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The Taborites: Central European Communism

By Andrew Drummond

The European Reformation movement is usually seen as beginning in Germany in the early 16th century with the Lutherans, and spreading northwards and westwards to Holland, Scandinavia and England and Scotland over the next century, in forms determined by the specific national stage of production. Earlier articles in this series¹ have indicated how the economic changes in Germany laid the basis for the national religious movement: the exploitation of silver mines in Saxony in a large scale transformed the quantitative accumulation of merchant capital in the late Middle Ages into a qualitative productive force leading into the early forms of capitalism. And this revolution in the economy completely changed class-relations in German society, instilled a mood of profound change — in religious form — into the thoughts and political attitudes of every social force. Without these changes, Lutheranism could neither have been born nor have developed with such rapidity right across Germany, and inevitably into Holland and then Britain, where the economic conditions were more than ripe for a thrifty religion which worshipped the success of individual effort.

But very little is commonly known about the Bohemian revolution (in what is today Czechoslovakia) of almost exactly one century *before* the German Reformation; it was a revolutionary movement with very similar features to the German one, the same nationalist character and the same social schisms. In its own way, it contributed to the German Reformation and thus to the European bourgeois reformations and revolutions. But its radical offshoot also established a communistic precedent — the Taborite commune — which was known across Europe: the manifestos of the principles of the radical Bohemian

movement were received as far afield as Venice, Barcelona, Picardy, Paris and Cambridge; and the German radicals of the next hundred years were influenced both directly and indirectly by this precedent. So this period deserves a place in the history of early socialism: Karl Kautsky, before he reneged on German Marxism, wrote of this Bohemian radicalism in his book *Communism in Central Europe in the Time of Reformation*² and, although he makes several false assumptions concerning the development of radical ideology, his description is excellent.

THE MATERIAL BASIS

The conditions for the Bohemian Reformation, which was led by Jan Hus, can be divided into two main sections. Firstly, economic and political: like German Saxony, Bohemia was a remarkably wealthy state, because of its position on the main medieval trade routes, because of its weaving and brewing industries, but mostly because of its natural mineral wealth. The West Bohemian silver mine at Kuttenberg was the richest in Europe. Bohemia was thus in a strong national economic position: the main towns were large and nurtured a high level of burgher culture (Prague University became one of the leading scientific universities in Europe — later, the astronomers Tycho Brahe and Johann Kepler taught there) and the burghers enjoyed a greater social and political freedom than their brothers in other parts of Europe. They were independent of feudal institutions.

In the provinces, the large land-owners grew ever wealthier and more powerful by using the silver to buy the lesser nobility off the land — or merely by exercising their legal 'rights', by the law of the sword. As these barons became more powerful, their long-standing disputes with the king erupted into the open — indeed, King Wenceslas IV was arrested and imprisoned by them on several occasions between 1394 and 1404; but this conflict also helped to weaken the political power of the nobility as a class, a process hastened by the ascension of the trading burghers and the mine-owners. The conversion to a monetary economy with the mined silver, then, upset the feudal order irreversibly. There were disputes about the ownership of land between the Church and the nobility, and at the bottom of the heap, the peasantry got the worst of every deal. Prices rose dramatically. And so did the traditional exploitation of Bohemia by Italy and the Roman Church.

The second condition for the Reformation in Bohemia was the body of radical ideology which existed there. Bohemia's plebeian, mining and artisan centres were breeding-grounds for many a heretical sect. And in the towns the burghers, seeking an independent philosophy to complement their social independence, turned to the ideas of Wyclif, the English preacher and leader of the 1381 Peasants Revolt, ideas brought to Prague around 1395 by Wyclif's followers, the Lollards³; and it is no mere accident that the leaders of the radical Bohemian Reformation were weavers, shoe-makers, tailors, etc. The demand for changes in the Church was, of course, no unpopular measure: the Church was the largest single land-owner, the wealthiest and most corrupt institution (in 1414, Pope John was found guilty of simony, of murder, sodomy and fornication). But in that period, an attack on the Church was equally an attack on the basis of the feudal social order. Alongside this, as a twin result of the economic advances, Bohemian nationalism arose, as a revolt against German and Italian exploitation; in the early 1400s, the Germans were expelled from Prague University, and demands for a native-language Church Mass found wide support. The leader of this national reform movement, Jan Hus, spread ideas largely derived from Wyclif — for a national, simpler religion, for a more democratic organisation of the Church, for a Church with no property interests — and he found a tremendous response to his calls, just as Luther did in 1517. Rome, terrified by these manifestations of heresy, anxious to save Bohemian souls, and not a little worried about the problems of fleecing an unwilling nation, excommunicated Hus in 1412, and then burned him at the stake in Switzerland in 1414.

FROM REFORMATION TO REVOLUTION

This execution did not, of course, alter the material conditions for the reform one jot. All layers of society, awakened by their material situation and their political experiences, saw their hope in the Hussite Reformation. Thus, the land-owning nobility saw their chance to annexe the coveted Church estates. The burghers saw their chance to drive the last bastion of feudalism out of the towns. But, as later in Germany, the direction of the movement rapidly went beyond the limits of all that was decent and right: radicals began to emerge at the head of the Hussite movement, openly siding with the poor and the lower classes — men such as Jan Zelivsky and Martin Huska — and

soon an entirely formidable lower-class movement took to the streets. In the provinces, Hussitism was principally a radical movement — the payment of tithes was refused, priests were chased out, arrested, even executed; the countryside was alive with the old 'Free Spirit' heresies. Seeing this, and understanding the threat posed to the feudal order, the nobility and King Wenceslas began to back-track with all speed, abandoning the Reformation and starting to restore Catholicism in the provinces and in the towns, and replaced Hussites in local and national government with carefully selected anti-Hussites.

All this came to a head in 1419. In April, a group of the radicals in Prague joined up with those in the provinces to the south, and issued a 'call to the Mountains' — a traditional radical call to the 'faithful' to withdraw to a fortified place to await the Apocalypse that was to sweep away the old order. Conventicles were held in forests, on hilltops, or, if the radicals could meet in a town without being arrested, as in Pilsen, they did so. This was a spontaneous reaction to the Catholic restoration, an attempt to defend all the religious and social gains. And these meetings found enormous support, with up to 50,000 people attending. Their demands were a simple development of Hussitism: no propertied priests; no tithes to be paid; and the distribution of *both* wine and bread at church services. This last demand may not seem particularly shattering — but 'Utraquism' ('communion in both kinds') was a symbol of the revolt: until then, it had been the privilege of the rich and of Church officials to receive wine and bread together; now a democracy reigned. Religion, it must never be forgotten, was the only possible theoretical expression of social criticism in that period, and every heresy had a social basis.

By the end of June 1419, news of these gatherings had reached Prague, so Wenceslas hastened the restoration — at a cost. The people of Prague, under Zelivsky, marched on the Town Hall, stormed it and hurled 13 councillors and judges from the windows — the so-called 'defenestration of Prague'. This action had two immediate results, apart from the decease of the councillors: Wenceslas was obliged to make a few concessions to the reform, and soon after died of a broken heart; and the wealthier and conservative Hussites joined forces with the Catholics against the radicals. For the rest of the year, the two sides were in perpetual confrontation.

But one thing must be said here which is important for understanding this period. Although the radicals were in the majority in Prague and in several other towns, and although the radical movement in the

country was gathering pace, there was no strong, united and clear *political* goal. Quite simply, the development of the productive forces had not nearly reached that stage which could give the burghers — let alone the lower classes — both the material force and the ideological guidance necessary for a seizure of power. Those conflicts then remained at the level of rebellion, not of revolution; but they were omens of what was to come in a later epoch.

At the end of 1419, the situation was aggravated by the death of Wenceslas; the succession fell to Sigmund of Hungary, a man zealous to restore the feudal relationships (and Catholicism) in their full glory. He began to raise a feudal army, drawing mercenaries from all over Europe, to lay siege to Prague — which refused to recognise him as king — and to defeat the rural movement.

CIVIL WAR

In early 1420, the revolt burst out in earnest. The radicals, whose numbers had grown in the towns of Pisek, Pilsen and Zatec, now began to organise into armed bands; in February, they captured first the town of Usti, and then took over a hill-fortress near Hradiste, and renamed it 'Tabor'. The name was a reference to a traditional prophecy that Christ would return to earth to punish the wicked, while those in 'Tabor' would be spared the Day of Doom. Tabor and six other centres then became the focal points of the radical 'Taborite' movement. The aims of the Taborites were essentially communistic. Their demands were set out in manifestos which were developed from, on the one side, a set of demands by the Prague Hussites, and, on the other, the tradition of heresy.

In our time there shall be an end to all things, that is, all evil shall uproot on this earth. This age is no longer the time of grace or mercy or charity towards wicked men who resist the Law of God. In this time of vengeance, all towns, villages and hamlets should be deserted by good people . . . no good men shall return there. . . after this exodus. . . Whosoever shall grant money or help or show any goodwill to such an enemy shall also suffer in body and in property.

These demands for punishment and for the destruction of 'sinners' were given a clear social character by the following:

As in Hradiste or in Tabor, nothing is mine and nothing thine, but all is common, so everything shall be common to all forever and no one shall have anything of his own; because whoever owns anything himself com-

mits a mortal sin. . . Debtors who flee to the mountains or the aforesaid five towns (Tabor, Pilsen, Pisek, Brod, Zatec) shall be acquitted of paying their debts. . . In this time no king shall reign nor any lord rule on earth, there shall be no serfdom, all interests and taxes shall cease, nor shall any man force another to do anything, because all shall be equal, brothers and sisters.

Not unnaturally, these demands found great support among the poor and the artisans, attracting people from all over Bohemia, and from Germany and Poland. With this support, the Taborites, while awaiting the Apocalypse, engaged in revolutionary warfare. They attacked towns and drove away the lords and priests, they led armies against the Catholics, they handed private forests and pastureland back to the communities, they amassed wealth and distributed it equally among their supporters; a 'tub economy' was instituted, whereby all the Taborites placed all their possessions and wealth in huge tubs for equal redistribution. In May and November of 1420, the Taborites went to the aid of the besieged Prague Hussites. The feudal armies, meanwhile, marched throughout the country, slaughtering and executing. In July 1420, the Taborites took on and defeated an army under Count Rosenberg, and in November, the nobility was forced to an armistice. Throughout 1421, open warfare was continued between the Taborite-Hussite armies and the Catholic nobility. The Taborite army under Zizka captured castles and fortresses, marched to Prague to demand a restructuring of society, having driven off the army led by Sigmund.

THE PROBLEM OF MEDIEVAL COMMUNISM

But this state of affairs could not last. Underlying social and economic pressures began to tear through the fabric of united Hussitism. When the pressure on Prague was relaxed in the summer of 1421, the burghers began to loosen their ties with the Taborites, and, although earlier they had expelled from the city all the non-Utraquists, this policy was now relaxed. The internal contradictions among the Taborites then appeared: completely opposed layers of society co-existed in Tabor, peasants, plebeians, artisans along with burghers and dispossessed noblemen. In November of 1421, the wealthier faction under Zizka offered the crown of Bohemia to the king of Poland (a man not noted for his revolutionism, nor even for his Hussitism) and then gained ascendancy over the more radical faction under Nicholas of Hus. In December and January, some 300

'Picarts' and Adamites' — lower-class anarchistic, free-thinking radicals were expelled from Tabor as a prelude to the political defeat of the left-wing in general. In March 1422, Zelivsky and other Prague radicals were arrested and beheaded by the conservative Hussites.

How did this come about? We have already noted that the relatively low stage of development of the forces of production favoured the lower classes even less than the burghers. These problems were in concentrated form in Tabor: as Kautsky says, 'Taborite communism was based upon the needs of the poor and not on those of production' — and it was a communism of consumption, which could not survive without a general change in the national economy, which in turn was impossible at that stage of history. This basic weakness was exacerbated by the continual war, which forced the Taborites to tax the very peasants they had just liberated from taxation, with a resulting loss of support. Finally, the turn of the Prague Hussites away from revolution effectively isolated and profoundly weakened the radical faction in Tabor, so that the Taborite 'moderates' (who were still radical by Prague standards) gained the upper hand.

After the defeat of the Taborite radicals, Tabor still continued to be a centre of radicalism until 1452, and for that reason a good example of early burgher revolt. In form, it was nominally 'communistic', but in content it soon reverted to a burgher economy and a bourgeois policy. Close connections were maintained with the miners and weavers of West Bohemia, particularly the mining town of Zatec, but the revolutionary driving force for communism had gone, an ideal negated by adverse material circumstances into something neither feudal nor socialist, but an embryo of bourgeois society. In 1452, the Bohemian ruling class finally dragged Tabor back into the political fold.

A COMMUNISTIC TRADITION

In itself, the Taborite movement did not pose a serious threat to the Bohemian ruling class, whose armies were able to isolate and then smash the rebels. It did, indeed, present a challenge to feudalism in its beginnings; but it simply was not the hour for the social layers supporting the left-wing. Economic and political organisation had not developed far enough. The real significance of the whole rebellion was the example which it set for later generations of radicals. The communistic organisation of the centres of rebellion; the communism of consumption; the unity of peasant and urban poor: it all amounted to

an act of revolution. Its example was copied by the German Anabaptists, particularly those of Munster in 1535.

This fame was strengthened by Hussite armies and missionaries, who entered Germany in the next decades. In the 1420s, one Johann Drädorff took the cause as far as Heidelberg, where he was burned; armies of Hussites and Taborites penetrated as far as Bamberg and Nuremberg in 1430 — and in these major towns, the lower classes opened the gates to welcome the invaders, and expelled the rich, much to the latter's patriotic horror; preachers were to be found in towns right across central Germany, very often in mining and weaving centres. In 1447, 130 Hussites were burned in the valley of the Tauber. In 1462, more were burned in Zwickau, a flourishing mining and weaving centre with a long history of radicalism, and which was a significant point in the political itinerary of Thomas Müntzer, the German revolutionary. In 1475, more Bohemians were active there. And just across the border in Bohemia, Zatec was the base for many Hussite and Taborite preachers. In the first great rebellion of the German Reformation, in the Tauber valley in 1476, the peasant leader Hans Böhm ('the Bohemian') operated under the guidance of one of these radical preachers.

And so the tradition of Tabor passed into the German revolutionary movement which flourished between 1476 and 1535. Both from the course of the Hussite Reformation proper and from that of the Taborite movement, valuable lessons were learned. Luther, in his early radical days, suggested that the Hussite example had to be followed. Müntzer, when Luther went over to the side of the nobility in 1524, accused the reformer of making 'Bohemian gifts' to the German princes — i.e. of allowing the princes to enrich themselves from Church wealth. And it is certainly not insignificant that Müntzer spent some time in Zwickau, in Zatec and in Prague, at a time when the radical Utraquist movement was re-emerging as a political force in 1521.

But the important thing to see in Tabor is that it was a decisive moment in the development of Reformation radicalism, a moment in a spiral of European social development. It contained a foretaste both of bourgeois society and of socialist society. Without the events in Prague and Tabor between 1419 and 1421, the course of the German Reformation and of the English Revolution would have been decidedly different. This spiral of development was one composed of opposites, of negations: the peasant and urban revolts of a class

nature; these later revolts in turn fed the national reforms and revolutions of other countries. Thus, an understanding of the early European Reformation and its material basis is essential for an understanding of the history of capitalism. The instruments for achieving the socialist revolution of today are now sharper, heavier — Marxism and the immense power and experience of the proletariat — than could even be imagined by the pioneers of communism in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Notes

- 1 See Labour Review, Vol 1, pp 199 and 545
- 2 London 1897; first published in German in 1895, as part of a history of socialism by Kautsky and Bernstein.
- 3 The entire history of the European Reformation, it might be said here, was an international one, even in those days of dark parochialism: the reforms of Wyclif travelled to Flanders, Germany, Bohemia; the reforms of Hus travelled to Germany; the reforms of Luther and of the Swiss reformer Zwingli travelled to Holland and Britain.