BOHEMIA AND THE EMPIRE: ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION

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The relationship between a small nation and state and its powerful neighbour can easily become, and in European history often did become, a trauma that influences not only the activities of politicians, but also the ways of thinking on both sides, as a rule more significantly on the side of the weaker party to such a juxtaposition. In this sense we can identify the main and never-ending theme in the history of Bohemia and its inhabitants: it is the relation to the Germans, Germany and to the Empire. During more than one millennium of their coexistence its objective content, of course, changed a lot. While in the early and high Middle Ages it meant mainly a limited relationship between the Czech governing dynasty and the imperial authority, in the late Middle Ages and in the early modern era the thematic field of Czech–German relations widened. The participants acting there and formulating their viewpoints were not only the sovereign and his court, but also the nobility, townspeople and clergy, including the intellectual elite. In view of the fact that from the thirteenth century until the end of the Second World War in Bohemia and Moravia there lived a very strong German minority, ethnical and language issues also became part of the relation between the Bohemian kingdom and the Reich. The issue of the relationship of these two constitutional law entities (státoprávní celky or staatsrechtliche Elemente) became also the object of a strong nationalist tension as early as the seventeenth century, when it occurred only sporadically, but much more commonly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The discussions on the relationship between Bohemia and the Reich, which developed after the fall of the Holy Roman Empire, reflected the extraordinary and complicated nexus between these two territorial and legal subjects of medieval and early modern Europe. It was this untypical and changeable relationship between Bohemia and the Reich that created a background where on each rival side only certain favourable elements of the development would be taken into account to create different, sometimes even contradictory models of interpretation. This complexity, interpreted
nowadays by contemporary German and Czech historiography,¹ can be only sketched in what follows.

The territory of Bohemia and Moravia, together with other lands of the Bohemian crown—Silesia and Upper and Lower Lusatia—undoubtedly belonged to the area under the authority of Roman (Roman-German) monarchs in the period of growing imperial universalism. In the early and high Middle Ages, efforts to subordinate the Bohemian lands directly to the emperor, or even to appoint members of the governing Roman-German dynasty to the Bohemian crown, appeared regularly. This tendency culminated in the last quarter of the twelfth century with the threat of the dissolution of Bohemia (ruled by the Přemyslid dynasty) into three independent Reich principalities—the duchy of Bohemia, the margravate of Moravia and the bishopric of Prague, that were to be subordinated directly to the emperor Frederick I. The imperial authority then declined, which brought a reversal of power, so that of Bohemian rulers increased and they were able substantively to affect the issues of the Reich.²

In spite of periodic disorders, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries Bohemian statehood gradually strengthened. In 1198, when Bohemia definitively became a kingdom, the Bohemian king could be only the vassal of the emperor (or of the Roman king as the future emperor—futurus imperator) and the Bohemian kingdom was not a fief, but only a part of the Reich. Therefore there appeared to be a mutually beneficial relationship between the Bohemian and Roman rulers, which helped to stabilize the specific relationship between Bohemia and the Reich. The emperor formally confirmed the Bohemian king, who had been accepted according to the Bohemian provincial or land laws; according to his title the Bohemian sovereign held also the office of arch-cupbearer (Erzschenk) which meant, very importantly, membership in the body of electors (Kurfürsten),

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² Zdeněk Fiala, Přemyslovské Čechy. Český stát a společnost v letech 995–1310 (Prague, 1965), 120–37: ‘The state of the Přemyslids and the Roman-German Empire’. 