

Czech Protestants and national identity:
commemorating Jan Hus in 1869

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Introduction

During the revolutionary years of 1848 and 1849, several Czech Protestants set out to promote a partisan version of Czech national identity that was based on the Protestant interpretation of the Hussite tradition. These Protestants not only claimed that the Czech nation reached the peak of its history in the Hussite period but also argued that to live up to this tradition today the nation should return to Hussitism. For them, the most obvious way of doing it was conversion to the Czech Protestant Church of the day. While Czech Protestant communities in Prague succeeded in attracting several hundred converts over these two revolutionary years, they clearly failed to convert the nation as a whole. Nevertheless, the Czech Protestants did not give up.

Their hopes received a significant boost at the end of the 1860s when some of the Czech liberal leaders started to employ Hussite symbolism in their attempt to mobilize popular support. The most significant event in this respect was the public commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Jan Hus in 1869. Many Protestant leaders welcomed this development because they saw in it a promise that their dearest hopes might finally come true. They argued that the nation had already come to accept its Hussite past and that this acceptance would lead the Czechs to the fully embrace the Hussite tradition – which they saw realised in their Protestant churches. In other words, they saw the Hus anniversary as a great opportunity for Protestants to move from the position of a peripheral minority to the heart of Czech national society.

In this essay, I will first describe what Czech Protestants expected from the 1869 commemoration of Jan Hus; then how these expectations played out in the public celebrations of the anniversary and, finally, how and why their hopes were frustrated. Contrary to the original expectations of Protestant leaders, the commemoration of the Jan Hus anniversary confirmed the marginal and peripheral position of Protestantism within the national community instead of overcoming it. In addition, the intensive involvement of some Protestant leaders in the liberal commemorative events elicited criticism from the more confessional Protestant elites and thus created a rift within the Protestant community.

The Protestant experience thus leads to an important point about national identity and nationalist ideology in general. National identity and ideology are often seen as the means to ensure the unity of a nation. However, the com-

memoration of Jan Hus as a national hero did not ensure the integration of Protestants into the Czech national community and even introduced discord among them. As the case of Czech Protestants illustrates, national ideologies serve as much to divide as to unite a national community. The liberals who devised the Jan Hus commemoration of 1869 did so in an attempt to mobilise popular support both for the Czech national movement as well as for their leadership role in it. On the other hand, Protestant elites envisioned a leading role for themselves. The eventual victory of the liberal project left them with two options: either to accept the liberal leadership and to give up the vision of the Protestant nation or to stick to the Protestant vision at the expense of accepting a peripheral role.

The Protestant vision of Czech national identity

Let us begin with the expectations that led Czech Protestant leaders to participate in the commemorative events of 1869. These expectations were closely tied to their vision of Czech national identity. Because I have already dealt with this topic elsewhere,¹ I will present only a brief outline here.

At the end of the 1860s the vast majority of Czech Protestant leaders believed that Protestantism was at the heart of Czech national identity. According to their interpretation of national history, the Czech nation achieved its fame and glory when it was Protestant (that is, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries) but lost all of this glory when it was stripped of its Protestantism during the counter-reformation. The conclusion they drew from this historical narrative was clear: the Czech nation must become Protestant again in order to regain the position it once enjoyed.

Those who subscribed to this vision of Czech national identity consequently argued that the Czechs should convert to the Protestant churches of their day which they presented as true national churches and inheritors of the Hussite reformation. The rising popularity of Hussite symbolism among leading Czech liberals encouraged hopes that the dream of the Protestant nation might come true. Czech Protestants thus entered the year of the Jan Hus anniversary with the aim of persuading as many Czechs as possible, perhaps the entire nation, to accept this version of Czech national identity.

Czech Protestants commemorating Jan Hus in 1869

Several other factors further supported these hopes. Of prime importance was

1 Petr Pabian, "Protestantská verze české národní identity ve druhé polovině 19. století," [The protestant version of Czech national identity in the second half of the nineteenth century] *Acta Facultatis Philosophicae Universitatis Ostraviensis: Historica* 11 (2004) 137-148; *ibid*, "Inventing the Hussite Nation: Liberals, Catholics, and Protestants in Conflict over Czech national Identity," *BRRP* 6 (2007) 275-282.

the introduction of the liberal church-state legislation in 1868 that restricted the power and privileges of the Roman Catholic Church. Czech Protestant elites perceived this legislation as the liberation of their church from the long and painful Roman Catholic dominance. This liberation, they believed, paved the way for the liberation of the entire nation from Roman captivity.²

Another event that raised the hopes of Czech Protestants was the so-called “first Czech pilgrimage to Constance, undertaken in 1868 by several hundred participants to commemorate the martyrdom of Jan Hus.³ The pilgrimage was organised by a group of radical Prague liberals within the context of heightened national mobilisation following the Austro-Hungarian *Ausgleich* of 1867. In these years, the Czech political elite demanded autonomy for the Czech lands on similar terms as those that were awarded to Hungary.⁴ The same context set the stage for the commemoration of Jan Hus in 1869.

In this year, the leading radicals within the Czech national party (the so-called Young Czechs) organized two major celebrations to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the birth of Jan Hus. Both of them took place at the beginning of September, the first in Prague and the second, two days later, in Husinec. Both events featured leading Young Czech figures as their main speakers – Karel Sabina in Prague and Karel Sladkovský in Husinec. The celebrations in both Prague and Husinec were attended by tens of thousands of participants who marched behind Hussite banners – a black banner with a red chalice.

Czech Protestant leaders not only welcomed these events but also actively participated in the celebrations. The Protestant pastor Bedřich Fleischer was the second main speaker at the Prague commemoration along with Karel Sabina. Similarly, Václav Valič, another Protestant pastor, was one of the speakers at the ceremonial banquet that concluded the Prague festivities. The leading Protestant weekly, *Hlasy ze Siona* (Voices from Zion), covered the celebrations extensively, understandably focusing on the speech of Bedřich Fleischer who, at this time, served as its editor-in-chief.⁵

The reports in this weekly magazine highlighted those aspects of the commemorative events that played into the hands of the Protestant expectations. In its editorial commentary the weekly emphasized that Czechs should commemorate Jan Hus for two reasons: as a reformer and as a great patriot. As

2 Petr Pabian, “Protestantismus a náboženská svoboda: české evangelictví v 60. letech 19. století,” [Protestantism and religious freedom: Czech evangelicalism in the 1860s] in Pavel Kůrka and Jaroslav Pánek, eds., *Angelus pacis: pocta Noemi Rejchrtové* (Praha, 2008) 325-343.

3 Bedřich Fleischer, “Slavnost památky mistra Jana Husa v Kostnici dne 6. července 1868,” [The celebration of the commemoration of Mister Jan Hus in Constance on 6 July 1868] *Hlasy ze Siona* 8 (1868) 142-144 and 149-150; Klement Borový, “Daleká pouť bez požehnání,” [A long pilgrimage without blessing] *Časopis katolického duchovenstva* 9 (1868) 312-314.

4 Hugh Agnew, *The Czechs and the Lands of the Bohemian Crown* (Stanford, 2004) 133-136.

5 Bedřich Fleischer, “Slavnost Husova,” [The Hus celebrations] *Hlasy ze Siona* 9 (1869) 163-6.

a reformer, he liberated the Czech nation from Rome; as a patriot, he liberated the nation from foreign dominance. In conclusion, the editorial expressed the following hope: “We hope that the nation, which so highly esteems its great men and liberators from spiritual slavery, will also awake from darkness to light and truth and from slavery to freedom and the glory of God’s children; that the nation will remember the fruits of Hussitism, as they grew ripe in the Unity of Czech Brethren, and will return to this magnificent and invaluable heritage!”⁶

However, Czech Protestants in this year did not content themselves with participation at the festivities organized by the liberals. On 6 July, they staged their own celebration to commemorate Jan Hus in Čáslav and attracted tens of thousands of participants. Again, the extensive report and editorial commentary published in *Hlasy ze Siona* made clear what distinguished this commemoration from the others in the eyes of Czech Protestant leaders. The author argued that while the vast majority of Czechs commemorate Jan Hus as a national figure, only Czech Protestants commemorate him fully – as both a national figure and as a reformer.⁷

Czech Protestants thus, on the one hand, participated in the liberal commemorative festivities, and, on the other hand, organised a celebration of their own. The speeches delivered by various leading Protestants at these events provide evidence that Czech Protestants attributed different aims and different expectations to these two modes of commemorating Jan Hus. Their own commemorative celebration in Čáslav had a distinctly ecclesiastical character – at a core of it stood the consecration of a newly completed church building for the local Protestant congregation. As such, this event was decidedly directed at those who were already members of one of the Protestant churches. The speeches and festivities largely presumed that participants already shared the same view of Jan Hus as well as the Protestant version of Czech national identity. The aim was to reassure participants in these views and to renew and confirm their commitment to them.

In contrast, Protestant speakers at the liberal celebrations addressed for the most part people from outside the Protestant churches – virtually all of them Roman Catholics. Thus the content and tone of their speeches differed markedly from those delivered in Čáslav. Within the context of the liberal commemoration, the aim was to win new converts to the Protestant understanding of Jan Hus and of Czech national identity. In short, Czech Protestants par-

6 Bedřich Fleischer, “Slavnost Husova,” *Hlasy ze Siona* 9 (1869) 163.

7 Bedřich Fleischer, “Slavnost posvěcení evang. ref. chrámu Páně v Čáslavi na den 500leté památky M. J. Husi,” [The celebration of the dedication of the evangelical reformed church of the Lord in Čáslav on the day of the 500th anniversary of Mister Jan Hus] *Hlasy ze Siona* 9 (1869) 121-125; E.H., “Z Čáslavi: Pětistiletá památka narození M. Jana Husi při posvěcení chrámu P. v Čáslavi d. 6. července,” [From Čáslav: The five hundredth anniversary of the birth of M. Jan Hus at the dedication of the church of our Lord in Čáslav on 6 July] *Hlasy ze Siona* 9 (1869) 136-137.

ticipated in the celebrations in order to invite the nation to convert to Protestantism as the true national church.

The existence of two different yet overlapping Protestant discourses on Jan Hus excellently illustrates how Protestant leaders viewed the role and position of Protestantism in the Czech national community.

First of all, they perceived the Protestant community as the heart of the Czech nation. As the commemoration of the Jan Hus anniversary in Čáslav made clear, only within this community could one find and share the full understanding of Czech national history and identity. Secondly, the Protestant leaders credited the Protestant community with an important mission: to attract and convert the entire nation. In other words, the two-percent Protestant minority should eventually embrace the whole Czech nation. Thirdly, they shared an ambivalent relationship to the liberal leadership of the Czech national movement: they welcomed the liberal turn to Hussite symbolism but disagreed with the liberal interpretation of Hussitism. In their speeches at the liberal celebrations, Protestant pastors insisted that it was not enough to commemorate Jan Hus as a national figure but that it was necessary to follow him in his religious choices as well. These pastors thus played the role of missionaries on behalf of the Protestant version of Czech national identity and hoped that their efforts would win converts from among those who came to commemorate Jan Hus.

Failure and conflict

To what extent did they succeed in these efforts? Czech Protestants themselves differed in their answer to this question. On the one hand, there were the optimists who interpreted the commemorative events as the first step towards the eventual fulfilment of Protestant hopes. In their view, those who attended the commemorative festivities had already divorced themselves from Roman slavery and thus entered the way to liberty in Christ and in the Protestant church. On the other hand, an increasingly vocal and influential group of sceptics agreed that the commemoration of Jan Hus led to the increase of anti-Roman Catholicism but maintained that it resulted not in conversions to Protestantism but rather in religious indifference.

In general, the weekly *Hlasý ze Siona* belonged to the first, optimistic, group. Between the end of the 1860s and the beginning of 1870s the magazine published a number of articles that interpreted the commemorative celebrations of Jan Hus in 1869 as a sign that Czechs are already returning to the faith of their fathers.⁸ Several articles argued that the spread and popularity of the Hus commemorations in 1869 constituted a genuine religious revival among the

8 *Hlasý ze Siona* 8 (1868) 134-135, 142-144 and 149-150; *Hlasý ze Siona* 9 (1869) 121-125 and 163-166.

Czechs.⁹ Even the more cautious voices read the events as a proof that the Czechs definitely divorced themselves from Roman Catholicism and as a promise of their upcoming conversion to Protestantism.¹⁰ At the end of 1871, two years after the Jan Hus anniversary, the magazine urged its readers: “Our task will be accomplished only when the entire nation will dwell in Christ. You, the remainder of God’s people, awake the nation, remind it that the time of return has come! Indeed, thereafter our nation will live! It will be holy unto God, the Lord will bless its efforts and he will accept the work of its hands.”¹¹ The Protestant leaders who belonged to this group apparently viewed the strategy adopted in 1869 as successful.

In contrast, the sceptics concluded already at the turn of the decade that this strategy had ended in failure. These authors found their main platform in the newly established magazine Protestant Churchman (*Evanjelický církevník*). Most articles published in this magazine agreed that at the liberal festivities Jan Hus was commemorated only as a Czech patriot and his faith had been disregarded. Czech anti-Roman Catholicism therefore resulted not in conversion to Protestantism but rather to unbelief, hypocrisy and religious indifference.¹² The authors associated with the magazine thus did not hope for an influx of Roman Catholic Czechs to the Protestant church.¹³ Nevertheless, even the “modern Hussitism” and contemporary anti-Roman Catholicism qualified in their eyes as a positive sign of the times and as a promise for the future. As one of the articles wrote: “The time will come when the Bohemo-Moravian nation will again congregate around the Bible and the chalice.”¹⁴ This group also differed from the optimistic circle in that they placed greater emphasis on the confessional identity of the Czech Lutheran and Calvinist churches.¹⁵ Their strategy was therefore to abandon the involvement in the liberal national activities and to concentrate on the religious and national work within the Protestant community.

Viewed from another perspective, the second group admitted liberal victory in the struggle over the interpretation of the Hussite heritage. In a sense, what the Protestant speakers tried to achieve at the Jan Hus commemorative events was to steal the benefits from the liberal organizers. The liberals organised the celebrations in order to mobilise popular support both for their political goals and for their leadership role in the Czech national movement. In contrast,

9 *Hlasy ze Siona* 8 (1868) 142 and 156; *Hlasy ze Siona* 9 (1869) 122.

10 *Hlasy ze Siona* 9 (1869) 192-193; *Hlasy ze Siona* 10 (1870) 117-119; *Hlasy ze Siona* 11 (1871) 112-113.

11 *Hlasy ze Siona* 11 (1871) 183.

12 *Evanjelický církevník* 2 (1871) 75-76.

13 *Evanjelický církevník* 1 (1870) 178.

14 *Evanjelický církevník* 2 (1871) 184-185.

15 Rudolf Říčan, *Vyznání a vyznavači: z historie českého protestantismu XIX. století* [Confession and its adherents: from the history of nineteenth century Bohemian protestantism] (Praha, 1940).

Protestants at these meetings promoted their own vision of Czech national identity, an identity in which the Czech Protestant community played a key role and, thus, in effect claimed leadership for themselves.

In this struggle over national identity and leadership Czech liberals secured a compelling victory while the Protestant attempt to escape the position of being a peripheral minority failed. We may see an illustration of this conclusion when we turn our attention from 1869 to the next largest Jan Hus commemorative event: the laying of the foundation stone of the Jan Hus memorial in Prague in 1903. The celebrations to mark the laying of the foundation stone featured no Protestant speaker.¹⁶ This simple fact demonstrates that the Jan Hus commemoration of 1869 did not help Czech Protestants to step out from their isolation on the peripheries of Czech society.

Moreover, by the beginning of the twentieth century the vast majority of Protestant leaders had accepted the liberal victory in the struggle over the appropriation of the Hussite tradition. Czech Protestants, however, did not give up either their own distinct understanding of this tradition nor the hope that the Czechs may eventually convert to Protestantism. Protestant magazines of the time counselled caution concerning the adverse situation of the times, but promoted hope for the future: "Let us neither be deluded nor fainthearted, yet let us fulfil our duty; God will take care of the rest. He can raise the dead bones of our people."¹⁷ Czech Protestants thus still cherished the hope that all Czechs would one day embrace their version of Czech national identity. They gave the definitive expression to this hope in 1918 when they invited the whole nation to join the newly established Protestant Church of the Czech Brethren.¹⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to turn from the Protestant story to a more general issue and use this case to illustrate the thesis that the commemoration of Jan Hus did not constitute an integrating factor in the nineteenth century Czech national movement. As I have shown, Czech Protestant leaders shared with the liberal elite their dedication to the Hussite tradition but differed from them in their interpretation of this tradition. In short, they criticized the liberals for not accepting the religious as well as the national dimension of the Hussite heritage. The 1869 and later commemorations of Jan Hus thus separated these two groups who held in common a dedication to the Hussite tradition. Moreover,

16 Cynthia Paces, "Rotating spheres: gendered commemorative practice at the 1903 Jan Hus memorial festival in Prague," *Nationalities Papers* 28 (2000) 523-539.

17 *Evanjelický církevník* 28 (1897) 63.

18 Petr Pabian, "Inventing the Hussite Nation: Liberals, Catholics, and Protestants in Conflict over Czech national Identity," *BRRP* 6 (2007) 280-81.

Czech Roman Catholics never accepted this tradition as part of their own version of Czech national identity.¹⁹

The Hussite tradition therefore constituted a contested rather than integrating issue in nineteenth-century Czech society. Consequently, as I have tried to demonstrate, the commemoration of Jan Hus in 1869, as well as other commemorations before and after this date, was caught between various groups aspiring to national leadership.

19 Petr Pabian, "Katolické ghetto, nebo katolický národ? České katolické vlastenectví na konci 19. století," [Catholic ghetto or Catholic nation?: Czech Catholic nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century] *Kuděj* (2005) 131-137.