REVIEW ARTICLES/CRITIQUES EXHAUSTIFS

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Recent Trends in Historical Research on Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Bohemia

Czech historians of early modern history have traditionally directed their attention almost exclusively to the past of their own country. As a result, important aspects of international development during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have been neglected, even in the connection with the situation in Bohemia. Historical research on the Bohemian Estates' anti-Habsburg rebellion of 1618-20 and the life of the distinguished Czech scholar Comenius (Jan Amos Komenský) have proved to be the only important exceptions to this rule. This "isolationism" in considering Czech early modern history has undoubtedly been influenced by the fact that, after 1620, Bohemia had lost her independence, and her direct influence in international politics diminished considerably. During the last decade Czech historians have attempted to explain the roots and characteristics of the "Dark Period" (Temno). They have oriented their research round three main and specific themes: the origin and the course of the Thirty Years' War, the significance of seventeenth-century Czech culture, and socioeconomic development in Bohemia during the eighteenth century.

West European and North American historians are acquainted with some of the recent Czech research on the Thirty Years' War. The well-known Czech researcher of this conflict, Josef V. Polišenský, has published many of his essays in Czech, German, and English. His book The Thirty Years' War was published in 1971, and his introduction to the historical research on the Thirty Years' War appeared in German in 1971, and in English in 1978.1

Polišenský finds his ideological outlook in Marxism. He considers the Thirty Years' War to have been a politico-military conflict between two basic types of European state-politics and societies of the early seventeenth century. The two opposites were represented at the beginning of the war by Spain and the United Netherlands. According to this concept, it is understood that the

opposition of the Bohemian Estates against the Habsburgs was a part of an international effort that aimed to prevent the Habsburgs and the Spanish Catholic monarchy from dominating the Continent. It is only natural that Spain would play the decisive role during the war. Spanish credits and aid were saving the Habsburgs in Bohemia as early as 1618, and later Spain financed more than half of the infantry at the disposal of the Holy Roman Emperor.

Polišenský illustrates the effect of the war on Bohemia by a comparison with developments in Germany. Both countries suffered unprecedented losses of population and a general economic exhaustion. However, in Germany the peace treaty of Westphalia (1648) constituted a compromise establishing the terms of a future political and religious development. Later, the most important German states saw significant periods of political independence. In contrast, Bohemia was doomed to become a province of the Habsburg monarchy. Cities were deprived of their old liberties. A large portion of the nobility lost many of its original political and religious rights and landed property, and was expelled from the country.

The socioeconomic impact resulting from the punishment of the Bohemian Estates for their rebellion is analyzed by Polišenský and his former student Frederick L. Snider. In their view the presently accepted statistics of privileged persons who emigrated from Bohemia during the Thirty Years' War is exaggerated. In 1656 only 28 percent of the total number of noble families living in Bohemia belonged to the new nobility. This group controlled approximately one-half of the landed property in the country. From 1620 to 1656, three-quarters of the new nobility came to Bohemia from abroad. Polišenský's and Snider's valuable research on the changes in the Bohemian nobility have recently been supplemented with new conclusions by several young historians. Eva Berndorfová traced the Bohemian nobility during the eighteenth century. She found that in 1757 the ratio between the old and new nobility was 29:71 respectively. Petr Čomej confirmed Polišenský's interesting hypothesis that noble landed property, confiscated in Bohemia after the rebellion of 1618-20, was divided mostly among old Bohemian nobility. New nobility seized their share only after the Wallenstein (Valdštejn) assassination.²