

60. THE HUSSITE WARS 1419-1434

An enormous crowd marches through the streets of Prague.

What is happening?

It is now four years ago that the Inquisition burned Huss at Constance. But the people in Bohemia have not forgotten John Huss. On the contrary! When news of the torture and martyr's death of John Huss and his friend Jerome became public knowledge in Bohemia, people all over the country were highly indignant! The Bohemian nobles sent a strong protest to the council at Constance.

They accused the Roman clergy of murdering two of their fellow citizens. These events made the Bohemian people even more hostile towards the Roman Catholic Church.

Entire Bohemia was in uproar!

We already know that Bohemia's king was Emperor Sigismund's brother. Emperor Sigismund of Germany stirred up his brother by demanding severe measures against the Hussites. His brother must *crush* that Hussite movement!

Alas, the Bohemian king listened to his brother. He appointed several counsellors in Prague who were fiercely opposed to Huss. Those counsellors recalled the Roman priests who had been driven away by the Hussites and expelled the Hussite preachers.

These actions pushed the anger and bitterness of the Bohemian people to a new height. The expelled Hussite preachers fled to a hill about forty-six miles south of Prague. When John Huss left Prague, he had also found a safe retreat there.

Eventually, this hill became the meeting place of tens of thousands of Bohemian people. They built a strong city on top of that hill and named it 'Tabor.'

In Judges 4, we read the history of Deborah and Barak. In verse 6 of that chapter, Deborah commanded Barak to assemble Israel and march to Mount Tabor. He had to join battle with the Canaanites, who oppressed the people of Israel.

The Hussites named the hill south of Prague 'Mount Tabor' because of this history.

THE UNREST IN BOHEMIA GROWS

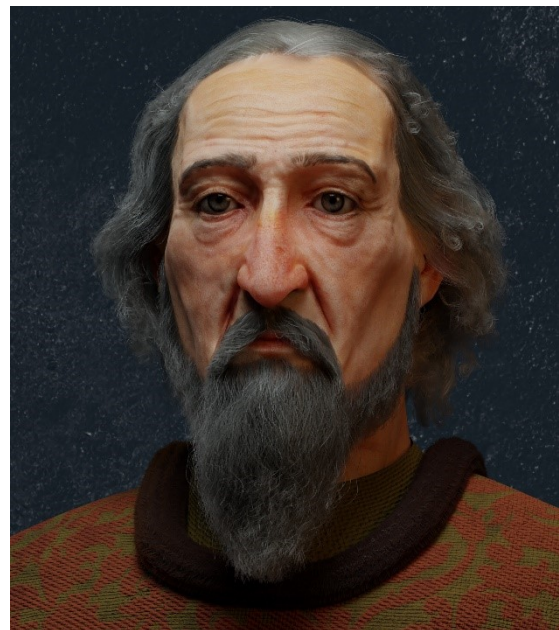
But they did not stop there.

To vent their anger about the actions of their king against the Hussites, they organised a massive religious rally. That's why crowds of people are marching through Prague's streets. The Hussites are holding their rally there. When the procession marches past the town hall, they see seven of the newly appointed counsellors standing at the window, watching them with a hostile attitude.

That was the straw that broke the camel's back! That visible hostility increases the bitterness and anger of the people to even greater heights! Under the leadership of a certain Ziska, a man with only one eye, they storm the town hall. They burst into the room where the counsellors are standing at the window.

Loud, angry screams come from the crowd of people who are still standing outside. They yell: "Toss them out of the window!"

So Ziska and his companions roughly grab the counsellors and throw them through the window



Emperor Sigismund

<https://www.artstation.com/artwork/4bql2l>



to the street below. There the enraged people overcome and kill them!

This action signals the beginning of a general revolt.

The angry crowd destroys some Roman churches and monasteries. They kill priests, monks and nuns. When the king of Bohemia hears about the terrible consequences of his action, he gets such a fright that he has a stroke and dies a few weeks later. Sigismund, the emperor of Germany, succeeds his brother as king of Bohemia. But the hatred of the people turns against him in double measure! They do not want that untrustworthy emperor as their king!

Had he not shamefully broken his word of honour given to John Huss at Constance that no harm would come to him? He, too, was guilty of Huss' death. So, away with him!

All of Bohemia is in a state of commotion. The new pope, appointed at the council of Constance, pronounced the ban on the Hussites. But the Bohemian people don't care about that at all!

They laugh about it!

The pope also realises that this religious weapon alone won't help in this situation. He must use a different strategy.

So in 1420, he preaches a crusade against the Hussites.

This call gets a good response.

Emperor Sigismund gathers a mighty army.

Most of the German rulers support him.

Other European rulers also join him. Some say he managed to raise an army of one hundred

thousand soldiers. With all those troops, Sigismund marches to Prague.

CIVIL WAR IN BOHEMIA

In Bohemia, the people are preparing themselves for the impending battle. Ziska plants his flag on Mount Tabor, and the Bohemian people gather from far and wide to support him. Soon the fighting commences, and...?

The enormous army of Sigismund suffers a terrible defeat! The Bohemian army overthrows the imperial soldiers with appalling losses for Rome!

A shout of joy echoes throughout Bohemia when news of the brilliant victory spreads! Encouraged by that success, more men join the army of Ziska.

But emperor Sigismund does not lose courage yet. He gathers another powerful army and marches to Prague for the second time that year! (1420). But the imperial troops are repulsed for the



Jan Ziska, the one-eyed commander
<https://warfarehistorynetwork.com/>



Jan Ziska at Vitkov near Prague

second time and suffer more bloody losses! The defeated and fleeing troops avenge their humiliation on the defenceless people. Women and children, aged, sick, weak and invalids, all become victims of the lust for murder and revenge by the imperial troops. They wreak terrible havoc, plundering and killing as they withdraw and leave a trail of smoke, fire and blood behind them.

This cruel wickedness stirs up the bitterness and anger of the Hussites even more! They continue the battle with undiminished bitterness.

Ziska, the brave commander, leads the Bohemian troops from victory to victory. Having only one eye does not prevent him from leading his troops with exceptional courage. He defeats every Roman army that marches against them. In 1422, a large national assembly deposes Emperor Sigismund and pronounces him an enemy of the Bohemian people.

Ziska loses his other eye during the siege of a city, so now he is totally blind. Yet, he remains the commander of the Hussite troops. When organising a battle, his friends describe the formation of the enemy troops to him. They

explain the terrain where the action is happening, and then he always makes the right decisions so that the enemy has to retreat in a humiliating flight.

In the year 1424, Ziska besieges another city. During that siege, he falls victim to the plague and dies. That is a heavy blow for the Bohemian people because they have lost their brave, indomitable leader. With a large majority of votes, they choose Procopius as his successor. Procopius is just as capable as Ziska and continues to lead the Hussite armies to more victories.

The pope is hard-pressed, badly cornered, and preaches crusade after crusade against the Hussites. However, nothing helps. All the crusading armies sent to destroy the Hussites suffer crushing defeats.

A few years later, Procopius even initiates an offensive war. Up till now, the Hussites had waged a defensive battle. If Rome attacked, they defended themselves. That now changes. Procopius shifts the battleground outside the Bohemian border. Till now, the German armies had invaded Bohemia every time, and the country had suffered severely. But now, Procopius invades German land, and his brave soldiers take revenge for all the plundering and killing of the imperial soldiers in Bohemia. Now the *German* countries are ravaged by the terrible war! Now *that* country experiences considerable devastation!

That murderous war even goes beyond Germany. It also rages in Austria and Hungary. The Roman clergy had not counted on that! This war is a great disappointment to them! Yet they keep going!

Emperor Sigismund, supported by the pope and many Roman rulers, wanted to end the war well.



Procopius defending himself at the Siege of Pilsen (1433–34) Wikipedia

Thousands of young men are called to arms again. They must replace the incredible losses and strengthen the ravaged armies.

In 1431 the emperor marches with an army of 130,000 men against the Hussite troops. *Now* they shall annihilate the Hussites with one blow! And ...?

That powerful army suffers a crushing defeat! The dead bodies of thousands and thousands of imperial soldiers cover the battlefield. The pathetic remnant flees in disorder. Fear grows in the hearts of the Roman soldiers. It seems as if the Hussite soldiers are invincible! It seems as if a "Higher Power" is assisting the Hussites.

Everything points to the fact that God is blessing the work of the Hussites. And that is true. How will this bitter struggle end?

ROME TRIES A DIFFERENT STRATEGY

The Roman clergy said to each other: "This can't keep going! We are not able to subdue the Hussites with weapons."

They were perfectly correct. The war had raged for many years, and the Roman armies had suffered one defeat after another. When Rome saw that she could not win by force, she tried another tactic. They called a council together at Basle.

They invited the Hussites to attend. Rome wanted to talk. They would initially concede something.

And ... that strategy was successful! The brave Bohemians, who had fought side by side so bravely for so many years, were now divided into two large groups. One party wanted to make peace with Rome. They were tired of war, and the Roman Catholic Church enticed them with beautiful promises.

However, the other party did not want peace by making friends with Rome. This party, called the Taborites, did not want to sacrifice their dearly bought liberty because they did not *trust* Rome. Now, strife and discord developed between the Hussites! That was very sad because that broke their power. Finally, the moderate party made peace, expecting Rome to keep its promises. But Rome had deceived them! A few years later, Rome broke its word and withdrew almost all its concessions. Eventually, the moderates returned to the Roman Catholic Church.

However, the Taborites did not want peace at the cost of liberty and continued fighting. But the defection of so many had significantly weakened them. Procopius still led his loyal troops, but in 1434, the Taborites were overwhelmingly defeated. The Roman soldiers managed to kill Procopius in that battle. Yet, the war continued to rage. A few years later, they were defeated again in their fortress of Tabor and almost annihilated.

This defeat finished the war. The remaining Taborites withdrew to lonely, inhospitable regions. There they joined the Waldensians and established the Brother churches.

Rome was not successful in destroying those Brother churches. We will tell you more about them later. Just remember that those churches called themselves "Bohemian or Moravian Brethren". They are a combination of Taborites and Waldensians.

THE HUSSITES GROW IN UNDERSTANDING

The followers of John Huss went much further in their struggle against the false doctrines of Rome than Huss himself.

John Huss believed and taught that there were seven sacraments. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that, too. But his followers, the Taborites, acknowledged only two: Baptism and the Lord's Supper. They were right. God's Word speaks of only two sacraments, not seven.

John Huss also erred by acknowledging the Roman transubstantiation: the changing of bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Christ. Rome teaches that the Lord Jesus is physically sacrificed by the priests every time they celebrate mass.

The Taborites rejected transubstantiation. They taught that bread and wine remain *unchanged* in the Lord's Supper and that we do *not* sacrifice Christ every time again. The Taborites in Bohemia

believed what John Wycliffe had taught in England.

John Huss had still believed in purgatory, but the Taborites rejected that error too. They said:

"Purgatory is a myth, an invention. Preachers and authorities must be forbidden to proclaim and maintain that false doctrine."

They could not say it more clearly. Do you see that the Taborites went much further than their famous teacher? They were much closer to the doctrines of John Wycliffe and God's Word than Huss himself!

The light of the gospel has certainly shone clearly in Bohemia, and when, one hundred years later, the great Reformation came, it found a positive response in the hearts of the Bohemian people. Then thousands openly sided with the Reformation. True, strife and trouble followed. Rome continued to persecute and oppress anyone who believed in the Word of God above the traditions of Rome. We will tell you more about that when we discuss the history of the Moravian Brethren.



August 14, 1431

Hussite forces, led by Procopius the Great, defeat a large army of crusaders <https://historystack.com/>

QUESTIONS

1. What were the results of the martyrdom of Huss and Jerome?
2. What steps did Rome take to crush the Hussite movement?
3. Who were the Taborites?
4. Identify Ziska. What did the people at the rally do?
5. How did the Bohemians react to the succession of Sigismund to the throne of Bohemia?
6. Why did the ecclesiastical ban fail to affect Bohemia?
7. What is meant by a 'crusade against the Hussites'? How did the first two crusades fare?
8. Who was Procopius.
9. How does an offensive war differ from a defensive war? Why did Procopius begin an offensive war?
10. When the Roman Church failed to wipe out the Hussites through its vigorous crusades, it turned to another weapon. What was this weapon?
11. How would this new weapon work? Was it successful?
12. What group remained faithful to the doctrines of Huss? What finally became of this group?
13. Who are the Moravian Brethren?
14. List three ways in which the Taborites differed from Huss.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Evaluate the offensive war begun by Procopius. Was this a just war based on God's Word? Quote one proof text for the stand you take.
2. Why was the last weapon of the Roman Church the most successful?
3. Give reasons why the Taborites differed from Huss in certain doctrines.



On March 25, 1420, general Ziska saw 2000 enemy riders approaching. In no time, he had positioned the 12 wooden wagons on a fairly narrow path between a dam and a swamp. In wars, wooden carts were mainly used as a means of transport and rarely as the last line of defence. But now Ziska ordered them to be placed as a mobile fence, tied together with chains, to withstand the severe attacks of the knights. In each cart, he put crossbowmen and men with blunderbusses. Behind the carts (they called them wagon forts), all other Hussites, including the women, received an improvised weapon. The one-eyed general had conquered 2,000 heavily armed knights with 400 men and 12 carts in one day. *Wikicommons*