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## Charles University: A History of Revolution

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Matous Komers

Laura Keldorf

History 101

14 November 2015

Question: What role did Charles University play in the spread and survival of Hussitism in 14th and 15th century Europe?

### Charles University: A History of Revolution

Charles University, otherwise known as the University of Prague, is considered one of the oldest and most prestigious academic institutions in Europe. Starting out as a religiously affiliated institution, it metamorphosed into a credible researched-based institutions as more common, secular schools of thought emerged throughout history. The university's eminent reputation came under threat in 1948 with the rise of communism in Czechoslovakia. The new communist regime firmly censored the curriculum of Charles University to maintain the dominance of its political and social ideologies. The university was forced to sever most of the bonds it had established with its international colleagues and its research department suffered as a result. On November 7th, 1989, thousands of Charles University students filled St. Wenceslas Square to protest against Soviet occupation and claim their rights to free speech, thought and education. They started the Velvet Revolution, which liberated Czechoslovakia from Soviet oppression, returning humans to all Czechs and Slovaks ("Charles University - History"). Although this uprising seems as unprecedented as it does extraordinary, Charles University had already fostered a culture of revolution at its birth in 1348. Only fifty years after its founding, Charles University stood at the forefront of the the Hussite Revolution, started by Jan Hus in an

effort to expose and eradicate the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church (Fudge 47). Charles University advanced the Hussite Reformation by introducing the texts of Jan Milíč of Kroměříž and John Wycliffe in Bohemia and providing the space for the spread of Jan Hus' ideas, attracting powerful human capital inherent to any significant theological shift.

King Charles IV of Bohemia was crowned as the King of the Romans in 1346 CE, selecting Prague as his capital. The newly-elevated status of Prague required Charles IV to make drastic improvements to the city, which started with his letter to Pope Clement VI, asking for permission to establish the first *Studium generale* (general study or liberal arts university) located north of the Alps and east of Paris. Previously, many Czechs emigrated in search of a higher education, which proved detrimental to the development of literacy and education in Bohemia. Therefore, the establishment of Charles University was a priority for both Clement VI and Charles IV (“Charles University - History”; “History of Charles University”). Charles IV wrote a charter that founded Charles University on April 7th, 1348. He justified the project within his charter by stating:

The loyal people of the kingdom, who crave with unceasing hunger for the fruit of learning, should not need to beg for alms in foreign lands, but should find in [the] kingdom a table laid for feasting, and that those who are distinguished by their acuity, both innate and given from above, should become educated through the acquisition of knowledge, and should no longer be forced to wander around the world. (“Foundation Charter of Charles University”)

Charles IV desired to improve the growth of literacy and scholarship within his kingdoms, which had become stagnant. The dearth of legitimate universities was significant, prompting foreigners, namely Germans, to join Charles University. Its reputation grew to the point where Prague became a place of learning similarly to the preceding university cities of Bologna and Paris.

In 1401, man named Jan Hus became the dean of the faculty of arts at Charles University, altering its faculties while gaining tremendous influence within it (“Charles University - History”). A learned theologian and clergyman, he recognized the Catholic Church’s hypocrisy and its repeated, intentional misinterpretation of the Bible in terms of greed and overindulgence of its clergy and followers. He gained many followers since the people needed a scapegoat for their problems, further spreading his ideas through the university system and his students. However, Hus was called to answer for his heretical claims at the Council of Constance in 1415, where he was burned at the stake after refusing to renounce his beliefs (Spinka, "Jan Hus").

Hus’ teachings made their mark and spread all throughout Bohemia. The popularity of his teachings combined with his martyrdom inspired many Czechs to continue to practice and promote his beliefs long after his death. After Hus’ death, the Hussites took up arms against the Church and the Holy Roman Empire (Spinka, "Jan Hus"). The people rallied behind the teachings and symbols Hus left behind to create the Bohemian Revolution, which was the first effort to reform the nature of the ecclesiastical hierarchy and a prerequisite to the Protestant Revolution that started one hundred years later (Atwood).

Charles University contributed to the conception of the Hussite movement by introducing the idea of religious reform into the scholarly setting. Based on the findings of Thomas A. Fudge, a professor of medieval history at the School of Humanities at the University of New

England, the Czech people had already established a tradition of reform throughout their society, but it flourished in the university through the induction of the works of Jan Milíč of Kroměříž and John Wycliffe (47).

Jan Milíč of Kroměříž was a Bohemian theologian and a preacher born in 1325 CE. After gaining a sweeping reputation as a priest, Milíč was elevated to the rank of minor bishop and treasurer of St. Vitus Cathedral, Prague's largest and most prestigious religious edifice. He served in his highly-esteemed position for three years, but became disgusted with the greed and corruption that accompanied being an ecclesiastical treasurer and high-ranking official ("John Milíč"). In 1363 CE, Milíč set out on a path of reform, advocating for humility, honesty and fairness within the Roman Catholic Church through obedience to the Bible. Robert Bideleux and Ian Jefferies, professors of Communist and Eastern European history at Swansea University, claim that Milíč foretold that the Day of Judgement was approaching and that the Church was dangerously unprepared. He deemed the crisis solvable through the acceptance of both the wine and bread during the eucharist as Jesus had instructed Christians to do during his Last Supper. Milíč's tradition was largely neglected in the past since wine was generally reserved for the higher classes, which made the use of it controversial among the clergy (Bideleux).

Being a scholar as well as a clergyman, Milíč was essentially responsible for the start of Bohemian religious reform through his heavy involvement in Charles University. According to Timothy George, the dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University, Milíč "broke through the language barrier by preaching in Latin for the university audience, in German for Prague's upper classes, and in Czech for the workers and common people." Milíč introduced the idea of Church reform not only to the Czech people, but to the scholars of Charles University,

which allowed for the transcription and reproduction of his work. Although he was simply a public preacher against corruption, his work was fostered and given importance within the university (George). Many Czechs even accepted his version of the eucharist, the consumption of both bread and wine during church service, which became known as Utraquism. Utraquism was contentious subject among theologians and clergymen, but the reception of Milíč's ideas within Charles University allowed for its distribution throughout the country. Soon after, Milíč founded the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, where ultraquist sermons were given exclusively in Czech. The Bethlehem Chapel became the base of Milíč's followers as well as a center of the mounting national reform, that Milíč started at Charles University (Bideleux).

Despite Milíč's relentless efforts, his work became essentially insignificant with the arrival of the teachings of the Englishman, John Wycliffe. Wycliffe was an English theologian that preceded Jan Milíč of Kroměříž, but gained significant exposure in Bohemia almost two decades after his Czech contemporary. Wycliffe was born in 1330 CE in Yorkshire, England, where he received the highest level of education at Oxford University, earning a bachelor's degree in theology in 1369, and a doctorate in theology by 1372 ("John Wycliffe"). After studying the highest theological faculty, Wycliffe filled many of Oxford's high-ranking offices, but resigned in 1378 CE to focus on church reform, much like Milíč. Wycliffe was literate to the extent that he could discern the true meaning of the Bible and recognize how the Church falsified it, realizing the illegitimacy of simony and the sales of indulgences. He also attacked the papacy for the abuse of finances and called on clergymen to generate income for themselves from professions consisting of manual labor such as farming and carpentry. ("John Wyclif.").

Wycliffe was an ardent supporter of translating the Bible from Latin to English, opening it to many of the common people in England and preventing its malpractice through its accurate interpretation by the public. Personally, Wycliffe believed in predestination, where there was a chosen elect of individuals already chosen to go to Heaven, as well as the doctrine of remanence, where only bread was used after baptism during church services. Wycliffe's belief of predestination combined with his reformational ideas came to be collectively known as realism (George). However, as his fame grew, he became a target of the Church, which forced him to retire in 1381 CE before his writings were deemed heretical by ecclesiastical authorities ("John Wycliffe."). By that time, his ideas had spread throughout Western Europe, even penetrating to Charles University in the heart of Prague.

Wycliffe's writings became the precursors to the Hussite efforts of reformation. According to Howard Louthan, a professor of history and an affiliate faculty member in religion at the University of Florida, and Dr. Graeme Murdock, an associate professor of history at the Trinity College in Dublin, "the writings of the Oxford professor John Wyclif began to circulate among the theological faculty of the university in Prague. Wyclif's controversial ideas made their way to Prague via a stream of students who followed Queen Anne of Bohemia to England for her wedding to King Richard II in 1382" (16). Once the ideas of Wycliffe traveled from England, they were intercepted by Charles University where they were transcribed and archived. Although Wyclif's work became more accessible to Czechs, it was not until it was received by Charles University professors that it gained credibility and stature in Bohemian society.

Charles University professors strengthened Wycliffe's doctrine by integrating it into the curriculum of theological studies. Before 1400 CE, Wycliffe's work that reached Charles

University was purely philosophical instead of religious, which made it unnecessary for it to be released to the uneducated public. Nevertheless, Wycliffe's reformatory ideas resonated deeply with the university professors. Matthew Spinka, a professor of church history at the Hartford Seminary Foundation argues that "the English theologian's ideas found enthusiastic reception among the Czech university masters because they powerfully stressed and strengthened the indigenous reform" (Spinka, *Jan Hus' Concept* 35). Spinka alludes to the reforms that were started by Jan Milíč and his followers. The Bohemian professors supported Church reform, which is why it reached the public. The professors prioritized the teaching of Wycliffe's doctrine to their students and provided it for the Czech people.

Jerome of Prague has been credited with translating it and releasing it to the lower classes in 1401 (Mladoňovic 31), as stated in Matthew Spinka's translation of the accounts of the 14th and 15th century scribe, Petr z Mladoňovic. The translation and integration of Wycliffe's texts into Charles University curriculum brought attention to the fallacies of the Church, as well as legitimacy of ecclesiastical reform in Bohemia. Charles University capitalized on the outside influences of John Wycliffe and Jan Milíč of Kroměříž, which ripened the reformative fruit of the Hussite Movement. It was just a matter of time before anyone came to reap its benefits. and Jan Hus rose to the occasion.

Jan Hus, a well-known Czech priest and theologian at Charles University, was directly responsible for starting the Hussite Revolution. He benefited from the influence of Wycliffe after serving as the dean of the faculty of arts during the winter trimester of 1401-1402, when Wycliffe's teachings had been freshly introduced and promoted by his colleagues and previous professors. David C. Mengel, the associate dean of the college of arts and sciences and an



associate professor at Xavier University, argues that Hus started his own religious reform at the dawn of the 14th century, which was a conglomerate of the teachings of Milíč and Wycliff. While Hus believed in Milíč's version of the eucharist, he identified more to Wycliffe's strict standards of ecclesiastical scrutiny especially in the case of finances and indulgences. As described by Matthew Spinka,

Hus became thoroughly acquainted with Wyclif's books, which he read avidly and assimilated substantially. He wrote in 1411 that he 'and other members of our university possessed and have read those books for twenty or more years.

(Spinka, *Jan Hus' Concept* 35)

Hus created his vision of a better Roman Catholic Church through the research of his contemporaries, which was only possible with the knowledge he gained through his involvement in the Charles University sphere.

By the latter half of 1403, Hus became the rector of Charles University, which granted him nearly boundless influence over the people in Prague. He preached his revolutionary ideas to the centralized group of individuals within the university system, firmly grasping control of the entire city. His influence grew to the point that "Hus was now at the height of his political position... He was the recognised leader of the university, and his popularity among the citizens of Prague was very great" (Lützow 107) as is articulated by Francis Lützow, a former Czech historian and Austrian parliament member. Hus' leadership of Charles University gained him an almost saintly reverence in Prague, which persuaded countless Bohemians to join him. Additionally, his high position allowed him to dictate the curriculum of the university, which was accommodated to promote his teachings. Based on the findings of Otakar Odložilík, a Czech

historian and archivist, “many students who got to know Huss and his friends, either at the University or on the occasion of public gatherings, carried his views to their homes or their spheres of activity scattered over all parts of Czech and Slovak territories” (84). The fusion between reverence and control that Hus concocted during his path to power aided the distribution of his doctrine. Many of his students became his followers, which was a crucial component of his rise to power, only enabled by the direct presence of Charles University.

The faculty of Charles University continued to assist Hus in his ecclesiastical reform through the continuation of his curriculum and the schooling of new Hussite disciples. The revolutionary contributions of Jan Hus were incorporated into the theological study program and his template concerning the course of studies was highly supported. Francis Lützow posits that the “plan of studies pursued by young Hus at the university was that usually followed by youthful students of theology” (67). Therefore, the university of Prague ensured that aspiring theologians were exposed to the same concepts as Hus in their studies, tipping them towards similar conclusions. The similarity of study allowed students to understand Hus’ plight, making them more inclined towards joining his cause.

Charles University also maintained a program designed specifically to train priests. It became the responsibility of the university staff to continue reforming the Church and training priests according to Hus’ ideology (Louthan 21). Ultimately, the university released the Hus-following students once they completed their studies. They preached the words of Jan Hus long after his death, constantly fearing the ecclesiastical authorities accusing them of heresy. Howard Kaminsky, the Professor Emeritus of History at Florida International University, suggests that since many Hussites refused to denounce their claims, they were crucified or

burned at the stake, which nurtured a widespread martyrdom within the clan of Hus' followers (142). The murders were meant to intimidate the rising population of Hussites within Bohemia, but they only spurred on their efforts. New conscriptors to the cause constantly streamed from Bohemian streets, the majority of them coming from the theological faculty of Charles University.

Charles University hosted the re-emergence of Czech values, including Hussitism, through scholastic legislation which prompted the emigration of Germans from Bohemia. Since Charles University was the only university in Central Europe, scholars from neighbouring nations had been flocking to it since its inception in 1348. Many of these immigrants were Germans who arrived with their notions of supremacy, deeming Czechs as barbaric and uneducated. Even though Czech were unruly to an extent, the effects of their perceived nature were exaggerated by the German contingent of Charles University. This generated both a national and religious divide, as most of the Germans opposed Czech realism in favor of Roman Catholicism or nominalism, which is the theory that only individuals and no abstract entities (as essences, classes, or propositions) exist (Mladoňovic 33; Lützow 104).

The immigrants asserted their hegemony over Prague, which put a stranglehold on Bohemian cultural expression and development. Since the Hussite movement was a part of Czech culture the Germanic ousting became a necessary step in the growth of Bohemia both socially and religiously. Charles University became a safe haven and a tool with which Czech were able to challenge German authority, return the power to the Czechs and continue the efforts of purification of the Catholic Church (Lützow 105). By regaining power within the university,

Czechs returned to their traditional way of life, absolute devotion to their cultural heritage and national pride.

In order to liberate themselves from Germanic dominance, the Czechs needed more of a voice in Charles University, since Charles IV founded it especially for Czechs. In the Charles University Foundation Charter, Charles IV stated that Czechs should study in their kingdom instead of searching for knowledge abroad. Despite including a clause concerning the acceptance of foreign scholars into the university system, Charles IV built it fundamentally for Czechs, not for Germans usurping positions of power. The argument of maintaining a true Czech university was used to try and return the power back into the hands of the natives, which led to the resumption of religious reform. Since German dominance was highlighted as an educational instead of a political issue, international political repercussions were avoided (Spinka, *Jan Hus' Concept 11*).

Jan Hus was heavily involved in the attempts to return power back into the hands of the Czech people in an effort to support his reformation. Francis Lützow posits that

Hus shared the general feeling of his countrymen, and in a passage in one of his sermons... spoke strongly against the Germans. Though Hus always declared that he preferred a good German to a bad Bohemian, he also expressed himself strongly with regard to the attitude of the German members of the university who were suspected of favoring Rupert of the Palatinate. (72)

Hus thought that the Germans resisted the efforts of the university to promote the ideologies of Rupert, the anti-Hussitist ruler of the German lands west of Bohemia. Rupert was a proud Catholic, which proved offensive to many Czechs who favored religious reform. Therefore, by

making the Germans seem detrimental to the Czech kingdom, Hus gained power for himself within the university, which was a step necessary to removing the obstacle that the German presence posed to the Hussite Rebellion in Bohemia (Mladoňovic 33, Lützow 104).

Charles University finally evicted the Germans through the Decree of Kutná Hora in 1409. The Decree of Kutná Hora was passed by Václav IV, giving Czech university representatives three votes, while allotting only one vote to foreigners during votes on university matters (“1409 - Dekret Kutnohorský”). Within Charles University, it forced “the migration of its German scholars and the transformation of the university from a predominantly German into an almost entirely Czech institution, [which] signified a shift in the international position of the Czech lands” (Brock 11), as asserted by Peter Brock, an English-born Canadian historian who specialized in the history of pacifism and Eastern Europe. The Czechs finally reclaimed the power within their own nation, since Charles University became a primarily Hussite institution (Fudge 96). Charles University functioned as a Bohemian stronghold, which empowered the Czechs to continue their own cultural traditions without the interference of Germans who tried to prevent it. The culture of Bohemia that returned in 1409 included the religious reform that had been ongoing for several decades, and was set back on course once the university was recaptured (Brock 11-12).

Charles University directly supported the Hussite Revolution through its use of religious legislature. When Jan Hus was called to the Council of Constance in 1415, the university actively strove to prove him innocent. Howard Kaminsky contends that “on 18 September Master John Pribram obtained from the rector of the University of Prague a notarized copy of the Act of 1409 by which the university had incorporated the Kutná Hora Decree into its statutes;

Hus [now had] evidence with which to meet anticipated charges from the German émigrés that he alone had procured the decree” (138). The gravity of the fact that Charles University supported leaders of the revolution is immense. It shows the paramount importance of the university in the development of the Hussite revolt as not only tool, but also a catalyst. It was a monumental gain for the Hussites since they had the support of such a massive and significant institution striving to save their leader. Despite the effort put in by Charles University to absolve Jan Hus of his crimes, Hus was burned at the stake in 1415 in Constance, Germany.

Charles University still supported the Hussite movement after Hus’ death by refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Council of Constance. In the case of 1417, the university forced Master Peter of Uničov, a proud anti-Hussitist, to confess the legitimacy of the ultraquism and to acknowledge Jan Hus as free of error in front of every member of the university (Kaminsky 239). Therefore, Charles University not only supported the Hussite movement, but also required violent protesters to commit to its truth. It directly contributed new members to the Hussite movement through its curriculum and doctrine along with instilling compulsory conversions for the violent enemies of the movement.

Charles University’s most influential support came in the February of 1420, when it allowed laymen to shed blood. According to Thomas A. Fudge, “the Hussites submitted a proposal to the university for a ruling on the feasibility of defending faith with arms. The university mandated that under no circumstances should priests engage in warfare, but laypeople might take up the sword to defend themselves and the faith should they be subjected to unlawful attack” (Fudge 96). This was during the time when the papacy sent out forces to attack the Hussites in order to subdue them, so it was important for them to defend themselves. It was

necessary for the survival of the Hussite doctrine, which was endangered due to the lack of leadership it had lost with the death of Jan Hus. Charles University acted as a governing body that prolonged the existence and legacy of the Hussites by giving them a chance to fight and make their voices heard.

The relative obscurity of the Hussite Rebellion does not adequately reflect its magnitude in the course of Western Civilization. The teachings of Jan Hus inspired Martin Luther to write his *Ninety-Five Theses*, which provided the basis of his Protestant Reformation. Luther argued against the same corruption within the ecclesiastical hierarchy, such as simony and the sales of indulgences. Lutheranism also gained a large following and was spread across all of Western Europe. Herman Hanko, the professor emeritus to the Protestant Reformed Seminary, firmly asserts that Luther, unlike Hus, gained tremendous attention because he was aided by the technology of the printing press, causing the European literacy rates to flourish. His writings were mass-produced and better-understood by the increasingly literate lower classes since they were easily accessible. The struggle between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism led to the Wars of Religion, which climaxed in a stalemate and ensured the survival of Protestantism to today (George). Although Luther is the most influential religious reformer in history, he would not have achieved success without Jan Hus, whose impact was upheld through the support he received at Charles University, but heavily crippled by the lack of technology and education in his time.

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