



The League of Lords between Feudalism and the Modern State: Diversity of State Models, Political Agency, and Opposition in Late Medieval Bohemia (1394–1405)*

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Traditionally, the League of the Lords (*Panská jednota*) is perceived as having been in opposition to the development of the modern state and as an embodiment of feudalism, which stood in stark opposition to rational modernization. In this paper, in line with the anarchist anthropology of David Graeber and James C. Scott, I would like to show that the nobles were not necessarily conservatives hostile to modernity but rather were political actors who were aware of their choices and who rejected changes not out of a mechanical conservatism but out of a motivated hostility to the modern state. Without losing sight of the pragmatic character of political events and alliances, I am therefore interested in this opposition group and, in particular, in the ways in which it justified its positions and sought to depict itself. Through an analysis of concrete events that occurred in Bohemia, this paper aims to challenge the linear doctrine on the development of the modern state as an unquestioned evolutionary development and thus reassess the possibility of (real) opposition and alternatives to the dominant model.

Keywords: state, revolt, league, Bohemia, agency

Traditionally, revolts in the Middle Ages are perceived as having been in opposition to the development of the modern state and are seen as moments in which the feudal mentality rose up against processes of modernization.¹ This assessment is also applied to noble and patrician revolts. These revolts are considered comparatively fleeting events fueled by lingering elements of an already outdated worldview and are generally criticized for not having had clear political aims and for having served only the interests of those who instigated

* With this contribution, I present one of my new research topics. This work therefore consists more of hypotheses and avenues for reflection than of tangible findings.

¹ Traditionally, revolts were considered a deviation from normal politics, an anomaly, and a set of acts aimed against the state and the growth of royal government, Mollat and Wolf, *Popular Revolutions*, 283.

them without considering or embracing any ambition to change the system.² Or rather, the fact that the leaders of these revolts did not seek to overthrow the monarchy and establish another political regime is taken as clear proof that their acts had no political significance. I would object to this assessment first merely by sharing the observation that the politicians of today are rarely tempted to introduce new social models and are often just as driven by personal motivations as medieval nobles and patricians allegedly were, but this does not prevent us from considering them as serious political players. In this paper, I would like to move away from these kinds of value judgments and propose a reinterpretation of medieval revolts by exploring the campaign of the Bohemian League of Lords against their king, Wenceslas IV (r. 1378–1419).

To briefly summarize the events, Wenceslas IV had been crowned at the initiative of his father Charles IV in 1363, when he was only two years old. He became full king upon his father's death in 1378. This means that Charles had feared that the succession would be contested. Problems arose quite quickly during Wenceslas' reign. There were continuous conflicts among members of the Luxembourg family (which explains the precaution taken by Charles in 1363). Jobst of Moravia (r. 1375–1411) and Sigismund of Hungary (from 1387) could not bear to submit to the authority of their close relative,³ and the high nobility complained of having been bypassed by the lower nobility, which enjoyed the favor of the court. When the always ambitious Jobst attacked his brother Prokop, with whom he cogoverned Moravia, Wenceslas had not deigned to intervene, perhaps preferring to see his relatives disunited, as Jíří Spěvák suggested.⁴ In addition, Wenceslas was criticized in the Empire, and he was on bad terms with the bishop of Prague, Jan of Jenštejn. In December 1393, the king was even poisoned, maybe by Sigismund, Jobst, and Rupert III of the Palatinate.⁵

It is in this context of the troubles and isolation of the king that the League of Lords was formed in May 1394, which led to the first imprisonment of Wenceslas in May–August 1394.⁶ As Wenceslas continued to fail to respect his promises, he was imprisoned a second time by his brother Sigismund, who

2 This corresponds more generally to Charles Tilly's model, according to which premodern movements were less complex and mature than their modern counterparts. Tilly, *Coercion*; Tilly, "How Protest."

3 Wenceslas was Sigismund's brother and Jobst's cousin.

4 Spěvák, *Václav*, 229.

5 Ibid., 229–30.

6 Ibid., 231–37.

took him to Vienna, in 1402–1403.⁷ After the king's release, an agreement was reached between him and the nobles in 1405 that put an end to the league, even though the lords had not managed to achieve all their objectives. As a result of this imprisonment, members of the high nobility were entrusted by the king with the supervision of the observance of law in the regions, and they were able to impose their choices for appointments to royal offices. However, the composition of the council remained the prerogative of the king.⁸

The idea is commonly accepted that the league belonged to the past, while the king's government was a step in the direction of the development of the modern state (for instance, the use of competent servants from lower social backgrounds, beyond the figure of the favorite). In this paper, I would like to consider the two models as two competing worldviews. In line with “anarchist anthropology,” I intend to show that the lords of the league were political actors who were aware of their choices and who rejected some practices not out of reflex conservatism but out of a motivated hostility to the king's conception of the state. “Anarchist anthropology” is a means of understanding and offering a critical reading of social processes in the world and history based on the choice of objects and an analysis of domination processes, including their adoption or deconstruction. From a retrospective and teleological perspective, “anarchist anthropology” attempts to deconstruct the great narratives of human history, and particularly the earliest chapters of this history (the emergence of the state, domination, coercion), to point towards our unconscious and ideological preconceptions as modern. It was developed in the 1970s, when Pierre Clastres brought to light the existence of a non-coercive power in so-called primitive societies, inviting anthropologists to abandon their prejudices and ethnocentrism.⁹ More recently, James C. Scott has challenged the idea that the state was the natural consequence of the appearance of agriculture and the adoption of more sedentary lifestyles. Indeed, Scott has highlighted resistance to the development and imposition of the state.¹⁰ Some medievalists have taken an interest in this development and the tools it provides better to define certain

7 Ibid., 338–52; Bobková and Bartlová, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 4b, 340–62. For more details, see Hlaváček, “Haft”; Hlaváček, “König Wenzel (IV.)”; and more recently, see: Schmidt, “Druhé zajetí”; Oertel, “Vorgeschichte.”

8 Spěváček, *Václav*, 358–59; Bobková and Bartlová, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 4b, 384–87; Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 5, 73–79.

9 Clastres, *Société*.

10 Scott, *Grain*.

phenomena of modernity that have their roots in the Middle Ages and differ in their medieval phase from what they would later become.¹¹

Without losing sight of the pragmatic character of political events and alliances, I am therefore interested (I) in this opposition group and, in particular, in the ways in which it justified its positions and sought to depict itself. I (II) situate it in a tradition of revolts and claims and in a strong ideology developed by the nobility in Bohemia and (III) underline the strategy of the league. My intention is to call attention to a diversity of state models in the Middle Ages and thus go against an essentially canonical interpretation, which had embraced a linear model according to which the modern state (inevitably and evolutionarily) overcame the medieval state.

The League of Lords

At the end of the fourteenth century, the League of Lords emerged as an oppositional group of noblemen dissatisfied with the rule of King Wenceslas. The movement was characterized by a strong group identity. To formalize their action and their mission statement, they published a letter on May 5, 1394:

In Prague, May 5, 1394. We Jošt, Margrave and Lord of Moravia, Henry of Rožmberk and Lord of Krumlov, Henry the Elder of Hradec, Břenek of Skála, Bergow of Bílina, Berka of Hohenstein in Saxony, Wilém of Landštejn, Jan Michalec of Michalovice, Boreš the Younger of Bečov and Rýzmbek, Boček of Kunštátu, otherwise known as Poděbrad, the lords of Bohemia, all confess by this letter, unanimously and manifestly, that we have entered into such a covenant and such a promise between ourselves, and that we all have entered into and are entering into such a covenant, and that we promise to hold one another faithfully without guile under our good faith and honor: that we all will and ought to be in unity, and to seek the good of the land, and to bring forth and do the truth in the land, and so to stand together always, that we may lead all the good of the land before us, faithfully helping one another without guile, according to all our faith and according to our honor, each of us and all of us together, with all the power that we each have without guile. And whosoever any of us or any of ours by any act whatsoever shall by any means press him out of the course of the land, or out of the finding of the manor, he is one

11 Forrest, “Medieval History.”

of us and we promise faithfully to help and to stand by him, that it may not be done to him, but that it may be done to every man.¹²

This letter begins with the names of the founding members of the League followed by the “lords of Bohemia,” the few nobles mentioned claiming to embody the interests of the whole group and even of the whole country (the word “land” / *zemský* – *země* appears four times in this short excerpt), although they of course spoke only for themselves. This claim to represent all is a typical illustration of *repraesentatio identatis* (representation-identity), which postulates that the part that represents is totally identical to the whole represented (*pars pro toto*) and which was formalized during the great councils of the fifteenth century (although this does not rule out its earlier existence).¹³ Considerable emphasis is put on consensus: “we all acknowledge by this letter, unanimously and manifestly.” This is typical of the medieval nobility: against the power of one monarch, the lords emphasized their communal organization as more valuable because it was more just.¹⁴ The action was intended to be in the name of all the Czech lords (the adjective “all” appears seven times), and the vocabulary insists on a promise, communal action, and mutual support within the group. This is called *jednota*, union, or the *pánská jednota* in Czech, and it is usually translated as “league of lords” by scholars.

The lords’ action was given legitimacy by their association as a community and the contention that this community was acting for the common good. This conviction was embedded in the philosophy of Aristotle, who postulated that “any community was made for some good.”¹⁵ The “community” was eternal

12 “V Praze, 5 máje 1394: My Jošt markrabě a pán Moravský, Jindřich z Rožmberka a pán na Krumlově, Jindřich starší z Hradce, Břeněk z Skály, Bergow z Bíliny, Berka z Hohenštejna v Sasku, Wilém z Landštejna, Jan Michalec z Michalovic, Boreš mladší z Bečova a Rýzemberka, Boček z Kunštátu jinak řečený z Poděbrad, páni čeští, všichni jednostejně a zjevně listem tímto vyznáváme, že jsme v takú mezi sebou úmluvu a v taký slib my všichni svrchupsaní vstúpili a vstupujem, a to sobě věrně beze lsti pod věrú naší dobrú a pode cti držeti slibujeme: tak jménem, že chceme a máme všichni my v jednotu býti, a zemském dobrého hledati, a pravdu v zemi ploditi a činiti, a tak vždy po tej spolu státi, abychom před se všechno zemské dobré snažně vedli, věrně beze lsti sobě pomáhajíce, podle vsí své víry a podlé své cti, každý z nás i všichni spolu, svú vsí moci beze lsti, co jí každý mítí možem. A koho by kolivěk z nás nebo koho z našich kterýmkolivěk činem kdo kdy kterak tisknúti chtěl mimo zemský běh nebo mimo nález pánský, toho tomu máme a slibujeme věrně pomáháti a po něm silně státi, aby se vždy jemu toho nedálo, než aby se každému právě stalo.” Spěváček, *Václav*, 232, transcription of: *Archiv Český*, vol. 1, 52–53; *Codex diplomaticus Moraviae*, vol. 12, 184–85, no. 189.

13 On the concept of representation in the Middle Ages, see Zimmermann, *Begriff*, 233–35; Hofmann, *Repräsentation*, 214–19.

14 Adde, “Communauté.”

15 Sère, “Aristote.”

through the perpetual succession of its members (*communitas non moritur*), and thus it embodied stability. In the hierarchy of medieval values, the collegial structure of the community provided a permanent consensus, very much in contrast with a mortal individual, who was inconstant in action and motivated by his own interests.

The regular emphasis on concepts of “community” and “assistance” overshadows the fact that the nobility was actually disunited. First, not all of them had joined the league. The loyalists included Prokop of Moravia and Jan Zhořecký, the cousin and the brother of the king, respectively. On June 7, Jan Zhořecký published a manifesto to fight the League. He gathered an army of the king’s loyalists and marched on Prague. The troops secretly took the king away from Prague. After a short stay at the Rosenberg castles of Příběnice, Český Krumlov and Vítkův Kámen, Wenceslas was interned at the Wildberg Castle of Stahremberk in Upper Austria. Jan Zhořecký eventually obtained his release (August 1, 1394) in return for promises of impunity and certain concessions.¹⁶ Secondly, tensions also existed within the league.¹⁷

In the letter written by the League, the king was not explicitly addressed, even though the letter implicitly claimed to correct his errors. The Lords indicated that they wanted to protect “the good of the realm” and “increase the amount of truth” in the country, thus implying that “the good” and “the truth” were not respected anymore. The medieval king was bound to the political society under his rule. From the twelfth century on, the Paulinian (and theocratic) concept of power, which had dominated society until then, was replaced by a contractual one, which recognized political society as a partner of the ruler, who could not be the owner of all the property of his subjects anymore.¹⁸ With the transformations of the modalities of domination which had led to the increase of central power and, simultaneously, to the increased need for the ruler to be able to count on intermediaries (the nobility, the cities), the idea of representativeness, of adequacy between the policy of the sovereign and the expectations of the community of the land, the *communitas regni* (*zemská obec* or community of the land in Czech), had emerged distinctly in the collective imagination.¹⁹ Many sources and testimonies clearly show that the capacity to

16 Spěváček, *Václav*, 235–40; Bobková and Bartlová, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 4b, 346. See the text of Jan’s manifesto in *Codex diplomaticus Moraviae*, vol. 12, 194–95, no. 202.

17 Novotný, “Ráj,” 223–24.

18 Coleman, “Individual,” 2; Szűcs, “Historical Regions,” 149.

19 Barthélemy, *Communitas*.

embody the interests of all and to respond as adequately as possible to them had become essential in power struggles, struggles that increasingly involved all subjects, whose appreciation was increasingly decisive because of the generalization of a contractual conception and practice of power.²⁰ In Bohemia, the lords of the League claimed to be the only ones able to ensure the common good.

Appealing to this notion of the common good, the Czech lords attacked Wenceslas for his alleged failures. Their criticism aimed at the king's purported neglect of political affairs and permanent recourse to members of lower nobility to govern with him. We find here again the *topos* of the bad adviser, a classic figure in medieval political thought.²¹ The common good was therefore respected only when the king ruled in concert with the lords, i.e. the high nobility, and took care of the country's affairs, both being linked: when the king collaborated with the lords, he was taking care of the country.

In *Nová rada* (New Council), Smil Flaška of Pardubice clearly formulated these claims. Smil's views capture the perceptions of the frustrated nobility. He had joined the Union in 1395. He was the nephew of Ernest of Pardubice (1344–1364), archbishop of Prague and close advisor to King Charles IV (1346–1378). Another of his uncles, Bohuš of Pardubice, also belonged to King Charles' entourage. Together with his father William, who had become the sole heir to (and administrator of) the family's possessions after the death of his brothers (Ernest, Bohuš, and Smil the Elder), our Smil (the Younger) personally experienced the king's arbitrariness. On the death of Smil the Elder, the king had unjustifiably exercised the right of escheat and had seized the town of Pardubice from his family. Smil and his father had embarked on a legal battle (1384–1385) which had ended in defeat. In 1390, when they had appealed, the royal court (*zemský soud*) had rendered its verdict in favor of the king.²²

In *Nová rada*, which became a major text in Czech literature, the new, inexperienced king summons the animals to give him advice "for the country's order and peace" (line 50).²³ 44 animals give their advice. There are 54 in all, if we add those who are mentioned but do not speak. The lion is thus a good

20 Watts, *Making*; Blockmans et al., *Interactions*; Schneidmüller, "Herrschaft"; Genet, *Consensus*; Damen, Haemers, and Man, *Representation*.

21 Rosenthal, "The King"; Nederman, "No Bad Kings."

22 Bobková and Bartlová, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 4b, 348–52.

23 I refer here to the verses as presented in the edition mentioned in the bibliography, Smil Flaška z Pardubic, *Nová rada*.

king, respectful of his collaborators and concerned with their advice for the common good. The calls to sleep soundly (made by the bear, 588), to eat and drink beyond measure (made by the bear, 587, the wolf, 702, 707, and the goose, 992), to follow one's desires (made by the fox, 1398–1401), or to isolate oneself and shirk responsibility (made by the cockerel, 1330–1332) correspond to the vices attributed to Wenceslas IV, who did not hesitate to isolate himself in his residences in Křivoklát or Kunratice, in the middle of the forest, to escape the tumult and his responsibilities and to indulge in hunting.²⁴ Along with the wolf, who is already looking forward to the feasts he will be able to have in exchange for services rendered to the king (730, 738–740), and the fox, who hopes to manipulate the king by flattering him (1382–1387), they all embody bad advisors of low social backgrounds, with whom Wenceslas allegedly had surrounded himself.

The leopard explicitly advises the king not to take commoners (488) but only “noble men” into his council, which should be small (491). He also enjoins him to respect the order and precedence of everyone (508) and not to neglect the prelates (510). The lesser nobility and merchants are openly scorned by the crane for their greed and their craving for social ascendancy via the purchase of offices (crane 645–675), a remark that directly echoes the criticisms of the League of Lords but is also a leitmotif of nobiliary literature.

In Smil's text, the bad influence of these advisors is canceled out by the good advice given by the other animals and especially by the final prayer of the swan. Written by one of the members of the league, *Nová rada* delivered a powerful message in these troubled times. From its foundation, the League had a strong identity, inscribed in a century of vernacular literature, which founded Czech noble ideology.²⁵

The Czech Nobility, a Tradition of Revolts and Claims and a Strong Ideology

Although they did not formulate any clear program in writing, the lords' revolt and their demands were part of a long tradition. Written around 1310, the *Chronicle of the so-called Dalimil* represented the first formulation of the political

24 While it was a source of social prestige everywhere in the rest of Europe, hunting was perceived negatively in medieval Czech chronicles and the medieval Czech political sphere in general. When practiced by the king, it signified his disinterest in the affairs of the country and the lords who were supposed to govern with him. On this traditional image in the Czech lands, see Adde, *Bon chasseur*.

25 Adde, “Idéologie.”

program of the lords in the context of succession crises after the extinction of the Přemyslid dynasty in 1306. Such a crisis was an opportunity to reconfigure the political order. Dalimil (the alleged author, though it is worth noting that the chronicle contains information from other chronicles written in Latin) took advantage of the threat of the Habsburgs to point out the danger represented by all Germans, even those of Bohemia, and thus to cast suspicion on the burghers of the country who were mostly German. At the same time, he showed that a good king was a king who worked with the lords, calling on the latter to fulfill their mission, i.e. to watch over the king and intervene if he were to prove too abusive. Dalimil condemns dissent motivated by personal aspirations.²⁶ Nevertheless, there are cases when revolt becomes necessary. Three great revolts (1247–1249, 1276–1277, and 1288–1290) were considered justified: the nobles opposed the pro-German policy of the kings Wenceslas I (1205–1253), Přemysl Ottokar II (1253–1278), and Wenceslas II (1278–1305) and their resulting exclusion from political affairs.²⁷ Dalimil presents these revolts as having been a necessity for the common good.

Dalimil goes so far as to wish for a new type of political system in which the king would be elected by the community of the land, i.e. the lords, in accordance with the principle of representation-identity mentioned above, according to which the part that represents is absolutely identical to the whole represented. He claims to be concerned about the risks involved in the link between power and the person of the king in the context following the murder of King Wenceslas III, and he insists that the king is stronger if elected.²⁸ In reality, if the king were to be elected, the nobility would be stronger as the main agent in the decision making process. Only through powerful noblemen could the state (and the ruler) enjoy greater stability. We have here an illustration of the theory of the king's two bodies. The political (or mystical) body is embodied by the community of the

26 Adde, *Chronique*.

27 On these revolts, see Adde, "Fragility."

28 "When the succession to the throne is natural, / if you kill the duke, his mother is not able to provide a new one. / But when the duke is chosen by election, / his death causes little damage. / Some people request the duke's death, / especially those who have some hope for themselves. / Let them know that when the duke was elected, / it is not possible to not get rid of him" [Kterěz kniežě po přirození vschodí, / když jeho zabijí, máťe jeho druhé neurodí. / Ale kterěz kniežě volenie rodí, / toho kniežčie smrt nemnoho škodí / Neb někteří jich smrti žádají / ti najvíce, již k témuž čáku jmají. / Vězte, když volením knězem kde může býti, / toho kniežčie nikte nemóž zbavití]. *Staročeská Kronika*, vol. 2, 150–52 (chap. 65, v. 31–38).

kingdom, itself represented by the nobility, and is able by its nature to overcome all the misfortunes (disease, aging, unexpected death) which can befall the king.²⁹

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the nobility had developed a strong political self-awareness thanks to texts presenting its views and claims and the repeated crises, which allowed its members to become active again regularly and thus consolidate and even expend their achievements. The first such crisis occurred just after the death of Přemysl Ottokar II (1278). His young son Wenceslas II was kidnaped by his regent, Otto of Brandenburg. During the king's absence (1279–1283), the nobility ruled the country, convening the kingdom's first general diet in 1281.³⁰

The second crisis started after the death of Wenceslas III, which led to the extinction of the Přemyslid dynasty. Following the short reign of Rudolf of Habsburg on the Czech throne (1306–1307), the new king, Henry of Carinthia, failed to win unanimous support in the kingdom. The abbots and lords of Bohemia began to negotiate with their suzerain and the new king of the Romans, Henry of Luxembourg (1308–1313). Henry's son Jean de Luxembourg became king (1310–1346). The newly elected King of Bohemia had to accept many demands from the nobility in the form of the *Inaugural Diplomas*. According to some stipulations, he could name only Czechs to principal offices and as members of his council. He also had to seek authorization from the lords to levy taxes.³¹ The Czech nobility managed to use the weakness of the king, a young foreigner, to impose itself as the embodiment of the nation and thus as the king's indispensable partner.³²

A new conflict between the lords and King John of Luxembourg which occurred in 1315–1318 confirmed the lords' achievements of 1310. In 1313, the death of Henry of Luxembourg meant for John the loss of the support of his father and the title of imperial vicar, which had given him the right to have

29 Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*.

30 On these events, see Jan, *Václav II*, 47–48. See also the report of the diet, RBM, vol. 2, no. 1238, 535–36.

31 According to the Inaugural Diplomas, the king had: 1. to name only “regnicos” to the great royal offices and in his council; 2. to seek authorization from the barons to levy taxes except to finance royal marriages and coronations; 3. to respect the right of the nobility not to participate in the personal wars of the king; 4. to accept the reform of the right of escheat: to ensure that the domains no longer fall into the domain of the king when there is no male heir, all descendants both masculine and feminine up to the fourth degree are allowed to inherit. *Codex Juris Bohemici*, 19–22, no. 11.

32 See Chaloupecký, “Diplomy”; Bobková and Bartlová, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 4b, 26–31; Bobková, *Jan*, 75–80; Jan, “Nástin,” 257. On the power-sharing situation between the nobility and the king, see Adde, “Représentation.”

foreign advisors as an imperial vicar. The attacks of the Hungarian magnate Máté (III) Csák (†1321) and the lasting instability it created in Moravia further complicated the situation. The king needed the support of the Czech lords, whose military aid in the Moravian crisis came with the condition that the king would dismiss his foreign advisors and officers. In October 1315, Henry of Lipá, leader of this tumultuous nobility, was arrested under the pressure of the queen and accused of having plotted with John's adversary Frederick of Habsburg. At the same time, John had to leave Bohemia to support Louis of Bavaria and to settle the equally complex situation in Luxembourg. The Czech lords intended to exploit the lack of a central authority. Henry of Lipá was released in April 1316 thanks to the pressure of his ever-growing camp. Ostracized, Queen Elizabeth had appealed to foreign mercenaries to assist her in her task, which further increased her political isolation. John came back to Bohemia in November 1317. At the same time, Henry of Lipá formed an official alliance with Frederick of Habsburg (December 27, 1317), which was joined by a great part of the nobility. Faced with this ever-stronger opposition, John called on Louis of Bavaria for help. Louis arrived at Cheb (Eger) on March 20, 1318. John wanted to organize a military expedition with the emperor against the treacherous barons, but the other players wanted to avoid such a risky conflict. The consequence was the signing of the *Domažlice agreements* on April 24, 1318. John had to confirm the commitments of the *Inaugural diplomas*.³³

The nobility had also taken a stand against Charles IV and his project of bringing the nobility into line with the *Maiestas carolina*, a legal code written in 1350–1351 the aim of which was to increase royal power. Included among its provisions were sections granting the right to judge criminal cases solely to the king and other rights giving the king greater control over functionaries to increase royal revenues. In 1355, the nobility finally rejected the code at the General Diet. Rather than let the matter come to an open conflict with the nobility, Charles preferred in the end to abandon the whole project.³⁴

By the end of the fourteenth century, the nobles had merged their stances during these episodes into a coherent synthesis, combining the political vision of the aforementioned *Chronicle of the so-called Dalimil* and a developed legal literature. The *Romšberk Book (Kniha Romšberská)*³⁵ was a handbook intended for the noble land court or “šlechtický zemský soud.” It dates from the first half

33 Bobková and Bartlová, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 4b, 49–58; Bobková, *Jan*, 99–121.

34 *Maiestas*: Kejř, “Die sogenannte Maiestas”; Nodl, “Maiestas”; Spěváček, “Řešení.”

35 Fiedlerová, “K otázce.”

of the fourteenth century, but additions were regularly made to it during the fourteenth century, depending on the needs of the nobility. It is the oldest legal book written in Czech. The book systematically codifies the common law and includes contemporary regulations. It contains not only legal provisions, but also advice on how to use them in practice. The book was initiated by Petr I of Rožmberk, “nejvyšší zemský sudí,” i.e. the High Court Judge of the Kingdom of Bohemia. Through his position and high office, Petr embodied the ideal of the great lord who worked with the king and was aware of and attached to the privileges of the nobility.³⁶ He belonged to an important noble family and had married one of the daughters of the aforementioned Henry of Lipá.

Another particularity of the nobiliary culture at the time of the League was, paradoxically, its appropriation and assimilation of Charles IV’s legacy, despite its opposition to the *Maiestas Carolina* four decades earlier. In the time of John on Luxembourg (1310–1346), the nobility had similarly presented itself as the guarantor of the Přemyslid legacy against the so-called “foreign king.” This was despite its enduring conflict with the Přemyslid kings during the thirteenth century.³⁷ Once dead and extinguished, the king and the dynasty no longer represented any threat. The dead king and the dynasty served as symbols of the state under the rule of a failed sovereign, as John of Luxembourg and Wenceslas IV were in the eyes of the Czech nobility. They also allowed the nobility to affirm itself as the defender of this state or statehood which was not attached to the ruling king but to a tradition, and thus depersonalized. An idealized vision of Charles IV was soon used to criticize Wenceslas IV, who was presented as his antithesis.³⁸ The shadow of Charles IV is easily identifiable, for instance in the manuscripts possessed by the Romžberk family, a powerful family which had taken part in all campaigns and plots against the Bohemian kings from the thirteenth century to the time of the League.³⁹ Of the 23 manuscripts of the *Maiestas Carolina* (twelve by Charles and eleven by his brother John-Henry, then heir to the Bohemian throne), two (one of each) were kept in the Romžberk Archives in Český Krumlov, while the others were kept in the Royal Archives.⁴⁰

36 Lavička and Šimůnek, *Páni z Rožmberka*. This family was also strongly involved in the League of Zelená Hora (1465–1471) created against George of Poděbrady. On the League of Zelená Hora, see Šandera, “The League.”

37 Přemysl Ottokar’s defeat against Rodolphe of Habsburg in 1278 was caused by the noblemen who had joined the king of the Romans. Žemlička, *Přemysl Otakar*, 443–76; Vaníček, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 3, 190–96.

38 Hübner, “Herrscher.”

39 Henry of Rožmberk is mentioned in the manifesto of the League. Cf. above.

40 Hergemöller, “Einleitung,” XI.

Only the Romžberk family possessed this text, testifying to their power and their interest in it. The manuscript ÖNB, cod. 619 [1396], held at the Austrian National Library and containing the *Vita Caroli IV* (Charles IV's autobiography) and the *Ordo ad coronandum Regem Boemorum* (Coronation Order of the Bohemian kings, written by Charles IV), was also in possession of the Romžberk family before it became part of the collection of the Austrian National Library.⁴¹ The destiny of Ondřej of Dubá (circa 1320–1412/1413) is another example of this new interweaving of Charles' legacy and the nobiliary ideology, emerging at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Ondřej belonged to the high nobility of Bohemia (lords of Dubá, Benešovici). He joined the League after briefly supporting Wenceslas. In 1394–1395 and again in 1402, however, he wrote a legal book, *Zemské právo*, which quoted extensively from the *Maiestas carolina*.⁴² A convolute reconstituted by Naďa Štachová offers an illustrative example of this new and surprising synergy. This convolute contained three medieval manuscripts, Cerr. A, Cerr. B, and Cerr. C, named after the collector, Cerroni. This enormous set included both Dalimil's nobiliary chronicle and the chronicle of Pulkava of Radenín, written for Charles IV, as well as Ondřej of Dubá's legal book and the Book of Rožmberk.⁴³ Despite his desire to bring the nobility into line, King Charles managed to symbolize the unity between the nobility and the state as St. Wenceslas had done for the nobility of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This does not mean that the nobility did not change over time (quite the contrary). But the group had succeeded in establishing a process of resistance to the ruler by systematically presenting itself as the protector of the common good and accumulating and synthesizing in its favor voices from many different horizons.

The Strategy of the League, Agency, and the Meaning of Revolt

The main grievance of the lords was the hegemony enjoyed at the court by the king's favorites of low social background, to the detriment of the high nobility, especially the high positions occupied by Zikmund Huler, a burgher from the town of Prague, Jira of Roztoky, and Jan Čůcha of Zásada, both members of the low nobility.

41 ÖNB, cod. 619, inscription written inside the cover of the Ms.

42 Spěváček, *Václav*, 495.

43 Štachová, "Cerroniho sborník."

However, as shown by Robert Novotný, Wenceslas' court was, on the contrary, marked by an overrepresentation of the high nobility in comparison with his contemporaries, such Rupert of the Palatinate, Ludwig III of the Palatinate, or the Dukes of Bavaria,⁴⁴ and also in comparison with his predecessor Charles IV, as shown by Peter Moraw.⁴⁵ If we look at the list of the *podkomoří* (chamberlains) of Bohemia, the most important office of the kingdom, we can observe that the change had started already under Charles IV, the last member of the high nobility occupying this prestigious office having been Henry of Lipá under John of Luxembourg.

Robert Novotný found 160 speakers and advisors at Wenceslas' Court. He could not identify the social origins of seven of them. 46 belonged to the clergy. 108 were lay people. Among the latter, seven were of burgher origin, 32 belonged to the lower nobility, and 61 belonged to the higher nobility.⁴⁶ It was thus precisely when they were most favored and when they actually dominated Wenceslas' court that the lords decided to rebel. Robert Novotný considered this a paradox which could only be explained by tensions and divisions within the nobility and competition among the main families of the kingdom, based on long-standing power-kinship ties, though he does not explain which ones were at play.⁴⁷

If the lords were dominant in state structures, why were they complaining? This is a judgment that has traditionally been made about revolts. The actions of the nobles appear so unsuited to the context. But it would be a mistake to look for coherence in reactions, especially in the political sphere. It is a bias of the historian to expect more coherence from individuals of past societies than from his contemporaries. We are not surprised by the incoherence of the politicians of our time, and we should accept that people capable of similar incoherence in the Middle Ages. Moreover, it is a misconception to link revolts to injustice, oppression, or misery. If injustice and oppression were present in the discourse of medieval rebels, they were not necessarily realities. As Ernest Mandel has shown in his work on May 1968 and the contradictions of neo-capitalism, an economic boom and access to a more comfortable standard of living generated new needs, and this in turn allowed for a more accurate grasp of the existing inequalities, which increased resentment and frustration until these sentiments

44 Novotný, "Ráj," 225; Moraw, "Beamtentum," 87–109.

45 Moraw, "Räte," 287–88.

46 Novotný, "Ráj," 224.

47 *Ibid.*, 223.

ultimately tore apart the social frameworks.⁴⁸ Similarly, it was precisely the domination of the state apparatus by the Czech high nobility that allowed the lords to revolt at the end of the fourteenth century. The lords were not driven by injustice and demands made by the king. Rather, they merely intended to take advantage of the strong position they enjoyed, while gaining even more power and profiting of the weakness of Wenceslas' rule in Bohemia and in the empire.

Studies of medieval revolt have almost invariably organized themselves around the concept of the state as the arena within which the revolts take place and take on meaning. Whether from a top-down perspective, as in the case of the histories written in the nineteenth century, or from a bottom-up Marxist perspective, as in many of the twentieth-century narratives, revolt is seen as an anomaly and a reaction against either arbitrariness or state excess. More recently, historians have increasingly shown that the "rise of the state" was a dialogic process in which the governed had considerable agency, often clamoring for more government rather than less.⁴⁹ We have to interpret the acts of the lords from this perspective: the members of the League were protagonists in the political sphere with their own views, their own forms of agency, and their own expectations.

The League of Bohemian lords was neither the result of a moment of panic among desperate members of an old, frail nobility (as the traditional secondary literature has tended to claim)⁵⁰ nor a disorderly and thoughtless attempt to preserve the feudal system or to satisfy the interests of the nobility (as the more recent literature has suggested). The creation of the League and the various steps it took were part of a political undertaking aimed at increasing the power of one clan over another in much the same way as the political parties of today clamor and scheme for power. No one would qualify the behavior of today's political parties as immature or inconsistent, and we should be similarly cautious about applying these kinds of terms to political protagonists of the past. The Czech lords were merely playing the political game of their time.

48 Mandel, *Commune*.

49 Firnhaber-Baker, and Schoenars, "Introduction."

50 This is actually the narrative of the high nobility and the Church.

Conclusion

Modern historiography has been dominated by the Weberian concept of the state's "monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order."⁵¹ Violence exerted by "non-state" or "non-royal" actors is then logically considered inherently a disorderly usurpation of governmental prerogatives, which is also in line with the view expressed by the central authority. However, the state in the late Middle Ages was much more polycentric, multi-layered, and diffuse than modern governments.⁵² For this reason, some historians, such as John Watts, are hesitant to speak of a state and prefer to use the word "polity."⁵³ Even if the debate is open-ended,⁵⁴ I still prefer to speak of a state insofar as medieval sources attest the existence of a central and sovereign authority that had developed during the Middle Ages, with its own bureaucracy and specific regalian rights.⁵⁵ The action of the League should be situated in this multi-layered and fluid architecture.

To consider the members of the League real political protagonists is also to distance oneself from the traditional, teleological, and ideological narrative on the history of the state, as described by Ian Forrest:

Generally, state growth is treated as a "good" (without justification) because in most liberal historiography and social science writing modern states are considered as good, and all that stands in the way of this growth is discredited. We see this in the language used to describe change in the history of state power: the verbs "to grow" and "to decline" set the pattern of positive/negative binaries, while abstract nouns such as "consolidation" and "fragmentation," and adjectives like "strong" and "weak" add to the normative discourse in which political history is habitually written.⁵⁶

As a group that destabilized the king's authority, the League was necessarily seen as an immature and thoughtless enterprise driven by the interests of a disunited nobility.

51 Weber, *Economy*, 54.

52 Forrest, "Medieval History."

53 Watts, *Making*. See also Dunbabin, "Government"; Moraw, "Herrschaft"; Schubert, "Landesherrschaft."

54 On this debate, see Davies, "State"; Reynolds, "There Were States."

55 Genet, *Genèse*.

56 Forrest, "Medieval History"; Bourdieu, "King"

In reality, the League offered an alternative view on the state through a political culture synthesizing the traditional nobiliary expectations as presented in the *Chronicle of the so-called Dalimil*, Smil Flaška's *New Council*, and the legal literature with Charles IV's legacy. By using the same infrastructure and the same ideology as the ruler and the state apparatus, the League contributed to develop and consolidate the state and statehood. Generally, protest does not reflect unease with the growing reach of government, but dissatisfaction with its limitations.

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