



# Jan Žižka of the Chalice: How an Old, Blind General Defied the Catholic Church, Unified the Hussite Movement, and Reshaped the Bohemian Reformation

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*Popular conceptions of the Bohemian Reformation (when it is considered at all) depict a movement governed entirely by the theology of Jan Hus. Though this isn't entirely incorrect, it ignores the evolving social context of 15th century Bohemia and the impact of non-clerical leaders in the formation of popular theology. This paper contends that, fueled by Jan Žižka's martial mission and protected by his seemingly miraculous victories on the battlefield, the Hussite movement radicalized under his leadership, deviating significantly from Hus's stated goals. I hope to show the central role laypeople can have on theological development and illuminate a crucial transformational factor in the Hussite Reformation.*

WHILE THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION begun by Martin Luther was undoubtedly the most significant critique of late medieval Catholicism, it was not the only one. The earlier Bohemian Reformation created similar civil unrest and radical theological teaching even as it initially sought to reform the Catholic church rather than break from it. This Reformation, which had its roots deep in medieval Bohemia<sup>1</sup> but was truly jump-started by Jan Hus in the early fifteenth century, was only radicalized when Hus was executed for heresy in 1415 at the Council of Constance. This dramatic condemnation of their figurehead angered his Bohemian adherents and created a power vacuum in the Hussite party, which eventually took their movement as far as Luther's would later go: a split from Rome and war with their Catholic enemies. The enraged Hussites, alienated by ecclesiastical and secular authorities, directed their assault on both church and state. This dangerous revolt required strong leadership, both theological and martial. In what appeared to be a sign of God's favor, Jan Žižka appeared on the scene to lead the Hussite army in their holy war. As the Hussite movement grew to encapsulate social uprising as well as theological reform, Jan Žižka grew in importance, quickly becoming the most important man in the Hussite party. Consequently, though he was no theologian, his leadership shaped the theology and social values of the Hussites both during and after his years at the head of the Bohemian army. Fueled by his martial mission and protected by his seemingly miraculous victories on the battlefield, the movement radicalized under his leadership, deviating significantly from Hus's stated goals.

While the teachings of Jan Hus heavily emphasized ecclesiastical reform and at times bordered on anti-clericalism, he desired neither a split from Rome nor a revolution. To be sure, many of his teachings from Bethlehem Chapel,<sup>1</sup> Thomas Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride: The First Reformation in Hussite Bohemia*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 33-59.

where he was a preacher, presented a challenge to traditional Catholic power structures. In *De Ecclesia*, drawing on the history of papal schisms and heresy, Hus declared it "evident that a pope living contrary to Christ, like any other perverted person, is called by common consent antichrist."<sup>2</sup> Likewise, he used the strongest terms to condemn clerical corruption and abuse of power such. Regarding these, Hus wrote, "They secure and sell simoniacally who make spoil out of the sacraments, living in pleasure, avarice, and luxury or who, by any other kind of criminality, defile the power of the priesthood— Consequently, they do not believe in God."<sup>3</sup> Such condemnation of worldly clergy was central to Hus's reform message along with his promotion of *utraquist* (lit. "both kinds") communion. Two elements are administered during the Eucharist: bread and wine (the cup). The medieval church traditionally distributed only the bread to laypeople, reserving the cup for clergy. Hus, and previous reformers throughout Europe, advocated for *utraquism*, the administration of both bread and cup, body and blood, to laypeople. Catholic authority, by contrast, despised such a revision of tradition. In a letter from prison during his last days on earth, administration of the cup remained prominent in Hus's writings. He wrote to Gallus, a preacher in Bethlehem Chapel, to "not oppose the sacrament of the Lord's cup, which was instituted of Christ both of Himself and through His apostles. For there is no scripture against it; but only a custom which has grown up, I think, through negligence." He continued with what was, by 1415, a common critique of the medieval church—"Only we ought not to follow custom, but the example and truth of Christ."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jan Hus, *De Ecclesia*, trans. David Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 128. <https://archive.org/details/deecclesiachurch00husjuoft/page/n7/mode/2up>.

<sup>3</sup> Hus, *De Ecclesia*, 115.

<sup>4</sup> Jan Hus to Gallus, June 21, 1415, in *The Letters of John Hus*, ed. Herbert Workman and R. Martin Pope (London:

Though his preaching challenged Catholic ecclesiology, sacramentology, and the authority of tradition, Hus remained devoted to the Catholic Church, at least as a concept. He refused to condemn the papal office itself, claiming that “the pope may be the vicar of Christ and may be so to his profit, if he is a faithful minister predestinated unto the glory of the head, Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he pledged, in a letter to Zbinek, then-Archbishop of Prague, “Whatever, therefore, the Roman pontiff Gregory XII or the holy mother church, yea, and your grace, lawfully enjoins, I will humbly obey.”<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Martin Malia refers to Hus, in comparison to the later radical movement, a moderate who “never considered himself separated from the church of Rome.”<sup>7</sup> Social revolution would have been even more unthinkable for Hus. Although King Václav of Bohemia was easily swayed to whichever position advantaged himself politically, Hus’s reform party was frequently the beneficiary of Václav’s support. His wife, Queen Žofie, was even more supportive of Hus’s progressive teachings.<sup>8</sup> In short, given the atmosphere of support from the highest nobility, a Hussite revolution would have made little sense during Hus’s life.

Tragically for Hus, however, his controversial views so threatened the church that he was summoned to the Council of Constance in 1415 to defend his teachings. With the promise of safe passage from Sigismund, King of Hungary and Emperor-Elect of the Holy Roman Empire, and under the impression that he would be given a fair hearing, Hus complied. Less than a month after arrival in Constance, however, Sigismund’s promise was broken and Hus was imprisoned.<sup>9</sup> To make matters worse, Hus was charged with promoting heresies he had never taught, given no chance to defend himself, and simply commanded to recant. Yet, faced with such blatant opposition, Hus refused to condemn the church in his final defense: “Know that if I was conscious that I had written or preached against the law, gospel, or mother church, I would gladly

and humbly recant my errors, God is my witness.”<sup>10</sup> His pleas fell on deaf ears. In July 1415, Jan Hus was burned at the stake, condemned by the Council of Constance for heresy. In this swift stroke, Bohemian Hussites lost their moderate leader, gained a martyr, and came under attack by Rome and Sigismund. Though Hus himself desired neither schism nor revolution, his execution primed Bohemia for both.

Under Žižka’s leadership, the spark materialized as the Hussite cause grew from simply a reformation into a more comprehensive reworking of social structures in Bohemia such that it can properly be called a revolution. While the revolutionary movement exploded under Žižka, its roots reached back to the previous generation of Hussite leaders, such as Jakoubek of Stříbo. After the deaths of Hus and Jerome of Prague, Jakoubek was one of the most prominent and enthusiastic promoters of Hus’s eucharistic theology. Under his leadership, utraquism was both more aggressively promoted...and expanded to include all baptised church members. Such a threat, according to Rome, must be condemned and destroyed. Since King Václav again refrained from dissuading the Hussites, Sigismund and Pope Martin V took the matter into their own hands. While theological differences could not break through Václav’s indifference, their combined might, including an investigation into Queen Žofie for promoting Hussite pastors, sparked him to action. The king quickly replaced Hussite priests with Catholic counterparts who increasingly refused to compromise with Hussite doctrine. While previously Hussites could further their critique of Rome while under the protection of the King, such a stance could not be continued. Adherence to Hussite theology now involved resistance to state authority, a position many Hussites, including Jakoubek, were uncomfortable with. As tensions rose in 1419, Jakoubek sank into the background.<sup>11</sup>

Fortunately for the Hussites, more radical leaders quickly filled the vacated positions of authority. Radical voices became the norm, assertively preaching against the Roman church, the rich and powerful, and any others who abused their power against the poor and peasants. Jan Želivsky, in particular, stirred up the masses in Prague with revolutionary and eschatological sermons. Tensions peaked on July 30, 1419, when Želivsky led the angered masses through the streets of Prague and overthrew the

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Workman and R. Martin Pope, *The Letters of John Hus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 277, <https://archive.org/details/lettersofjohnhus00husjuoft/page/22/mode/2up>.

<sup>11</sup> Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 91-92.

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Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 248, <https://archive.org/details/lettersofjohnhus00husjuoft/page/22/mode/2up>.

<sup>5</sup> Hus, *De Ecclesia*, 136.

<sup>6</sup> Jan Hus to Archbishop Zbinek, December, 1408, in *The Letters of John Hus*, ed. Herbert Workman and R. Martin Pope (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1904), 21, <https://archive.org/details/lettersofjohnhus00husjuoft/page/22/mode/2up>.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Malia, “Hussite Bohemia, 1415-1436: From Heresy to Proto-Revolution,” in *Hisory’s Locomotives: Revolutions and the Making of the Modern World*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1nphp4.6>.

<sup>8</sup> Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 76-77.

<sup>9</sup> Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 83.

city government by throwing them out the window of the New Town Hall.<sup>12</sup> It is during this defenestration that Žižka first associated himself with the Hussite cause.<sup>13</sup>

The same revolutionary tension and eschatological mindset simultaneously erupted throughout rural Bohemia, especially in the South. There, peasants began making pilgrimages to mountain sites and gathering collectively for utraquist communion. Later that year (1419), all true believers were called to march on Prague to declare their faithfulness in these last times. Undoubtedly welcomed by the radicals involved with the defenestration, the presence of such masses and the advantage they would undoubtedly bring against any continued assaults by Rome or Sigismund swayed even the more moderate Praguers to unite themselves to this radical movement.<sup>14</sup> While such radicalism simmered out in Prague, it continued in the countryside, especially in the town of Tábor. The Tábórites definitively rejected any vestiges of the official church, centered their services around preaching and utraquist communion, and even outlawed private property.<sup>15</sup> It is with these radical Tábórites that we find Jan Žižka.

Žižka cut a surprising figure for a medieval general. Already pressing sixty at the defenestration in 1419, during the entirety of his time at the helm of the Hussite army, Žižka was already an old man by medieval standards. Moreover, in 1419 he had only one good eye, which he promptly lost two years later to archers during a siege.<sup>16</sup> And yet, whether one-eyed or completely blind, Žižka continued to lead the Hussites who, according to Malia, “saw themselves as a chosen people, a nation of the elect with a calling to redeem all of sinful Europe.”<sup>17</sup>

As dangerous as these revolutionary uprisings by Hussites were, the violence was far from over. Even as the Hussites radicalized under Žižka’s leadership, the Roman authorities heightened their assault on Bohemian Hussites since their radical agenda, now backed with able leadership and military force, threatened established authorities, both secular and ecclesiastical. Shortly following the defenestration, King Václav died, leaving Sigismund the rightful king of Bohemia. Hussite faithful, however, refused to allow this defier of the law of God, enemy of

<sup>12</sup> Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 92-95.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Fudge, “Žižka’s Drum: The Political Uses of Popular Religion,” *Central European History* 36, no. 4 (2003): 551, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4547353>.

<sup>14</sup> Malia, “Hussite Bohemia, 1415-1436,” 47-48.

<sup>15</sup> Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 95-96; Malia, “Hussite Bohemia, 1415-1436,” 48-49.

<sup>16</sup> Fudge, “Žižka’s drum,” 552.

<sup>17</sup> Malia, “Hussite Bohemia, 1415-1436,” 50.

Hussite doctrine, and author of Jan Hus’s execution to peacefully take the Bohemian throne. In the spring of 1420, in a joint effort to exterminate opposition, the Pope called a crusade against the Hussites led by Sigismund in an attempt to claim the Bohemian crown that was rightfully his. By July, Sigismund’s army had reached Prague, where Žižka led a defense that was severely overmatched and undertrained. In a remarkable turn, Žižka’s forces soundly defeated the royalists on July 14 of that year and Sigismund was forced to retreat. While he had been technically crowned during a brief time in Prague, Sigismund’s power was in name only—the Hussite defense held.<sup>18</sup>

However, Sigismund would not be denied so easily. To defend the Law of God against such a threat, Žižka quickly trained an army of peasants. He created a force that fought in units, as opposed to the individual style of the medieval knight, and was rigidly disciplined. Moreover, he revolutionized the use of wagons in battle, creating what amounted to primitive tanks. The heavily enforced wagons were used in defensive formations and, loaded with cannons, on the attack.<sup>19</sup> These revolutionary weapons and discipline, along with brilliant tactics, allowed him to win victory after victory against overwhelming odds. During the old, blind leader’s four years at the head of the Hussite army, he never lost a battle.<sup>20</sup>

By ceaselessly defending the Law of God and its Hussite adherents from Sigismund and the Roman Church, Žižka became the embodiment of the Hussite movement. His coat of arms was redesigned to display the Hussite chalice, a prominent symbol of their utraquist theology, and was even called “Jan Žižka of the Chalice.” According to Thomas Fudge, “Žižka personally identified himself with an idea, one of personal faith, of national solidarity, of revolutionary significance.”<sup>21</sup> These same victories, so glorious for the Hussites, were enraging to their opponents. In addition to losing every battle the crusades brought against the Bohemian heretics, they were continuously defeated by a blind old man leading an army of peasants. To justify their losses, and no doubt fueled by Žižka’s infamous cruelty towards monks, Catholic forces claimed that Žižka was demon-possessed, an assertion which continued to their evaluation of his men.

<sup>18</sup> Matthew Spinka, “Epilogue,” in *John Hus: A Biography*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 305, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1m3nxzc.13>.

<sup>19</sup> R. Urbánek, “Jan Zizka, the Hussite (On His Quincentenary),” *The Slavonic Review* 3, no. 8 (1924): 272-284, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4201855>.

<sup>20</sup> Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 98-107.

<sup>21</sup> Fudge, “Zizka’s Drum,” 552-554.

To make matters worse, their losses were to a force that was increasingly radical in their denial of traditional catholic practice. Žižka's victories allowed for the survival and sustained influence of a more radical faction, the Taborites, within the diverse Hussite movement. Thanks to Žižka's leadership, what was originally a sanctuary for the especially spiritual became, as Malia puts it, "a military-religious confraternity, a community of warrior-saints."<sup>22</sup> While these seem a stark contrast to the academics at Charles University—the more moderate faction of Hussites—the two factions were, out of necessity, united behind the person of Žižka. Though the theology of Žižka's Tábor was frequently criticized by the moderates in Prague, upon threat from Sigismund they readily hailed Žižka for aid. Indeed, because of the continued Roman crusades, the support of Žižka's "warriors of God," as they were called, was necessary for survival. As Fudge asserts, "Jan Žižka de facto controlled the power structures within Bohemia. Had he been so inclined, doubtless he could de jure have seized absolute political power and ruled as king."<sup>23</sup> To this extent, Žižka could moderate Hussite theology. The most radical group, for example, the "Picards," were too extreme even for Tábor (possibly due to their dabbling with pantheism), from which they were expelled before being destroyed by Žižka.<sup>24</sup> In this, we can see how vital Žižka's approval was for the survival of religious dissidents in Bohemia.

As a result, unity within the movement was never again as great as under Žižka, and radicalism was never again given a place of such prominence. Thus, the "Four Articles of Prague," which Fudge calls the "*raison d'être* of the Hussite cause,"<sup>25</sup> included calls for priests to be stripped of all temporal power and secular authorities to enforce the Law of God: "Numerous priests and monks, supported by temporal law, possess worldly goods in opposition to the commandment of Christ. This is to the detriment of their office and is also harmful to the lords of the secular estates. These priests shall be deprived of such power, which is unlawful" and, "all serious sins, particularly those committed publicly, along with other offences against the Law of God shall be prohibited and punished regardless of their estate, by those who possess the power to do so."<sup>26</sup> This second pillar of Hussite reli-

<sup>22</sup> Malia, "Hussite Bohemia, 1415-1436," 49.

<sup>23</sup> Fudge, "Zizka's Drum," 555-556.

<sup>24</sup> Spinka, "Epilogue," 307.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Fudge, *The Crusade Against Heretics in Bohemia, 1418-1437: Sources and Documents for the Hussite Crusades*, (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 83.

<sup>26</sup> "The Four Articles of Prague," in *The Crusade Against Heretics in Bohemia, 1418-1437: Sources and Documents for the Hussite*

gion essentially promoted the cleansing of the church by secular powers.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, the Four Articles justified their holy war against Sigismund by declaring, "And if someone comes to harm because of us it is because it was absolutely necessary to protect both ourselves and the law of God from such violence and cruelty."<sup>28</sup> While the call for clergy to give up secular power was a continuation of Hus's own critique of rampant corruption in the church, the declaration of the state's power over the church and the violent defense of Hussite doctrine went far beyond the teachings of the Hussite patriarch.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, in these, and other statements on the preaching of God's word and partaking of eucharist, all Hussites were united.<sup>30</sup>

While the four years of Žižka's leadership brought remarkable unity, his death to the plague in 1424 signaled the beginning of the end for the Hussite revolution. No longer united behind his extraordinary military leadership, the movement began to fracture. Although many Hussites were truly loyal to Žižka, including Želivsky in Prague and many of the peasants (especially those in his army), others were beholden to his army only as a necessary aspect of survival. Even during his life, moderate Praguers remained unconvinced by the radicalism of Tábor, and even Žižka's brand of Táborism conflicted with some branches of Taborite dogma.<sup>31</sup> Upon his death, Tábor split, with Žižka's staunchest supporters moving to Hradec Králové and taking the name "Orphans."<sup>32</sup> While the Hussite armies continued to fight invading forces, moderate Praguers increasingly sought compromise with the Roman church and in 1434, the Taborite and Orphan armies were destroyed by a moderate Hussite coalition. By 1437, the revolution was decisively over.<sup>33</sup> As Malia writes, "With Žižka's departure from the scene, the most radical and, so to speak, 'creative' phase of the revolution was over."<sup>34</sup>

Though Žižka, despite his military prowess, could not establish a long-term Hussite state, his brief period of leadership did permanently alter the practical theology of the movement, a change seen most notably in the tenets of popular religion. To begin with, Hussite rhetoric significantly changed; where the previous generation of Hussites

*Crusades*, (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2017), 83-84.

<sup>27</sup> Malia, "Hussite Bohemia, 1415-1436," 51.

<sup>28</sup> "The Four Articles of Prague," 83-84.

<sup>29</sup> Malia, "Hussite Bohemia, 1415-1436," 51.

<sup>30</sup> Spinka, "Epilogue," 305.

<sup>31</sup> Urbánek, "Jan Zizka, the Hussite," 279-282.

<sup>32</sup> Spinka, "Epilogue," 311.

<sup>33</sup> Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 114-122.

<sup>34</sup> Malia, "Hussite Bohemia, 1415-1436," 53.

looked to the gospels to emphasize love and fraternity, those led by Žižka turned instead to the kings of the Old Testament, whose mission from God involved the destruction of enemies in battle and the upholding of God's law.<sup>35</sup> Decades later, Hussite art prominently displayed Žižka leading his troops in battle. Even centuries beyond, Žižka's image was employed in critiques of clerical abuse. Most striking is Žižka's depiction in a page of a liturgical manuscript where he takes the traditional place of St. Peter. God and Mary stand centrally, flanked by angels and the saints. Jan Hus notably stands in the left, holding the chalice. Standing at God's right hand, holding the keys to the kingdom, is Jan Žižka. In addition to attributing church power to Žižka, who was no clergyman, and giving him the position of an official saint, he here outranks Jan Hus and usurps even St. Peter in heaven.<sup>36</sup>

Such a dramatic shift from the peaceful Hus to the violent General Žižka as the face of the Hussite movement was no minor progression. It involved a reworking of Hussite values and was facilitated by Žižka's remarkable military accomplishments. With the support of King Václav, the inclusion of revolutionary aspirations was unnecessary to the Hussite movement. However, with his abandonment due to pressures from Rome, and especially upon his death and the succession of Sigismund, the unrest in Bohemia invited such a dramatic development. Sigismund, however, possessed the overwhelmingly larger and better-trained military, along with the support and resources of the Papacy. Under such an immense threat, successful response demanded unity from the Hussites. This unity both brought the remarkable (albeit short-term) success of the revolution and facilitated the survival of the radical faction of Hussites. Even so, only with Žižka's unorthodox tactics and revolutionary use of weapons could the revolution be sustained long enough to altar the Hussite rhetoric and iconography. With these miraculous victories, however, martial imagery and revolutionary aspirations became central to the Hussite cause; Hussitism became synonymous with radical social upheaval. In this light, one might understand why Martin Luther's subscription to Hus's teachings at the Leipzig Debate proved so explosive.

In all of this, Žižka was essential. Without his leadership, revolution was impossible, and without the unity his leadership brought, any wholesale reworking of the Hussite agenda would have been fractured and incomplete.

<sup>35</sup> Malia, "Hussite Bohemia, 1415-1436," 51-52.

<sup>36</sup> Fudge, "Žižka's Drum," 558-562.

Because of this, while Jan Hus remains the founder and face of the Hussite movement, Jan Žižka, a blind, old man, was a vital leader in the movement, an important facilitator of early reformation, and one of the most important figures in fifteenth-century Europe.

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