

A Communist Image of the Hussites: Representations and Analogies

Key words: Bohemia, church, religion, communist ideology, Communist Party, Czechoslovakia, Jan Hus, Hussites, idealism, monument, painting, romanticism, sculpture, socialist realism.

In 2005, Czech national television held a popular survey to select the greatest Czech historical or contemporary person. Among the top ten were three men from the Middle Ages: King Charles IV (in 1st place), the Hussite commander Jan Žižka (5th place), and the spiritual founder of the Hussite movement Jan Hus (7th place). From time immemorial, the Czechs have commonly recognised those figures who were connected with the Hussite movement, even though the entire movement and its representatives were subject to various historical interpretations, stressing different aspects of the uprising. This materialised not only in the ideological explanations of historians but also in the visual and other arts. The most marked interpretation of the Hussite movement was provided by Czech communist ideologists after the Second World War. I

will focus, via a selection of artworks, on the specific issues they stressed in connection with the Hussite movement.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE HUSSITES

The Hussite movement emerged in Bohemia in the first half of the 15th century in the form of an uprising directed against the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church, and against social injustice. Its name is derived from Jan Hus (ca 1369-1415) – who sometimes appears as John Huss in English. He was a university scholar and a preacher who became an ardent critic of the Church, which at that time was still divided by the papal schism. Hus was inspired by the doctrine of John Wycliffe, and called for reformation of the venal Church in his sermons and lec-



Fig. 1. Jan Zázvorka, Jan Gillar, Monument to National Liberation, 1929-1932.

Bohuslav Kafka, Jan Žižka at the Vítkov Hill, 1941, bronze, H - 900 cm. Photos by the author



Fig. 2. Josef Malejovský and Antonín Strnadel, Entrance door to the Vítkov monument, 1953-1958, bronze.
Photo by the author

tures. He was excommunicated by Pope Alexander V in 1410, but did not stop preaching until summoned to defend and explain his teachings at a trial in Konstanz in 1414. Challenged by both Church and secular authorities, he was ultimately accused of heresy, and burned at the stake in 1415.

Riots and disturbances broke out in Bohemia following the death of Hus. The Hussites, who came from all strata of society, created military-political formations with bases in different Bohemian towns. Although their demands were not always unanimous, their common religious goals could be summarised as the freedom to preach, the return of the Church to a state of humility and poverty, equal laws for laity and clergy, and communion for all. The latter demand provided the Hussites with their primary symbol, the chalice.

1419 saw the ejection of several councillors through the windows of Prague Town Hall, with mobs in Prague attacking and robbing monasteries, churches, and the houses of German citizens.¹ The most prominent Hussite military leader, Jan Žižka (ca

1360-1424), successfully repulsed five foreign crusades against the Hussites. Originally a highway robber, at the age of approximately 60, Žižka became associated with the rebels. Half-blind most of his life, he lost his remaining eye four years before his death, but was nevertheless a highly capable warrior at the head of a Hussite peasant army.

The Hussites consisted of a number of diverse communities living mainly in southern Bohemia. A radical Hussite flank settled in the town of Tábor, where it formed a special commune based on joint ownership and human equality. As Thomas Fudge has pointed out, this group in fact lived according to the ideals of communism, and shared everything – including wives. Their utopian dream quickly dissolved, however, due to differences in the background of the community members, divergent interests that led to corruption, a loss of vision, and no communal production despite communal consumption.²

Internal tensions between the individual Hussite groups brought about the final disintegration of the Hussite cause, and to a fratricidal battle in Lipany

in 1434. Something of a compromise followed, whereby the Hussite Church and certain original demands of the Hussites were recognised. But King Sigismund, who had been exiled during the Hussite wars, returned to rule Bohemia.

INTERPRETATION AND RE-INTERPRETATION OF THE MOVEMENT

The Hussite movement has been so favoured throughout Czech history because of its interpretive adaptability. Nineteenth century national revivers mainly emphasised the Hussites' nationalist consciousness and struggle against their oppressive German rulers; scholars during the time of the first Czechoslovak Republic stressed their cosmopolitan nature and philosophical base; communists showed "the importance of the Hussite tradition in the class struggle of the people, and especially its function in the struggle of the working class, which the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia brought to victory".³

This Marxist vision by the communist interpreters of history promoted the Hussites as proto-communists; by the same token, post-Second World War Czech (and Slovak) society was depicted as having inherited Hussite traditions. The post-1948 communist rule was justified by the claim of an inevitable historical process which had started in the Middle Ages. Klement Gottwald, the first "working-class president" of Czechoslovakia, stated clearly in 1948: "We are building our people's state in the traditions of Tábor and of the national awakening"; and: "If our nation was again ever brought close to its most famous Hussite period – today is the day".⁴

THE HUSSITES IN THE ARTS

The 19th century national awakening produced a number of artworks commemorating the Hussites. Leaders and principal events in Hussite history became motifs for paintings and sculptures reminding the people of their great national history, and the independent mediaeval state. Admiration of the Hussites was carried into the 20th century, to the time of the first Czechoslovak Republic, when, for example, Jan Hus' propagated motto "Truth wins"

was embroidered onto the presidential flag, where it has remained to this day. I should also note that several 19th and 20th century musical works, by, amongst others, Antonín Dvořák and Bedřich Smetana, were composed on Hussite themes.

In the 1950s, communist ideology did not rely solely on re-interpreting the Hussites in speeches or pamphlets, it also promoted the creation of literary works, movies, and artworks with a dogmatic message. Novels on Hussite themes by Alois Jirásek, one of the most prominent Czech writers of the late 19th and early 20th century, were adapted for films, and distributed internationally.

As I have already suggested, the 1950s' visual depiction of the Hussite movement was based on a long tradition of artworks portraying individual leaders and battles. A major project of the 1950s, connected with the Hussite tradition, was the completion of a monument on Vítkov Hill in Prague – the site of the first Hussite battle. The construction of a liberation monument, military museum, and archives had already started back in the 1920s, but was completed in the 1950s with a different concept, and the omission of certain unwanted aspects (e.g., the Czechoslovak legions) of the state's military history. It was also temporarily a mausoleum for the body of Klement Gottwald, the great defender of the Hussite tradition.

THE VÍTKOV MONUMENT

An 18-metre high monumental statue of Žižka on horseback stands in front of the main museum building [fig. 1]. The sculpture was designed by Bohuslav Kafka back in the 1930s, executed in 1941, and erected in its present location in 1950. I shall now focus on the door leading into the museum, which is decorated by a relief depicting the apotheosis of the Hussites, created by Josef Malejovský and Antonín Strnadel. Strongly influenced by historicism, Malejovský portrayed events from Hussite history and mythology alongside revolutionary achievements of the working people. Six episodes from the Hussite period occupy the left side of the door, and modern parallels adorn the right side [fig. 2]. The relief thereby functions as an epitome of the



Fig. 3. Karel Lidický, *Jan Hus*, 1954, bronze, H - 250 cm.
Source: Jaroslav Rataj, *Karel Lidický*, Prague: Odeon, 1977, fig. 60

communist vision of the Hussites – it manifests the idea of the predestined implementation of Hussite revolutionary ideas in the events following the Second World War.

Seen in relief, the main feature generally emphasised in visual representations of the Hussites is the class struggle of the peasants against an unjust social division; their religious goals are, however, suppressed. Zdeněk Nejedlý (1878-1962), minister of education and arts after the Second World War, was an all-round scholar and one of the main proponents of the communist-Hussite tradition, who maintained that the religious role of the mediaeval Church should not be overestimated.⁵ Instead, he emphasised the secular and economic role of the Church in society – an aspect that was detested by the common people. At the same time, the self-same Zdeněk Nejedlý initiated the rebuilding of the Bethlehem Chapel – where Hus had first delivered his sermons. Motivated more by the reconstruction of nationhood and the “cradle of the Czech people’s movement”, the replica represented the contradicto-

ry and selective attitude of the communists regarding their national history.⁶

Returning to the door at Vítkov: the first relief, in adherence to the suppression of the religious motives behind the movement, shows Hus preaching out in the open rather than in a church. Hus’ follower Jan Želivský, portrayed holding a chalice and thus promoting communion for all, is also situated in a Hussite camp. During this period – contrary to the 19th century paintings which might be exemplified by *Preaching at the Bethlehem Chapel* by Alfons Mucha – disconnection from the church and an emphasis on a secular setting appear in a number of other depictions of Hus. The socialist artist Karel Štěch (1908-1982) placed Hus under the open sky in southern Bohemia in a woodcut that was part of his *Hussite Cycle*, carved between 1950 and 1957 to represent the idealised events of the Middle Ages.

MONUMENTS IN THE 1950S

Jan Hus was represented as the spiritual founder of the subsequent revolution, a martyr, and a national hero in a number of sculptures executed in the 1950s. Karel Lidický carved Hus in 1954, both for Prague and for Hus’ birthplace, and very similar statues erected in villages and towns (e.g., Chrudim, Katovice u Strakonice, Soběslav) to commemorate Hus the preacher, are basically a repetition of the one analogous composition [fig. 3].

Although Jan Žižka first appeared as a popular hero, he quickly became a political symbol as well. The only successful commander in Czech military history, he stood for courage and determination, as well as the class revolt and struggle against a foreign enemy. Alongside the Kafka monument at Vítkov, his statue appeared mainly at sites connected with his deeds. A neo-classical sculpture by Josef Malejovský, author of the Vítkov door, was erected in Žižka’s alleged birthplace, Trocnov; another, by Jiří Dušek, was installed in Hradec Králové, site of a Hussite battle. More notably in Žižka’s case, historical precedents from the 19th century – including Josef Strachovský’s 1884 monument in Tábor – were used as the inspiration for new works of art.

NATIONALISM IN THE HUSSITE MOVEMENT

Both Hus and Žižka have been represented as national symbols. The nationalism of the early 1950s saw the current revolutionary period as the ultimate patriotic outcome of the past, and the greatest triumph in the nation's history.⁷ Although the movement was not successful, its defeat was temporary – and its tradition survived until victory by the Communist Party.

This nationalistic aspect of the Hussite movement was again taken over from the 19th century national revivers. In their interpretation, the Hussites, recruited from native Czechs, fought against the German tyrants who ruled, and who controlled trade in Bohemia. An example of a visual form of this point of view is Jan Šebek's *Revolt in Kutná Hora* (1950s), which depicts miners rebelling against the majority-representing German upper class in that Bohemian town. Moreover, Hus died at the stake in Konstanz, Germany, and King and Emperor Sigismund was seen as a violator of the Czech language, kingdom, and crown.⁸ These nationalistic attitudes regarding the Hussites have survived to this day, and can be exemplified by the use of Hussite themes and visual symbols by a Czech neo-nazi singer Daniel Landa.

IDEALISATION OF THE HUSSITES

Hus and Žižka were the only figures stressed by communist historiography and visual representations as Hussite heroes. This could be explained in terms of the cult of personality politics and a deliberate simplification of the Hussite myth. There was, of course, a different official explanation: according to communist scholars, the Hussite tradition survived mainly among the common people. The common man remembered Hus and Žižka as leaders/initiators of the struggle, and was not confused by any number of other Hussite figures. According to Nejedlý: “The common man thinks in a simpler way, and thus often more correctly than many intellectuals ... he sees Hus, the brave propagator and defender of the people against the oppressors. And he sees Žižka, fearlessly slaying the enemy of the people.”⁹

Representation of an idealised present, future, and past was a requirement of the official ideology. Events from the past were chosen to depict problems that could be connected with the contemporary revolutionary struggle of the working people.¹⁰ The heroes of the past needed to be positive and good in order to educate the new generations. Hus' ethical and moral integrity, and his struggle against the powerful Church were stressed, and the fact that Žižka and his troops were responsible for the destruction of a great number of churches, monasteries and urban dwellings was, in the light of their struggle against social-economic tyranny, suppressed.

To return again to the Vítkov monument: the entire concept and the individual scenes were executed according to the principles of socialist realism set out by Andrei A. Zhdanov in 1934. These include the premise that true and historical reality should be depicted in a manner that educates, and that works of art should be executed in the style of revolutionary romanticism.

The Hussites were an ideal topic for this romanticised revolutionary style. The struggle for a better

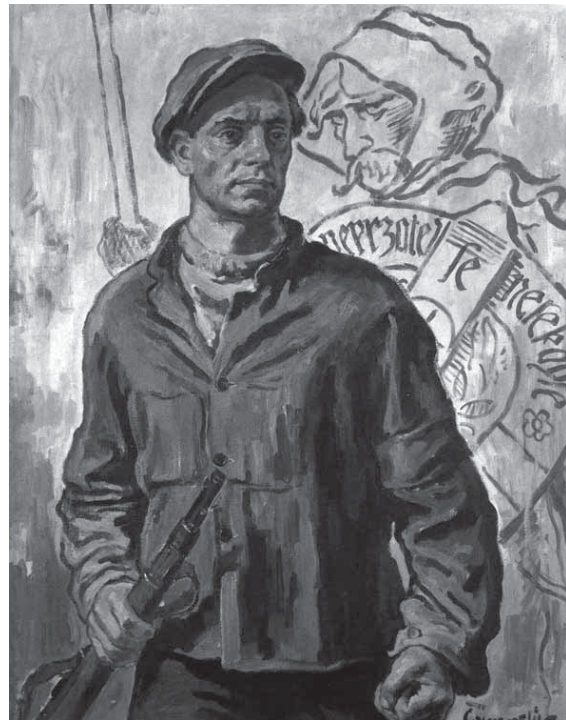


Fig. 4. Jan Čumpelík, *Detail of the poster for the Exhibition of History of Revolutionary Struggle, 1949, oil on paper, 143 x 103 cm. Source: Tereza Petišková, Československý socialistický realismus 1948-1958, Prague: Gallery, 2002, p. 75*

future in an ideal society, and the fight of the new against the old were paralleled with the present. The door of the Vítkov monument shows the victorious working class at different stages during the 20th century. The Soviet army is heartily welcomed in Prague in 1945, the questionable communist coup of 1948 is depicted as a triumph of the people's militia, and the better future to be achieved by building communism materialises in the last scene.

TODAY'S ARMY - MODERN HUSSITES

Along with Hus and Žižka, the army also appears as an important subject in a number of the door reliefs. According to František Kavka: "The victorious February of 1948 was a prerequisite for the Hussite revolutionary tradition to become the backbone of the Czechoslovak army".¹¹ It was not only the Czechoslovak army that was perceived as following the Hussite tradition – so was the people's militia which was created after 1945. When the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia took over the government in February 1948, the militia was recruited from the ranks of ordinary workers. So-called "Operational Committees" were mobilised to prevent trouble in factories, and to frighten non-communists – although officially it was claimed that, "[the people] were able to fight off the attempts of the capitalists and other traitors to bring our people, in February 1948, to a new and even worse Lipany..."¹² [fig. 4].

The Czechoslovak army was called the People's Army. According to communist interpretation, the Hussite troops were mostly composed of common people, whose aim, along with the establishment of a socially just system, was "the provision of the happy development of our country".¹³ The Czechoslovak army sought, among other things, to fight the modern capitalist crusaders by consciously selecting the Hussites (and the Soviet army) as their role model. The capitalist crusaders were the Allies – imperialists of the West – who liberated western Bohemia in 1945, and the domestic enemy, who were compared to the mediaeval crusaders and corrupt feudalists.

The Vítkov monument door relief stands for the historical military struggle against the traitors, and culminates in the depiction of a happy communist so-

ciety. A number of other scenes portraying Hussite troops in battle are mostly executed in a rigid historicist style. The scenes chosen basically conformed to requirements that included the credibility and dramatic character of the painting, an emphasis on individuals, a positive/optimistic attitude, and a focus on the entire message of the subject. Again, the execution of these battle paintings is highly indebted to paradigms from both 19th century Bohemian,



Fig. 5. Access to the Vítkov monument. Photo by the author

and contemporary Soviet painting. Examples of the former include works by Jaroslav Čermák, Václav Brožík, Mikuláš Aleš, while the latter could be exemplified by Alexander Bubnov's *Morning on the Kulikovo Field* (1942-1947).

CONCLUSION

From an art historical point of view, a dependence on 19th century paradigms is visible in most of the 1950s artworks depicting the Hussites. The resulting revolutionary romanticism of the paintings, and the conservative academism of the sculptures complied with the period demands of socialist realism.

The subject matter was, however, more important than the actual representation. The primary message of the works of art promoted the inevitable connection between the Hussites, and the communists who brought the mediaeval social revolution to a victory. The two positive heroes, Jan Hus and Jan Žižka, played a crucial role in this interpretation, and together with the Hussite army and rebelling common people, became the main themes of the artworks.

Certain aspects of the movement were stressed, and others suppressed, in both the visual and theoretical interpretations. The militaristic aspect of the Hussites became a suitable strategy in post-Second World War Europe, and provided a parallel in the form of the mediaeval troops and the socialist people's army. The importance of the religious cause which had initiated the movement, was, however, overshadowed by an emphasis on the social revolt of the working class against a corrupt and wealthy enemy.

I have also shown that one can detect discrepancies, including the ambiguous view of religion and the spiritual message behind the movement, and the communist attitude regarding the Hussite rebellion. Considering the Vítkov monument one last time, one can see that it also has features in common with religious symbolism – among them the door reliefs, which copy the decor of doors leading into Catholic churches. Likewise, the entire access to the museum on the top of the hill is designed as a pilgrimage, with the main walkway leading the procession up a monumental staircase [fig. 5]. And finally, the statue that dominates the hill was actually commissioned in the 1930s by a democratic Czechoslovak government – but has always been associated with the communist development on the hill.

The vote for the greatest Czech hero, as mentioned at the beginning of this presentation, was accompanied by a vote for the greatest Czech villain. The winner, ironically, was the very same president whose body lay in the mausoleum for nine years. As history's greatest villain, this propagator of the Hussite-communist succession ended up at the opposite end of the scale from the main heroes of the Hussite uprising.

Notes

¹ Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia. A Czech History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 37.

² Thomas Fudge, 'Neither Mine nor Thine', in: *Canadian Journal of History / Annales canadiennes d'histoire*, XXXIII, April 1998, pp. 26-47: p. 40.

³ František Kavka, *Husitská revoluční tradice (The Hussite Revolutionary Tradition)*, Prague: SNPL, 1953, p. 14.

⁴ Klement Gottwald, quoted in Kavka, 1953, p. 24 and p. 264.

⁵ Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Hus a naše doba (Hus and our Times)*, 3rd ed., Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1952, p. 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

⁷ Kavka, 1953, p. 260.

⁸ Sayer, 1998, p. 38.

⁹ Zdeněk Nejedlý, *Komunisté – dědici velikých tradic českého národa (Communists, the Inheritors of Great Traditions of the Czech Nation)*, Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1950, p. 18.

¹⁰ Mikuláš Bakoš, *O socialistickom realizme (On Socialist Realism)*, Bratislava: Štátne nakladateľstvo, 1952, p. 36.

¹¹ Kavka, 1953, p. 268.

¹² Vladimír Rošt, 'Poučení z husitské minulosti' ('A Lesson from the Hussite Past'), in: *Tvorba*, XX, no. 33, 1951, p. 785.

¹³ Josef Macek, *Husitské revoluční hnutí (Hussite Revolutionary Movement)*, Prague: Nakladatelství Rovnost, 1952, p. 12.

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Komunistinis husitų vaizdinys: reprezentacijos ir analogijos

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Bohemija, bažnyčia, religija, komunistinė ideologija, komunistų partija, Čekoslovakija, Janas Husas, husitai, idealizmas, paminklas, tapyba, romantizmas, skulptūra, socialistinis realizmas.

Santrauka

Čekų istoriografijoje husitų judėjimas naudojamas įvairiais politiniais tikslais. Čekų nacionalinio atgimimo požiūriu, XV a. pradžios husitai buvo kovotojai prieš vokiečių priespaudą, o komunistų sukurtas oficialus įvaizdis pavertė husitų judėjimą revoliucine kova, XX a. darbininkų klasės pranašu. Husitų veiksmai, vienas didžiausių Viduramžių sukilimų prieš feodalinę santvarką, buvo suvokiami kaip kelio į socializmą pradžia. Komunistai laikyti posthusitais, o husitai – prokomunistais. Tai buvo sąmoningai propaguojama užsakytuose meno kūriniuose, kurie turėjo lavinti mases ir sukurti komunizmo istorinio neišvengiamumo įspūdį.

Daugelis XV a. husitų judėjimo įvykių aspektų buvo sąmoningai praleidžiama, tad straipsnyje svarstoma, ką komunistinė valdžia, kurdama husitų įvaizdžius, buvo pasirengusi pamiršti, o ką – prisiminti, kad galėtų propaguoti savo ideologijas. Pavyzdžiui, religinis husitų judėjimo aspektas buvo arba nutylimas, arba naudojamas kaip ginklas prieš to laiko bažnyčią. Kita vertus, valstietiška sukilimo kilmė buvo pabrėžiama ir tapo efektyviu propagandos įrankiu.

Remiantis XX a. antrosios pusės paveikslais ir skulptūromis, vaizduojančiomis husitus, tyrinėjama oficialioji judėjimo siejimo su komunistine darbininkų klase politika. Analizuojami paveikslai, kuriuose pavaizduotas bažnyčios reformatorius Janas Husas (pvz., Karel Lidický) ir karvedys Janas Žižka (pvz., Josef Malejovský), „eilinio kareivio“, kovojančio už laisvę, atvaizdai (pvz., Jan Šebek). Daug dėmesio skiriama reljefui, kabančiam ant Prahos karo muziejaus durų – jame vaizduojama husitų ir komunistų apoteozė.

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