's parish churches. After a decade long struggle with the king, in 1405 the upper nobility controlled the land government. Royal officials had to swear obedience to the land council. The offices of the regional justices reverted to the noble families who had traditionally held them. This increased political power freed the barons from the king's attempt to deprive them of their hereditary lands by proclaiming them escheated or by appointing his favorites as guardians of the person and estate of minor nobles.

The nobles separated themselves from the rest of the population through their castles. These dominated the surrounding countryside with their towers, walls and moats. They served as the means and symbol of the political power. The family that lived in the castle had the right to collect rents and other payments from the peasants who lived below and beyond the walls. The castle as the administrative centre contained the records as to what the peasant owed and whether he or she had paid. By the fourteenth century the nobles' privileges were deeply enough ingrained in the public

¹⁴ Šmahel, *La révolution*, pp. 23–26 and Klassen, *The Nobility*, p. 37.

mind and their economic wealth was such that in constructing castles they no longer needed to concentrate on its military function but could see to the material and residential comforts of daily living when building.¹⁵

Urban wealthy

The patricians and other wealthy burghers in city and town held the status that the nobility enjoyed throughout the land. In Plzeň they made their incomes off of trade in white cloth exported abroad and beer for local consumption. Others lived off of rents paid to them by debtors. Prague's wealthy lived off of trade and commerce, the arms industry which served the royal and ecclesiastical courts and some Saxon towns and from rents and incomes from rural estates. What set them apart from the rest of the population was their abundance of material possessions. The last wills of the rich reveal extensive inventories of household effects, furniture, fine clothing and precious stones. Their living quarters were spacious allowing both comfort and privacy. Social and economic status was also reflected in the dress codes; a patrician woman could have more folds in her veil than could a mere artisan's wife.¹⁶ It was from the ranks of these that the town counsellors were drawn and which held a privileged political position. Bohemian society was not particularly unique. Some were wealthy, others were poor. However the recession at the beginning of the century was especially hard on the economically disadvantaged.

Disadvantaged groups

There were of course impoverished individuals among various social groups but there were four groups which found making a living especially difficult in the early fifteenth century. These were the gentry, the peasants, the urban masses and women.

Gentry

It may seem strange to discuss the gentry under disadvantaged groups in the middle ages. Members of this group, because they owned land and served as warriors, were part of the ruling class. They were free and noble born and belonged to the land community. They could own and alienate their property and register it in the land records. However by the end of the fourteenth century the barons tried to make the break between themselves and the gentry more clear. No one could enter the rank of the upper nobility

¹⁵ Šmahel and others, *Dějiny Tábora*, pp. 116–119.

¹⁶ Mezník, "Ökonomische Charakter", pp. 43–92, and Miloslav Polívka, "Vývoj zbrojních řemesel v Praze na konci 14. a v první polovině 15. století", *Documenta Pragensia*, 6 (1986), pp. 47–71. Kejř, *Husité*, p. 35. John Klassen "Household Composition in Medieval Bohemia", *Journal of Medieval History* (in press).

without the barons' approval. The upper nobility began to stress noble birth as a pre-requisite to status rather than property and political power which townsmen and squires could gain through commerce and royal service.¹⁷

There were about 2000 gentry families in Bohemia at the beginning of the fifteenth century. These were divided into two groups although distinction was not sharp. The upper group, called *rytíři* (*milites*), *vladykové* or *zemané*, literally knights and gentlemen and squires and the lower group called *panoše* (*cliens*, *armiger*) or esquire. While many built themselves fortresses or small castles, many also lived in simple farms which scarcely raised them in social prestige above their subjects.¹⁸ Only a few owned whole villages with about ten fields, most had one to three fields with three to five peasant families cultivating them. The wealthiest of lesser nobility could live exclusively from the income of their states. Those with smaller estates had to augment their livelihoods through service. Lastly there were those with either negligible or no land holdings (some even without a residence) who sought their livelihoods entirely through service.

Most members of the gentry, although they had peasants on their land from whom they received rents in money, collected a poor living. In the Plzeň region over sixty percent of the gentry shared a village with two or three other families. A study of gentry estates between 1395 and 1410 suggests that for most, income from rents was far from adequate to feed a family of three or four. It took between 240 and 360 groschen a year to live in Prague.¹⁹ Country living was less costly. Nevertheless close to eighty percent of the gentry had rental incomes of less than 660 groschen a year, not enough to live with their families on an economic level much higher than their own serfs. About eighteen percent had incomes from 700 to 1700 groschen, enough to survive. The wealthiest four percent of the gentry class earned around 1800 groschen a year and more. These were often found among the royal favorites. They loaned out money to their peers, to the barons and even to the king. They invested in town houses for which they aroused the ire of the upper nobility.

The gentry's other option for earning a livelihood was to enter either military or governmental service with the king, the barons or the prelates. Urban occupations led to loss of noble status. Before the revolts of the barons curtailed the king's freedom the gentry actually had access to powerful and remunerative royal offices. Most however held only subordinate positions such as associate judges, summoners, regional counselors and others. Any service requiring literacy or production was largely

¹⁷ Polívka, "Mikuláš", pp. 12–13.

¹⁸ Polívka, "Mikuláš", p. 16 and Šmahel, *Dějiny*, p. 121.

¹⁹ Polívka "A Contribution", pp. 331–359 and "Mikuláš", pp. 15–19.

reserved to townspeople and to members of the clergy. Few gentry held important positions but the few who did might become quite wealthy.²⁰

Although the economic and political position of the gentry seems to have declined in the decades before the revolution, this did not mean that only the poor were attracted to the revolution. There were individuals who through personal effort and ability succeeded in pre-revolutionary Bohemia and yet joined the revolution. One such was the military captain of the radical Taborites, Nicholas of Hus. From an impoverished family, he had done very well for himself utilizing his own military and administrative skills in the service of monarch and Church. By 1416 he was burgrave of a castle owned by Vyšehrad Cathedral. By supporting the revolution he stood to lose all he had so painstakingly built up in the last twenty-five years.²¹ The military and political experience of gentry such as Nicholas helped the radicals survive until their defeat at Lipany in 1434.

As part of the ruling class the lesser nobles participated in the land diets insofar as they could afford to attend. They did not however accomplish specific political goals for their class. Those who entered the circles of power did so as individuals mostly because the king trusted them or because they had certain skills, experience and commercial know-how which he needed in his government. A number of the gentry fought alongside the king in his struggle with the barons and with Archbishop Jenštejn who claimed ecclesiastical supremacy over lay rulers.

Their participation in the battles with the archbishop, prepared the gentry for John Wyclif's and Hus's teaching that the Church should not have secular power. In addition the experience of having a number of people from their own class in important positions of power, as well as pressure from the barons limiting their status and power in Wenceslas's government, likely contributed to the development of class consciousness and later demands to be recognized as a separate estate in the land government.²²

Peasants

The peasants, most of whom lived on manors and owed services, rents and obedience to their lords, made up the majority of the population. Bohemian writers and preachers too had an anti-peasant mentality characterizing them as lazy, drunken, stealing, lying and neglecting their salvation. There is no reason to believe that the Bohemian peasant opposed social privileges or differed from the one in Andrew of Regensburg's dialogue. He believed in absolute equality as long as this did not mean his servant was his

²⁰ Polívka, "Mikuláš", p. 22.

²¹ Polívka, "Mikuláš", pp. 30–63.

²² Polívka, "Mikuláš", pp. 25–29.

equal. The late medieval peasant had some allies among the intellectuals and clergy. John Hus and Archbishop John of Jenštejn argued for the peasant's freedom from the Lord's customary right of reversion. Hus dignified the peasant's toil saying it entitled him to possession of the land. On the other hand, the law upheld the discrimination against the peasants when in 1402 the Land Court ruled that they could not cite their lords before the Court.²³

Two important Czech scholars of the Hussite revolution, Jiří Kejř and František Šmahel agree that life for the peasant was difficult at the beginning of the fifteenth century. They disagree, however, as to whether conditions worsened just before the revolution. It is not clear therefore if peasants remembered better times to which they hoped to return.²⁴ In any case, as recent studies have shown, material standards of living varied greatly within the peasants.

Land was available in the Chýnov region in south central Bohemia, where the plague had hit and villages were deserted. A little further south, land was in short supply and peasants turned to the infertile land in the moors. An analysis of an archiepiscopal estate in south Bohemia shows that most peasants had holdings that allowed a subsistent livelihood. Of 196 holdings, twenty-eight (14.3%) were smaller than half a field; 100 (51%) were half a field; twenty-two (11.2%) were between half and a whole field and forty-one (20.9%) consisted of a whole field and five (2.6%) were more than a whole field.²⁵ A half field was the minimum required to live so those with less had to find a living working for others. Life for peasants seems to have improved at least on Rožmberk estates where the number of cottars declined by half from 1380 to 1420.²⁶

By 1420 most peasant payments had been commuted into money. Most labor services (*roboty*), which in the fourteenth century averaged about four to eight days a year, had disappeared by 1400 in south Bohemia. This freed peasants to work on their own lands during peak farming days such as planting, ploughing, hay-making and harvest. The level of the rents varied considerably probably in accordance to the value of the land. Most paid

²³ Jiří Kejř, "Zur Bauernfrage im Hussitentum", *Jahrbuch für Geschichte des Feudalismus*, 7 (1983), pp. 51–53, 67, and Klassen, *The Nobility*, p. 77.

²⁴ For the following see Kejř, "Bauernfrage", p. 54. Šmahel, *La Révolution*, pp. 55–57, 61–62, and his *Dějiny*, pp. 168–177, and František Graus, *Dějiny*, p. 198 and *passim*. See also Frederick G. Heymann, *John Žižka and the Hussite Revolution* (New York, 1969), pp. 42–43 and R. R. Betts, *Society in Central and in Western Europe: Its Development towards the End of the Middle Ages*, in *Essays in Czech History* (London, 1969), p. 249.

²⁵ A field or *lán* was inexactly measured but in general was a piece of land that could be farmed with two oxen. In Latin *mansus* or *aratura* was used and in German, *Hufe* and *Hufe*. V. Brandl, *Glossarium illustrans bohemicomoravicae historiae fontes* (Brno, 1876), p. 116.

²⁶ Šmahel, *Dějiny*, p. 174.

between sixty and 100 groschen a year, a number that remained static over the forty years preceding the revolution. We do not know what percentage of income this was but it was about ten percent of the rental income for a poor member of the gentry. General taxes approved by the land assembly for the king, were not a burden since the last one collected in South Bohemia was in 1389. In addition the peasant paid the parish tithe which on average was from sixteen to twenty groschen. Perhaps the most vexatious aspect of their situation was that peasants could not assure their offspring secure inheritance rights to the land. Peasants earned a little extra income through bee-keeping and raising livestock especially sheep, whose wool supported a small textile industry. Wealthier peasants earned incomes through carting, brewing, milling, smithing, carpentry, butcher, shoemaker and ropemaking and other products needed for daily living.

Peasant housing was sparse and crowded. Archaeological evidence from peasant houses in southern Bohemia shows that indoor living space was small. Dwellings near Tabor ranged from those measuring about 6.5 metres by 7.3 to the smallest which was 3.6 by 3.8 meters. This space also had to store vegetables, grains, and other foodstuffs. It was sometimes also used for work. In one household the open hearth served heating, cooking and smithing purposes.²⁷

Changes in the administration of the manorial economy in some ways improved the freedom of the peasant. Nevertheless their living conditions were difficult. Many peasants were not able to pay their obligations and had to ask meekly for relief or for delay of payment. For most families the whole range of obligations coupled with limited resources and a primitive technology, meant that even in years where there was no disaster, they lived a hand to mouth existence.

Urban poor

Bohemian towns also had their disadvantaged residents; the poor, propertyless and marginal and criminal elements. In some cities fifty percent of the people were exempted from property taxes because they were too poor. This meant they did not have the privilege of citizenship and they could not participate in the public life of their community.²⁸ Some of the wealthy contributed to the poor as they prepared their last testaments but not all of the gifts for the poor were designed to benefit them materially.²⁹

²⁷ Rudolf Krajíc, "Současný stav poznání hmotné kultury středověké vesnice na Táborsku", *Husitský Tabor*, 6–7 (1983–1984), p. 50, nn. 15, 52.

²⁸ Graus, *Chudina*, pp. 86–88, 98, and M. Bělohávek, *Dějiny Plzně od počátku do roku 1788* (Plzeň, 1965), p. 50.

²⁹ John Klassen, "Gifts for the Soul and Social Charity in Late Medieval Bohemia", forthcoming in *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* (1990).

The poor were discriminated against socially, economically and legally. The level of pomp and ceremony at a funeral or wedding reflected one's social prestige. Thus a guild allowed its masters seven pounds of candles at their funerals, whereas a servant could have only half a pound. Butchers charged the poor more for meat. The law also discriminated against the poor. A worker claiming unpaid wages was assumed to be disturbing the peace and was locked up during his or her appeal. In 1410 the town council of New Prague punished apprentices who made agreements among themselves not to cooperate with unpopular employers.³⁰

The most disadvantaged urban population were the unskilled workers, journeymen, servants and persons on the margins of society if not beyond the law, people such as prostitutes, beggars, gamblers and thieves. There were many unskilled workers who found work that lasted any where from one day to a year. They worked as aids to skilled craftsmen especially in the construction industry carrying supplies and treading the big wheel which ran the derrick and crane used to hoist stones in building cathedrals. When the building boom of the late fourteenth century came to an end, many workers found themselves out of work. Many of these lived in the city's outskirts. Few journeymen, although they had proficiency in their craft, could set up their own business, and hence they worked permanently for their masters. When masters loaned journeymen money they required that the debtor work for him until the loan was paid off. Since pay was subsistent, the debt was rarely redeemed. In practice the worker lost his freedom of movement, the right to dispose over his person. František Graus's analysis of the items left with the pawnkeepers in Prague shows that people in financial desperation left objects they needed to make their living, items such as waggons, snares, hunting traps, knives and half completed pieces of leather.³¹ At the bottom of the social and economic structure were the illegitimate children, the troublemakers, gamblers, burglars and thieves who were entirely outside the protection of the law.

Women

Women were also among the disadvantaged. For men of the propertied classes, they were the means whereby the family or lineage was maintained and extended. For churchmen, on the other hand, a woman attained her highest potential if she had nothing to do with males and remained a virgin. A woman could not live alone without raising public suspicions that she was dishonourable. Even leaving a household where her husband violently beat her, cast doubt on her honour, not the man's. The family was often a brutal association with the woman the victim. The church court records show that

³⁰ Graus, *Chudina*, pp. 97–98, 105, 142.

³¹ Graus, *Chudina*, pp. 36–45, 88, 203–204.

the most frequent cause for a marriage failure was a husband's violence towards his wife.³²

For most women whose families had wealth to protect, marriage was a matter arranged by the men of their families. The Church gave children the right to withhold their consent, but the dowry and the inheritance could be jeopardized by a woman unwilling to marry her family's choice. On the other hand we also know that there was a great deal of spontaneity in the social life of young people. They met in the streets and in taverns, flirted openly and women freely took the initiative buying men beers and asking them to marry them. In vows taken in the clandestine weddings, those not in the Church, show that both bride and groom promised to obey the other.

Women played almost no role in public life. A woman was forbidden to participate in war, could not carry a weapon nor ride astride a horse, essential if she wanted to fight in the aristocratic fashion of shock combat. Women who inherited estates to which public offices, such as municipal judgeships, were attached could not exercise the office's public function such as presiding at the town council meeting. Her husband or other male kin, took her place here. The sorry lot of women can best be seen in Queen Sophia, the wife of Wenceslas. After his death, she was compelled to remain part of King Sigismund's retinue, who used her as a pawn in his struggle for the Bohemian throne. Her plaintive letters to her Bavarian family and her attempted escapes were ineffective.³³

The ideological program of the revolution

The revolution was fundamentally a religious phenomenon which accords with the prevailing mentality of the period. Medieval life was totally absorbed with religious terminology and sentiments. The Czech Hussite specialist, Jiří Kejř writes: "There was not a basic step one could take in daily life which was not tied to religious concepts. Religion influenced a far wider range of thought, of sentiment and of action than we can imagine today."³⁴ Every medieval reform movement justified its views by appealing to the Bible and pursued an ideal Christianity which it identified with a life of poverty. This ideal was also an important part of the Hussite revolution, which in many ways represents the culmination of medieval popular reform movements. In censuring the wealthy it was a public protest against the

³² John Klassen, "Marriage and Family in Medieval Bohemia", *East European Quarterly*, 19 (1985), pp. 271–272.

³³ John Klassen, "Women and Religious Reform in Late Medieval Bohemia", *Renaissance and Reformation*, 5 (1981), p. 216, "Household Composition", and F. M. Bartoš "České královna v husitské bouři", *Jihočeský sborník historický*, 10 (1937), pp. 15–24.

³⁴ Kejř, *Husité*, p. 41.

social conditions and against an inequitable division of property ownership, social status and political power.

John Hus, a university professor and preacher, venerated by later revolutionaries, set the tone. According to him, people with true Christian faith were humble not arrogant, generous to the poor and not greedy. Their goodwill and kindness regenerated the church which in turn produced a Christian society and polity. Both the process of revolution and the end result gave power to the laity and benefitted the disadvantaged.³⁵

Hus's teaching represented a direct threat to the authority and property of the Church. In his day the territorial church was the norm. Every one was a member of the church by virtue of her or his baptism just after birth. It was clear however to many that not everyone in the Church or in Christendom behaved in a way faithful to Christ. This Church, according to Hus, included both the goats and the sheep, the good grain and the tares which would be separated at the day of judgement. On the other hand he described a Church, made up of the faithful, those predestined to follow Christ in love and faith. The faith of some in this group may appear only later and so the identity of each could not be positively known. Nevertheless an indication of faith could be inferred from their action. He told his hearers, if you want to know who is truly a Christian, judge by their fruits.

Hus, influenced by John Wyclif, gave the laity the right to choose whom to obey. The Church claimed people had to obey priests because they had been ordained into office. They were the successors to Christ and the apostles. Hus, on the other side, said they had to obey priests and other church authorities only if they lived holy lives. Hus openly reproved the many prelates who fell short of his standards. He said it was a shocking offense for the clergy to call themselves heads or members of the body of Christ when they acted viciously, and lived barren lives in luxury and pomp and devoured the alms of the poor, accumulated benefices, and, as in the pope's case allowed himself to be adored on bended knee and to have his feet kissed. As his predecessors, of the late fourteenth century, Hus too stressed the Church's wealth and affluent life style, in the face of general poverty, as a mark of sin and faithlessness.

If a priest was clearly a sinner, lay men and women needed to correct and admonish him on the basis of Holy Scripture. If the clergy refused to accept correction then the faithful had to conclude he was an enemy of Christ and they were not bound to believe or obey them. This in essence made the people sovereign and represented the foundation upon which the Hussites assumed the right to choose their own king and upon which Tabor built its

³⁵ Most of the following comes from Howard Kaminsky, *A History of the Hussite Revolution*, pp. 23–55, 310–360. See also Matthew Spinka, *John Hus' Concept of the Church* (Princeton, 1966).

republic. As one Prague observer, who felt King Sigismund was unworthy to be king, put it, “an ass does not cease being an ass, just because he is anointed and crowned with a crown”.³⁶

A second feature which Hus learned from Wyclif was that the Church’s authority was limited to the spiritual realm. Coercive force or governmental powers belonged exclusively to the secular lord and king. The clergy had no business acting as land lords, collecting taxes, rents and fines and sitting as judges in their courts deciding the relative merits of parties involved in secular disputes. At first Hus believed that if he spelled out the scriptural life of faith to his fellow clergy they would voluntarily reform. The Bohemian church however declined his invitation. Hus then concluded that the king and nobility must reform the church and deprive it by force of its secular dominion and property. The Church was subject to the sovereign lay ruler.

Hus supported peasants on their right of ownership of the land. Some of the nobility were clearly troubled by the ethical issues his call to share the wealth had raised. In 1407 a nobleman wrote Hus asking what he should do with respect to the question of death dues and property reversion. According to custom the land lord, as proprietor, had the right to collect a tax from an estate when the peasant died with no natural heir. Hus directed the questioner to the Bible and to Jerome and Augustine and his answer favoured the commoner. If the nobleman wanted to avoid the fate of the rich man of the Gospel of Luke who ended in hell, Hus advised him not to accept the death duties. “Consequently, since the taking of death duty or large inheritance is linked with covetousness, faithful Christians should diligently seek to avoid it, to be merciful toward their neighbours in order not to lose the eternal goods and thereafter not to fall into everlasting torture.”³⁷ He concluded that the lord did not have the right to collect this tax. “For his [peasant’s] property is the result of his labor and he is the owner of it.” Hus assumed the lord’s motive for collecting the tax was greed. Those who seized the property of others and did not share theirs were in danger of hellfire. Hus claimed that the peasant with no heir has the freedom to sell the property, bequeath it via last will or give it to the poor.

Hussite ideals were not in themselves original. What was new and what made events in Bohemia from 1400 and after revolutionary, was the effort of especially the radicals to put these into a coherent political program which they expected would transform daily life. They actually tried to build social, ecclesiastical and political institutions which reflected the will of God as seen in the apostolic Church. After Hus’s death in 1415 his followers tackled the task of defining his legacy. In the next five to six years a number

³⁶ Jiří Daňhelka (ed.), *Husitské skladby budyšínského rukopisu* (Prague, 1952), p. 16.

³⁷ Matthew Spinka, *The Letters of John Hus* (Manchester, 1972), p. 14.

of tendencies developed. Some of his colleagues and followers remained with the Catholic Church as the gulf widened. Others chose a moderate Hussitism calling for communion in both kinds and royal taxation of clergy without them actually giving up ownership. In addition there was a radical tendency marked by the adventist expectation of the early return of Christ and his new kingdom. When this did not materialize many took refuge in a deserted fortress in south Bohemia where they started a new community hoping to remain uncontaminated by the old. This they called Tabor but it soon became much like any other medieval city. What most parties could agree on at least temporarily were the Four articles of Prague. These were, first, that both the wine and the bread should be ministered to the laity at communion; second, the word and truth of God should be freely preached; third, all priests should give up wealth and improper lordship over temporal goods; and fourth, public mortal sins should cease and the land cleansed of scandal. Each group within the revolution interpreted the articles in its own way.³⁸

The peasants and the poor did not draft their own demands. Historians have concluded that what the Chiliasts described as the kingdom of God was also the agenda of the peasants.³⁹ In the context of the enemy seemingly winning in 1418–1419 many radical priests had counselled the people to leave their farms and possessions and find refuge in five cities expecting the return of Christ and an end to the old social order. When Christ did not visibly return as predicted early in 1420, the Chiliasts, inspired by Wenceslas, a tavern keeper in Prague and Martin Houska, explained that Christ had returned secretly and was waiting for his faithful to violently overthrow the old order and prepare for the kingdom of God.

This meant sinners and evil people had to be killed and then the elect of God would then possess all their goods and freely administer their estates and villages. People would have all the gold and silver they wanted. There would be no more rent payments to lords, no subjection of one person to another. The elect would freely and undisturbed possess the villages, fish-ponds, meadows, forests, and domains of the former lords. All the people of high rank were to be chopped down as pieces of wood. Women would be free of pain and trouble, generating children and grandchildren without pain or original sin and no longer suffering the grief of a dead infant or child.⁴⁰ The ideals for a renewed society of this radical group were expressed in terms of religious hopes and expectations.

³⁸ Kaminsky, *A History*, p. 369, and Šmahel, *La Révolution*, p. 74.

³⁹ Most recently, Kejř, "Bauernfrage", p. 58, Rostislav Nový, "Poddaní v husitské revoluci", *Husitské Tábor*, 4 (1981), p. 96.

⁴⁰ Kaminsky, *A History*, pp. 340, 347, 349.

Participants of the revolution

The Hussite revolution was not a class war of the rich and privileged classes under attack from the poor and disadvantaged. In fact what set it apart from peasant revolts of late medieval Europe, was the Hussites' success in establishing a coalition of all the classes and groups of late medieval Bohemia.⁴¹ The clergy, the nobility, the towns, including their governments and the poor, the peasants and women from all ranks made substantial contributions to the successes of the revolution. The common struggle was aimed against the Church and its large property holdings; after that each group followed its own goals.

The clergy, above all those at the university, were the most active participants in the revolution in that they supplied it with its ideology. Thus Master Laurence of Březová argued the political case of the Hussite moderates by identifying it with the rights of the Bohemian Crown similar to contemporary European legal descriptions. Master Jakoubek of Stříbro laid the ideological basis of a unified reformation embracing moderates and radicals whose foundation was the local congregation under local secular control.⁴² Among the radicals, the monk, John Želivský led the Prague masses in thought and deed overthrowing the royalist magistrates in the famous defenestration in 1420. He took Hussite ideas of a responsible monarchy out of the protected lecture halls to the streets of the common people and led the radicals' attack against the medieval order of king and estates.⁴³

The nobility was also one of the early supporters of reform. It made endowments for and spoke out on behalf of those who wished to study and advance reformist ideas. Their support of Hus and others against the church hierarchy culminated in a protest letter to Constance, sealed by 320 Bohemian nobles in 1415 when the Council burned Hus to death and in the formation of a league of Hussite nobles. The league bound its members to protect their priests against the Church's attack. In 1417 a number of nobles protected Hussite priests in their parishes while expelling those who remained Catholic. In this way powerful and successful nobles such as Čeněk of Vartenberk, gave the reform movement time to establish itself in southern Bohemia. During the revolutionary wars members of the gentry put

⁴¹ Kejř, *Husité*, p. 59.

⁴² Howard Kaminsky, "The University of Prague in the Hussite Revolution: The Role of the Masters", in John W. Baldwin and Richard Goldthwaite (eds), *Universities in Politics* (Baltimore and London, 1972), pp. 79–106, and his *A History*, pp. 187–191.

⁴³ Božena Kopiczková, "Vztah pražských radikálů ke státní moci", *Folia Historica Bohemica*, 12 (1988), pp. 290–296.

their military and political experience at the disposal of the radical field armies which kept European forces at bay for fourteen years.⁴⁴

Townpeople supported ideas of reform and revolution which were preached in the city of Prague in Bethlehem chapel. They demonstrated on behalf of Hus when he was attacked by the church hierarchy. In 1410 some of the magistrates in Plzeň supported the cause of reform against its enemies among the clergy.⁴⁵ Towns however, did not lead until 1419. The important urban centres were royal and had to follow the king's lead which grew increasingly anti-reform after 1412. But after 1419, when King Wenceslas died, the masses of Prague and other towns, often cooperating with the propertied magistrates, played a leading role in the armies and the Diets of the land. The Diets frequently met in Charles University and the chancellery of Old Town Prague prepared much of its written work.⁴⁶

The peasants formed the basis of the Hussite armies and most of the original residents of Tabor were poor peasants. Hussite enemies saw the revolution as a diabolic fraternity where peasants dominated. It was the peasant element that kept the nobility from carrying out its ambitions and the Catholic opponents recognized that and sought to separate the upper classes from them. Next to the chalice, the harvest flail, was the symbol of Hussite armies. In 1429 after nine years of failure, King Sigismund's allies told him he had been defeated by peasants. In the early years they voluntarily joined the field armies of the Orphans and of Tabor which were ninety percent infantry. They fought in disciplined formation, not the result of long drills, but because they believed in their cause and in their community. They learned to exploit the circular waggon fortress as well as artillery very effectively against the crusading armies of Europe. These rural folk, through their military captains were represented in the Diets of the land and influenced public policy until the 1434 defeat of their armies.⁴⁷

Women also participated in the revolution. Some wrote devotional works and preached sermons supporting the cause of reform. Noble women were among the early adherents of the reform piety represented at Bethlehem chapel. They established endowments and used their rights of patronage on behalf of their favorite preachers. In 1421 a crowd of women opened a large church for a radical priest when the city council tried to prevent him from speaking. Women fought alongside men in some battles and provided general sustenance and nursing care. They also expected to be

⁴⁴ Klassen, *Nobility*, pp. 85–98.

⁴⁵ Šmahel, *La Révolution*, pp. 48–49.

⁴⁶ Kejř, *Husité*, p. 112; Ferdinand Seibt, "Communitas Primogenita. Zur Prager Hege-
monialpolitik in der hussitischen Revolution", *Historisches Jahrbuch*, 81 (1962), pp.
80–100.

⁴⁷ Kejř, *Husité*, pp. 71, 113, 145–157.

part of the public discussions where policy and tactics were formulated.⁴⁸

Results: A balance sheet of the revolution

Above all the Hussites' target was the Church, one of the most powerful political and economic forces of the land. They wanted to deprive it of its property and secular power. In this the revolution succeeded admirably. The underprivileged, however, were not the ones to reap the rewards.

The major accomplishment of unified Hussitism was forcing the supreme body of the Church, the Council of Basel (1431–1443), to acknowledge the Bible as the final authority in negotiations over religious matters. Previously in any discussion or disagreement it had been the Church that decided. At Basel, the Church accepted as a partner in discussion a party whom it had until recently called a heretic and with whom it refused any discussion. It no longer claimed to be the judge, to whom the other had to submit. Furthermore the supremacy of canon law was a thing of the past in Hussite Bohemia. No longer did it penetrate all aspects of life. No longer could church courts call on the secular arm to enforce its decisions and place even rulers under interdict. The clergy was no longer the wealthiest class. In fact young men were no longer interested in the profession because of the poor living conditions so that a shortage developed among both Hussites and Catholics. The Church's administrative structure was also greatly weakened as the archbishop's office left Prague.⁴⁹

The Church also lost possessions all over Bohemia. In the central part all went to the laity.⁵⁰ Conservative estimates suggest the Church lost eighty percent of its land. Even in Catholic Plzeň the laity gained twenty percent of its land. The biggest loser was the Prague episcopal chapter which gave up fifty-eight villages, and four monasteries lost from thirty-five to forty-five villages each.

The nobility gained the most as it accepted Hus's invitation to take over church property. Both Catholic and Hussite nobles gained property from the Church as well as from the king. At the same time there were some nobles such as Čeněk of Vartenberk, a Hussite and one of the most powerful barons in the land, who refused to enrich themselves with confiscated property. In 1417 when mobs attacked church institutions, a number of Catholic nobles took over wardship and ownership of their property in return for protection. Church land was registered to the king but in fact powerful Catholic barons such as Ulrich of Rožmberk assumed possession. In 1436–1437 King Sigismund ratified such property transfers, charging the Hussites a fee and rewarding his supporters for services. In the end however

⁴⁸ Klassen, "Women", pp. 211–218.

⁴⁹ Keř, *Husité*, pp. 96–100, and Šmahel, *La Révolution*, pp. 110–111.

⁵⁰ Šmahel, *La Révolution*, pp. 27–28, 40, 109, and Keř, *Husité*, p. 60.

it was a few noble families which got the lion's share of the Church's property while sixty percent had to be content with gaining one or two villages.

This distribution of property gave some of the disadvantaged gentry opportunities to enrich themselves. It led to major upheavals as the domains of individuals from the gentry and of the new nobility exceeded those of many of the old venerable families. For example John of Smiřice and Jakoubek of Vřesovice entered the ranks of the barons through property gained at the expense of the church and of some other noble families. Nicholas Trčka of Lípa, originally a member of an insignificant gentry family, acquired an immense domain which by 1450 comprised nine castles and manors, fourteen towns and over 320 villages. The estates of most gentry however continued to be too small to maintain them. Many continued in the service of local barons or as mercenaries in foreign armies.⁵¹

Towns as corporations and individual burghers also gained property from the Church. Tabor, the community to which peasants had fled in 1420, itself became a property owner and lord, having acquired three towns and forty-nine villages with 600 dependent peasants which had belonged to the archbishop. In many towns a group of newly rich came into existence as a result of the seizure and redistribution of Church property.

The disadvantaged did not realize the new society for which they had hoped and fought, although they made some gains during the revolution. Peasants gained a degree of religious freedom, they were free to fight in the armies as equals and even lead some units and they shared in the booty which the army frequently captured. They were freed from the taxes of the Church and were considered to be part of the national community although not of its body politique.⁵² However they continued to pay rents to both Catholic and Hussite overlords and even Tabor required its subject peasant to pay the annual Fall rent already in 1420. In addition they bore the burden of the banal or *Hold* payment to individual lords responsible for keeping the peace or protecting their subjects. In many cases peasants paid this tax to more than one lord. Peasants also fell victim to plundering and murdering soldiers. As the field armies required more and more supplies, as at the siege of Plzeň in 1433–1434, they took them from the nearby Catholic peasants. After the Hussite wars the lords took a number of measures to keep their workers on their lands. In 1437 the Land Court ruled that lords could force peasants who had fled during the wars to return and in 1467 the Diet of the land gave nobles title to lands of their subjects who had died intestate.

⁵¹ Klassen, *The Nobility*, pp. 116–118, 140, 135; Šmahel, *La Révolution*, pp. 109, 115–117, and Kejř, *Husité*, p. 190.

⁵² The distinction is made by Šmahel, *La Révolution*, p. 121.

Rostislav Nový's study of the peasants in the revolution shows that their economic conditions hardly changed. His analysis of peasant holdings on Rožmberk baronial estates before and during revolution, in 1379, 1423 and 1433 shows about twenty percent of the arable land was deserted because of flight by peasants to Tabor especially in 1420. For some reason peasants did not take up cultivation of these fields. The stratification by property holdings however remained more or less the same. Those with less than one field (*lán*) increased from 56.5% to 57.7% from 1423 to 1433 and those with one or more fields decreased from 43.1% to 41.7%. Those in the middle remained stable. In 1423, 82.6% and in 1433, 81% had from half a field to one. It appears that few took advantage of deserted fields by offering either to buy or work them. In 1423, 0.4% had three fields the same as in 1433. In 1423 the same percentage had two and one-half fields. There were no holdings this size in 1433. The revolution seems to have had no effect on peasants' land holdings on the domains of royalist barons.

On the monastic domain of Žd'ár property was distributed a little more evenly during the revolution as the number of peasant's with moderate holdings increased between 1407 and 1462. Here a one-field holding was essentially a large one. From 1407 to 1462 the percentage of peasants with one field dropped from 4.2 to 2.9%. At the same time the percentage of those with half a field and three quarters increased from 35.9% in 1407 to 45.9% in 1462.⁵³ Nový's very necessary study of material conditions of peasants needs to be expanded so that the question of the revolution's impact on peasant holdings can be answered more fully. One would like to know why the peasants with small holdings and the cottars did not take up the deserted land, since they needed it and since the lords needed workers.

Hussites and Taborites did not abolish the traditional concept of the three tiered society. Jakoubek of Stříbro, a Hussite moderate, and a Taborite manifesto of 1431 divided the church into three classes in which the common people were to serve the upper two classes. Even the Chiliast articles, at least in the words of their enemy, John of Přebor, describe a three tiered society of lords, burghers and peasants and provided more severe punishments for the peasants. The intitulations of most Hussite public documents, which omitted the peasants, suggest that they were not seen as part of the body politique.⁵⁴

The returns to the urban poor from the revolution were also meagre. A new patriciate emerged in cities as their administrations confiscated the property of those who had fled and distributed it among Hussites or sold it cheaply. As a result those who earlier had no hope of gaining property now did. In Prague the prices of houses dropped during the revolution although

⁵³ Nový, "Poddaní", pp. 98–99.

⁵⁴ Kejř, "Bauernfrage", pp. 67–73.

in Kutná Hora they rose as people, including members of the popular field armies, invested in real estate for speculative purposes. Tabor soon changed from a society where all was held in common to an ordinary city. As people acquired land and built houses differences in wealth soon followed. For many this development was a disappointment. Between 1422 and 1424 peasants who had hoped for an end to the old order returned to their lands on the estates of Ulrich of Rožmberk, a strong supporter of the Catholic and royal cause. On the other hand the new patricians of Prague defended the interests of the lower and middle classes in the government.⁵⁵

One way that the rich traditionally helped the poor was through charity. An analysis of last wills and testaments of the Plzeň burghers suggests that, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries people gave more to the material needs of the poor and less to religious ceremonies such as masses and prayers for the dead, which were designed to meet the spiritual needs of the testator. The revolution, however, cannot take direct credit for this trend (although it may have been influenced by Hussite values) because the burghers of Plzeň were staunch Catholics.⁵⁶

The revolution did not bring women any long lasting gains. As Hussite leaders tried to forge a unity of the various parties in 1420 they excluded women from participation in public meetings. The deep seated prejudice against women was summed up by Jakoubek of Stříbro, the leader who came the closest to representing all Hussite parties. He expressed his disapproval of women fighting and their involvement in public affairs, in secular courts and business. Submissiveness, humility and modesty suited them better.

In practice women made substantial contributions to family business in the fifteenth century but were prohibited or declined to govern public affairs. Even though a woman held dominion she could not enter the building of the town council. For example, in 1471 Elizabeth of Vartenberk, the ruler of Bydžov, undertook to arbitrate a dispute between the guilds and the town council. Although active in the negotiations at the start, when they moved to the town hall she sent her son to represent her. The situation was similar in Plzeň where women who inherited the office of town judge were represented by their husbands at the council meetings.⁵⁷

Children acquired greater standing among Hussites. They were considered full members of the reformed church community. Jakoubek of Stříbro began the practice of giving communion to children and a chronicler describes how children flocked to the sermons in the open and infants in their

⁵⁵ Kejř, *Husité*, pp. 61–62, and Šmahel, *La Révolution*, p. 119.

⁵⁶ Klassen, "Gifts for the Soul".

⁵⁷ Jan Kapras (ed.), *Liber Conscientiae Civitatis Novobydžoviensis a. MCCCXI–MCCCCLXX* (Nový Bydžov, 1907), pp. 9–10, and Klassen, "Household Composition".

mothers arms took communion. The reasoning was that if they were baptized they also ought to participate in this ceremony which was central to Hussite worship. In the mass gatherings of Hussites in the open fields, children were told to listen to the sermons and not play games. The scolded young likely did not see the revolution as an advance for them. Boys and girls also fought in the armies and helped build fortifications. Noemi Rejchrtová argues that Hussite children enthusiastically joined their new communities on their own initiative and gained dignity as active human beings.⁵⁸

The peasants, the majority of the population, the driving force in the revolution and those with the most to gain from social and economic change, won almost nothing substantial. The lofty ideals of a reformed church where wealth was shared with the poor, ideals represented by Hus's followers from Jakoubek to Nicholas of Pelhřimov at Tabor, came to nought as people faced the prospect of actually giving up or came into possession of privileges and property. Jiří Kejř suggests that the times were not ready for Taborite ideas of reform and that the vision of an egalitarian society exceeded the capability of Europeans of the fifteenth century. Peasants soon became uneasy with the shape of the revolution. Some left when they found that the old taxes and rents were to continue in Tabor. Others left as the field armies' expeditions in the 1420s pursued booty more than they defended the faith. One of the military captains, John Čapek of Sány amassed fantastic fortunes of 300,000 groschen in silver and gold, enough to buy three or four baronial estates with castles. His behaviour contributed to the spirit of malaise. Tension grew within the armies and fights sprang up.

It is easy, from today's vantage point, to condemn past revolutionary acts of violence as Simon Schama does for eighteenth-century France.⁵⁹ It seems more difficult to see revolutionary oppressive force as similar to that of the established system. In the case of the Hussite revolution we are fortunate to have access to a contemporary, Peter Chelčický, who sympathized with the ideals of the movement but criticized it for not living up to its own standards. The old order fared no better in his hands. His words cast into sharp relief the behaviour of colleagues and leaders who gave up on the ideals and may well have helped peasants decide to leave Tabor in 1424 and return to the Catholic baron's estates when they saw that their hoped for society of equals was doomed.

Chelčický, a layman and of gentry background is in some ways the most important voice from fifteenth-century Bohemia.⁶⁰ His was the most radical

⁵⁸ See her "Dětská otázka", pp. 35–77.

⁵⁹ *Citizens. A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989), p. 792.

⁶⁰ For the following see Howard Kaminsky, "Peter Chelčický: Treatises on Christianity

attack on the medieval social and political order. His intellectual and moral stature was such that at one time or another every major Hussite leader sought his opinion on matters of doctrine or ideology. Few took his advice and these visits may have been valued more as sources of refreshment, although they must also have left many troubled.

He rejected violence as a tool for Christians. The Hussites, although they started out believing war was wrong, accepted the need for fighting. Chelčický argued violence made people as evil as the enemy and that the devil did not care when they smashed walls and mercilessly destroyed their foes, because he simply left those whom they called evil and entered the hearts of those who believed themselves to be righteous.

For that reason Christians could not use governmental structures. Anticipating Machiavelli and Hobbes, Chelčický saw that secular power, or the Prince, through violence and force, keeps people orderly, and the strong from suppressing the weak. The prince is incapable of practicing Christian virtues.

The more peacefully it [secular power] seeks to rule, the crueller it must show itself in its punishments, so that the people should fear it all the more [. . .] [O]therwise [. . .] the strong will suppress the weak, dragging them from their cottages and taking over their villages, their houses, their lands, and even their women; but through power such violence is stopped.⁶¹

Any political regime, whether revolutionary or traditional, was based on violence. Christians, on the other hand, could not impose their values on secular or pagan society with the help of the prince's sword. As Chelčický put it: "weak is the preaching of Christ's priest who, unable to bring some people into Christ's justice through Scripture, calls upon power [prince] and announces their adultery, drunkenness, and other sins in the church, forces power to punish them, and believes that in so doing he is successful in his preaching". In other words the state will use force but Christians rely in persuasion based on scriptures.

Chelčický also believed in an equal social order in which the peasant had the same worth and dignity as the nobleman. There was no justification for noble privileges. They enjoyed special status as a result of robbery and violence. Furthermore paying tithes and rents was paying homage to men when it should be reserved for God. The nobles live in luxury because of the labour of the peasants. They sell serfs as though they are an object, part of the land. None of this can be justified within the body of Christ. A Christian will not devise all sorts of forced labor for others to do, so that he can sit in

and the Social Order", *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 1 (1964), pp. 107–177.

⁶¹ Quoted in Kaminsky, "Peter Chelčický", p. 140.

the cool shade and ridicule the “louts” and “boors” roasting in the heat, or drive them out into the bitter cold in their smocks to trap hares, and himself sit in the warm indoors. Nor will one impose on others any involuntary servitude that he would not want himself.

Chelčický pointed out that if religious ideals are in fact to transform the temporal world they must be true to themselves. At the same time his total repudiation of the use of force and violence to achieve his goals indicates a vision which transcends its realization on earth. Even if people cannot fashion the type of society they want it is still worth the effort to try and persuade them. This element of quiescence in his thought endears him to the modern mind wary of religious and political fanaticism which seeks to impose its view of morality on unwilling members of society.

The revolution's achievements for its participants were important even if the dreamed for society was not realized. For a while the Church's leadership acknowledged the need to dialogue with those of opposing views. Temporarily the politically and economically powerful paid at least some attention to the interests of the weak and poor. Briefly the notion prevailed that all men and perhaps even women share in basic human dignity and potential. The history of the Hussite struggle to gain rights and independent status for their people is a tragic one, ending in catastrophe for the Czech Hussites in 1620 with the Habsburg victory over the estates. Nevertheless the principles they raised did not die with the end of the revolution. Ideas such as religious toleration, popular sovereignty, the dignity of the common man and women and the destructive powers of greed and violence all raised by the Hussites have to a greater or lesser extent become characteristic ideals of western civilization.