

Czechs and Poles in the Middle Ages. Rivalry, Cooperation and Alliances

Pavel Krafl / e-mail: pavel.krafl@seznam.cz

Department of History, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

Krafl, P. (2013). Czechs and Poles in the Middle Ages. Rivalry, Cooperation and Alliances. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 5/2, 73–80.

doi: 10.2478/cphpj-2013-0016

The article contains a description of the development of Czech-Polish relations in the Middle Ages. The author divides Czech-Polish relations in the Middle Ages into three periods. The first period (10th–12th centuries) is characterised by frequent conflicts and rivalry in the struggle for dominion over East-Central Europe. The second period (from the beginning of the 13th century to the 1330s) is characterized by more peaceful relations and the subsequent expansion of Czech power into Silesia and Poland. This period ends in the 1330s, when the newly-established power and political arrangements were formally accepted. The third period (from the 1330s to the beginning of the 16th century) sees a growth in mutual sympathies between the two nations and, at the same time, the rejection of the Czech “heresy” by the Poles. This resulted in the Czech throne being taken up by a Polish dynasty.

Key words: *Middle Ages; Czech-Polish relations; Bohemia; Poland*

In this article, we describe the development of Czech-Polish relations in different periods of the Middle Ages. The fundamental work on the history of Czech-Polish relations is the synthesis entitled *The Czechs and Poles in the Past*, which was edited in the 1960s by Josef Macůrek and Václav Žáček.¹ The literature published after this synthesis is contained in several research reports and bibliographies.²

¹ *Češi a Poláci v minulosti [Czechs and Poles in the past]*, I.–II. Ed. J. Macůrek – V. Žáček, Praha 1964–1967. See also Krafl, P. (2003): Přehled česko-polských vztahů v 10.–15. století [*Overview of Czech-Polish relations in 10th–15th centuries*], *Časopis Matice moravské* 122, pp. 147–180 (reviewed by Ivan Hlaváček, in: *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 60, 2004, 2, p. 818); Krafl, P. (2010): Czesi i Polacy w średniowieczu. Rywalizacja i współpraca [*Czech and Poles in the Middle Ages. Rivalry and cooperation*], *Wiadomości Historyczne* 54, 4, pp. 5–19.

² *Polskie badania Bohemistyczne i czeskie badania Polonistyczne w ostatnim trzydziestolecu. Nauki historyczne i filologiczne – Polonistické studie v České republice a bohemistické studie v Polské republice v posledních třiceti letech. Historické a filologické obory [Polish studies in the Czech Republic and Bohemian studies in Poland in the last thirty years. Historical and philological studies]*. Ed. M. Myška – R. Gladkiewicz, Praha 1995; Krafl, P. – Rezník, M. – Valenta, J. (2000): České studium dějin země středovýchodní Evropy v letech 1990–2000 (Polsko, Lužice, Maďarsko, Pobaltí) [*Czech studies of the history of Central European countries in 1990–2000 (Poland,*

We will divide Czech-Polish relations in the Middle Ages into three periods: i) the 10th–12th centuries; ii) from the beginning of the 13th century to the 1330s; iii) from the 1330s to the beginning of the 16th century. The first period is characterised by frequent conflicts and rivalry in the struggle for dominion over East-Central Europe. The second period is characterized by more peaceful relations and the subsequent expansion of Czech power into Silesia and Poland. This period ends in the 1330s, when the newly-established power and political arrangements were formally accepted. The third period, which covers the late Middle Ages, sees a growth in mutual sympathies between the two nations and, at the same time, the rejection of the Czech “heresy” by the Poles. This resulted in the Czech throne being taken up by a Polish dynasty.

In the 10th–12th century, the coexistence of the two neighbouring countries with similar mother tongues was accompanied by mutual incursions that reflected the distribution of political powers in Central Europe at that time and the internal situations and conditions of individual early states. The rise and fall of individual principalities went hand in hand with the rise and departure of strong dukes. The gaining of control of Lesser Poland (the Cracow region) and Silesia by the Czech Dukes Boleslav I (935–972) and Boleslav II (972–999) resulted in Great Poland that became the centre where the Polish state developed. The crisis in Bohemia after the death of Boleslav II (999) was characterized by the attack of the Polish Duke Boleslav I the Brave (992–1025) on the territories of the Přemyslid Dynasty, including Bohemia. In contrast, from the 1030s it was Poland that was affected by crisis, and the Czech Duke Břetislav I (1035–1055) exploited this situation in order to expand Czech power. The plunder gathered during the campaign in Poland in 1039 included the relics of St. Adalbert. Břetislav I intended to use the relics, stolen from the cathedral church of Gniezno, for the establishment of an archbishopric in

Lusatia, Hungary, Baltic States]. *Slovanské historické studie* 27, 2000, pp. 27–80, 155–177; KRAFL, P.: *Milenium Świętego Wojciecha w czeskiej literaturze naukowej [Milenium of St. Adalbert in Czech scientific literature]*, *Studia teologiczno-historyczne Śląska Opolskiego* 21, 2001, pp. 365–374; KRAFL, P. – ŘEZŇÍK, M – VALENTA, J., *Czeska polonistyka historyczna w latach 1990–2000 [Czech historical Polonist Studies in 1990–2000]*, *Kwartalnik historyczny* 109, 2002, 4, pp. 71–98; P. Krafl, *Badania nad dziejami Polski, Śląska i stosunkami czesko-polskimi do końca XVII wieku w Republice Czeskiej w latach 1990–2000 [Researches on the history of Poland, Silesia and Czech-Polish relations in the late 17th century in the Czech Republic in 1990–2000]*, *Rocznik Biblioteki Naukowej PAU i PAN w Krakowie* 52, 2007, pp. 449–476; *Česká polonistika a polská bohemistika na přelomu století. Czeska polonistyka i polska bohemistika na przelomie stuleci [Czech Polonist studies and Polish Bohemical studies at the turn of the century]*, ed. M. Borák – R. Gładkiewicz, Praha 2009.

Prague. Later, The Polish Duke Kazimir I (1034–1058) gained control over Silesia. After the fall of the Polish King Boleslav II the Bold (1058–1080), the balance of power shifted back towards the Czech state. Sometimes, these shifts in power resulted in interventions by Roman sovereigns. Also, internal conflicts taking place in the heart of the Czech or Polish state were an excuse for military intervention by the empire. Sometimes, the Czech Duke participated in the Roman sovereign's interventions in Poland. These power struggles concerned efforts to gain control over Silesia, which was alternately under Czech or Polish sovereignty.³

The interruption of efforts on the part of the Silesian Dukes Henry I and Henry II to reunite disintegrated Poland after the Mongol incursion of 1241 enabled the Czech sovereign to direct his expansion to the north, i.e. into Silesia and further on into Poland. King Wenceslas II exploited this situation (1278–1305). The bridgehead for entering Poland was principalities in Upper Silesia which became fiefs of the Czech king. The subsequent takeover of the Cracow region, the Sandomierz region, Great Poland, and Gdańsk Pomerania by the Czech King Wenceslas II was a significant contribution to the unification of Poland. The period of the rule of King John of Luxembourg (1310–1346) sharpened relations between the two countries. A distinctive milestone in the development of relations between the Czech and Polish kingdoms was the political negotiations in the Hungarian town of Trenčín (1335) and in Visegrád (1338). The Polish party accepted Czech sovereignty over Silesia and the Czech party accepted the royal title of the Polish King Kazimierz III (1333–1370) (by that time the Czech King John of Luxembourg used the title King of Poland and called the Polish king "the King of Cracow").⁴

The beginning of the third period was characterized by the strengthening of Czech power in Silesia. Mutually negative attitudes were significantly moderated during the rule of King Charles IV (1346–1378). The period of the rule of Wenceslas IV (1378–1419) brought not only a turnabout in foreign policy but also a change in Czech society's perception of Poland. This mutual transformation of attitudes was completed in the Hussite period; at that time we can speak about a Czech fondness for Poland. As far as the policy of the Polish royal court towards the Hussites is concerned, it could be characterized as wait-and-see neutrality. The Polish king pursued a self-serving policy towards the Czech Hussites: the Hussites blocked the military forces of the Bohemian, Hungarian and Roman King Sigismund (King of Bohemia

³ KRAFL, P.: *Přehled...*, op. cit., pp. 150–151.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

1419/1436–1437), an ally of the Order of German knights and therefore an enemy of Poland. The majority of the Polish intelligentsia remained faithful to the Church; the awareness of mutual affinity was overshadowed by the rejection of “heresy” by Polish society. In general we can say that throughout the Middle Ages relations between the Czechs and the Poles were the most cordial in the 15th century. The Polish king more or less preferred a dynastic policy (a possibility to gain the Czech crown for the Jagellonians) to efforts to reannex Silesia to Poland.⁵

The policies of the Czech and Polish states with regard to each other also included mutual candidacies for the throne. King Wenceslas II's efforts culminated in his crowning as the Polish king in Gniezno (1300). His son, Wenceslas III (1305–1306), was killed during a campaign aimed at gaining control over the Polish lands that he inherited. An attempt by Sigismund of Luxembourg, the son of Charles IV, who was engaged to Princess Maria, the heiress to the throne of Poland, to gain the Polish crown was unsuccessful. The first Polish ruler who should have been elected the Czech Duke was Bolesław I the Brave (1003). Polish efforts to gain the Czech royal crown appeared as late as the 15th century. Finally, the Czech throne was gained by Vladislav Jagellonian (1471–1516) and then his son Ludvig (1516–1526).⁶ The Přemyslid and Piast dynasties were linked through numerous bonds of kinship. The first historically documented bond was the marriage of the Polish Duke Mieszek I (+992) and Doubravka, a daughter of the Czech Duke Boleslav I; Doubravka contributed to the adoption and spread of Christianity in Poland. The wives of Czech sovereigns included Elisabeth-Richenza (called Rejčka), a daughter of Przemysław II of Great Poland, who married the Czech Kings Wenceslas II and then Rudolph of Habsburg (1306–1307). Marriages were also entered into between members of secondary branches of ruling families and members of the aristocracies of both countries.⁷

The most valuable sources of knowledge about the perception of nationality or country in a particular period are narrative sources, especially chronicles. With respect to Polish attitudes, the chronicle by *Gallus Anonymus* from the second decade of the 12th century is of particular interest. The hostility between the Czech and Polish states was reflected in the author's attitude; Gallus calls the Czechs “the most ferocious enemies of the Poles”. In his chronicle from the first quarter of

⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 154–156.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 156–157.

⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 157–160.

the 13th century, *Wincenty Kadłubek* follows Gallus's interpretation of Polish-Czech relations. Although he abandoned Gallus's unilaterally negative evaluation of the Czech state, the basic attitude remained unchanged. *Jan of Czarnków* based his chronicle on his own political experience. His negative attitude towards King John of Luxembourg was accompanied by a new element: the idea that antipathy towards the sovereign did not mean antipathy towards the inhabitants of the country under his rule. *Jan Długosz*, a canon in Cracow, used a large number of Czech and Polish documents and chronicles in his 12-volume work called *Annales seu chronice inclityi regni Poloniae*. His thoroughly negative attitude was formed by his resistance against the Czech "heretics"; he extended his antipathy to their ancestors as well.⁸

The Czech chronicle by *Kosmas* from the beginning of the 12th century was a counter-balance to the chronicle by Gallus Anonymus. In the same way that the chronicle by Gallus shows a clear anti-Czech attitude, the chronicle by *Kosmas* also contains an apparent anti-Polish sting. By contrast, the Czech historiography of the second half of the 13th century remained clearly detached regarding cases of mutual conflict. The chronicle by *Přibík Pulkava of Radonín*, written at the time of Charles IV (1344–1378), contains the first literary description of the tale about the brothers Čech and Lech, the forefathers of the Czech and Polish nations. The chronicle was very popular and influenced the awareness of his contemporaries. The legend about the two Slav brothers was then elaborated by *Jan Długosz*, who made Čech a younger brother of Lech.⁹

We also have a great deal of information about contacts between the Czech and Polish ecclesiastical hierarchies. The step-brother of St. Adalbert, Radim-Gaudencius, became the first metropolitan of Gniezno. After the establishment of the ecclesiastical province in Prague in 1344, Charles IV unsuccessfully attempted to subordinate the bishopric in Wrocław to the Prague archbishopric. There were also frequent bonds between monks. Polish and Czech monasteries of certain orders had a joint organization: Bohemia and Moravia were parts of the Polish province of the Dominicans (1225–1301); the Minors also had a joint Czech-Polish province (1239–1517); Polish and Czech monasteries of the Augustinians were included in the Bohemian-Bavarian province. The Czech Order of the Knights of the Cross with the Red Star expanded to Silesia and Poland. Many monks from Bohemian monasteries found refuge in Silesian and Polish monasteries during the Hussite revolution.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 160–162.

⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 162–163.

A significant migration of Polish priests to Bohemia took place in the second half of the 15th century.¹⁰

The mutual influence of Czech and Polish legislation is apparent. We can find several provisions copied word for word from the code of 1349 by the Prague Archbishop Arnošt of Pardubice (1343–1364) in significant provincial statutes by the Gniezno Archbishop Nikolas Trąba (1420). The statutes by Archbishop Arnošt also influenced the statutes by Jakub Korzwi of Syrokomli, the bishop of Płock (1389). In contrast, Czech ecclesiastical legislation is influenced by the legislation by Jakub Świnka, the archbishop of Gniezno; his statutes of 1287 were adopted by the Prague Archbishop John of Jenštejn (1379–1396). The Bohemian mining law was used in Poland. The presence of King Wenceslas II in Poland brought about the establishment of the institution of the royal Hauptman (capitaneus) – a king's representative with full administrative and military powers.¹¹

Czech cultural influence spread mostly in Silesia; during the reign of Wenceslas II, Czech culture also spread in Lesser Poland and Great Poland. The majority of books imported to Poland in the 15th century came from Bohemia; the Czech Lands supplied Poland with theological, liturgical and religious educational literature. For example, the Manuscripts of the Polish Queen Hedwika are of Czech origin. Many Polish books were decorated in the workshops of Czech illuminators; one example is the bible by the Gniezno Archbishop Jarosław Skotnicki. The Czech language played the role of official language in documents produced in Poland in the second half of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century. The origins of documents and letters written in the Czech language on Polish territory go back to 1431; the first Czech document is from 1422. The Czech language was used most in the royal office and by certain representatives of central Polish authorities, certain aristocrats, and Czech and Polish mercenaries. It is assumed that the old Polish religious terminology developed before the mid 11th century and was based on the Czech form of the Old Church Slavonic language. There are parallels and links between the military tactics and structures of Hussite armies and the arrangements described in Polish military codes of the first half of the 16th century. Polish military terminology was adopted from the Czech language.¹²

Prague University established in 1349 was of Central-European importance. The Poles had their own university nation there, which

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 163–166.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 168–169.

¹² *Ibidem*, pp. 169–170.

included, among other things, students and teachers from Silesia. The biggest influx of Polish students was in the last quarter of the 14th century. Nine would-be bishops were among Polish students in Prague. The Prague University studies of Polish students contributed to the development of preaching in Poland at the end of the 14th century. Certain Prague professors of Polish, Czech and German origin took charge of the organization of the restored university in Cracow (1400). Two of the most important of these were the first rector in Cracow, Stanislaw of Skarbimierz, and Jan Isner, who organized a new theological faculty. 25 out of 31 professors at the restored university in Cracow studied in Prague (data from 1404). The start of the Hussite revolution (1419) caused a further decline in the importance of Prague University in the eyes of the Poles.¹³

The cultural and university-level contacts between Prague and Cracow, which flourished especially at the turn of the 15th century, were the basis for the spreading of ideas relating to religious reform in Poland. The reformers Conrad Waldhauser and John Milíč of Kroměříž had their contacts and supporters both in Silesia and Poland. The letters by John Hus were also addressed to the Polish king. Several members of the delegation of the Polish king at the Council in Konstanz added their voice to complaints about the course of the trial of John Hus. During the Hussite revolution, Polish diplomacy had to face efforts by the Order of the German Knights to interpret every attack on the Order as support for the Hussites. The supporters of the Hussites in Poland did not form a broader movement – they were individual sympathisers or small groups gradually eliminated by the inquisition. A number of Czech anti-Hussite theologians found refuge in Poland. Efforts to prevent the spread of the Hussite movement in Poland led to restrictions on the translation of theological works and the Bible into the national language; as a result, these works were translated into Polish much later than into Czech.¹⁴

Czech kings and Czech military forces participated in crusades on the northern and north-eastern borders of Poland and in conflicts between the Order of the German Knights and Poland. Přemysl Otakar II led two crusades into Prussia (1255, 1267). A number of Czech mercenaries fought on both sides in the war between the Order of the German Knights and Poland between 1409 and 1411. The would-be leader of the Hussites, John Žižka of Trocnov, fought in the large battle near Grunwald/Tannenberg, in which the Polish army was victorious. In 1432,

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 171–173.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 173–175.

the Hussites and the Polish king concluded an agreement on mutual help in their struggle with the Order of the German Knights. Then the Hussite army launched its most extensive raid: against the Order of the German Knights in Pomerania (1433).¹⁵

Conclusion

The attitudes of the Czechs and the Poles towards each other developed throughout the Middle Ages. Czech-Polish xenophobia, typical of the 10th–12th centuries, declined in Czech thinking during the 13th century. The 14th century brought about the legend of the brothers Čech and Lech. The idea of Slavic reciprocity gradually spread in the Czech milieu; this tendency culminated in the 15th century, the Hussite and post-Hussite period, when it was in accord with political interests. The Polish milieu was not so much influenced by the idea of Slavic reciprocity. Polish attitudes were mostly formed by negative attitudes towards the Czech heresy.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 175–176.