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Jiří of Podebrady, King of Bohemia

The Coat of arms of the Bohemian King and Kingdom.

Historical Note: The Rulers of Bohemia

The lineage of the rulers of Bohemia (part of the present-day Czech Republic) can be traced back to the Přemyslid dynasty, who ruled Bohemia from 873-1306. First were the eight legendary kings, beginning with Přemysl, a peasant who married the royal princess Libuše.

After these eight kings came a series of Přemyslid dukes, starting with Bořivoj I and concluding with Přemysl Otakar I, who became king in 1198.

Following this time came the Přemyslid kings, who ruled Bohemia from 1198 to 1306; from 1306-1310, three non-Přemyslid kings ruled.

In 1310, the illustrious Luxembourg royal dynasty was founded, ushering in the Golden Age of Bohemia. This dynasty ended in 1437 (due to the upheavals of the Hussite Revolution), with the rule of Sigismund. The Hapsburg dynasty began in 1437, with the rule of Albert of Hapsburg; it ended in 1457.

Into this dynastic breach stepped Jiří (George) of Podebrady, who ruled from 1457-1471. Jiří's rule marked a crucial moment in the religious and political history of Bohemia; his enlightened reign established a culture of economic and political growth for Bohemia for 150 years.

Hussism

To understand Jiří of Podebrady's role in the complex unfolding of religious belief in Bohemia, it's necessary to briefly review Hussism (please see the issue 09.06 issue of *continuous conversion* for a more thorough discussion of Jan Hus). In the late 14th century, Jan Hus, Bohemian Catholic priest, ran afoul of the Roman church with his reformist teachings. He noted 4 key principles:

1. That the Church should allow free preaching of the Scriptures (in Czech, not Latin);
2. That the full Communion in bread and wine should be given to laymen as well as priests;
3. That the clergy should live according to "Apostolic Poverty";
4. That there should be strict church discipline; i.e., mortal sins should be prohibited for the clergy as well as the laity.

These principles were unacceptable to the Roman Catholic Church; through a series of political maneuvers, Hus was brought to "trial" for his supposed heresies; the trial was not fair, and Hus was burned at the stake for his unrecanted beliefs in 1412.

Split among Hussites

As is often the case, the martyrdom of Hus was highly effective in spreading his reformist beliefs among his Bohemian countrymen. Yet the new "protestant" Hussite Christian movement, was quickly split into rival factions. One group, the Taborite Hussites under Jan Žižka , favored communalism among themselves, while believing that slaying heretics was a duty for the Christian. They established a religious community considered heretical by the Catholic Church Tabor. *To p. 2*

The Utraquist King

A more conciliatory approach was taken by another Hussite group, the Utraquists (who took their name from the Latin *sub utraque specie*, meaning "in both kinds"). These Hussites were willing to cooperate with the Roman Catholic Church, and eventually reached an accord with the Church, joining their respective armies at the Battle of Lipany (Česky Brod) in 1434 and defeating the combined Taborite and "Orphan" Hussite armies.

The violent divisions within Hussism had negative and ultimately destructive effects on the development of the Bohemian nation and on the spread of Protestantism in Central Europe. Jiří of Podebrady stepped into this confusion when, as a boy of 14, he fought in the Battle of Lipany in 1434 on the side of the victorious Utraquists. He became a prominent member of the Hussite party and then its leader.

When the Bohemian kingdom was in turmoil and without a hereditary king, the Bohemian nobility elected Jiří as king in 1457. Jiří of Podebrady was the first freely-elected Bohemian ruler, chosen from among the country's nobility without regard to any previous agreements, hereditary claim to the throne, family connections or dynastic origin. His rule was a time of rebuilding and redevelopment for the Bohemian kingdom following the tragic events that resulted from the martyrdom of Jan Hus, the schism of Hussism, and the harsh efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to maintain Bohemia as a Catholic Christian nation.

During his rule, Jiří won recognition throughout Central Europe. Through skillful diplomacy; he gained respect for his kingdom and forged ties with neighboring nations. He authored an ambitious "Peace Plan" for all of Europe, a medieval version of a NATO-like organization for mutual defense, by proposing a treaty among all Christian powers, with Germany, Bohemia, France, and Italy as the founding members. The member states would pledge to settle all differences by exclusively peaceful means. There was to be a common parliament, and other common institutions. Jiří couched the proposal in Christian terms, using their common religious beliefs to unite these rulers in defense against the Turkish invaders who had conquered Constantinople in 1453.

However, Jiří didn't succeed in having his plan adopted. The Hungarian monarch at this time, Matthias Corvinus (with the support of the disgruntled Czech Catholic opposition, who didn't like the idea of a Protestant on the throne) declared war against Jiří (who happened to be Matthias' father-in-law). The Hungarian campaigns against Bohemia ceased only after Jiří's death and the ascent of Vladislav Jagellon (Jiří's hand-picked successor) to the throne.

Jiří's plan for European unification was ahead of its time, no doubt, but his efforts at internal Bohemian unification met with success. He steered his country away from the extremes of Hussism, made overtures toward the establishment of lasting peace in Europe, was the first freely-elected Bohemian king and was the first Protestant king of Bohemia. Above all, Jiří of Podebrady's rule demonstrated to Central Europe that religious differences could be handled peacefully.

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