The Battle Of White Mountain

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Group: II/21
Good morning Ladies and Gentleman.

Today I will present you a course of events that definitely influenced the life of Jan Amos Komensky and generations after him. This point of the Czech history had an eminent impact on what followed for the next three centuries. Therefore my colleagues Matúš Gaborčík, Tomáš Míča and me have prepared the topic The Battle of White Mountain.

Let’s start with conditions that predominated in the kingdom of Bohemia. The major cause of The Battle of White Mountain seems to be religious intolerance between the Catholics and the Protestants. The Protestants should have ensured their freedom of worship by the document signed by the Emperor Rudolph II. – The so-called Majestat. But Habsburgs didn’t respect this document and they increased their persecution of the Protestants. The Bohemian nobility was in more or less open revolt against the Emperor.

No wonder that later on they took an appropriate action. They met in Prague despite a warning given by Emperor Mathias from Vienna, to discuss the situation. The next day, led by such figures as Václav Budovec and Jindřich Mathias Thurn, the enraged aristocrats decided to act...

The most curious event in this history goes like this: the victims of their anger proved to be two royal councillors, namely Wilhelm Graf Slavata and Jaroslav Borzita Graf von Martinicz in their office at Prague Castle. These loyal Catholics were thrown from the 2nd floor window of the Castle's Ludvík wing, and this has come to be known as the Defenestration of Prague. Falling 17 meters, the men must have believed they were falling to their deaths. But, to everyone’s surprise, including their own, they suffered only relatively minor bruises. Later, Catholic followers attributed their miracle landing to holy intervention by the Virgin Mary. In reality, it was a ditch into which they fell, as well as bushes onto which they landed that probably saved their lives.

Soon, cooler heads among the nobility began to prevail, but by now it was clearly too late. Royal officials had been offended; the act could not be undone…
However, at first the nobles tried to demonstrate that their protest was not direct aggression against their ruler. But Emperor Mathias didn’t thought so and from the very start he labelled this uprising as a rebellion. The nobility then elected a thirty-members directorate made up of noblemen, knights, and townsmen in equal measure. They issued an apology in self-defence to try to calm the situation but with no success. The directorate became a central body for organising the new Estates army. A mercenary army that had been formed out of hundreds of anti-Catholics, hearing of the rebellion, made their way to Prague.

Finally, completing the rebellion, the Estates deposed their Habsburg ruler Ferdinand II. in 1619, and appointed Frederick of the Palatinate as the new king of Bohemia. The hope was that Frederick, who was nephew of James I. in England, would be able to secure support and funds from abroad but in reality he remained isolated. The Winter King, as he was later nicknamed, would last barely more than one season, forced to flee from the kingdom of Bohemia after the decisive battle of White Mountain…

Now let’s see how things really changed. The start of the year 1620 saw the advantage shift to Austrian forces – a year before, Ferdinand II. secured funds from Spain and support from Poland. On the other side, the Czech lands stayed internationally isolated and found themselves short of monetary funds. By the third week of September, united Imperial and Catholic League forces met in the south Bohemian town of České Budějovice, one side led by Maximilian of Bavaria, the other by Karel Bonaventura Buqouy. Both were fanatic supporters of the Counter-Reformation and entrusted by emperor to move on Bohemia.

Meanwhile, the Estate armies of Christian of Anhalt and Jindřich Mathias Thurn met in Jindřichův Hradec, failing to stop the advance of Austrian forces all the way up to Pisek. In west Bohemia, commander Arnošt Mansfeld was also forced to withdraw to the town of Pilsen. Shortly after, the Imperial and Catholic forces negotiated a cease-fire with Mansfeld, while awaiting reinforcements. The Estates army, meanwhile, stationed itself in Rokycany and then moved to Prague.

The breaking point comes right now. On the night of November 7th part of the Estates army, led by Thurn, take up an advantageous position at White Mountain, known in Czech as Bílá Hora. The morning of the 8th of November the Estates army was ready at White Mountain in two lines, formed of foot soldiers, cavalry, and
reserves. The right wing flanking the Hvězda arboretum, the left, led by Thurn himself, backs against the Ruzyně hillock. Cannons were set up. Behind their positions were 5 000 riders. Another 600 nearby. On the whole, the Estates army numbered about 15 000 men.

On the other side, the encroaching Catholic and Imperial armies, consisted of 27 000 men, were taking position on the field and their cannons were lined in a row out front. The both sides were ready for the battle.

At first, a small force of Catholics was sent to engage the enemy, because they wanted to see how the Protestants would react. Fighting began just after noon. There was surprise on both sides, none was greater, and fight was equal. But after some time part of the Estates forces began to fold under that attack of Catholics. Suddenly, Thurn's well-trained mercenaries showed a clean pair of heels. Other units, seeing them go, followed behind. Meanwhile, a cavalry charge led by Christian of Anhalt, inspired by its momentary turn, was not supported and the counter attack cut through his legion with devastating effect. The battle was just sealed. Several key military leaders of Protestants fell into enemy hands. With defective support, a lack of unity and a lack of steadfastness in the end, the day was lost before it had even properly begun. Thousands of dead or dying men were on the battlefield, while others were captured.

It is not hard job to work out the consequences. The Bohemian uprising had been crushed. The Habsburgs triumphed and could set re-catholicised Bohemia, punishing all those who remained behind, who had taken part in the revolt.

The next year, in 1621, 27 noblemen were executed on Prague's Old Town Square and an exodus of tens of thousands people, from Bohemia began. No other than a Habsburg have ever again sit on the Bohemian throne...

Ladies and Gentleman, I hope that this presentation has been of benefit to you and you have broadened your horizons. Thank you very much for paying attention and I wish you a good luck in the future. Thank you for now. Goodbye.