

# The War Begins—The Defenestration of Prague (May 1618)

## Abstract

---

In May 1618, the Protestant and Hussite estates met at Prague to discuss what they perceived as interference on the part of Crown Prince Ferdinand of Styria in Bohemian affairs in general—and in matters of confessional co-existence in particular. During an attempted coup by Protestant regent Count Heinrich Matthias of Thurn (1567–1640), armed retainers working on his behalf pushed their way into the meeting room of Prague Castle. They singled out two Catholic regents, Jaroslav Borzita von Martinicz (1582–1649) and Wilhelm Slawata (1572–1652), accused them of plotting to subvert Bohemian religious liberty, and then threw them and a secretary out of a window. In doing this, they were deliberately reenacting the first defenestration (from the Latin word for window) of Prague in 1419, when seven city officials had been thrown from a castle window.

The rebellion grew as the Bohemian estates, controlled by Hussites and Protestants, formed a provisional government. They began canvassing Protestant Europe for allies and initiated a program of repression against Catholicism. The crisis deepened in May 1619, after the death of Emperor Matthias (r. 1612–19) and the Imperial and Bohemian succession of Crown Prince Ferdinand as Emperor Ferdinand II (r. 1619–37). The conflict now moved toward war. Ferdinand was elected emperor, but the rebels deposed him in favor of Elector Palatine Frederick V (1596–1632) who accepted and was crowned King of Bohemia. Meanwhile, military operations were indecisive until late in 1620, when the Imperial and Catholic League armies crushed the rebel forces at White Mountain (November 8, 1620). It was the first battle of what would come to be known as the Thirty Years War.

## Source

---

On Wednesday, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, the eve of the Feast of the Ascension,<sup>[1]</sup> at 8:30 in the morning, after the procession had been performed and the holy mass heard, four lord regents came from the main church St. Vitus to the Bohemian chancellery. They quickly carried all the chairs and benches except for a single chair out of the chancellery so that there would be enough room for the arriving Utraquist<sup>[2]</sup> lords. And at around nine o'clock, Utraquist lords from all three estates<sup>[3]</sup> began arriving in large numbers with their attendants and servants in the castle of His Imperial Majesty in Prague, [and] in the Bohemian chancellery. And [they] even went as far as the Council Chamber, which is due the greatest security and respect, without an appointment, with the greatest of importunity, so that the said chamber was full of these nobles and knights, and the burghers were mostly standing outside in front of the door, which thus had to remain wide open.

When the original four regents stood together in a window corner near the stove where they had more room, and hoped that there would be an answer of the Utraquists to His Imperial Majesty's letter, which had been received on Monday, in which they had once again been instructed quite gently not to meet again until His Imperial Majesty had arrived or sent other instructions.

Instead of this, they soon had a text read aloud in a clear voice by Lord Paul von Rziczán which went something like this: "After Your Imperial Majesty sent their graces, the lord regents, a pointed letter, which we asked to be distributed after the original was read aloud, it quite shocked all the Utraquist estates, [for] in it Your Imperial Majesty already declared our lives and honor to be lost. [As it seemed] everyone meant to proceed against us with execution, we came to a unanimous agreement that we, at the risk of life and limb, honor and property, meant to stand firm together, all for one and one for all, and

---

neither expect nor submit to any legally binding statement, but rather faithfully assist one another and protect each other to the utmost. Because, however, it was known that such a letter was the result of consultation with our religious enemies, we want to know and have asked those lords regent present whether some of them knew of this letter or participated in [drafting] it, or approved it.”

Thereupon the supreme burgrave<sup>[4]</sup> answered that because there were so few of the lord regents present in the Bohemian chancellery, and further because one of them, namely Lord Adam von Waldstein, the lord high steward, was lying sick in bed at his home in Prague, they would request that the three Utraquist estates submit the statement that they had had read aloud, so that the said steward could be notified and they could consult with him. They did not want to fail to provide<sup>[5]</sup> an appropriate answer on the next Friday (for the next day was an important holiday).

At this point several—Lord Heinrich Matthias von Thurn, Lord Leonhard Colonna von Fels, and Wilhelm Popel von Lobkowitz, senior—spoke one after the other to the lords regent: “No, no, we are not content with that. Why should one provoke us and refer us to the lord high steward, with whom we are quite content and are certain that he is not our foe but a pious man and our friend. We want to confirm this quickly [...]” Then the three lords listed above all spoke at the same time: “Later we can ask the high lord steward [for an answer] if we want, but now we want to have a clear answer from the four of you who are present.”

At this the four lords regent went to the window in the corner and answered that they were bound and sworn by oath to keep everything that they were told and discussed in the council secret at all times and not to reveal anything that was told them. Even more so was this the case as advisors of His Imperial Majesty, territorial officers and lords regent of the Bohemian Kingdom. Outside of the council could they say very little of that which had been discussed in the council, or [even] what they had and had not discussed, and they [the Utraquist party] should expect no confession. [...]

When, however, the aforementioned Utraquist lords were not satisfied, especially the Lord Count von Thurn, who remarked: “Since this is a very serious question, the burgrave and the lord great prior<sup>[6]</sup> can answer. Otherwise we do not intend to leave the Bohemian chancellery until we have received a clear answer.” And in this moment Lord Hans Litwin von Rziczán revealed the pistols which had hidden on his belt under his cloak, drew them and fired menacingly. [Then] he went up to Lord von Martinicz, kicked him defiantly, and straddled him, so that the supreme burgrave said after a short conversation: “Because the lords are not content and practically force us, we wish to declare together before God the Almighty, publicly to you and the entire world, that we have protested to the highest degree and take all those lords present as our witnesses, that His Imperial Majesty should in no way be unhappy with us, [...] that we were forced to give this answer and that we can say with good conscience that we did not advise the text which contradicts His Majesty’s letter. And because we see nothing in it that is offensive, much less so in those passages to which you have referred, that there is nothing to be condemned, as we have found, so if it should please you, we should allow said Imperial letter to be read immediately for better reference.”

At this they began an intense discussion, especially Lord Count von Thurn and von Fels, Wilhelm Popel the senior, Bohuslav Berka, Wenzl Wilhelm von Ruppá, Joachim Andreas Schlick, Hans Litwin von Rziczán, Albrecht Hans Smirzicky, and Lord Ulbrich Kinsky called loudly, “The Imperial letter clearly goes against His Majesty’s letter.” Again they said: “Lord supreme burgrave and lord grand prior, we know full well that the two of you are pious and did not advise this or wish to harm us, so Lord Slawata and Lord von Martinicz must have convinced and misled you.”

Then they turned to the other two lords, i.e. Wilhelm Slawata and von Martinicz, and said: “You are enemies of us and our religion, who wanted to keep us from our Majesty’s letter. You also persecuted your subjects who are Utraquists in his Imperial Majesty’s territories, especially in Crumau and

---

Straschitz. [You have] tried to force them to [adopt] your religion against their will, or expelled them from their properties. [You] displaced the Utraquist pastors in Imperial appointments and replaced them with Catholic priests, and furloughed and released captains and other servants in Imperial territories, replacing them with those of your Catholic religion.” First Lord Slawata answered: “I am no foe of the Utraquist lords and have not acted against his Majesty’s letter, nor forced my subjects to [adopt] a religion.” At this Lord Wilhelm Popel broke in with these words: “Didn’t you force those in Telč!?” Lord Slawata continued: “No, I never forced them, but I allowed whoever did not want to be an obliging Catholic to sell his property within a fixed time and to leave my territory unhindered with the money, even the richest, and to seek his fortune elsewhere. And anyway it is not fitting to interfere with the territory of Telč, because it is not in the Bohemian kingdom but rather in the Margraviate of Moravia.” And Lord von Martinicz answered: “I am too weak to be the enemy of these lords or damage them. As far as my subjects are concerned, I did motivate them to [adopt] the holy Catholic faith, but without any special force, rather with appropriate measures, and even before the letter from His Majesty, which I was subsequently able to obtain. And those were converted with proper instruction and faithful reprimands. [...] The appointing of the pastors, however, is not our privilege but rather His princely Grace has allowed the Archbishop of Prague [to do so] because the current, but also the previous Imperial Majesty had, before and after the distribution of the Letter of Majesty<sup>[7]</sup> commanded them to fill each and every position<sup>[8]</sup> with pastors. Thus those pastors which had been appointed by the Archbishop of Prague in his territories, who had been consecrated to the priesthood and placed in the Imperial Majesty’s parishes and positions in his obedience, but had then fallen away from the true faith and the Holy Catholic Church, at the same time wantonly neglecting their obedience to the Archbishop, they had been displaced and others appointed in their stead, which is clearly allowed and within the rights according to the agreement between the Catholics and Utraquists.”

At this point Lord Wilhelm Popel spoke about how at the last Bohemian Diet where the king had been elected we had been deceived and allowed that in the royal declaration concerning the privileges of the Letter of Majesty nothing was set down in detail but only a general list of the privileges. In this way our pious, honest Lord Count Thurn was denied the position of burgrave to Carlstein and lost the use of the corresponding property. Von Martinicz then responded that decisions reached in the Bohemian Diet of His Majesty and as king of Bohemia had been approved by all three estates and they must remain unchanged. Then Martinicz turned to Count Thurn and said: “Lord Count, this man shall be my witness and cannot deny what I have said, rather he must recognize it as proper truth, just as I have professed it at the transition of the offices in the presence of His Majesty and the other lords and high officers of the territory. After His Imperial Majesty promoted the man one level, namely to the office of supreme judge of the feudal court, but entrusted to me the office of burgrave to Carlstein, for which I did not wish to desire to do him harm and furthermore he had back then quickly been left by His Imperial Majesty, even had requested, that I should be satisfied with this, if Your Majesty wished to grant him this request. Your Imperial Majesty, however, did not desire this, rather wanted to remain with the previous resolution and the former distribution of offices, so that the lord had to take an oath as the supreme judge of the feudal court before me, and I, who had taken an oath as the burgrave to Carlstein, had to comply. And thus in this matter I am innocent and falsely accused.”

Thereupon the nine people mentioned were again thrown into confusion, especially Lord Count von Thurn and Lord Wilhelm Popel and all the others present were incited against the two lords Slawata and Martinicz with these words: “See, you dear lords, these two are the greatest foe of us and our religion, who wish to deny us the [the rights outlined in the] Letter of Majesty, the compromise, and other religious liberties. You can be certain, all you lords, that as long as they remain in our country, our Letter of Majesty—indeed our own lives with those of our dear wives and children—are not safe, and if we spare their lives, then the Letter of Majesty and our religion are doomed, and our bodies, honor, and property will be spoiled and lost, for thereby and in their proximity justice will not be obtained. For this reason they desire to now declare and punish quickly those who are here, and when we get [our hands on] Paul

---

Michna, who has snuck away because of his bad conscience, we will know how to behave towards him.”

During this speech, Lord Slawata sighed and spoke deliberately into Lord von Martinicz’s ear: “My Lord, Brother, if only we had gone away from them as I wanted, but you advised me against this, and see, now it is spoiled completely.” To which Lord von Martinicz answered: “Oh, my dear Lord Brother, it has come about much better than if you—an officer of the land and Imperial advisor and councilor—had abandoned the country in this [hour of] greatest need and danger, contrary to your oath. Then you would have been considered a dishonest and disloyal man, but now you suffer and die with me as an honest and true servant, a martyr of the Lord and of the emperor, our king and lord. Let us commend ourselves to the Lord our God.” Lord Slawata spoke to everyone: “O lords, we beg you for the sake of God not to rush into this and proceed against us—especially as the most noble among you are our friends—without prior charge and hearing, to intervene with such hostility contrary to all equity and fairness, but rather because we both are resident of the kingdom and, God be praised, of considerable wealth, and should one of them, be he who he may, have reason to lodge a complaint against one or both of us, this person should do so as is proper with His Imperial Majesty, our most gracious monarch, or summon us as required by the proper tradition of the local, honorable laws, in which case we would be pleased to appear opposite our accusers and respond to them, to accept the final legal sentence or proclamation and to obediently comply [...].”

Soon after this—I think—Lord Wenzl Wilhelm von Ruppá—surrounded by the others, read in their midst with a clear voice a text that went approximately like this: “Wilhelm Slawata and Jaroslav von Martinicz do not sign the Letter of Majesty which Your Imperial Majesty Emperor Rudolph issued in the year 1609 at the territorial parliament to all three Utraquist estates for the free exercise of our religion, as well as the compromise established by both the Catholic and Utraquist parties, in addition to the amnesties with other authorities, local officers, and members of the territorial court, neither in this nor in other matters of religion, the articles of the territorial parliament, [and] the record in the *Landtafel*.<sup>[9]</sup> As we have already declared loudly against them, in as far as they infringe upon the right outlined in the Letter of Majesty, the compromise, and our other religious freedoms which they do not allow us, although it was the minimum which should be taken up or happen, we in this case must be suspicious of them and cannot perceive or think other than that we must consider them our enemies. Since we now sufficiently recognize and are certain that the upsetting Imperial letter which was discovered resulted from their advice, and was composed here in Prague, and that they thus sought to negate the aforementioned Letter of Majesty and our freedom of religion, indeed to destroy completely the compromise and other agreements reached in the territorial parliament [...], we must publicly declare them to be both personal enemies and enemies of our land, destroyers of our rights and the general peace. And we will thus inflict a serious punishment upon them.”

After this text (or one along these lines) had been read aloud, the speaker loudly asked everyone present with these words: “Are you in favor of this? All in favor say ‘aye.’” Then nearly everyone, even their closest relatives, answered with a great cry. Then the same Lord Wenzl Wilhelm von Ruppá approached the two lords and said: “I am very sorry, my heart is heavy because of what is happening. I have long feared and predicted this; nothing good will come of it.”

To this the two men answered, one after the other: “It is known to all that we were unable at the territorial parliament of 1609 to become involved in matters dealing with religion or sign anything with a good conscience. We have answered on this point at that time to the lords and the others from all three Utraquist estates and appropriately apologized. Because the signature of the Imperial Letter of Majesty had nothing to do with us, just like the amnesties, which were issued by His Imperial Majesty himself and not by us, and contained in the decision of the parliament, it was neither necessary nor prudent for us to sign them. The compromise, however, was signed by those lords who had reached it and we had not assisted, so that there our signature was also unnecessary, just as in the other articles of faith and ecclesiastical matters. Because we—as simple people—had little to say or do with those matters, we

---

were not inclined to act against our conscience or to amend the record in the *Landtafel*. Similarly, in the ecclesiastical matter concerning Braunau, clearly a matter for His Imperial Majesty, it was not appropriate for us to seek an agreement with those lords, for with such negotiations and compromises we Catholics have already lost a great deal, but rather the lords should have brought the entire matter to the complete estate and brought their demands or supposed justice peacefully before the proper avenues. As concerns however the present accusations, we promptly and publicly answered at that time before all the lords with a clear protest, that this evil suspicion conceived against us is unfounded, and that all such accusations must be sufficiently proven within the system of justice. And we protest again [...] that one should have respect of our position with His Imperial Majesty and our office and not employ violence against us, or physically attack us in the slightest.”

To which Lord Wilhelm Popel said: “We are taking no regents but rather the evil enemies—to us all and the common peace.” To which Lord v. Ruppá quickly added: “Yes, let us issue an apology [i.e. a defense] accordingly so that the whole word can see that we acted honorably and in good faith.” Then Lord Wilhelm Popel and a few others turned to the other two regents and said: “Lord supreme burgrave and Lord grand prior, you should be along your way, we intend to do nothing bad to you, but we intend to have justice with these other two.” And then they attempted to take the supreme burgrave out by the hand.

Then Lord von Martinicz took the supreme burgrave by the left sleeve of his coat and addressed him with these words: “Lord supreme burgrave, my dear father, I beg your grace not to leave and to part from us, for we regents should not abandon each other, but rather suffer good and bad together and inseparably, should stand together in life and death.” At this the supreme burgrave pulled himself out of their grasp and wanted to remain in the chancellery, holding up his hands to prevent any sudden violence. Several others, however, then physically took the supreme burgrave and the lord grand prior to the door of the chancellery and led them away.

Then they immediately attacked the two aforementioned lords furiously and violently, so I think, Count Thurn, Count Joachim Andres Schlick, together with some others took Lord Slawata, and Lord Wilhelm Popel, Hans Litwin v. Rziczán, Lord Ulrich Kinský, Lord Albrecht Smirzický and Lord Paulus Kepler violently grabbed Lord Martinicz. They pulled them back and forth from the oven to the opposite window through the entire Bohemian chancellery and screamed: “Now we are going to have justice against these enemies of our religion.” And then Lord von Martinicz said loudly: “Yes, well, because it is for the sake of God and the Catholic religion as well as for the emperor’s sake, we want to patiently endure it all.” The members of the Utraquist estate disregarded this comment and their begging and replied: “Yes, in a minute we will lead in the wicked Jesuits, as well.”

And so the aforementioned persons themselves threw Lord von Martinicz—without his hat, which had a beautiful cord embellished with gold and precious jewels and which had been snatched out of his hand—still wearing his black canvas coat and his rapier and dagger, out of the window so that he fell into the rocky castle moat, thirty cubits below. He called out faithfully, “Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, Mother of God, remember me!” However, as he repeatedly called out the holy names “Jesus-Mary,” this horrifying toss and fall did not only not cost him his life, but, through the intercession our most precious and dear Lady and the grace and mercy of God, he sustained only slight injuries. It was then generally said, also among pious, god-fearing souls who themselves had clearly observed this and convincingly claimed, that our most holy and praiseworthy Virgin Mary the Mother of God was seen in the air above Lord von Martinicz, who was the first to fall, and, as his admirable patron, was seen to catch him by spreading her cloak beneath him and softening his fall to the earth, saving him from certain death and preserving his life and health. Which, although Lord von Martinicz himself did not so clearly perceive it, is no less true. He recalls well, that he called out both holy names, because he had long wished and hoped to be crowned as a martyr, and it truly seemed to him as though the highest heavens had opened themselves to him and that he should soon enter there in eternal glory.

---

Then they smashed the fingers of Lord Slawata's right hand, with which he tried to hold on, until they were bloody and he also devoutly called upon the Lord our God, saying "God have mercy on me, a sinner!" Then they threw him through the same window without his hat, in a black velvet coat and his rapier, so that he, too, fell to the earth, rolling about eight cubits farther and deeper than Lord von Martinicz, with his head wrapped up in his heavy coat. Finally the third, Lord M. Philip Fabricius, a councilor of the Holy Roman Empire and secretary of the kingdom of Bohemia, [was thrown from the window], mostly because Lord Albrecht Hans Smirzitský, who had also previously plagued him in his writings, demanded this. He, too, was thrown from the window into the moat without his hat and wearing his coat, and also called diligently to God: "Lord have mercy on my soul!" And in this case the primary actor was Ehrenfried Berbisdorf with others, who had also torn at his hair and his beard.

## NOTES

[1] The Feast of the Ascension is the day on which Christ is believed to have ascended into heaven; it falls forty days after Easter—trans.

[2] The German text uses the term "Sub Utraque" to refer to this party. The term predates the Protestant Reformation in Bohemia and means "under both," referring to the insistence that the laity receive both the host and the chalice at communion—trans.

[3] Unlike in other regions of the Holy Roman Empire, the clergy was not recognized as an estate in Bohemia after the early fifteenth century, though many clerics came of course from the nobility. The political process was controlled by the landowning class which was divided into lords and knights, while the peasants and citizens were granted only an advisory role—trans.

[4] Adam of Sternberg—trans.

[5] i.e., they agreed to provide—trans.

[6] Matthew Lobkowitz—trans.

[7] The so-called Letter of Majesty is also included in this project—trans.

[8] The German uses the term "Collatur" which is the right to appoint the holder of an office or stipend—trans.

[9] The traditional record of legal precedence and land ownership in Bohemia—trans.

Source: *Documenta Bohemica Bellum Tricennale Illustrantia. Tomus II. Der Beginn des Dreißigjährigen Krieges. Der Kampf um Böhmen. Quelle zur Geschichte des Böhmisches Krieges (1618–1621)*. Academia Prag. Verlag Hermann Böhlau Nachf.: Vienna-Cologne-Graz. Prague, MCMLXXII, pp. 42–49.

Translation: Ellen Yutzy Glebe

Recommended Citation: The War Begins—The Defenestration of Prague (May 1618), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-the-reformations-to-the-thirty-years-war-1500-1648/ghdi:document-4394>> [April 03, 2025].