Jan Žižka

600 Years since the Death of the Bohemian General and National Hero

by Petr Čornej

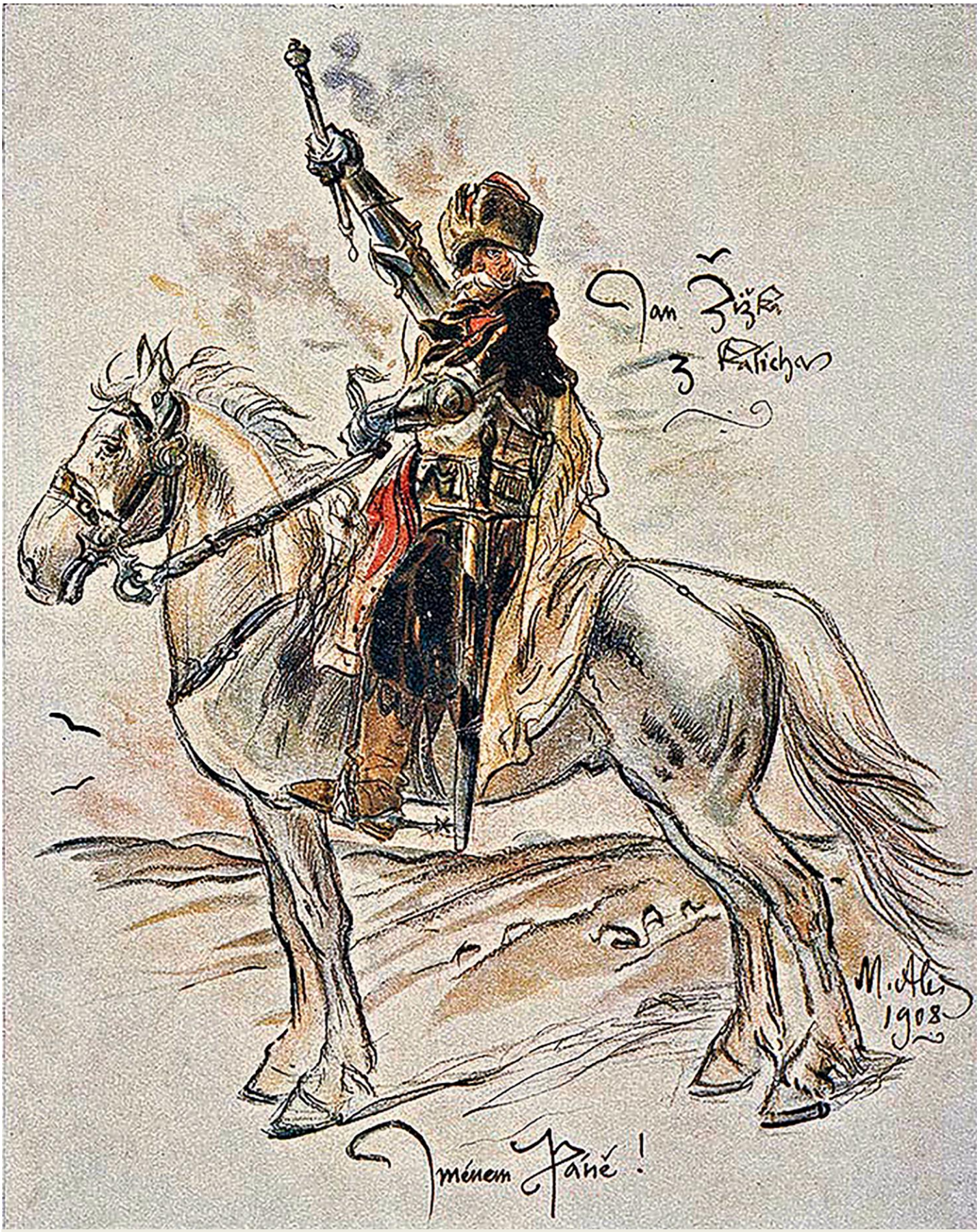
When Czech Television organised a survey in 2005 on who is the greatest Czech, Jan Žižka of Trocnov took the fifth place. Only the Emperor and King Charles IV, the first Czechoslovak President Tomáš Garigue Masaryk, Václav Havel and Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius) came ahead of him. Žižka was followed by the popular actor Jan Werich, Reformation thinker Jan Hus, composer Antonín Dvořák and writer Karel Čapek. Perhaps apart from Werich, they are all figures known around the world, except Žižka, who hardly shares their global fame despite books about him being published in the USA or Poland.

In many ways it is a paradox because he belongs to the six world battle leaders who never experienced the bitter taste of a defeat (Pharaoh Thutmose III, Alexander the Great - King of Macedon, Roman commander Scipio Africanus, Genghis Khan's strategist Subutai, Napoleon's Marshal Nicolas Davout). However, in the Czech lands Žižka enjoys permanent popularity despite the fact that opinions on his historical importance can differ dramatically. Christians of non-Roman Catholic denominations, supporters of national movements and the left-leaning Czechs and progressives, including T. G. Masaryk, have always seen him as an avenger of the ignominious death of Jan Hus in Constance, a genius war leader and also an excellent and wise statesman. On the other hand, members of the Roman Catholic Church, political conservatives and pacifists strongly condemn the successful Hussite military leader for his merciless conduct of war. Controversies about Žižka, the roots of which go back deep into the 15th century, are unlikely to be resolved in Czech society any time soon even though scientific historiography of the last fifty years has delivered a balanced portrait of the general, stripped of the layers of myths, superstition and illusion. Here I will try to capture his main characteristics in a concise summery.

Today no one doubts that the Hussite warrior was born around the year 1360, probably in Trocnov, the name which he used (Jan Žižka of Trocnov), or nearby in the South Bohemian locality. His life, until he enters the scene of great historical importance, is shrouded in a fog of obscurity from which solid facts only occasionally emerge. He

The image of Žižka from the Chronicle of the Founding of Bohemia by Martin Kuthen of Sprinsberk (1510-1564)

came from a family of rural gentry and in his youth lost an eye. This is most likely why he was known as Žižka, which in Old Czech meant someone with one eye or somebody who could hardly see. None of his siblings used the same surname. Not being a good manager, he soon lost his small estate and entered the service of the powerful Lord Jindřich (Henry) of Rožmberk (Rosenberg), a man second only to the King. However, very early in the 15th century and for reasons unknown, Žižka declared enmity to him and joined fighting groups in the pay of other influential aristocracy, which attacked and harmed the Rožmberks and their allies. These groups operated far outside the law and Žižka could have faced the gallows, but in 1409 the King Wenceslaus IV himself granted him a full amnesty. This allowed Žižka, together with other Bohemian and Moravian aristocrats, to fight as a mercenary soldier for the Polish ruler in the Baltic region. It is likely that he fought at the great Battle of Grunwald in July 1410 against the Order of the Teutonic Knights. He then probably stayed abroad and there are speculations he also fought at Agincourt for the English side, but it seems more likely that he returned to Prague. There he became a guard at the royal court of King Wenceslaus IV. We don't know if it was there that Žižka met the preacher Jan Hus, who was sentenced by the council of Constance to be burned at stake as a hardened heretic (6th July 1415). In any case, he fully identified himself with Hus's concept of reforming the Church and society, anticipating the great European Reformation movement a hundred years before it began.



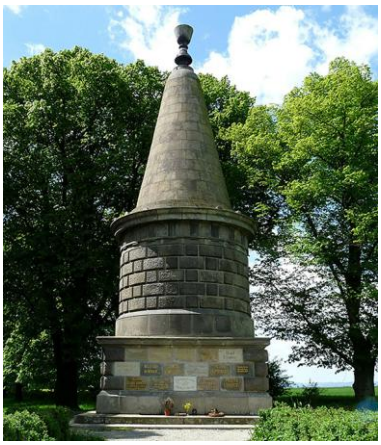
Žižka as depicted by Mikoláš Aleš (1852-1913) 'Jménem Páně!" 'In the Name of the Lord!', a coloured drawing of 1908. Aleš is probably best known today as one of the painters who decorated the famous foyer of the Czech National Theatre, Prague

The answer to why Žižka took this important decision could only be hypothetical. He was almost sixty years old, at the time thought to be the gate of old age and a point to consider whether or not he would be saved - the proper goal of the earthly life of all believers. Looking back, he must have realised this was not possible. He killed, he robbed and thus committed mortal sins. By identifying with the way Hus preached the Law of God as the highest standard of conduct for every Christian, he found a glimmer of hope for his own salvation. This is probably why he started to defend and spread these ideals in a way that, as an aristocrat, he knew well – with a sword in his hand.

Basic principles of the Hussite interpretation of the Law of God were briefly summerised in the Four Prague Articles (free preaching of the word of God; prohibition of the secular rule of the Church including expropriation of its land; punishment for mortal sins; celebration of the communion under both kinds as a necessary condition of salvation established by Christ himself). The last article in particular became a clear symbol of the Hussite movement and its reverence for God's Scriptures. The highest bodies of the Roman Catholic Church (ecumenical councils and the Pope) denounced as heretical the programme, which was clearly conceived as a transnational challenge, and together with the Holy Roman Emperor and the King of Hungary, Sigismund of Luxemburg, announced a crusade against the Hussites. At the turn of 1419-1420 Bohemian Hussites, whose postulates were directly influenced by the teachings of the English thinker John Wycliffe, rose up literally against everyone - against the entire western Christian world headed by the highest representatives of spiritual and worldly powers and against all Roman Catholics in the territory of the lands of Bohemian Crown. Both enemy sides entered a holy war fighting for the highest, absolute and God's truths. It was a fight that wouldn't allow for a compromise. For Žižka, however, it was an opportunity to enter a stage of great history where he stayed until his death.

Žižka attracted attention for the first time on 30th July 1419 as a co-organiser and participant of the defenestration of the anti-Hussite councillors in Prague's New Town. From that moment, considered to be the beginning of the Hussite revolution, Žižka was seen as an able, radical Hussite performing top military functions. Starting in Prague, he was in Plzeň (Pilsen) at the turn of 1419-1420 and from March 1420 in Southern Bohemia in the newly founded Hussite settlement with a biblical name of Tábor. Here he was elected to be one of the four commanders and entrusted with building the Tábor army. Due to the disputes with the Tábor clergy he left in early 1423 and moved to Eastern Bohemia where he founded his own Hussite union based on a permanent army and programme rules of the so called Žižka's military order. For five years he tirelessly fought against the enemies he considered to be heretics and sons of the Antichrist. Within a relatively short time he fought and won eleven battles, seven with the enemies of Czech lands and four with the crusader troops of Sigismund of Luxemburg, who after the death of his brother King Wenceslaus IV claimed the Royal Crown of Bohemia. Žižka's most famous victory was at the Hill of Vítkov near Prague on 14th July 1420 where he defeated Sigismund's crusaders and, crucially, helped the disintegration of the first anti-Hussite crusade. His next victory was in January 1422 at the battle of Německý (German) Brod, today Havlíčkův Brod, where he dealt a crushing blow to Sigismund's second crusade, as a result of which the Holy Roman Emperor lost all appetite to break the Hussites by force and resorted to diplomacy. Žižka's victory was doubly remarkable because in June 1421, while conquering Castle Rabí, he had suffered a serious injury to his good eye and most likely lost his eyesight altogether. His reward was a recognition from his own fighters who knighted him before the battle of Německý Brod. Žižka saw it as a proof of belonging to the chosen Knights of Christ. His complete devotion to the Hussite Canon of God's Law testifies to the fact that the castle he had built for himself in Northern Bohemia was called Kalich (Chalice), he started using the predicate - Jan Žižka of Kalich, and the chalice became his seal.

People who knew Žižka regarded him as a brave and courageous man but never credited him with foresight and prudence. The Hussite general was undoubtedly an energetic and temperamental man who despised behind-the-scenes intrigues. He enjoyed a full authority among his soldiers who saw him as a strict and just battle leader, a man who spent most of his time on military campaigns. He was hard and uncompromising on his enemies, in keeping with the aristocratic ethics and age-old rules of war. If the defenders of the enemy stronghold capitulated voluntarily and accepted Hussite beliefs, he didn't harm them. If they resisted, he followed the Old Testament law and had all the fighting men killed. He used the same principles as those followed later by the European



Žižkovo Pole, Vysočina Region

Žižka's Mound, dating from 1874, is a 16m (52 ft) high conical memorial, said to be located at the place where Jan Žižka died

reformation movements - he destroyed monasteries, persecuted monks and stripped sacral buildings of statues and paintings that only encouraged idolatry and drew the believers away from the Eucharist and the Word of God. This is the main reason why Roman Catholics have never liked Žižka, while the supporters of the Reformation have placed him firmly in the heavenly kingdom.

However, there is no dispute about Žižka's military genius. As a general he achieved success thanks to his excellent improvisational abilities, his feeling for the terrain and how to use it, and for combining battles in an open field with the partisan forms of fighting. He also belonged among the important military innovators. For his army, consisting mostly of simple foot warriors armed with voulges (poleaxes), iron flails and crossbows, Žižka chose a very effective defensive strategy of using wagon forts, an insurmountable obstacle for an enemy relying on the heavy cavalry. In this way he was able to defeat much larger armies. He also tried to deploy firearms but at the time their effectiveness was still very low.

Jan Žižka, who died on 11th October 1424 during the siege of Přibyslav, is anchored in Czech historical memory as a symbol of intransigence, defiance and victory. In the context of European history he comes across as a forerunner of the fighting followers of the Reformation such as the German Franze von Sickingen or the English Oliver Cromwell.

Prof. PhDr. Petr Čornej, *retired from Charles University and Czech Academy of Sciences, is the author of* Spory o Jana Žižku 1424-2024; Velké dějiny zemí Koruny české V. 1402-1437; Jan Žižka, Život a doba husitského válečníka; Husitská revoluce, Stručná historie. *All are available from www.kosmas.cz*