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Whether a True Christian May Wage War: Hussite Polemics About Just War

The problem of combining high moral standards and involvement in military actions has been discussed among Christian writers since antiquity. However, each epoch had to face the issue as it was not easy to explain and understand how to obey the commandment of love and yet use weapons against “thy neighbor.” The problem became even greater for the zealous Bohemian reformers who had to deal with the alternative of either insubordination leading to bloodshed or a betrayal of their ideals. While they had to fight, they also had to encourage other Czechs to support their struggle. On the other hand, they needed to construct a theory, or at least prove that their actions were justified and necessary. And after the conflict they needed to describe them in a way that would leave the reader with a proper impression.

Hussite warfare and ideology have been the subject of detailed reflection for nearly two hundred years now. They have represented different nations, attitudes and methodologies.¹ Professor Thomas Fudge wrote the most recent and extensive article about the

¹ The focus on the military aspects of the Bohemian revolutionary movements in the fifteenth century was visible in the historiography beginning in the nineteenth century. Among widely quoted works of a strictly military interest, one may mention: C. Grünhagen, *Die Hussitenkämpfe der Schlesier 1420–1435*, Breslau 1872; E. Wagner, *Jak valčili husité*, Praha 1946; J. Durdík, *Husitské vojenství*, Praha 1953 (Polish edition: J. Durdik, *Sztuka wojenna husytów*, transl. J. Chlabicz, Warszawa 1955); Z. Drobná, J. Durdík, E. Wagner, *Kroje, zbroj a zbraně doby předhusitské a husitské*, Praha 1956; J. Dolejší, L. Křížek, *Husité. Vrchol válečného umění v Čechách 1419–1434*, Praha 2009.

justification of war in the thought of Nicholas of Pelhřimov, a prominent Taborite ecclesiastical leader.² The aim of this article is thus to outline the main manifestations of the idea of the just war and to show the relation between the academic disputes in Hussite circles and the practical application of their ideas, as well as to describe the evaluation of their military actions as seen in other sources.

It is well known that, looking for a model for their struggle, the Hussites drew comparisons with both King David and the Maccabees.³ These were natural models. They both fought in a just cause against an overpowering enemy, defending their territory and faith. The Hussite battle descriptions also contained other biblical images and allusions. As Petr Čornej proved in the case of Sutoměř, the battle description was, in fact, based on Joshua's fight against the Amorites.⁴ In Kutna Hora, the commemorative pattern was based on the Passion.⁵ But the above-mentioned examples form a category of myth, built after the events to memorialize and idealize the Hussite warriors and the whole movement. The fact that they were also marked by the conviction that the Hussites conducted a just war is quite a different topic. Another matter is their attitude towards war worked out by Petr Chelčický, which has been the subject of reflection by Wojciech Iwańczak in a wider social context.⁶ This case, due to its complexity, must be put aside in keeping with this article's aims and the editorial restrictions.

Let us then look at some examples of how the theories were constructed and argued and then evaluate them in practice.

² T.A. Fudge, "Crime, Punishment and Pacifism in the Thought of Bishop Mikuláš of Pelhřimov, 1420–1452", in: *The Bohemian Reformation and Religious Practice*, vol. 3, eds. Z.V. David, D.R. Holeton, Prague 2000, pp. 69–103.

³ F.J. Holeček, "Makkabäische Inspiration des hussitischen Chorals «Ktož jsú boží bojovníci»", in: *In memoriam Josefa Macka (1922–1991)*, eds. M. Polívka, F. Šmahel, Praha 1996, pp. 111–125; S. Segert, "Makkabäer und Hussiten", *Communio Viatorum* 1959, vol. 2, pp. 50–60.

⁴ P. Čornej, *Tajemství českých kronik. Cesty ke kořenům husitské tradice*, Praha 2003, pp. 149–150.

⁵ P.F. Nowakowski, "Wielowymiarowość opisu bitwy pod Kutną Horą w ujęciu Wawrzyńca z Brzezowej", in: *Religia wobec historii, historia wobec religii*, ed. E. Przybył, Kraków 2006, pp. 253–262.

⁶ W. Iwańczak, *Ludzie miecza, modlitwy, pracy. Trójpodział społeczeństwa w średniowiecznej myśli czeskiej*, Kielce 1995, pp. 107–144.

The Theory

Initially one ought to touch upon the writings of John Příbram, one of the most moderate Utraquists. He wrote several short treatises about the conditions of just war. One of them, preserved as a manuscript in the Library of the Metropolitan Chapter of Prague and partially published by Jaroslav Goll at the end of the nineteenth century, contains nine conditions.⁷ Among them we may find all those conditions that were traditionally considered to be necessary, i.e. the legitimacy of the ruler or the power conducting the war, righteous intent, and just cause. Other conditions may also be accepted without certain reservations. Příbram says that the aim of war should not be to destroy but to defend and promote innocence and that it should be preceded by serious religious reflection and prayer.⁸ What may be significant for his later disputes with radical opponents is that he draws a distinction between the soldiers of Christ, who accept the rules, and others, who form the army of the Antichrist.

At the end of the revolutionary decade of the 1420's, Příbram wrote a highly polemical treatise titled *Život Kněží Táborských* ["The Life of the Taborite Priests"].⁹ This one mixes theoretical deliberations (there aren't many of them in his text) with an evaluation of the Taborites' practices. Příbram enumerates the misdeeds and even crimes of the radicals, such as murdering and burning priests, washing hands in the blood of sinners and many other terrifying actions.¹⁰ The descriptions are quite vivid and picturesque. It is worth keeping in mind that, as an Utraquist, Příbram often used rhetorical tricks, quoting opponents through inaccurate fragments taken out of context. The result of this careless attitude was that at the beginning of the 1440's there was no one in the radical camp who wanted to

⁷ J. Příbram, "Tractatulus parvus de bello", in: *Quellen zur Geschichte der Böhmischen Brüder*, vol. 2, ed. J. Goll, Prag 1882, pp. 56–57 (source D, partial edition), manuscript: Knihovna pražské metropolitní kapituly, D. 53, 372b–379a; regarding the manuscript see: A. Podlaha, A. Patera, *Soupis rukopisů Knihovny Metropolitní Kapitoly Pražské*, vol. 1, Praha 1910, p. 363; F.M. Bartoš, *Literární M. Jana Rokycany, M. Jana Příbrama, M. Petra Payna*, Praha 1928, p. 64.

⁸ J. Příbram, "Tractatulus parvus de bello", op. cit., p. 57.

⁹ Jan z Příbramě, *Život kněží táborských*, ed. J. Boubín, Příbram 2000.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 46–47 et al.

discuss matters with him.¹¹ Yet despite these defects, the treatise presents the theory in its purest form. Příbram accuses the radicals of not respecting the rules of just war. To support his view he presents St. Augustine's conditions for just war, such as a legitimate authority, freedom from wicked intentions like greed or lust for domination, and a just cause. Příbram claims that all of the conditions were not fulfilled. Moreover, the radicals acted in the entirely opposite manner.¹²

After defending the country from the attacks of subsequent crusades the radical Hussites initiated their own military actions. These were directed abroad and became known as *spanilé jízdy* – the magnificent rides. The reason for undertaking this series of military actions was quite complex. On one hand, they were supposed to spread Hussite ideas and in fact we can see increasing attention given to the Hussite movement in Europe during those years. On the other hand, it was a good way of preventing a retaliatory action. By attacking German regions, the Hussites weakened them and made it more difficult for them to organise another crusade should such an idea appear again. But the most solid reason was even more pragmatic – the Hussites needed money, and robbing the neighbouring lands was one of the easiest ways of solving their economic problems. At least for a short time.

The series of expeditions that took place from 1427 and the intensity of these actions became a topic of discussion between the moderate and radical Hussites. The discussion took place in Prague in April of 1431.¹³ From the moderate side the main participant was John Rokycana, who became the main figure of the faction after the death of Jakoubek of Stříbro in 1429. Nicholas of Pelhřimov represented the radical position. The debate concerned several problems, but the most important for our topic is naturally the one connected with waging war. Rokycana criticized the involvement of radical Hussite clergymen in military actions. The treatise which Rokycana wrote after the dispute was analyzed by the Czech researcher, F.M. Dobiáš, who noticed that the Utraquist archbishop [of Prague] also accepted the conditions

¹¹ “Kněží Táborskí odpírají zprávám o nich po zemi rozpisovaným (1443, Aug.)”, in: Z. Nejedlý, *Prameny k synodám strany pražské a tábořské v letech 1441–1444*, Praha 1900, pp. 53–54.

¹² Jan z Příbramě, *Život kněží*, op. cit., p. 43.

¹³ B. Zilynská, *Husitské synody v Čechách 1418–1440*, Praha 1985, p. 68.

of just war worked out by St. Augustine and claimed that even soldiers have to love their opponents, including heretics.¹⁴

As it was said earlier, over a dozen years ago Thomas Fudge wrote a detailed article on the thought of Nicholas of Pelhřimov. However, he focused on the role of punishment and analyzed the Taborite's ideas from this perspective. Here I will examine Pelhřimov's thought strictly in relation to this paper's topic – as a justification of military actions.

Nicholas of Pelhřimov, defending the radicals' views and actions, wrote a treatise titled *Confessio taboritarum* ["The Confession of the Taborites"].¹⁵ It was an apology, consisting of answers to the charges levelled by Rokycana. There are many detailed points in the treatise and the whole text is a direct response to Rokycana. Among them there are issues concerning the sacraments and the rules for celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The problem of war was naturally also present in the defense. The explanation was divided into two parts. First, the Taborites dealt with the accusation of supporting and taking part in military actions. After explaining their views on the matter they addressed the accusation of participation in secular power.¹⁶ Mixing clerical functions and secular offices, or exercising functions of the secular arm, was strictly prohibited by one of the Four Articles of Prague. However, the versions of the article differed and were vague enough to allow many exceptions, justified by the circumstances. It may be useful to add that the essence of the article was usually connected with the possession of wealth. So it was quite easy to focus on just one aspect of temporal domination rather than on both at the same time – wealth and administrative/military power.

Nicholas of Pelhřimov responded to the two accusations in a similar form with slight differences. The comparison of both fragments of the text shows clearly the structure of his explanations. First, he quotes the accusation. Then he recalls why the Hussites had to defend God's law and explains that it was due to the activity of the Antichrist who couldn't stand the spread of good deeds. At this point

¹⁴ F.M. Dobiaš, "Rokycanův spis «De septem culpis»", *Theologická Příloha Křesťanské revue* 1967, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 108–109.

¹⁵ Mikulaš z Pelhřimova, *Vyznání a obrana Táborů*, eds. A. Molnár, F.M. Dobiaš, Praha 1972.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 236–238.

he referred to John Hus, leaving no doubt that the radical reformers should be treated as the followers of the executed preacher.¹⁷ After that he begins the explication of the main problem. Nicholas writes that the military actions were undertaken against people who were the enemies of the God's law and who opposed it when approached with other, peaceful methods. He declares that the Taborites are ready to cease military actions immediately once their opponents return to the right path of truth and justice. The radical says the Hussites would prefer a spiritual fight through prayer instead of blades but it does not mean they can condemn the use of swords. He reminds his audience that years earlier the question was discussed with members of the academic faction and the two sides agreed that military actions might be waged under certain circumstances. One of the conditions concerned the goal of the struggle – the spread of God's salutary commands in the whole Church, now deprived of their due influence. Nicholas tries also to answer the allegation that there is no solid evidence in the Bible supporting the Taborite involvement in military actions. The Taborite leader says that he does not want to justify any of the wrong things that happen during a fight. Instead he invokes earlier decisions clarifying the radical views on the case that were made during the congregations in Pisek in 1422, in Hradište and in Klatovy in 1424. He reminds his audience that the Taborite position has not changed and that they are still against unjust conflict the purpose of which is temporal wealth or revenge. He also rejects the temptation to merge spiritual and secular authority quoting the Second Epistle of St. Paul to Timothy (2:4): "No soldier on duty entangles himself in the affairs of life, that he may please him who enrolled him as a soldier." At the end of this point he stresses once more that the Taborites are against any misdeeds, however, he is convinced that among the Utraquist followers such wrongdoings might have also taken place.¹⁸

What strikes a reader of the apology is the similar conclusions of the two points connected with warfare and involvement in civil dominion. On the one hand it is the condemnation of all deeds that are against God's Law and of earlier arrangements among the Hussites. But it is also a response which forces the accusers to look at their

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 236.

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 237–238.

own moral status. Nicholas seems to be fully aware of the division between theory and practice in the actions of the radical units. There is no trace of pacifism in his arguments, but one can read between the lines that an extensive correction is required on both sides to meet the rules once laid out by the reformers.

The justification of military expeditions was still an open problem for discussion at the time when Tabor was in a much weaker position militarily compared to their strength before the Battle of Lipany. The problem was also discussed during the disputes in 1443, however, this time other questions were far more important, mainly those concerning the Eucharist.¹⁹ The position of the radicals did not change and Nicholas once more invoked their regulations from the period of the anti-Hussite crusades.

The radicals' views on the possibility of engaging in war lead us to think of their proponents as rather reasonable people with a certain self-consciousness. In terms of theory they adhere to the main, traditional directives about just war – it must not be conducted because of vanity or greed and one has to reconsider his actions when they are not leading to a proper end consistent with God's Law. There is nothing new or rebellious in those views. The only question that is put aside is the need of a legitimate authority. But the Hussites do not question that rule. They raise objections against the legitimacy of the people in power and do so according to their understanding of God's law.

Practice

In addition to the above theoretical disputes on the just war it is useful to look at some examples in practice. It is not my intention, however, to present legal violations or demonstrate that the Hussites committed war crimes. These facts are obvious and there is no need for persuasion here. I would just like to add some popular Hussite views to the ones presented earlier.

¹⁹ Most of the sources from that discussion concerned the sacrament of Eucharist and the final conclusion, condemning radical views in that matter, was composed to eradicate the eucharistic heresy, see: "Rozsudek sněmu zemského o víře proti kněžím strany Táborské, 31.I.1444", in: Z. Nejedlý, *Prameny k synodám*, op. cit., p. 107.

We can trace popular views on war through those sources that were neither the intellectual product of the movement's main ideologists nor of their opponents. The authors of the manifestos, letters and military statutes reacted to current events. They wanted to justify their actions or describe proper behaviour. It was not their aim to build a consistent ideological system.

At the beginning of the revolution, when it became clear that Bohemia had to face the crusade, the defenders produced several manifestos.²⁰ They were meant to explain the causes of the situation and to encourage Czechs to stand against an incoming attack. Those manifestos, however, which were directed at the foreigners, consisted of explanations and justifications for the Bohemian resistance. The core of all the manifestos was the Four Articles of Prague. But the articles did not provide a sufficient foundation for the view that the kingdom must be defended against the crusade, and what is more against Sigismund of Luxemburg, the righteous heir to the crown. For this reason the arguments found in the manifestos present the traditional criteria for a just war in the context of the situation in Bohemian. In "Manifest Pražanů do českých krajů" ["Prague's Manifesto to the Bohemians"], published in April 1420, the author focused on the idea of defending the kingdom, the nation and the true Christian faith, which had been flourishing in the kingdom and had become endangered by the oppressors.²¹ The same arguments may be found in other manifestos from the time directed to the inhabitants of the Czech Kingdom.²²

Apart from arguments based on fidelity to tradition, heritage, love of country and the preservation of "the most Christian kingdom" in some manifestos, we also find other passages that correspond well with the idea of just war. For example the problem of resistance against King Sigismund is explained in a manifesto directed to Venice in July 1420.²³ In a long list of Sigismund's wrongdoings we also find violations of the law (concerning his policy towards Moravia), but also his hostility towards the kingdom and the Bohemians. In

²⁰ About the use of the manifestos see mainly: K. Hruza, "Schrift und Rebellion. Die hussitischen Manifeste aus Prag von 1415–1431", in: *Colloquia mediaevalia Pragensia*, vol. 1, eds. F. Šmahel, M. Nodl, Praha 1999, pp. 81–107.

²¹ "Manifest Pražanů do českých krajů", in: *Husitské manifesty*, ed. A. Molnár, Praha 1980, pp. 65–66.

²² "Páni a Pražané všem Čechům", in: *Husitské manifesty*, op. cit., p. 69.

²³ "Manifest husitské Prahy do Benátek", in: *Husitské manifesty*, op. cit., pp. 84–93.

a manifesto directed to the Units of the Margraviate of Meissen published in July 1420, the authors justified the Hussite resistance by suggesting that King Sigismund was a tyrant who assaulted the kingdom and should be treated as an offender.²⁴

At the same time the authors of the manifestos paid attention to how their ideas were received. They declared their readiness to correct their views and actions should someone prove or notice that they violate God's law.²⁵ So, as we may see in both praxis and propaganda, the Hussites also felt the need to express their position in the context of traditional elements of just war theory.

We also find some elements of just war theory in the military statutes of John Žižka.²⁶ The introduction to the statutes contains the Four Articles of Prague, written as tasks. Especially the third and fourth articles seem to be instructions, or orders, for a Hussite army. Their aim is therefore to put ecclesiastical and social affairs in order. The order and discipline required by the statutes need no discussion, but there are some other points which may be related to the idea of just war. One of them was the order to collect all the spoils on a common pile in a selected place, which expressed the absence of greed among God's soldiers. Another point concentrates on the moral value of the soldiers, showing clearly that there is no place among them for regular sinners. At the end of the list the author once again shows the aim of the struggle – the defence of God's law and the defeat of the true and open heretics. So the whole list of military statutes contains the principles of just war: discipline and dependence on God's law, lack of greed and sinful actions, correcting wrongdoers and heretics.²⁷

The final part of the statutes contains an interesting passage showing the relationship between a soldier's behaviour and God's involvement in the struggle. The author believes that if the soldiers obey the rules, God will help them in their fight. This was not a rhetorical device, but true belief, as shown in a letter written by Jan

²⁴ "Do vojska míšeňského markraběte", in: *Husitské Manifesty*, op. cit., p. 78.

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 83.

²⁶ On the ideological role of the statutes see: R. Štátný, *Čeští spisovatelé deseti století*, Praha 1974, p. 258.

²⁷ "Vojenský řád Žižkův", in: *Výbor z české literatury husitské doby*, vol. 1, eds. B. Havránek, J. Hrabák, J. Daňhelka, Praha 1963, pp. 502–506.

Roháč of Dubé in December 1434.²⁸ The date of the letter shows quite clearly the position in which the radical commander found himself. It was already after the decisive battle of Lipany, and the Taborites had made attempts to recover from their losses. The military strength of the radical camp was in decline, so it was natural to examine its causes. Jan Roháč sought and found them in the moral condition of the Hussites. He does not point out any particular offenses. However, his views are simple and confident. God was once on the Hussite's side and let them win against their opponents. Now the Hussites are losing, so it is clear that they must have lost God's support. This could only happen for one reason: the Hussite soldiers had become morally lax and were no longer as devoted to God as they once were. If they should stop committing sins and again reach higher moral levels, they would surely start winning once more. God would help them again as he used to during their greatest victories.²⁹

The pattern of Roháč's thought is not unique. Medieval armies linked not only their victories to God's help and the moral perfection of their soldiers but their defeats as well. We can see, however, that this point contained in Žižka's statutes was a credible and important one for the Hussites. At the time of Roháč's letter, the Taborites were already conscious of their moral trespasses, as shown through the explanations of Nicholas of Pelhřimov to the allegations made by Rokycana.

The above-mentioned examples of theoretical and practical elements comprising the Hussite idea of just war show that the elements of this theory were by no means revolutionary. God's soldiers were supposed to fight in a just cause, maintain discipline (especially by obeying God's law), avoid greed and other sins and stop fighting at the very minute when their opponents decided to turn back toward the right and pious path. The rules, worked out in theoretical disputes, were present in more or less visible form in the practical commands of the military statutes and also in propaganda. So one may ask whether it is a mistake in this case to call the movement a revolution? Such a question is reasonable and sound. One can hardly find any rebellious aspects in the theory of just war conducted by the Hussites, but it is clear that its interpretation was flexible enough to justify the actions undertaken.

²⁸ "Táborský manifest Jana Roháče z Dubé", in: *Husitské manifesty*, op. cit., pp. 214–217.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 215–216.