

ARISTOCRACY AND DOMINION IN MEDIEVAL BOHEMIA AS DEPICTED BY CZECHOSLOVAK HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Aristocracy and dominion have proven over the millenia to be extremely durable constants of sociopolitical and cultural life. Acknowledgement of this fact, however, was achieved only after historians had recognized the errors and misconceptions which arose in the 18th and 19th centuries from applying views of the Enlightenment as well as Romantic and Liberal concepts to the origins of European social development. Interestingly enough, the German and Czech historical views, although originating under similar circumstances and leading to the same errors, had diametrically opposing results. In the German view, the Slavs possessed none of the characteristics needed by a people capable of building and preserving their own state, and were thus doomed to remain the mere objects of despotic rulers, whereas the German ancestors had allegedly lived in an ideal condition of freedom and equality which enabled them, in common, to determine their own destiny. The Czechs likewise claimed for themselves a heritage of primitive democracy and assigned the Germans the role of brutal despots who had introduced inequality and serfdom into Bohemia (Palacký).

The present contribution attempts to outline the changes in the image of the aristocracy in Czech historical science since František Palacký. Just as notions that once prevailed in Germany and Austria have been replaced by more accurate views, above all due to the work of O. Brunner, K. Bosl, W. Schlesinger and others, the traditional ideas of the aristocracy have also

changed in the case of Bohemian historians. The works of H. Jireček, W. W. Tomek, the students of J. Goll J. Šusta, V. Novotný, J. Pekař and others represent significant strides on the path to a better understanding of the problem. At almost the same time in the 1930's, Václav Vaněček in Bohemia and Otto Brunner in Austria recognized that statehood was a product of the interplay of sovereign and aristocracy, with Vaněček, who is now Ordinary Professor for Legal History in Prague, for the first time documenting the existence of an influential and independent class of magnates in Bohemia.

After the Communist assumption of power, it first appeared that the upper classes would be entirely disregarded as an object of research. But after a period of dogmatic research coloured by class-struggle concepts, Czech historiography arrived at a more sober and factual approach, thanks largely to the confrontation between dogma and the evidence provided by source material. In this process, František Graus, Zdeněk Fiala, František Kavka and a number of younger historians have made important contributions. Still, the results of the more recent studies on the older leading strata in Bohemia are based on the revolutionary conclusions of Václav Vaněček, which correspond to those of modern German social history. The basis has thus been created for a mutually fruitful exchange of views.