



## “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” – The Impossible Term “Propaganda” and Its Popular and Anti-Royal Uses in Luxembourg Bohemia (ca. 1390–1421)\*

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The article follows two paths. First, it deals with the genealogy of the concept of propaganda and the ambiguities and vagaries of the term associated with it. On the one hand, this concept is decisively shaped by modern prerequisites. On the other hand, it has characteristics that make it a timeless element of political communication. Because of the strong influence of modern phenomena on what we have come to understand as propaganda, the application of this term to premodern examples works only if the communicative context is emphasized, including the historical and social background, the strategies of the propagandist, the propagandist's sense of the most effective means of swaying a certain target public, etc. Second, the focus is on parallel manifestations of propaganda in Bohemian society in the decades before the Hussite Wars (1390–1420). One can identify two of the functions of the propaganda of the time: it was used to deepen and spread the Hussite reformist thinking among the general population and to subject the respective Luxembourg kings, Wenceslas IV and Sigismund of Luxembourg, to harsh criticism. There were few points of contact between the two forms of propaganda used to further these two goals, since they addressed different social groups, but their effectiveness clearly demonstrates how far-reaching the impact of political propaganda could be in the fifteenth century.

Keywords: medieval propaganda, pre-Hussite Bohemia, Luxembourg dynasty, Wenceslas IV, Sigismund of Luxembourg

Good terms are all alike. Every bad term is bad in its own way. The latter applies in particular to the term propaganda when applied to pre-modern phenomena. The term has been subjected to particular scrutiny in the German secondary literature, mainly because of its ideological framing in the Nazi-era. One could raise

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many objections to its use. First, the term itself only emerged in the seventeenth century and therefore cannot be applied to communication strategies used in the Middle Ages. Moreover, it only began to acquire the meanings and connotations it has today in the nineteenth century, because it was only in this period that it became the powerful instrument of political influence used by actors in the public sphere to form parties.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, its definitions were modelled on modern ideas of the public and the media. Some voices have suggested that, given the comparative dearth of sources from pre-modern centuries and the very different nature of the public sphere and the political languages of the times, we can refer to the communication and persuasion strategies that were in use as propaganda-like at most. Most phenomena of political communication between rulers and the ruled could be explained using the methods introduced by Hagen Keller and Gerd Althoff in the 1980s<sup>2</sup> for the study of symbolic communication and ritual. Their theses concerning the political culture of the Middle Ages, which primarily relied on visual and oral forms of communication as source material, are based on examples from the early and high Middle Ages. Here, the main medium was not writing but sophisticated sign systems and symbolically charged acts, including gestures and rituals. All rulers, i.e. kings, emperors, and also the pope, relied in their communication on this spectrum of non-verbal instruments of power. After all, the symbols comprising these semiotic systems were universally recognized political instruments that could be used to express both consent and dissent.

For football enthusiast Gerd Althoff, medieval rule had a lot in common with a game governed by fixed rules that were binding for both parties.<sup>3</sup> They included publicly celebrated rituals of rule, such as petitions or acts of submission, but also controlled expressions of emotion, i.e. the notorious tears of the king, which he could allegedly shed at will.<sup>4</sup> The main argument is compelling: in a time without universally binding international law or corresponding procedures, compliance with these rules served to secure an urgently needed peace. At the same time, these diplomatic habits appear as a hermetic discourse used among powerful elites that could hardly be accurately characterized as propaganda in the modern

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1 Schieder and Dipper, “Propaganda.”

2 Among the many publications in which this approach has been used, the following provide the most up-to-date overviews: Althoff, *Inszenierte Herrschaft*; Althoff, *Die Macht der Rituale*; Keller, “The Privilege,” 75–108; Keller, “Gruppenbildungen,” 19–32; Keller, “Mündlichkeit – Schriftlichkeit,” 277–86.

3 On this concept, see Althoff, *Spielregeln*; Althoff, “Demonstration,” 229–57.

4 Among the critics of the concept, sometimes polemical: Dinzelsbacher, *Warum weint der König*. More general: Buc, “The monster,” 441–52; Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual*.

sense. Seen from the early and high medieval playing field, this may be true. But this idea of political balance is also one that largely excludes any interaction with external disruptive elements, or to stick with the football metaphor, a swearing coach on the sidelines or the effects of a pyrotechnical rumble in the stands.

The wider variety of sources from the Late Middle Ages, however, confronts us with political facts that can only be explained as the effects of propaganda in the modern sense of the word. One might think, for instance, of the significant number of negative legends that tarnish the historiographic image of kings and queens. Often, these legends turn out to be byproducts of intra-dynastic squabbles. One could mention the hapless Edward II, the deposed count of Tyrol, John Henry of Luxembourg, or the French queen Isabella of Bavaria, who became the target of England’s enemies during the Hundred Years’ War.<sup>5</sup>

Much as we collide here with the methodological limits of research on rituals, we must also confront the modern scholarship on models of communication. This scholarship tends almost completely to ignore the pre-modern era and focus instead on the most formative examples of what we have come to understand as propaganda, preferably the mass propaganda created by Josef Goebbels.<sup>6</sup> No wonder. As an object of study, as an example of communicative strategies used to galvanize the masses, this propaganda has much more to offer. First and foremost, it made use of dynamically deployable mass media that was available across all social classes, as well as scientifically measurable interactions between political elites and the citizenry. The study of medieval propaganda offers none of these certainties. First of all, there are no models for this period, in which there were no modern structures of mass communication and the approach to the “public sphere” was completely different. Despite this, the popularity of the term propaganda in medieval studies is unbroken, even if researchers often forget to tell their readers what they mean by it, perhaps in the shy hope that their readership intuitively knows. But there is also an understandable unease associated with the term today, which is why the question of its applicability to pre-modern times is often limited to the search for comparable parameters based on ways in which it has appeared in modern times. This is only partially

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5 On Edward II: Valente, “The deposition,” 852–81; Given-Wilson, *Edward II*; on Queen Isabeau of Baviere, Adams, *The Life and Afterlife*; Clin, *Isabeau de Bavière*; On Margarethe Maultasch and the Transition of Tyrol from the Luxembourg Dynasty to Habsburg: Cainelli, “Die Ehetraktate,” 235–48; Haidacher and Mersiowsky, *650 Jahre Tirol mit Österreich*.

6 On the omnipresence of Goebbels’ propaganda apparatus, Kater, “Inside the Nazis”; Hachmeister and Kloft, *Goebbels-Experiment*; Sösemann, *Goebbels-Propaganda*, 52–76; Schieder and Dipper, “Propaganda,” 108–12.

effective, since the manifestations of propaganda, which is a highly amorphous communication phenomenon, often make little sense outside of a specific sociocultural context. But then again, there is something chameleonic about propaganda, such as its timeless characteristics.

Given the ambiguities of the term when applied to different eras, it is necessary to approach its potential usefulness, in medieval studies, from more than one direction. First, we must consider the genealogy of the concept, which calls attention to this versatility. We must then examine forms and uses of propaganda in pre-Hussite Bohemia which show both characteristics: the universal elements of propaganda on the one hand and, on the other, the features of this propaganda (which often addressed several diverse target audiences at the same time) that were specific to Bohemia in the years between 1400 and 1421. In this wide array of propaganda manifestations, the anti-royal examples used against the Luxembourg kings Wenceslas IV and Sigismund of Hungary were only a small side effect of the many crises of the period, which according to modern communication models favored the emergence of propaganda. These crises included the Great Schism, the development of a Czech-centered, spiritual-national reform movement, a royal reign made fragile by power issues and intra-dynastic strife, and the beginning of the confessional Hussite Wars. In the course of these often overlapping conflicts, several defamatory writings were composed which left significant traces in the later historiographical portrayals of Wenceslas and Sigismund.<sup>7</sup> However, chronicles are not at the center of the study, as they represent a category of propaganda that has already been filtered.<sup>8</sup> The focus is more on contemporary sources, such as treatises and manifestos, which even at the time were considered documents which would only be relevant for a comparatively short time. These documents are familiar to the scholarly community, but they have not yet been examined side by side or as a corpus.

### *Term and Concept*

Propaganda, like any communication phenomenon, defies precise definition. It is rather a spectrum of fleeting uses of language and other communication tools the influence of which can be perceived in many different ways. The verb

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7 Cf. Hruza, “Audite coeli!” 129–52; Roschek, “König Wenzel IV.,” 207–30; Čornej, “Dvojjí tvář,” 67–115.

8 Stedt, “Geplante Öffentlichkeiten,” 203–36.

*propagare*, on which the term is based, comes from early modern biology, where it was used as a synonym for “to expand.” “to graft,” but also “to reproduce.”<sup>9</sup> In the early seventeenth century, when it first appeared, it referred primarily to spiritual growth. In these early days, propaganda was both a missionary instrument and an institution of the Catholic Church.<sup>10</sup> The *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*, founded for this purpose in 1622, was a subsidiary authority of the Counter Reformation papacy with a permanent office in Rome. Pope Gregory XV had provided it with the necessary bull, and the intention was to provide support for the mission in China and thus help Catholicism play an increasingly global role.<sup>11</sup>

However, it seems that this modest office, the history of which has still not been given a thorough discussion in the secondary literature, also served other purposes. Around a century later, it was described in Zedler’s *Universal-Lexicon* as a “contact point for new Christians visiting Rome for the first time.” It was meant not only as a point of reference for new bishops from distant colonies who came to visit the Roman shrines for the first time.<sup>12</sup> It also addressed Catholic dignitaries who had been driven out of their dioceses by the Protestants. From the outset, the seat of the *Propaganda Fide* provided not only a place of refuge but also a forum for ideological edification, especially as the house had an printing press of its own which could produce and distribute any number of breviaries and missals.<sup>13</sup>

The French revolutionaries appropriated this idea of an ideological center when they transferred the concept of propaganda from the spiritual to the political sphere at the end of the eighteenth century. They saw themselves as missionaries (*missionnaires*) and apostles (*apôtres*) of a global doctrine, the new democratic credo. In 1791, Camille Desmoulins, the French revolutionary and

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9 Schieder and Dipper, “Propaganda,” 69.

10 The term “propaganda” became the *terminus technicus* for all Christian missionary institutions of every denomination; Schieder and Dipper, “Propaganda,” 69.

11 Propaganda is not mentioned in the founding bull (June 22, 1622). However, an excerpt from the founding day reports that the pope had entrusted 13 cardinals with the *negotium propagationis fidei*; Schieder and Dipper, “Propaganda,” 69.

12 Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon*, vol. 6, 973–74; Art. Congregatio de Propaganda Fide: *Zu Fortpflanzung des Catholischen Glaubens errichtet, und versammelt sich wöchentlich einmal in Gegenwart des Papstes in einem besondern Palast, der der von gedachtem Gregorio vor dieses Congregation aufgeführt werden, und in welchen diejenigen Personen, so nach Anehmung der Catholischen Religion nach Rom kämen die Heiligthümer zu besuchen, ingleichen vertriebene Bischöffe, und andere Geistliche aufgenommen, und verspflegt werden.*

13 Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon*, vol. 6, 974. *Es ist auch eine Druckerey daselbst befindlich, in welcher Breviaria, Missalia et co. gedruckt und von der aus an die Oerter wo es nöthig ist, hingesendet werden.*

cofounder of the Jacobin Club in Paris, equated the task of the Jacobins with that of Catholic *Propaganda Fide*. Like the *Propaganda Fide*, the “propaganda clubs” of the revolutionaries should also further the spread of democratic teachings throughout Europe.<sup>14</sup> These clubs did not exist for long, but it was precisely during the Restoration period that they also promoted the emergence of a conspiracy narrative spread by the advocates of corporatist society. According to this narrative, a secret organized revolutionary network operating out of Paris was responsible for the July Revolution of 1830.<sup>15</sup>

The idea that propaganda helped give every political movement a specific center and form a steady political following only began to be voiced after 1848, when the conservative parties of Europe began to understand the potentials of this tool. At that time, the methods of political propaganda included verbal persuasion but also persuasion by deed, as carried out with bayonets by the Anarchists. The German social democrats and communists distanced themselves from this practice and redefined the term *agitation*, which was based on arguments.<sup>16</sup>

The concept of propaganda received another layer of meaning around 1900, when the fields of sociology and later psychology turned their attention to its effects, making use of methods from emerging disciplines, such as communication sciences, public relations, and propaganda research.<sup>17</sup> This was the birth of American PR and the propaganda concepts of Edgar Bernays who basically invented the profession of propagandist. He understood propaganda as a positive instrument that could be used to promote democracy and the common good, for example in the public health campaigns at the end of World War I, which helped motivate the American (rural) population to be vaccinated against typhoid and typhus.<sup>18</sup>

With his comparatively positive assessment of the uses of propaganda, Bernays was unquestionably in the minority, however. In 1922, Walter Lippmann, who studied the formation of public opinion, pointed at the much more probable

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14 The French revolutionaries sought “de propager la vraie liberté.” Schieder and Dipper, “Propaganda,” 77–79.

15 While the clubs were still demonstrably active in the 1790s, there are no indications in the sources that they were active during the Restoration period. However, there is solid evidence that the institution of Parisian propaganda survived and played an active role in the 1830s. Schieder and Dipper, “Propaganda,” 81.

16 Schieder and Dipper, “Propaganda,” 94–99.

17 Around 1900, the idea arose that commercial, religious, and political propaganda were basically the same advertising tool, as they all served to persuade a target group, Schieder and Dipper, “Propaganda,” 101.

18 Bernays, “Manipulating Public Opinion,” 958–71.

dangers of manipulation through the mass media.<sup>19</sup> The experiences of the Nazi era again shifted research on propaganda in the direction of its psychological effects. For Jacques Ellul, the main aim of modern propaganda was to evoke feelings. Its main goal was no longer to change the ways in which people think, but to get them to act in the way the propagandist intended.<sup>20</sup>

But what has changed since 1962, when Ellul formulated his findings? I could share a relevant personal experience. In the autumn semester of 2023, I offered the topic of “Propaganda in the Middle Ages” as an exercise both at the University of Vienna and my home university in Brno in the Czech Republic. I was interested in whether the experiences with propaganda in the Cold War had had an impact on the prevailing perceptions of propaganda among students. They were familiar with propaganda mainly from their parents’ experiences. Since propaganda had a much more positive connotation in the countries of Central Europe than in the West, I hoped to find at least some differences.<sup>21</sup> The result was sobering. Instead of historical insights, the students offered me rather gloomy pictures of the present. They perceived propaganda as pure evil, i.e. as a highly ambivalent if not openly dangerous instrument of political manipulation, very much in the spirit of Walter Lippmann. Its main power lay, according to them, in total information control, which is why they associated propaganda with illiberal regimes, extremist political parties, and messianic individuals, all of whom (according to the students) were trying to impose their ideas on a wider public. In doing so, they would rely on strategies ranging from the simplification to the distortion and even the invention of information, or what has now become infamous as alternative facts.<sup>22</sup> The same accounts for constructed images of imaginary enemies, the exploitation of stereotypes, and the use of vulgar language, to name just the most important responses. Neither was there any trace of a positive perception or a historical grasp of the history of propaganda.

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19 Lippmann, *Public Opinion*.

20 Ellul, *Propagandes*.

21 Hruza has already pointed out that the term underwent a positive revaluation in the communist countries of Central Europe after World War II, while in the West it was replaced by alternative terms (public relations, marketing methods) due to its strong associations with the Third Reich. Hruza, “Propaganda,” 13.

22 The term “fake news” in particular, which was first coined as a means of suggesting that the mainstream sources of news were biased and unreliable and now is often understood more broadly to refer simply to forms of disinformation, propaganda, and hoaxes, is currently put to such a shifting array of uses that it is difficult to predict the latest developments. Cf. Wardle, “Fake news. It’s complicated”; Cooke, *Fake news*; Hendricks and Vestergaard, *Postfaktisch*.

It was quite clear that it would be next to impossible to apply these understandings of propaganda to pre-modern phenomena. Today, as empirical experience has confirmed, the concept is highly emotionalized, and understandings of propaganda tend to center around its impacts, which can only rarely be demonstrated in the case of medieval examples. To make the term usable again, it was necessary to get back to the complex web of relations between the propagandist and his target group, i.e. to emphasize the process famously summarized in 1948 by Harold D. Laswell, whose famous model of communication is based on the following question: “Who says what, in which channel, to whom, and with what effect?”<sup>23</sup> It was therefore important to comprehend the multiple levels of interaction between the propagandist and the target group as a playful relationship that finds expression through the chosen channels of information. And one must not forget the craftsmanship of the propagandist. He must know the tastes of his public, prepare the information in a credible way, and choose the channels so as to ensure that his target accepts the information conveyed, whether it is true or not.<sup>24</sup> In addition to choosing the right tools and channels, he must also be clear about the most promising strategies in the respective context.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, as Umberto Eco has pointed out, most information is ambiguous and can therefore be interpreted in various ways. Effective propaganda therefore requires not only control of the channels but also manipulation of the information content so that the target group gets only the message intended by the propagandist.<sup>26</sup>

As rhetoric became an increasingly important instrument with which to shape political opinion, a broad spectrum of strategies and motifs was developed the effective use of which determined the persuasive quality of the communicative act. Although the effectiveness and availability of some propaganda techniques depend on the specific cultural contexts, we still find similar propaganda techniques in use in almost every period of history. For example, the tactic recognized by Vladimir I. Lenin of simplifying persuasive content or limiting it to a core message that could be understood by as broad a public as possible was

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23 Laswell, “The structure,” 37.

24 Skill was an aspect to which Josef Goebbels also attached great importance. He saw propaganda as an art form of persuasive communication; cf. Hruza, “Propaganda,” 9–10; Doob, “Goebbels’ Principles,” 419–42.

25 Eco, “Guerilla,” 166–77.

26 *Ibid.*, 175.

perfected by Joseph Goebbels, but it had already been put to use in the medieval *ars dictaminis*.<sup>27</sup>

Among these universal truisms of propaganda use is the fact that effective propaganda depends on freely accessible, publicly available information. This information constitutes the foundation of every propaganda invention, since it increases the credibility of the constructed messages. Lies have a special role to play here. According to Goebbels, lies have to be carefully inserted into the propaganda act, as the target audience otherwise may no longer believe the message. However, it has also been true over the ages that the dissemination of persuasive content has been particularly successful when it has been carried out by well-known personalities. Equally efficient and timeless is also the strategy of disseminating persuasive content on many channels simultaneously and, above all, repeating the key messages as often as possible.<sup>28</sup> The latter elements both merit a chapter of their own. Most of the tried and tested strategies are based on familiar (narrative) motifs that change only slightly over time.<sup>29</sup> The communication procedures include the particularly catchy use of oppositions between good and evil and references to the perpetual struggle between the two. Above this conflict lingers a higher power that represents the principle of order and intervenes only to punish or reward. We also encounter the martyr and the principle of self-sacrifice for an idea or community, which is highly topical in the Hussite period. Last but not least, the propagandist may also use humor or parody. The former is known since antiquity as a subversive instrument of the ruled, enabling them to criticize their real or perceived oppressors in public without putting themselves in immediate danger.<sup>30</sup>

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27 Schieder and Dipper, “Propaganda,” 98–100; Doob, “Goebbels’ Principles,” 426–28.

28 Propaganda researcher and psychologist Leonard W. Doob was one of the first people to analyze the microfilm versions of Goebbels’ diaries in his research on propaganda strategies after World War II. He identified a list of fifteen principles that determine the success of propaganda in a society with modern mass media. Some of these principles are specific to times of war, while others, such as the two characteristics listed, have timeless validity, Doob, “Goebbels’ Principles,” 423.

29 One of the few historians who has dared look for propaganda structures in the pre-modern era was the British PR specialist and historian Oliver Thompson. His work, published in 1977, contains many terminological inaccuracies, especially for the pre-modern period, but it nevertheless provides a useful overview of recurring narrative motifs used for propagandistic purposes. Thompson, *Mass Persuasion*, 15–23.

30 On the intersection between humor, irony, and political subversion, cf. Schleichert, *Fundamentalisten*; Billig, *Laughter and ridicule*; Eco, *Tra menzogna e ironia*; Morreall, *Laughter and Humor*.

## *Propaganda against the Luxembourg Kings*

The years surrounding the outbreak of the Hussite Revolution have long been known as a period in which propaganda was used in an unprecedented density of transmission across all social classes. Between 1400 and 1420, the leading figures of the Hussite movement in particular succeeded in disseminating the complex content of their theology in a broadly effective, easily understandable way.<sup>31</sup> They utilized all available media and channels and relied in particular on the long-term impact and constant repetition of their messages. Anti-royal propaganda developed against the backdrop of the same crisis-related background. Its propagandists and target audiences belonged to a socially higher and therefore smaller but more educated group. However, they too ultimately used strategies and persuasive instruments that were similar to the tools and techniques used by the Hussites. But what kinds of communication spaces existed in Prague around 1400? The largest of these spaces was tailored to an audience that, according to Thomas Fudge, was illiterate.<sup>32</sup> By this I mean that most city dwellers could read at least reasonably well, which is why the emerging Hussite movement used oral preaching but, above all, combinations of text and image as a means of spreading its ideas. Most common was the convergence of “paint, poetry and pamphlets,” often in the form of allegorical images or symbols, to which explanatory or supplementary lines of text were sometimes added and which were carried as a kind of banner in public stagings, such as parodistic processions against ecclesiastical abuses, for example Pope John XXIII’s indulgence policy in 1412.<sup>33</sup>

Oral propaganda from the Hussite period consisted mainly of songs and poems, of which the Czech music historian Zdeňek Nejedlý has compiled a significant number from the Hussite period.<sup>34</sup> It would be practically impossible to reconstruct the melodies, but the texts they combine several of the functions mentioned above, with the most important aim being the propagation of the

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31 Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 179.

32 *Ibid.*, 180.

33 One of the most notorious satirical processions of 1412 was organized by students and Master Hieronymus of Prague. It was centered around an allegorical chariot decorated with seals in the manner of papal bullae. On it sat a student disguised as a prostitute with bells and jewels on his hands, adorned with imitations of indulgence bullae and offering these bullae to spectators with seductive gestures and flattering words, cf. Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce*, vol. 2, 252–53.

34 The controversial Czech musicologist Zdeňek Nejedlý collected Czech “folk songs” from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century between 1900 and 1913. His *Dějiny husitského zpěvu* (1913) are dedicated to the Hussite period.

movement. Accordingly, the texts reassures all sympathizers and encouraged them to distance themselves from splinter groups and opponents. But they were also intended to motivate members and supporters, including King Wenceslas IV, and sometimes also to persuade them to act in the interests of the movement. At the same time, they used “slander, subversion, and sedition” to belittle their opponents with the entire spectrum of parodistic tricks.<sup>35</sup> Songs and highly mobile groups of singers have always been a tried and tested medium with which to spread specific ideas across social and age boundaries. For the Hussites, they were an excellent form of low-threshold protest in which children could also be involved. The Utraquist priest Jan Čápek, for example, wrote a song for these kinds of groups in 1421, after the surprising victory of the Prague Hussites against Sigismund’s crusaders. The aim was to let them proclaim in the streets of Prague that God had personally driven away the thousands of barbarians, Swabians, Saxons of Meissen, and Hungarians who had attacked Bohemia.<sup>36</sup>

This children’s song offers an example of one of the forms of propaganda that offers an often unacknowledged advantage to which my students in Brno drew my attention. Songs and slogans are so low-threshold (from the perspective of the complexity of the texts) and positive that reciting, singing, or shouting them can be fun. The children who were taught to love the Soviet Union and despise the West with slogans and songs in school and kindergarten during socialist times did not find these texts offensive either, presumably because the act of reciting or singing them was enjoyable, at least to some degree.<sup>37</sup>

This use of provocative sayings and rhymes was already common in Hussite times. Just like the songs of Soviet times, the songs of the Hussite era could also be memorized by the illiterate. Best known is the phrase “veritas vincit, pravda vítězí,” or “the truth prevails,” which was incorporated into the

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35 Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride*, 188–91.

36 The first verse is the most meaningful in this respect: “Children, let us praise the lord / Honor Him in loud accord! / For He frightened and confounded / Overwhelmed and sternly pounded / All those thousands of Barbarians / Suabians, Misnians, Hungarians / Who have overrun our land.” Fudge, *The Crusade*. 81.

37 Little research has been done on the subject of low-threshold propaganda in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. A classic example of this kind of propaganda is the campaign against the “American beetle” (the *leptinotarsa decemlineata*, or Colorado potato beetle). The regime called on the population to collect these beetles in the 1950s and thus distracted the citizenry from serious domestic political problems. Cf. Formánková, *Kampaň*, 22–38.

official coat of arms of the Czech Republic after 1920 but was initially the battle cry of the socially and linguistically heterogeneous Hussite armies.<sup>38</sup>

If one had to define a place in Prague where the propaganda material of these years reached a density that bears comparison with the ideological and spatial presence of the early modern *Propaganda fidei*, it would be the Bethlehem Chapel in Prague, a propaganda center *avant la lettre*, where the Hussite movement had its spiritual and practical headquarters from 1402 on. The walls of the original chapel were decorated with hymns, defamatory images, and quotations from the works of the leading reformers. There was also an oral element. Jan Hus preached here in Czech at least three times a day between 1402 and 1412, and this gave his words tremendous impact over time.<sup>39</sup>

The situation was different with anti-royal propaganda, for which the Prague public was primarily a sounding board in the years immediately before the Hussite Revolution. Its main media were textual. The surviving pamphlets, tracts, and manifestos directed against Wenceslas IV and his brother Sigismund are exclusively the products of the elites, the clergy, the nobility, their chancellors, and sometimes also university circles.<sup>40</sup> These groups constituted a rather hermetic public sphere, and the general population had little access to their knowledge and intellectual expertise. Anti-royal propaganda was more a political byproduct of the general crisis than a category in its own right. Therefore, its genres are also diverse and range from a sober, legal recording of various gravamina committed by the kings to anonymous Latin lamentations, satirical poems and manifestos often written in several languages.<sup>41</sup> What they have in common is an appealing undertone, which is directed either at the respective king, his supporters, or his opponents, whereby motifs from the criticisms of rulers were used. The arguments touched on two aspects: the morality of the rulers' acts and the legal dimension of these acts. In the course of the fourteenth century, the idea that a tyrant king could be deposed using appropriate legal means became firmly established, such as the idea that depositions were to be implemented by authorized interest groups only.<sup>42</sup> Even if the propaganda

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38 Cf. Kroupa and Veyne, *Veritas vincit*.

39 Šmahel, "Reformatio," 264. On the architectural elements of the Bethlehem Chapel in Hus' times, see Baláček et al., *Jan Hus v památkách Prahy*.

40 Cf. Hruza, "Propaganda," 19–21.

41 Cf. Hübner, "Mord und Rufmord," 74–80.

42 The figure of the tyrant, perhaps best exemplified by Emperor Nero, had been a popular motif for bad rule since Suetonius' *Imperial Vitae*, which was legalized with the Investiture Controversy. Golf, Schanze, and Tebruck, *Tyrannenbilder*; Backhaus, *Tyrann als Topos*, 379–404.

against Wenceslas IV and Sigismund of Luxembourg had different roots and initiators, both were ultimately centered on the highly political question of their suitability as Bohemian or Roman kings.

Why Wenceslas, the eldest son of the extremely successful Emperor Charles IV, was caught in the propagandistic crossfire of his clerical and aristocratic critics is more complex than nineteenth-century historians suggest. Most of these historians considered him simply a bad, lazy, and incompetent king.<sup>43</sup> What is certain is that, in 1378, as the 17-year-old Wenceslas succeeded his great father Charles IV, he had a difficult time from the outset, as he had to deal with problems that were partly due to his position and partly related to the major upheavals of the time.<sup>44</sup> One of these problems was the generational change in the king’s crown council, where several politically experienced members from Charles’s time were getting old, so the young king lost his immediate protection. Another reason was economic decline, which was reaching Bohemia from the west. This was accompanied by several waves of epidemics, to which Wenceslas’s first wife, Joan of Bavaria, fell victim in 1386.

Furthermore, the king’s position in the complex structure of Bohemian rule became more vulnerable again, for there were two other powerful stakeholders in the kingdom: the Bohemian barons and the high clergy. Both used the change of rule to force the young king to renegotiate their own rights to rule.<sup>45</sup> The dispute between the five heirs of the House of Luxembourg, i.e. Wenceslas’s cousins Margraves Jobst and Prokop of Moravia, and especially Wenceslas’s long-term dispute with his younger half-brother Sigismund of Hungary, who plotted with the margraves, also caused upheaval.<sup>46</sup> Wenceslas’ Bohemian opponents thus had an opportunity to achieve their goals through pressure from several sides, albeit with changing alliances.

Clouds were also gathering over the empire of which Wenceslas had been head since 1376. Wenceslas had been a thorn in the side of several ecclesiastical electors, in particular the pugnacious Archbishop of Mainz, John II. This was particularly true after his father bought him the Roman crown.<sup>47</sup>

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43 The narrative motif of the “lazy Wenceslas” largely goes back to Piccolomini’s *Historia Bohemica* (1458). In the German secondary literature, this image was mainly established by Lindner, *Geschichte*, vol. 1 (1875). The great Bohemian historiographer of the nineteenth century, František Palacký, also preferred to avoid the subject of the elusive king, cf. Činátl, *Dějiny*, 59–66.

44 For a critical look at the political legacy of Charles IV, cf. Rader, *Kaiser Karl der Vierte*.

45 Cf. Klassen, *Nobility*; Šmahel, *Husitská revoluce*, vol. 1, 200–8.

46 Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 5, 29–32; Čornej, *Dvoji tvář*, 71–80.

47 Sthamer, *Erzbischof Johann II.*

The question of obedience in the Great Schism certainly played a role in this. The young king initially showed open sympathy for his cousin, the French king Charles V, who based his political ambitions on the Avignon papacy. This was a terrifying vision for the Rome-orientated electors, and as far as they were concerned, it had to be avoided at all costs.<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, the European context was far less important for the emergence of the black legend of Wenceslas than the entanglements in Bohemia itself. Although Wenceslas was criticized by many as the exclusive guardian of his father's legacy shortly after the death of Charles IV, the real spark for the construction of his bad reputation was a personal feud between the king and the Archbishop of Prague, John of Jenstein. John had been the king's chancellor in the first years of his reign, but he had left this post as early as 1384 because he had not gotten on with Wenceslas. He too feared Wenceslas' rapprochement with France, but he also took offence at the young king's efforts to break up the church structures that his father Charles had created.<sup>49</sup>

Wenceslas, on the other hand, took offence at John's ascetic orthodoxy and his open sympathy for the opposition League of Bohemian Barons. However, the main point of contention was church policy, namely the right of investiture of the Bohemian kings in the appointment of high church offices, which they had been allowed to exercise since the Přemyslid period in the thirteenth century<sup>50</sup>. This involved rights, but also no small amount of revenue, which Wenceslas wanted for the kingdom from then on. In doing so, he provoked a closing of ranks between the high clergy and the Bohemian barons, as well as other princes, including his brother Sigismund.

The situation came to a head in the spring of 1393, when Wenceslas attempted to make the Benedictine monastery of Kladruba, which had previously belonged to the Prague archbishopric, a bishopric dependent on him personally. With his contacts to the League of Lords, Jenstein succeeded in thwarting the intervention of the royal power with a legal coup d'état. However, Wenceslas then captured Jenstein's closest associates, the cathedral deans Nikolaus von Puchnik and Johann von Pomuk, and had them tortured in order to find out more about the bishop's plans and the individuals behind them. Pomuk died in the process.<sup>51</sup>

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48 Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 5, 57–63.

49 Klassen, *Nobility*, 51; Weltsch, *Archbishop John of Jenstein*, 68.

50 Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 5, 629.

51 Hübner, "Mord und Rufmord," 71.

Politically humiliated, Jenstein fled to Rome and wrote the *Acta in Curia Romana*, a collection of 37 articles of accusation against the king, which he wanted to present to Pope Boniface IX in the hope that the pope would make Wenceslas pay for the death of his court jurist for the death of his court jurist. The *Acta* were thus a personal reckoning. The text did not initially have a propagandistic purpose. It did not call on anyone apart from the pope to take action, nor was it intended to be read aloud. Initially, it was meant as a legally usable inventory of the long-term disputes with the king, for which the archbishop hoped to be financially compensated. However, the text also contained the first comparison of Wenceslas with Emperor Nero, a central motif of discourse on alleged tyrants which was widely discussed both legally and politically. This comparison was formulated in a way that Boniface, who was in favor of the Luxembourg Dynasty, could accept.<sup>52</sup> In the 27th article, Jenstein, who was not present himself, describes how the king had tortured Pomuk “with his own hand, applying the burning torch to his side and other places” on his body.<sup>53</sup> However, it was not even the legal aspects of the treatise that made Wenceslas seem a tyrant to the public, but its targeted exploitation by the archbishop’s sympathizers, the Bohemian barons, and, later, the ecclesiastical electors. Jenstein’s treatise reached the League of Lords, which had Wenceslas IV captured in the autumn of 1394.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, the text was sent to his supporters at the Prague bishop’s court, who passed the treatise on to the University of Heidelberg and into the hands of the electoral opposition. The gravamina listed in the treatise became the basis for Wenceslas’ deposition. The Nero motif appears again in a letter of complaint addressed to the king in 1397.<sup>55</sup> However, the final use of the extract from the *Acta* quoted above was in the sixth article of Wenceslas’ deposition decree from 1400, which was the result of a collaborative effort between Heidelberg canonists and lawyers from the Electorate of Cologne’s chancellery. It contains the following accusation: “[Wenceslas] murdered, drowned, and burned with torches in a terrible and

52 Weltsch, *Archbishop John of Jenstein*, 68–69.

53 *Ipsaque solus manum et ignem ad latera vicarii et officialis et cetera loca apposuit*. Jentzenstein, *Acta*, Art. XXVII, 433.

54 Eberhard, “Gewalt gegen den König,” 101–5.

55 The League of Lords (1397) wrote a letter of complaint with accusations against Wenceslas in which the Nero motif is further embellished: *Proč Vaše Jasnost učným pražské koleje studentóm a kněm Neronovu ukrutostí protivila se, neukazuje jim Vaše Jasnosti lásky, neb některé ste jímali, jiné stínali, jiné topili, jiné břebelci jako hovada cídili, jiné bili ste kyji, žádné jim jakožto přejasný otec Váš neukazuje pomoci, ale kládami, okovy i všelikými haněnímí je mnohokrát zhanbovali ste?* In Havránek, *Výbor*, 619.

inhuman way, with his own hand and with many other criminals he had with him, honorable and noble prelates, priests, and clergy and many other worthy men,” which is not worthy of a Roman king.<sup>56</sup> The passage also refers to the widespread notoriety of Wenceslas’ alleged crimes. This contention was intended to facilitate the legal side of his deposition. At the same time, it underlined the simple fact that the ecclesiastical electors, at least in their territories, worked diligently to slander Wenceslas publicly.<sup>57</sup> The attribution of the term tyrant by the highest ecclesiastical circles remained with Wenceslas until his death in 1419. His opponents used it again when it became clear that the king supported the Hussite movement, which, after the fiery death of Jan Hus, also earned him the reputation of a heretic.<sup>58</sup>

### *Between Sender and Reciever*

While the propaganda against Wenceslas was linked to the overlapping power interests of various secular and clerical groups in Bohemia and later also in the empire, the negative image that emerged of Sigismund was exclusively the result of the tensions between him and the Bohemian Hussites. The most effective instrument used by the Bohemian Hussites was written manifestos, which became their most important medium of information from 1412, when Hus was banned, to the 1460s, when the movement disintegrated.<sup>59</sup> The target audience of these manifestos was the Bohemian supporters of the Hussite cause, but the manifestos were also used to inform potential sympathizers in the surrounding countries, which resulted in the publication and spread of similar materials in several languages.<sup>60</sup> In terms of content, they served both for spiritual edification and internal strengthening of the movement, as well as to provide information about the current political situation, with propagandistic intentions. The steadfastness of the movement and the doctrine of faith were emphasized, but usually the difficult political and military situation of the movement was also brought to the foreground, as were the intentions of the royal opponent and his

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56 *Er bait auch, das erschrecklich und unmenschlich ludet, mit sins selbes hand und auch ubermicz ander uebelteder die er by yme bait erwirdige und bidderbe perlaten pſaffen und geistliche lude (...) ermordet, derdrenket verbrandt mit fackelen und ys jemerlichen und unmesslichen recht getodet.* In Weizsäcker, *Deutsche Reichstagsakten*, vol. 3, 256.

57 Graus, “Das Scheitern,” 20; Hübner, “Mord und Rufmord,” 60–61.

58 Čornej, *Velké dějiny*, vol. 5, 177–211.

59 Hruza, “Manifeste,” 121–22.

60 *Ibid.*, 132–33.

allies. The propaganda materials also contained requests for advice and help and sometimes also for personal or financial support.<sup>61</sup>

The manifestos of 1420, when the conflict between Sigismund and the Hussites turned into an open war, also document the verbal armament that came with this war. They began with a dilemma, however. Sigismund’s call for a crusade, which the papal legate had read aloud in Wrocław on March 17, 1420, presented many Bohemian nobles with an impossible choice. They sympathized with the Hussites, but they also recognized Sigismund’s legitimate claim to the Bohemian throne. Sigismund had threatened the Hussite nobility not with conversion but with extermination.<sup>62</sup> The fear of physical destruction, of losing all secularized church property again, and of further radicalization prompted Lord Burggrave Čenek of Wartenberg to convene a meeting of like-minded noblemen at Prague Castle on April 18, at which manifestos were written in German and Czech.<sup>63</sup> For Wartenberg, who was a follower of the king, the threat issued by the king in Wrocław represented a formal legal basis for a justified call to arms. The occasion for the document was serious, but the form of a feudal letter was not chosen. Instead, they chose the more open form of a manifesto. This was intended to provide the addressees with arguments as to why they should not pay homage to the king and instead arm themselves for the fight against Sigismund. In keeping with the occasion, its form was based on a formal charter. It was addressed to the higher nobility and the towns and villages of Bohemia and Moravia. Sigismund was also referred to without irony with the full title of Hungarian and Roman king. This was followed by the justification for the refusal to show homage, which drew on legal elements similar to the legal elements of Wenceslas’ decree of Deposition.<sup>64</sup> Here, too, the basis was the right to resist, because the Hussites now understood the Kingdom of Bohemia as an elective kingdom of their estates. In their view, Sigismund was neither elected nor crowned, and he was guilty of numerous offences against the Bohemian Crown and His Majesty,<sup>65</sup> such as the betrayal of Jan Hus with the rejection of

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61 This applies to the manifesto of March 19, which was apparently distributed immediately and thus found its way to Nuremberg and Ulm. Hruza, “Manifeste,” 136–37.

62 Hruza, “Manifeste,” 132.

63 Both manifestos were based on the same text. The most important difference between the versions in various languages was that the Czech version began with the Hussite ideological program, i.e. the four Prague Articles. Hruza, “Manifeste,” 133.

64 Cf. Schnith, “Königsabsetzungen,” 309–29.

65 This argument is linked to the general humiliation of the “Czech tongue,” which is mentioned in the text as frequently as the Bohemian crown, or more precisely, 14 times. Both are a substrate for the principle

chalice communion and the elevation of one of the most prominent enemies of the Hussites, John the Iron, to the Olomouc episcopal throne. Sigismund's attacks on the territorial and political integrity of the kingdom were also clear through the pledging of the Margraviate of Brandenburg and the sale of the Neumark to the Teutonic Order. Here again we encounter aspects of the discourse on tyrants in the accusations brought against Wenceslas, including allegations concerning the execution of Hussite merchants in Wrocław, whose property he had appropriated, and accusations involving his approach to Count Palatine John, Duke of Bavaria, who had transferred Jerome of Prague, Hus' comrade-in-arms, to Constance in 1416. But there is also a direct reference to the Nero motif. In January 1420, Wenceslas allegedly had ordered the German miners in Kuttenberg to throw all the Czechs into the shafts, and some 400 people had perished. This was probably an unverifiable legend circulating among the Hussites.<sup>66</sup> For these reasons, according to these propaganda materials, no one should pay homage to him, because anyone who were to do so would be a traitor to the Kingdom of Bohemia.

Given the fragility of the Hussite alliance at the time, this alliance should be understood more in symbolic political terms. However, this manifesto, whose dissemination can be traced as far as Ulm, was trendsetting in that it provided a structure for the rejection of Sigismund, which then took on a satirical tone.<sup>67</sup>

This was also true of the four Hussite manifestos preserved in the so-called Bautzen Manuscript, which were written between July and August 1420 by an author from the circle of the Hussite chronicler and magister Laurentius of Březová.<sup>68</sup> The circumstances of its creation were favorable to the Hussites cause. Sigismund's crusader army had suffered an unexpected defeat at Vítkov in Prague. He had been defeated by a small contingent led by Jan Žižka on July 14, and his army had been dispersed. Furthermore, he was not able to keep his subsequent coronation at Prague castle a secret. His role as a villain is clear. But in addition to this, the authors experimented with various propagandistic contents and strategies.

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of the national unity of sovereign power and royal territories, exploited by the Hussites for propaganda purposes. Šmahel, "The Idea," 16, 191.

66 On the ten charges against Sigismund in detail, see Hruza, "Manifeste," 143–46.

67 This information was taken from a letter that the council of Nürnberg sent to Ulm, cf. Hruza, "Manifeste," 137.

68 On the context of the manifesto tradition, see Hruza, "Ghostwriter," 415–20.

The first of these manifestos, the so-called *Lament of the Bohemian Crown to God and against the Hungarian King and the Constance Assembly*, also known as *audite coeli* in Latin, has been the subject of extensive research.<sup>69</sup> The main protagonist of this fictional speech is the personification of the Bohemian crown, who addresses the world and God as the allegorical bride of the Bohemian kings and thus the widow of Wenceslas IV. The crown mentions the good old kings of Bohemia up to and including Wenceslas IV, and it contrasts these exemplary rulers with the new bridegroom, Sigismund, who is portrayed here as an ogre and the embodiment of the anti-king, thus rhetorically reversing the ideal of the ruler: instead of protecting his subjects and upholding the traditions of the dynasty, he betrayed Margrave Procopius and, even worse, betrayed his brother Wenceslas. He was also responsible for the deaths of Jan Hus and Jerome of Prague. The enforcement of the crusade proclamation in Wroclaw clearly showed that he had betrayed the Kingdom of Bohemia and the crown (the metaphorical speaker), which was and last guardian of Bohemian majesty.<sup>70</sup> Sigismund is viciously attacked in the document, and his honor and social position are ridiculed. The strategy and language used in the document had a high entertainment value and a high recognition effect. This is shown, for instance, by the well-known comparison of Sigismund with the apocalyptic beast. According to the Bohemian Crown, Sigismund was “not human, but the most murderous offspring of a poisonous snake, which not only wants to tear apart his mother’s womb at birth, but to destroy her entire body. He is... the terrible dragon that your beloved apostle saw, red, with seven heads, ten horns, and crowned with seven crowns and ten stars.”<sup>71</sup> In general, Sigismund was “closer to an animal than to a human being, as he lacks all reason: a deaf viper, a dog, a predatory fox and greedy wolf and as unreasonable as a donkey standing next to a market stall and not understanding the violin playing.”<sup>72</sup> Accordingly, doubts were expressed about his legitimate descent. Charles IV was only presumed to be Sigismund’s father. Sigismund was averse to royal grandeur, which is why the Bohemian Crown described him not as a branch but as “a little twig of a noble foreign root, sickly and covered in

69 Cf. Hruza, “Audite coeli,” 129–52.

70 Sigismund is described as a villain allied with the Roman Church who destroys the *bonum commune* of the Bohemian kingdom. Hruza, “Ghostwriter,” 420.

71 In Czech: *Tentot’ jest, jakožt’ se jistě domnívam, onen ještér brožný, od tvebo milébo apoštola viděný, červený, sedmiblavý, desíeti rohy zřobatílý a sedmi korunami korunovaný, jenž oné dvanácti hvězdami korunované, slavné lákání ženy a plod její ušlechtilý, bolestně řízený, pílí obželinými ustý vražedlně sežrati.* The Latin description is significantly shorter. Hruza, “Ghostwriter,” 421.

72 Daňhelka, *Husitské skladby*. 32.

dung.”<sup>73</sup> In a reversal of the virtues of a ruler, the crown laments that Sigismund would neither protect the weakest of his subjects nor would be interested in preventing injustice: “How many virgins have been defiled (...) How many honorable, undefiled marriage beds have been defiled! (...) How many widowers, widows, how many orphans and how many childless, poor, needy, miserable, and desperate people have been destroyed by his evil hand.” The crown itself is also presented as his victim: “with an unprecedented fury, he rages against me, an abandoned widow, but also a mother and benefactress, and he strives to throw the famous majesty of my glory into the abominable dust.”<sup>74</sup>

However, *Audite coeli* was addressed not only to an educated audience who wanted to be entertained and thus possibly distracted from the difficult political situation. It was also intended for a wider public, as it was translated into Czech, together with the second satirical manifesto *nuper coram*, or the *Censure of the Bohemian Crown on the Hungarian King Sigismund*, written after Sigismund’s unsuccessful coronation.<sup>75</sup> While the Latin manifestos were most likely intended to appeal to educated Hussite sympathizers in Europe, the Czech texts are clearly intended for a domestic, mostly functionally illiterate audience. Accordingly to reding situations, they differ in content, but also in style. In the latter, Sigismund’s misdeeds are depicted much more vividly. The text has a strong national undertone, and the language is a little coarser. For example, Sigismund is portrayed in a gender-stereotypical manner as an effeminate warrior who was also responsible for the defeat to the Turks in 1419 because whores had robbed him of his virility. Here, too, he is mocked by the Bohemian crown: “You have become so effeminate through the lust of harlots that you did not dare put on your armor and did not see the enemy armies, but fled in shameful flight.”<sup>76</sup> This would have been repeated, the crown alleges, at Vítkov in Prague, where Sigismund’s effeminacy meant that he was unable to prevail against a small Hussite contingent, which included women and a girl, despite his military superiority: “But you were startled, perhaps by the frightening sound of a dry

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73 To emphasize Sigismund’s lack of royal dignity, the crown refers to him not as a branch but as a “little branch” of a noble foreign root. Daňhelka, *Husitské skladby*, 30.

74 Klassen, “Anti-Majesty,” 277; Daňhelka, *Husitské skladby*, 24.

75 The main accusation in the case of this manifesto is that Sigismund had not received the crown legitimately and was thus taking the Kingdom of Bohemia by force. Klassen, “Anti-Majesty,” 271.

76 Klassen, “Anti-Majesty,” 271.

leaf or perhaps by the snap of the flail (the popular Hussite weapon!). You fled shamefully and lost the bravest part of your large entourage.”<sup>77</sup>

As a conclusion to this discussion, we observe that a proper research discussion on premodern propaganda does not yet exist. As far as they are comparable, the results do not contradict medieval ritual research, but can be linked to its phenomenology. The results of the study, insofar as they are comparable, do not contradict medieval ritual research, but can be linked to its cognitive categories. The example of the Bohemian kings Wenceslas IV and Sigismund of Luxembourg in particular shows that propaganda in the fifteenth century could not function without a well-established framework of political symbols, rituals, and ideas of order. The king was a public figure who embodied normative notions of majesty. At the same time, he was forced to deal creatively with this network of norms, especially in times of crisis. His subjects or rivals for power by no means interpreted this embodiment of the norm as inviolable. This became particularly clear in the late Middle Ages, when politically and religiously motivated interest groups used every available means of communication to remind the king of the need to comply with these conceptual norms. We have ample evidence from this period in support of the conclusion that propaganda was an integral part of ritual-based communication among monarchs, elites, and wider audiences. However, since the tools through which propaganda could be propagated were accessible to an array of social, linguistic, and religious groups, uses of propaganda had an unpredictable side that even the presidents of today’s democracies fear. The many instruments, strategies, and motifs on which propaganda relies can be used at the right time and by capable propagandists to significantly change perceptions, e.g. to polish one’s own image, to help convey even a misleading a message convincingly. It may serve as a subversive form of expression for the frustrations of the oppressed, or to herald a toxic reception history that can no longer be shaken off. The strength of the mechanisms of propaganda lies in the ways in which they can be effectively adapted to new circumstances, and this in turn makes it possible to use them to interfere drastically with the normative frameworks of political rituals. The grip that various uses of propaganda had on Bohemian society before and during the Hussite Wars, including wide swathes of the population and representatives of royal power, speaks for itself.

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<sup>77</sup> “You arranged your army for war and advancing gloriously toward their wooden huts, built with wooden slats meant for sheepfold, and here attacked with bold hand, having a thousand troops for each defender of the hut.” cit. after Klassen, “Anti-Majesty,” 271.

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