chapter 12
Nobles: Between Religious Compromise and Revolt¹

Václav Bůžek

In early modern Europe the nobility derived justification of its superior social status primarily from a continuous revival of memory and a constant emphasis on the depth and degrees of nobility. They protected their exclusivity from other groups by establishing special corporations most frequently through the Estates. Although the proportion of nobility within European society gradually decreased during the late Middle Ages and early modern period, they preserved their long-term dominant position in the political, religious, cultural, and even partially the economic arenas. With the exception of Spain, this upper class represented approximately 1–1.5% of the total population in most western European countries during the 16th and first half of the 17th centuries. This percentage also roughly corresponds to their numbers in Central Europe. While in Upper and Lower Austria, the landed elite constituted approximately 0.5–0.6% of the population around 1600, in Bohemia it was closer to 1%. There were higher proportions only in Hungary (4–5%) and Poland (10%) as these regions had larger groups of minor nobility.²

While the 16th century witnessed the increasing self-confidence of nobles in Bohemia, Austria, Hungary, and in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, they could not imagine governance without a king, who was perceived as a divinely-sanctioned guarantor of stability and justice. In this society ordered by the Estates, the ruler shared the administration of the realm with representatives of individual Estates, the most influential of whom were the highest administrators of the realm and regular participants in diets. The ensuing political dialogue between the monarch and the Estates was directed toward the promotion of the common good, which would bring benefits and prosperity to the realm, as well as simultaneously establishing, strengthening, and validating the natural order of society.³

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1 Translated from Czech by Jan Volek.
3 Václav Bůžek and Zdeněk Vybíral, "Freiheit in Böhmen und Mähren zwischen Hussitismus und Dreißigjährigem Krieg," in Kollektive Freiheitsvorstellungen im frühneuzeitlichen Europa
Whenever a disagreement between the king and the nobility arose, proceedings often escalated into conflict. The progression of such disputes could lead to three different responses from the Estates during meetings of diets or on other occasions. The nobles could argue for the maintenance of their traditional freedoms, refuse to comply or grant the requests of the monarch, or assert their prerogatives and protest perceived violations of the established order. Among the rights that the upper and lower nobility considered particularly sacrosanct was freedom of religion.

At the beginning of the 16th century, many members of the landed elite in Bohemia, Austria, Hungary, and Poland-Lithuania embraced the ideas of the German and Swiss Reformations for a number of reasons. Some were generally disaffected with the Catholic church, while others either rejected the lifestyle of the clergy or sought to find new pathways to deepen their personal devotion. In this context, however, Bohemia represented a unique case. Demands for church reform had already been raised during the Hussite revolution in the 1420s and 30s. The ensuing Bohemian Reformation resulted in an extensive secularization of ecclesiastical property, exclusion of the clergy from diets, expansion of the nobility’s political influence, and most importantly the first enduring religious division in Europe.

During subsequent negotiations at the Council of Basel (1431–37) concerning the readmission of the Hussites into the Catholic church, the Utraquists (as Hussites would later be known) unsuccessfully tried to convince the council to mandate the reception of the Eucharist for all inhabitants of Bohemia. The final agreement (the Basel Compactata), confirmed in 1436, nevertheless guaranteed the ecclesiastical bifurcation of Bohemia into the Utraquist and Catholic churches. Although Pope Pius II formally repealed the agreement in 1462, the religious division remained de facto unaltered, since Bohemian kings continued to recognize both ecclesiastical bodies regardless of the opinion of the Holy See. Royal recognition of the Compactata was