

Hussite Women:

Fighting More Than the Crusaders

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The *Ninety-five Theses* that Martin Luther posted on the church door in Wittenberg in 1517 have long been seen as the catalyst which caused the many tensions within the Western Catholic Church to burst forth in the Protestant Reformation movement that swept across Europe beginning in the sixteenth century. Despite Luther's famed role, his *Ninety-five Theses* were simply the spark that ignited the Reformation which already had its roots in previous proto-Reformation ideas and movements from across the continent. In particular, the Hussite followers of Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague rose in popularity in the Bohemian and Moravian lands of Central Europe in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The Hussites built on reforms by lesser known Czech clerics in the fourteenth century that were embraced by much of the regional population. Following the death of Jan Hus at the stake at the Council of Constance in 1415, the region descended into religious turmoil until the failure of the fifth and sixth crusades declared against the Hussites throughout the 1430s.

As much of the social structure defined by the Church collapsed amid the shifting religious ideas that characterized the period, many women began to play greater roles in both religious and temporal society. I contend that despite the semi-fanciful tales of female warriors fighting on the battlefield, the nature of this period gave Hussite women the chance to champion other social battles—such as public preaching and social reforms—and experience a degree of equality. That these women later returned to traditional roles only emphasizes the powerful pressures of the primary roles which had been expected of them before the Hussite Revolution. This relative glimmer of female emancipation, strengthened by cultural depictions of strong women, was eventually snuffed out; however, these women had experienced a level of freedom *en masse* that many European women would not experience again until the nineteenth century and beyond.

To explore the various roles that women played in the years leading up to the Hussite Revolution, we will examine documents from Early Reformation scholar Thomas A. Fudge's anthology of sources, which contains papal bulls against the Hussites, records of military campaigns, Hussite manifestos, song lyrics, and letters from the time of the first crusade against the Hussites in Prague in 1420. I will focus mostly on the

sparse mentions of women in these documents and use the extensive work of John M. Klassen, a scholar of medieval gender and Christianity, to examine women's roles in the extended period of the Hussite movement. Then, I will briefly touch on the traditional role of the female victim, which is often associated with women during violent clashes, before discussing in more depth the religious and social reform roles which a variety of women took upon themselves during this period. Last, I will cover the famous, if limited, military involvement of Hussite women.

The traditional experience of women in war has long been a vulnerable and precarious one with women as a symbol of the home and often the inspiration or the emotional reason for men to continue fighting. That women's bodies have been considered as both sacred and symbolic for many cultures implies that the practice of capturing the enemy's women is symbolic of capturing the anchors of the home and thus, of their society.¹ The violation of women's bodies during war through sexual assault, too, can be seen as a way of destroying this sanctity that each opposing side wishes to protect.² Yet, the motives for such violations were often simply unbridled lust and obsession with the power experienced amid the violence of these wars. The declaration that any person who adhered to Hussite beliefs or had any sympathies for Hussites was a heretic also allowed further justification for such violence in the minds of crusading armies as it was directed against people who were no longer considered Christian. Crusading armies treated non-Christians and heretics as sub-humans because of the common, pervasive imageries against them. This attitude easily justified the practice of violence against civilian populations—especially women—as seen in the various anthologized letters and records which note the “abominable acts” women experienced.³

While many Hussite women were certainly involved in the social and religious movement in different ways, the vulnerability of both female bystanders and active participants in a battle or siege unfortunately meant that many were victims of sexual violence. The majority of records refer to “many abominable acts...committed against young girls and wives... [who] were treated so villainously that it is awful even to write about it!”⁴ A similar threat is recorded in the following passage from a general account of the conquest of towns deemed heretical by the papally-approved crusading armies. The passage attempts to appeal to the Republic of Venice for an alliance against the Holy Roman Emperor and King of

1 Kylie Alexandra, “War, Society, and Sexual Violence: A Feminist Analysis of the Origin and Prevention of War Rape,” *HOHONU* 8 (2010): 18.

2 Ibid.

3 Thomas A. Fudge, *The Crusade Against Heretics in Bohemia, 1418–1437* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2002), 63.

4 Ibid.

Bohemia, Sigismund. The diplomats note that Sigismund has shown “himself to be an open enemy of the realm and all of its citizens,...He leads the Hungarians and Germans...whose impious hands are soiled with the blood of virgins, infants, pregnant women, and men.”⁵ Therefore, though women took part in roles other than their traditional domestic ones during the extended Hussite uprising and defense, it must be acknowledged that the conventional threat to themselves and their bodies remained very real.

While the conventional wartime violence against women is clearly documented, we also have documents that note the active role many women had in the changing society emerging from a wide array of reform suggestions. Though there was a body of women who went out and either fought personally in the battles against the crusaders or supported male soldiers by adopting traditional female roles as army followers, we will discuss these women further below. We must first explore the experience of female religious figures and their role as Hussite reformers. The eighteenth of the twenty-four papal resolutions against the Hussite heretics published by the Council of Constance in 1418 states: “Preaching by women and the laity should be prohibited entirely and [violators] ought to be punished.”⁶ Such a statement from the Catholic church implies that women were involved deeply enough in the movement and reform of the Hussites that the Catholic Church felt the need to address the heretical nature of their involvement. These women preached and promoted Catholic doctrines that the Hussites agreed with such as *utraquism*—communion in both forms, or bread and wine—for the laity and not simply bread. The sense that the papacy felt the need to formally reject permission to women preaching, and preaching in the vernacular, implies that these women existed in the movement in large numbers.

While these particular primary sources have little more to say about the existence of female religious figures and preaching, the central role of religious reform in the Hussite movement makes it clear we must discuss women’s religious experiences of this period. To do this, we will examine what Klassen’s scholarship on Hussite women reveals about female participation in the doctrinal reforms of this movement. By the death of Hus in 1415, the long-established group of female religious, the *Beguines*, had already started practicing Christianity in a way which mostly agreed with Hus’ message of clerical poverty, humility, and religious debate.⁷ The strong presence of the *Beguines* and their houses of lay followers in Prague included their leading role in public debates over Scripture and other religious matters.⁸ In this way, the *Beguines* were not only aligning

5 Ibid., 72.

6 Ibid., 20.

7 John M. Klassen, “Women and Religious Reform in Late Medieval Bohemia,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 5, no. 4 (1981): 205.

8 Ibid.

themselves with a newer reformer who was under immediate threat from the Church, but they were using their status as a lay order to go against the traditional cloistering of female religious. This, perhaps, was what made female preaching so threatening—the direct female affront to papal authority—as the Beguines did not formally ask permission to continue preaching the way they had been for two centuries. That the Beguines joined the Hussites in debate and sympathized with their doctrines, meant that these women were not simply outside of papal authority, but they were also involved with those who formally rejected papal authority when the Pope rejected their requested reforms. Other women were attracted to the newer and more radical branches of Hussitism, especially the Taborites.⁹ Some of these Taborite doctrines particularly influenced some of the women’s extreme reactions in the midst of and following battles, as we will see when we discuss Hussite warrior women and female fighters.

Among the most famous roles which some Hussite women took upon themselves was that of becoming soldiers and defending Czech villages and cities. They fought alongside the majority male armies against the crusading armies that threatened their land, people, and reform movement. We see evidence of this female military participation in a 1420 letter to the Duke of Bavaria in which the Margrave of Meißen told of the crusaders who “took 156 prisoners, women who had fixed their hair like men and had girded themselves with swords, with stones in their hands, wearing boots. Among these were some high-born.”¹⁰ While scholars have long debated whether these stories of women fighting “in the military gear of men” are, in fact, true, and if true, how prevalent were they among the Hussites, the consensus is that Hussite women did fight, but many did not dress as male soldiers.¹¹ Such dress was expensive and not always available when women needed to fight, since many female warriors were peasant women who were either thrown into defending their towns, as told in the account of the Battle of Vítkov where “two women, with one girl and twenty-six men...offered brave resistance hurling stones and thrusting with spears...[in an attempt to] repulse [the invaders].”¹² That one “possessed no armour” but still “stood valiantly refusing to yield a single step saying that no faithful Christian must retreat from [the] Antichrist...[until she] breathed her last,” emphasizes that these women did not just fight to defend their land and lives against those with the papal authority to kill them where they stood—they fought zealously for the Hussite reforms and participated in the utraquist mass which followed the battle.¹³

9 Ibid., 207.

10 Fudge, *The Crusade Against Heretics in Bohemia*, 73.

11 Ibid., 73.

12 Ibid., 77–78.

13 Ibid., 78.

Such women did not simply fight when called upon; they also worked in other roles which contributed to the Hussite defense against and rebuttal of all five Catholic crusades waged against them. Again, we see this in the account of the Battle of Vítkov where the famous blind commander Jan Žižka ordered the reinforcement of a defensive bulwark at Vítkov which was undertaken by “a large number of women, girls and laypeople from Prague.”¹⁴ These were women who saw themselves as civilians, but were willing to help the Hussite armies and their cause. In addition to the building and maintaining of defenses, many women became traditional army followers to provide such services as cooking, laundry, and medical care for the wounded.¹⁵ These women often travelled in the portable *wagenburg*, or “wagon castles,” a caravan of army wagons which could quickly wrap around itself to create a defensible position from which to fight.¹⁶ Thus, many of these women were in the midst of battle whether they took on a fighting role or not.¹⁷ Thus, women were not only participating in the uprising by cross-dressing, but also aiding the cause through their vital role in regular army support.

The involvement of women in these battles, and the wide array of roles women had in the Hussite Revolution—especially as lay religious, warriors, and army followers—was relatively unusual for the time. These women had more opportunities to participate in civil, religious, and military society due to the nationalistic overtones of the Hussite Revolution, which included an emphasis on the Czech language and culture of the German “invaders.” Klassen argues that this influence of nationalist sentiment and preference for Czech traditions allowed the ascent of the mythical founding story of the Czechs in Central Europe.¹⁸ While Klassen notes Petra Kellermann-Haaf’s argument that “warring women were a reality in the middle ages...[and the chroniclers] referred to real women engaged in actual combat,”¹⁹ they were often underrepresented due to the various chroniclers rejecting their role in defying the traditional non-violent and passive roles of women. Chroniclers included direct or passing comments in letters such as that sent to the Margrave of Meißen as well as official Church historians who were unwilling to recognize the female role in religious activities, much less in reforms they condemned.

The story of Libuše, a mythical eighth-century princess who was

14 Ibid., 79.

15 Hannesjoachim Wilhelm Koch, *Medieval Warfare* (London: Bison Books, 1978), 166–167.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 John M. Klassen, *Warring Maidens, Captive Wives, and Hussite Queens: Women and Men at War and at Peace in Fifteenth Century Bohemia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 22.

19 Ibid.

chosen as the next ruler of the Czech lands, emphasizes the familiarity of strong female warriors in the general consciousness. Libuše's tale was expanded in the fourteenth century to fulfill the political need of supporting a noblewoman's claim to her family inheritance over the claim of a male outsider.²⁰ To support this female claim with an empowering tale, the myth of Libuše came to include a battle waged by her female second-in-command, Vlasta, against those men who repudiated Libuše after her death.²¹ This popular tradition of a pair of strong female antecedents in the Czech lands was likely a unifying force that inspired a level of acceptance of women's greater roles in society and justified the embracement of women who became warriors. The tale of Libuše suggests a level of agency among Czech women by the fifteenth century, which made their roles in the Revolution much less shocking, if still novel, in their society.

As these diverse sources show, Bohemian and Moravian women engaged in society in many ways during the Hussite Revolution and had an impressive level of emancipation during the social upheaval surrounding the religious reform and resulting strife with the Catholic Church. Despite the oft-exaggerated tales of female warriors fighting on the battlefield, these women did fight, both in the military and in other social battles. While women were still as vulnerable to capture, rape, and death as they had been for centuries, women also took on more religious roles, as the Hussites and their various theological branches allowed room for lay female preaching in the vernacular. This opportunity to not be cloistered as a religious order gave women such as the Beguines in Prague more opportunity for their voices to be heard in the vibrant religious debates of the time. In addition to increasingly public religious roles, women also contributed to the defense against the crusading armies as warriors, nurses, army followers, and local populations. This relative agency, especially when compared with the lives of many women in Western Europe, was a moment in history where women began to become as involved in society as they had ever been, supported by nationalistic myths of the strong female progenitor of the Czechs, Libuše. Despite these opportunities, many women did maintain their traditional roles as wives and mothers, briefly creating a society of choice for many women. That women eventually resumed their previous gendered roles did not mean that they had lost all progress in society; however, even as these roles became more restrictive again, the uneasy reconciliation between the Hussites and the Church allowed an unprecedented level of religious freedom and expression in the region. Thus, while women gained social agency and then lost the majority of it, they retained the freedom to believe as they liked without threat of persecution—a freedom which would not emerge in the rest of Europe until Luther.

20 Ibid., 14.

21 Ibid.