It is not uncommon for religious leaders to present their own epoch as a unique period of time, perhaps the most important in history or the time when the end of the world nears. Probably in each century we could find a good example of at least one such thinker in Europe alone. Most of them perish from memory, however.

But some of them gain so much attention that their participation in the religious and political events of the epoch stays longer both in minds and books. It is definitely so when we think about the hussite movement, or even wider, the early Czech Reformation, called by one of the most brilliant modern scholars, František Šmahel – “a reformation before reformations”\(^1\). The complicity of the movement makes it difficult and at the same time more interesting to describe the approach to the coming end of the world in general terms. Each thinker, each preacher and scholar who touches the problem has had his own views on the matter.

But it is not my aim to outline all the views we may find in the pre-hussite and hussite writings. I would like to show the event that became a central point in the Czech religious history of the late middle ages linking the period of disputes with a period of open hostility and warfare – known as the hussite revolution. The event was so important that it was thought of as a beginning of Armageddon by those who took part in it. And so important that even not being the end of the world it started to change not only the political situation of the Bohemian Kingdom completely, but also marked the point of division in the hussite movement. I would like to present the siege of Prague 1420 as the hussite end of the world.

**Religious background**

The decades before the outburst of the hussite revolution were marked by an increasing wave of religious writings and preaching. Most of it concerned the situation of the church. The preachers condemned abuses of power, lack of ideals (for example the ideal of poverty) among hierarchical clergy etc.\(^2\) When they deepened their reflections on the roots of the

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2. There are three preachers before John Hus, who are generally recognised as “pre-reformators”: Konrad Waldhauser, John Milič and Matthew of Janov. All of them gave their sermons in Prague, all were deeply interested in matters concerning the moral state of the church. About the teachings and life of Waldhauser see S. Bylna, *Wpływ Konrada Waldhausena na ziemiach polskich w drugiej połowie XIV i pierwszej połowie XV wieku*, Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1966, pp. 9-51; the influence of the three preachers on the religious atmosphere in Prague at the time of Hus’ activity, see P. de Vooght, *L’hérésie de Jean Huss*, Louvain 1960, pp. 7-35; a short introduction about Milič with a new edition of the contemporary sources about him (worth mentioning relation of Matthew of Janov): M. Kopiecy, *Jan Milič z Kroměříže a Jan z Jenštejna*, Žďár nad Sázavou 1999; a well written but a bit older article about Milič’s devotion and activity:
present state they usually described it as a final stage of world history or a special period of time. For example, John Milič, living in the late 14th century, basing on the writings of a Spanish scholar – Arnald de Villanova – showed his epoch as a moment of struggle with the Antichrist, both in the secular branch and inside the church. Milič saw social oppression in Europe, as well as heresies, a flood of crimes against the canon law and other wickedness as the fruit of the work of the Antichrist or rather antichrists. Preachers who worked after him also saw the presence of the Antichrist and his increasing power, however usually there were quite wide differences in their views on the matter. Matthew of Janov focused his interpretation on the misdeeds inside the church and pointed there, analysing the Antichrist’s plans. The best known of the Czech reformers, John Hus, also asked about the role of the Antichrist in the contemporary church. He interpreted the Donation of Constantine as a root of evil. In his opinion this event gave the Antichrist the tools for spreading wrong attitudes and sins inside the visible community.

All these opinions were based on the conviction that the present epoch was at least a special one, if not the beginning of the last days. The conviction lasted even several decades later, however it was rather blurred by the process of the revolution and its closure – the compacts of Basel.

Four years after the John Hus’ death on the stake in Constance, people in Bohemia started understanding Hus eschatological, biblical announcements more precisely. This was connected with the activity of more radical and at the same time less educated preachers, whose sermons explained reality in black and white terms. One of them, John Želivský gave fierce speeches in the church of Saint Mary in the Snow, one of the main points of Prague’s New Town. In one of his sermons from 1419 he said:

“And the Lord shall show us, that we have part in His glory in the war against the Antichrist and his members, and he announced us the peace just like the apostles, like it’s written in the gospel of Matthew: Mt 24,30-31. ‘And they shall see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. At the sound of a loud trumpet, he will send his angels to bring his chosen ones together from all over the earth.’”


Arnald de Villanova suggested the time of coming of the Antichrist, based on the biblical Book of Daniel. John Milič, as F.M. Bartoš, the editor of his work noticed, used the Arnald’s concept in his own treatise, F.M. Bartoš, Poznámky, [in:] Milič z Kroměříže, Poslání papeži Urbanu V. Spisek o Antikristovi (trans. F. Loskot), Praha 1948, p. 29. Look also: A. de Villanova, Der tractatus de tempore adventus Antichristi, [in:] H. Finke (ed.), Vorreformationsgeschichtliche Forschungen II. Aus den Tagen Bonifaz VIII. Funde und Forschungen, Münster 1902, pp. CXXXVII-CXXXIX and CLIX.

Matthiae de Janov dicti Magistr Pragensis Regulæ Veteris et Novi Testamenti III (ed. V. Kybal), Innsbruck 1911, pp 4-5.

In “De Ecclesia” Hus provided the readers with a story of the church gaining power from the secular branch, beginning with Constantine. He ended this particular part with a rhetorical question concerning the true nature of the pope who would be elected without representing Christian virtues and only taking into account the wealth and secular power, see: J. Hus, Tractatus de Ecclesia (ed. S. Harrison Thomson), Praha 1958, pp. 122-125.

The compacts were generally seen as the final agreement after a long dispute with the Council of Basel. Therefore it was at least improper to put the same pressure on perceiving the activity of the Antichrist inside the church by the reformers, as it was during the period of military clashes and anti-hussite crusades. The compacts in fact were a compromise, not fully satisfying for both sides, see F. Šmahel, Husitské artikuly a jihlavská kompaktáta, [in:] Jihlava a basiléjská kompaktáta, Jihlava 1992, pp. 11-28; IDEM, Husitské Čechy. Struktury, procesy, ideje, Praha 2001, pp. 292-307 and 441-452.

Želivský’s sermons undoubtedly were not the only ones that supported the atmosphere of endangerment caused by the grouping forces of Antichrist. People, who listened to the radicalising priests, started gathering on the hills in different parts of Bohemia, giving the places biblical names. Those pilgrimages referred to the passage from gospels commanding all believers to run up the hills and mountains “when the day comes”. A Polish historian, Stanislaus Bylina, conducting research on the religious behaviour of the laity in the late middle ages wrote an article about Bohemian pilgrimages to the hills in 1419. Analysing the sources he noticed a difference in two phases of pilgrimages which occurred that year. The first phase, which happened in spring and summer, was merely a religious meeting with services, giving the communion in both kinds and preaching. It was full of eucharistical processions, and a key role in motivation was played, as the scholars show, by women.8

The second phase, which took place in autumn, was different from the first one. The mood of the public had changed. The topics of the sermons, as some later sources say, were revolving around the endangerment of the faith, building Christian strength and ruling with God’s law. From time to time those moods were strengthened by religious and political leaders of the radical communities.

One must remember that it was in July of that year that one of the most significant incidents in Czech history occurred in Prague. On the 30th an armed procession under the leadership of John Želivský came from the Church of Saint Mary in The Snow to the New Town’s Townhall, ending in the first defenestration in Prague.9 A few weeks later king Venceslaus died and the kingdom faced the beginning of chaos as the legal successor was King Sigismund, the late king’s brother, who had been connected with the death of John Hus on the stake in Constance four years earlier.10

The Year

So, as we imagine the situation in the first half of 1420 we may see that there is no king, and the successor is widely thought of as a threat to the custom of utraquism, and by the nobles as a threat to their political position. The social mood is being more and more radicalised and the above described pilgrimages give an opportunity to build communities, not only religious but also representing a serious military power, although not yet tested in battle. Last but not least, the chiliastic views allowed some to interpret the events as a prophesised activity of “false prophets”, the Antichrist, and a prelude to the second coming of the Saviour.11

Even in that delicate position one could expect things would progress more or less peacefully. Unrest could disappear when the new king sits on his throne in Prague, because to achieve that he would have to make an agreement with the nobles and, taking his personal situation and involvement with the case of Hus, at least guarantee the freedom of receiving communion in both variants.

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8 S. Bylina, Husyckie poutě na hory i ich uczestnicy, [in:] W. Iwańczak, J. Smolucha (eds), Wspólnoty małe i duże w społeczeństwach Czech i Polski w średniowieczu i w czasach nowożytnych, Kraków 2010, pp. 338, 343.
10 It was hard to ascribe the legal guilt of John Hus’ death to Sigismund of Luxemburg. On the other hand there was no doubt in the Czech environment about the moral guilt of the Roman King. This is the explanation why there is very little said about his guilt in the documents that were written for foreign readers and at the same time the problem is shown in the letters/manifestos addressed to Czechs. See manifesto Páni a Pražané všem Čechům, [in:] A. Molnár (ed.), Husitské Manifesty, Praha 1980, p. 68.
11 The background of the Czech millenarism as well as its development and differences among reformers were described in details in S. Bylina, Dwa nurty proroctw chiliastycznych, [in:] S. Bylina, Hussistica, Warszawa 2007, pp. 65-85.
But all optimistic predictions were erased at once when during the king’s stay in Vratislavia in March the pope’s bull “Omnium plasmatoris Domini” was read. Pope Martin V announced the holy crusade against heretics in Bohemia. Sigismund obtained thus a means allowing him to gather armies from all over the Christian world, but on the other hand it put his Czech and Moravian allies in an awkward position. As we read in one of the manifestos from the time, written in April 1420, the movement was definitely interpreted as a war against the faithful Bohemian Kingdom, and in the first moment united even those who were on opposite positions in their views and in the social hierarchy.

The troops of Sigismund came to Prague at the end of June 1420. They surrounded the city occupying the Lesser Town (Mala Strana), the Hradčany and controlling the northern and southern side. Only one side – the eastern – was relatively free. The main point on the side was the Vitkov Hill (today’s Žižkov), which was a natural aim if one wanted to close the siege. So it was not unexpected that both sides decided to fight for the Hill. A small unit led by John Žižka, consisting of only 29 people, among them three women, built makeshift barricades on the hill, while the German knights from Meissen on the 14th of July decided to ride against them, using the eastern, gentle slope. They were convinced that it was only a matter of a short period of time before the peasants, armed with flails would escape, fearing confrontation with the professional, well-armed soldiers. It was quite unexpected for them then that these peasants not only conducted a fierce and successful defence, but also that they got rather peculiar aid from the city. During the clash they were supported by an armed procession which came to the hill from the city. It was led by John Žižka (who earlier left his unit and returned to the capital) and by a priest carrying a monstrance. This was not a view often seen by the soldiers, who most probably thought that they were going to teach some rednecks their lesson. The German unit was disorganised, some of them trying to ride down the steeper slopes, which was not an easy task for a full-armed knight, and ended for some tragically. The battle was over, the hill defended by the hussites. But it did not mean at the same time that Prague was free or the big crusader’s army defeated. The later, called the “battle of Vitkov Hill”, could be treated as an insignificant incident, possible to “repair” by using a stronger force and repeating the attack.

Some historians see in the July struggle as the turning point of the siege of Prague, based on its military outcome. But realistically evaluating this opinion cannot be sustained. So most modern scholars usually ask about the real reason behind the fact that the siege of Prague in 1420 finally did not succeed. Among the more convincing theories is that presented by Petr

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14 For the analyse of the tactical situation in Prague see: J. Dürdek, Sztuka wojenna husytów (trans. J. Chlabicz), Warszawa 1955 (hereinafter referred to as: Dürdek, Sztuka wojenna), p. 182.


16 P. Černý, Tajemství českých kronik. Cesty ke kořenům husitské tradice, Praha-Litomyšl 2003 (hereinafter referred to as: Černý, Tajemství českých kronik), pp. 117-138. The particular chapter of the book revolves around a question whether events on the Vitkov Hill should be called a battle or rather a skirmish (“bitva nebo šarvátká?”).
Čornej. The Czech historian argues that king Sigismund, who was always lacking funds for his activities in politics, did not want to ruin the richest city in the kingdom by an unnecessary assault, during which it would definitely be plundered and maybe even burnt.\(^\text{17}\)

On the other hand among his Czech supporters were some of the nobles who had been afraid of the crusade a few months earlier, writing the April manifesto. Now they stayed with Sigismund, which gave him access for example to the Prague’s castle, but at the same time their support obliged him to be more careful in treating the kingdom’s capital. Sigismund was crowned in the Prague cathedral on the castle hill, and later that year he resided there.\(^\text{18}\)

After a few months, at the beginning of November, there was another battle also lost by the crusaders. The stronghold of Vyšehrad on the southern side of Prague ceased to be the measure for holding any siege of the capital city in the future.

Knowing all this one must ask: where could one see any end of the world during the siege of Prague in 1420 if nothing really happened? To see it we need deeper insight into the events of that year and also descriptions of the them.

We do that here in three steps: first, looking at the end of the world that was supposed to happen, but never did. Secondly, how the events were described and how this could lead a reader to eschatological conclusions and finally the real end of some world that could not have been noticed at the time.

**The End of the World that Did not Happen**

One of the most known Polish fantasy writers, Andrew Sapkowski, wrote in his novel “Narrenturm” (the first part of the so-called “hussite trilogy”):

> “The end of the world in 1420 did not happen. There were no Days of Punishment and Revenge, preceding the introduction of the Kingdom of Heaven. The world neither vanished nor burnt. At least not the whole world. It was quite funny though...”\(^\text{19}\)

This ironic statement from the popular novel refers well to the sources. John Příbram, one of the milder Czech reformers, seeking an agreement with the Roman Church, wrote a treatise about radicals – “The life of the taborite priests”. It is a highly polemical work, written not earlier than in 1429.\(^\text{20}\) Příbram condemns many views popular among radical reformers and also some of their customs. He mentions that the taborite priests (specifying his names, starting with Mikulaš of Pelhřimov) had predicted that the Day of the Judgment should come in 1420 on the basis of the Bible. Příbram says that it proves that they are “liars and deceivers”.\(^\text{21}\)

The chronicle written by Laurentius of Březova, also from a certain perspective, mentions the same accusation, as well as listing chiliastic errors he calls “Articuli et errores Taboritarum”.\(^\text{22}\) All of them are put at the beginning of a long list of taborite faults.

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\(^{17}\) ČORNEJ, Tajemství českých kronik, pp. 138-144.

\(^{18}\) F. ŠMAHEL, Husitská revoluce 3. Kronika válečných let, Praha 1993 (hereinafter referred to as: ŠMAHEL, Husitská revoluce 3), p. 49. However Sigismund left Prague quite quickly, in the beginning of August, so his reign (not accepted by some nobles) was more a demonstration than fact at the time.

\(^{19}\) A. SAPKOWSKI, Narrenturm, Warszawa 2002 (a fragment translated by PFN).


\(^{21}\) JAN z PŘÍBRÁMÉ, Život kněží táborských (ed. J. Boubin), Příbram 2000, s. 39.

So the predicted and announced Day of Judgment did not happen, but somehow it still fertilised minds. Even of those that did not share the radical opinion.

**An End of the World that was Written about**

As mentioned above, most of the moderate writers and polemicists did not agree with the vision of the end of the world in 1420. However, if we look at the description of the events provided by them, an atmosphere of eschatological seriousness is quite visible. Even written from some distance of time, the sources are not free of this either. As Petr Čornej showed, the first small clash in March 1420 near Sudoměř was described on the basis of the battle which took place between the Old Testament hero Joshua and Amorites. The earlier death of Venceslaus IV resembled the description in the Revelation of St. John (there is an expression “roaring as a lion”). Laurentius of Březova, quite critical in his opinions about the extreme radical reformers, gave a detailed account of the sermon delivered by John Želivský in March 1420. The radical preacher compared king Sigismund to the dragon, one of the key figures in Saint John’s Revelation. The red dragon, an emblem visible on the banners of the Luxemburg family’s troops was then a clear signal for the people in Prague that the end of the world was really near.

The key event in the summer siege – the battle of the Vitkov Hill – was also immortalised by Laurentius in a specific way. He emphasised the effort of a small group of “God’s soldiers”, and painted a picture where a woman encourages men with the words: „It can’t be that a Christian yields to the Antichrist”. It was also he who colourfully portrayed the help of the armed procession led by a priest with a monstrance. Finally it was Laurentius who enumerated what the army surrounding Prague consisted of in terms of nationality. Apart from Czechs, Moravians, Germans etc he also mentioned Swiss and Poles. All of this led to the conclusion that the faithful Christians, Bohemians, who had received communion under both variants had fought with the forces of the Antichrist, which were put together from all of the nations of Earth against them. The situation became known by the nickname – “proti všem”, i.e. “against all” and one must admit that it was not far from the idea of Armageddon.

That is the way the siege of Prague was seen even from some perspectives, about a decade and much later. And it is quite important to stress that this was so thanks to the annalists. It is beyond doubt that the picture reflected also the oral tradition.

**The End that Could not Have Been Seen**

There are areas, however, where the end of the world happened in 1420. Or, one should rather say, “the ends” or “ends of some worlds” or more poetically “the end of the world as some knew it”. Historians usually see the year as a beginning – a real beginning of the hussite wars or the time when revolution reached its full extent. But the siege of Prague had

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23 ČORNEJ, Tajemství českých kronik, p. 150.
24 VÁVRINEC z BŘEZOVE, Kronika husitská, p. 346 (“cum magno clamore et rugitu quasi leonis”).
26 Idem, p. 388.
27 Idem, p. 384.
28 The idea „proti všem“ became also popular among scholars, who used it as a short and quite precise description of the hussite feelings during the period of crusades, and as a useful expression to title the chapters in the works describing the events of that time, see ČORNEJ, Tajemství českých kronik, p. 117-156 (chapter: „Proti všem“); ŠMAHEL, Husitská revoluce 3, p. 36-52 (chapter: “Proti všem: rozpad první křížové výpravy”) and others.
its consequences. Some of them were visible but overlooked, others not seen until some
years or decades later and sometimes not linked with the situation at all.

The first one was a major change in the city’s social structure. During the difficult period of
mutual fighting – at the beginning only with words and treatises or sermons – the national
case became more and more important. It was not earlier than in 1409 when by the Decree
of Kutna Hora the king changed the balance of powers at Prague University. As a result the
Czechs were supported against the majority of German scholars, who had been dominant
for a long time. But before 1420 it was mainly at the university where the national case was
visible. After the death of Venceslaus IV and facing Sigismund as a candidate and legal
heir to the throne it appeared that the national case covers wider parts of the society. And
in 1420, as a reaction to the announced crusade, Czech identity was rapidly strengthened.
Obviously this occurrence was in opposition to the Germans.

Prague was inhabited by a big population of Germans. This consisted often of rich
families living in the Old Town. In the summer of 1420 the Germans were expelled from
the city. The defenders feared that they could become a fifth column, maybe traitors allowing
Sigismund’s troops to enter the city. It was definitely one of the reasons why the biggest and
richest city in the kingdom underwent a time of unrest and (adding natural problems like
floods at the beginning of 1430s) it lost a lot of its earlier power.

On the other hand the void was filled with the arrival of taborites and other radical groups
of peasants with their religious and military leaders. They all came to help in defending
the city. Their stay in Prague, however, also had other consequences. Radicals could see how
the people in a rich city live and how far from the ideals of a poor church the life it was.
The reformers from the university on the other hand could see that the radicals were much
further ahead in their demands and views than they themselves wanted to achieve. They did
not accept the customs of celebrating the mass without vestments and with little attention
to the liturgical rules, as well as the mentioned predictions about the end of the world.

The lists of errors I mentioned earlier are a good example of the situation cause by
the mutual presence of these groups. They reflect a discussion which turned into a harsh
polemic or even a quarrel that had place in December 1420 in the House of Peter Zmrzlik
in Prague. Radicals (among them both chiliasts together with more pragmatic theologians)
were accused by the university masters of 70 errors (the number higher than in the list of
errors made by Hus, according to the council of Constance).

The whole meeting, relayed in detail by Laurentius of Březova, can be interpreted as
a result of the proximity in which different groups of reformers and their followers lived
during the siege. They had enough time and occasions to learn about each other’s customs,
style of life and views. The siege brought them closer than they could ever be. And the
consequences were unavoidable. It was possible to keep peace between them at a distance,
but the mutual enemy – Sigismund and his army – in fact turned them against each other.
The significance of the discussions of that period was so great that in 1443, during one of the
subsequent clashes between the theologians, reminiscent of an example which was used in one of the sermons delivered about two decades earlier!![32]

The siege of Prague in 1420 was definitely not the end of the world. Lots of articles and books written about husite warfare are small, but still convincing proofs As some expected it to be, the others recognised them as heretics because of this. But in some ways it did become an end. As the prologue of Armaggedon or not, the siege of Prague started to be seen as a key event of a final phase of history in traditional and husite writings. Finally it became an end not visible sometimes even for a historian – the beginning of the end of delicate cooperation between the factions. Last but not least it was a great change in the life of the capital city. All combined, the year meant the end of the former social, religious and political shape of the Czech Kingdom, so in a way the end of the world as they had known it before.

[32] List M. Jana Příbrama p. Jakubovi (z Vřesovic) o jednání na synodě Kutnohorské, 21.VII.1443, [in:] Z. NEJEDLÝ (ed.), Prameny k synodám strany pražské a táborské v letech 1441-1444, Praha 1900, p. 43, response to the accusation with information, that the sermon was given “more than 18 years ago”: Kněží Táborští odpírají zprávám o nich po zemi rozpísovaným (VIII.1443), [in:] Z. NEJEDLÝ (ed.), Prameny k synodám strany pražské a táborské v letech 1441-1444, Praha 1900, p. 51.