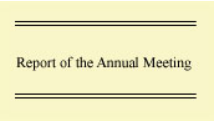
Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association
Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada



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Volume 40, numéro 1, 1961

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300585ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/300585ar

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Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)
1712-9095 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Heymann, F. G. (1961). The Death of King Ladislav: Historiographical Echoes of a Suspected Crime. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, *40*(1), 96–111. https://doi.org/10.7202/300585ar

THE DEATH OF KING LADISLAV: HISTORIOGRAPHICAL ECHOES OF A SUSPECTED CRIME *

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In 1483, as every student of English history knows, the boy-king Edward V disappeared in the tower of London and was never seen alive again. The question whether this was the deed of Richard III, or perhaps even that of his successor, is still under some dispute, though it seems that Henry VII had far less opportunity to commit the crime than Richard. About a hundred years later another boy-prince, Dimitri, youngest son of Ivan the Terrible of Russia, died a violent death, and while this occurred during the reign of Dimitri's older half-brother, Fedor the Bell-Ringer, later rumors claimed that the young prince had been murdered by the order of Boris Godunov, then the power behind the throne and seven years later elected Tsar. This case is still in doubt, and its notoriety is largely due to Pushkin's drama and Moussorgsky's opera, much as that of the death of the little English princes is due to Shakespeare. No great dramatist or composer has so far taken notice of the premature end of another boy-king which occurred in 1457, merely a quarter of a century prior to the death of Edward V: the sudden and in its consequences equally important death of young King Ladislav Posthumus of Bohemia and Hungary.

But if the dramatists did not take hold of this event, politicians and historians have done so. Some of them have tried to prove that someone had killed the fledgling ruler. Others answered with sharp counterattacks against the accusers. And both, accusation and defense, have throughout those ages down to our own century been conducted with an acrimony which might often seem quite puzzling. There was rather little of this "Let the dead bury their dead" attitude. The dead, it seemed, were still very much alive and needed to be either condemned or justified. We shall soon let the dead, and especially the dead historians, speak for themselves.

But first the basic facts. Ladislav was one of those few princes who were kings already at the moment of their birth. His father, Albert II, had himself been the son-in-law of the last Luxemburg King-Emperor Sigismund. On the basis of old dynastic arrangements between Luxemburgs and Habsburgs, and through his election as King by the Estates

* We regret the omission of the diacritical accents in relation to Czech personal and place names especially in the footnotes. This results in a change of the value of some letters, but they had to be omitted for technical reasons. Ed.

of Hungary and Bohemia, Albert became the first ruler to combine the three crowns which in the 16th century were to form the nucleus of the great Habsburg Empire. But he had had to fight for his heritage, and had died after an uncertain reign of less than two years. The son, born in February 1440, nearly four months after his father's death, was destined again to become King of Bohemia, King of Hungary and Duke of Austria. He was almost generally accepted as king of Hungary as early as 1445, after the tragic death at Varna of his competitor Wladyslaw the Jagiellone, King of both Poland and Hungary. Yet Ladislav's uncle and guardian, Emperor Frederick III, did not release the boy from virtual emprisonment till forced to do so by the Austrian Estates in 1453. In the same year Ladislav was also crowned King in Prague, after he had promised to safeguard the Basel Compacts, the peace arrangement between the Church of Rome and the Czech Estates which ended the Hussite Wars and granted the Czechs the use of the Chalice for laymen. He had also implicitly acknowledged the elective character of his Bohemian Kingship.

But though he was now recognized as rightful bearer of three crowns, he could not govern as yet. In his two Kingdoms gifted and powerful men had been elected and confirmed as "gubernatores" or regents: Jiri or George of Podebrady in Bohemia, Janos or John Hunyadi in Hungary. Hunyadi's rule did not last long. Soon after his spirited and victorious defense of Belgrade in 1456 the great killer of Turks died, survived by two sons, Ladislav or in Hungarian Laszlo, as I shall call him to avoid unnecessary confusion, and Matthias. Young King Ladislav was not willing to let his namesake, who was only a young man of 24, inherit his father's power. He hurried to Belgrade, accompanied by his highly ambitious mentor and relative, Count Cilli, long an enemy of the Hunyadis. They did not quit the field easily. In a brawl in Belgrade Castle Cilli was slain by the Hunyadis and their retainers. King Ladislav, however, took his revenge. Carefully disguising his intentions he lured the two Hunyadis to his court in Buda where Laszlo was arrested and immediately decapitated, while the much younger Matthias, in chains, had to accompany the King to his residence in Austria. It seemed that the young ruler had achieved, at this young age, a position of real strength and independence, at least in Hungary.

Meantime negotiations had been concluded for the King's marriage with Princess Madeleine, daughter of Charles VII of France. In these discussions the Czech regent, George of Podebrady, had had a prominent part. The reason was political — there was hope that an intimate connection with France would counteract the Burgundian claims upon Luxemburg, a Bohemian fief since the times of King John the Blind.[1] George

[1] See Urbanek, *Vek podebradsky* (in Ceske dejiny, ed. Novotny), III, 1930, pp. 189 ff (later quoted: Urbanek, Vek) and the letter of Charles VII in Fontes rerum Austriacarum, vol. XX, Vienna 1860, p. 123.

now insisted, against considerable hesitation on the part of the King, that the wedding be celebrated in Prague.[2] There the young King arrived from Vienna late in September 1457, while a delegation consisting of some of the leading nobles of Bohemia and Hungary went to France to conduct the princess to Prague. But before this solemn procession could even start on its way east, the royal family of France was informed that the King, at the tender age of 17, had died of the plague on the 23rd of November.

But was it the plague? This was the time of the Renaissance, a time when suspicions of murder were easily aroused. It might be assumed that the Royal Court of France had a considerable interest in getting to know all about it. France's best-known historian of the later 15th century, Philippe de Commines, was himself still a boy when Ladislav died, yet he claimed to have been personally well informed about this event. According to him, Ladislav, whom he calls "Le Roi Lancelot", probably because this sounds much like the Hungarian form Laszlo, did not die a natural death. He was, Commines says emphatically, poisoned. The deed was done "by a Lady of high birth who had fallen in love with the King and the King with her". "I know this", says Commines, "because I have seen her brother. She was fiercely angry with the King, for he intended to marry the daughter of King Charles VII who today is called the Princess of Vianne. Therefore the lady poisoned the King when they were together bathing, by giving him an apple to eat. She had applied the poison to the fruit with her knife".[3]

This story, more romantic than political but supposedly learned first hand by Commines — and I do not mean here to enter the old dispute about his value as a historical source — would hardly have shaken the domestic peace of the Kingdom of Bohemia if it had been believed. But there, and even more so in the dependent duchies of Silesia and in the neighboring country of Austria, different suspicions arose. Naturally the question was asked: "cui bono?" And the answer was very obvious. On the second of March, 1458, about, a quarter of a year after the young King's death, George of Kunstat and Podebrady, who had already governed the country for the last six years, was elected King by the Czech diet. He, clearly, had risen high as a result of Ladislav's death. As he was a Utraquist, that is a Hussite insisting on the right of the Czech people to have the Holy Communion dispensed in both forms, bread and

[2] Urbanek, Vek III, 191 ff.

[3] The story appears in all editions, generally in book VI, chapter 12 (Edition Godefroy, Paris, pp. 268-9). Some Czech historians, including Palacky, assume that the "Lady of high birth", also in Commines' report, is George of Podebrady's wife Johanna whose brother, Lev of Rozmital, did indeed visit France. However she was old enough to be Ladislav's mother, and it seems doubtful whether Commines is really referring to a woman whom he should have known, during the years of his youth to have been Queen of Bohemia and, after George's death, still for quite a few years an active and well-known Queen-Dowager.

wine, to laymen as well as to priests, his election had been most warmly supported by the head of the Czech Utraquist Church, its non-canonical archbishop John Rokycana. Obviously his church was now more firmly defended than before. There we have already two prominent figures who, it could be claimed with some justification, stood to profit from this death. But it seems that a man who clutches a crown by secretly killing the King also needs his Lady Macbeth, and so George's faithful consort, Johanna, from the baronial house of Rozmital, was almost immediately and strongly implicated. Further, in Austria, there was Ulrich Eizinger, powerful leader of a baronial group and an old enemy of Cilli. He had recently been in some disgrace with King Ladislav who had come under the influence of the former mayor of Vienna, Conrad Hoelzler, an enemy of Eizinger as well as of George of Podebrady. Therefore the King's death strengthened Eizinger's position in Austria. Accordingly he, too, was accused of having had a part in the suspected murder though, at best or at worst, he could only have been an instigator, having been far away in Austria at the time in question. Since Matthias Hunyadi, called Corvinus, who had been ordered to be brought to Prague by Ladislav shortly before his death, was almost immediately freed by George and was elected King by the Hungarian Estates, he, or at least the Hunyadi party in Hungary, was also sometimes charged with association in the crime. As a simple fact of history it should be pointed out here that Ladislav's death resulted in the rise of national Kingship in Bohemia and in Hungary and postponed the formation of the East-Central European power of the Habsburgs by nearly three quarters of a century.

But among all those suspected nobody was as prominent, as important and, in the end, as controversial as King Ladislav's successor in Bohemia, George. He was a Czech, a Slav, but in the Bohemian crownlands he had many German vassals and subjects. He more than anybody else represented a differing ideology, especially a reformed religion, widely considered as heretical, but also a political attitude which later brought him into conflict with antagonistic political and social forces inside and outside Bohemia. Thus the overwhelming part of the discussion that proceeded from here was not merely whether Ladislav died a natural or a violent death, but more precisely whether he died a natural death or was murdered, directly or indirectly, upon the order of George of Podebrady.

Beside the mere "cui bono", therefore, another issue naturally loomed large: What had been the relationship between the two, George and Ladislav? This was a question which especially those people would ask who were anyhow inclined to distrust the regent. There had been a time when this relation had seemed nothing if not warm and cordial. During the early years of Ladislav's official rule, beginning in 1453, during which the boy-king had resided in Prague, his education had been supervised by George with great care. Of course he had not been able to make

a Czech, even less to make a Hussite of the youngster whose upbringing, up to this moment, had been essentially German and intensely Catholic. But he had seen to it that Ladislav learnt the Czech language, became acquainted with the history of his Slavic Kingdom and of his predecessors, and he had wisely if not always successfully tried to prevent the young man from throwing away his popularity among the people of Prague by attacks upon the Hussite-Utraquist creed and clergy. In these periods an intimate relation had developed between the two which was well characterized by their calling each other "father" and "son".[4]

Later on, as a result of Ladislav's stay in Hungary, some if not much of the original closeness and warmth had evaporated. George had been a good friend of the older Hunyadi whose career had had so much in common with his own, just as in Austria his friend had been Lord Ulrich Eizinger. The execution of Laszlo Hunyadi upon Ladislav's order was an act of which George was bound to disapprove.[5] Nor had he liked some attempts of the King to make decisions of great political importance on his own, without the approval of the regent — decisions which might have involved Bohemia in war with Ladislav's former guardian whom the young man hated bitterly — the Emperor Frederick III. And when George called a combined diet of the Czech and Austrian Estates to the Moravian city of Znojmo, the King countermanded this call.[6] It would thus seem rather unlikely that George could look forward with much joyous anticipation to the none too distant day — St. George's day, April 23, 1459[7] — when the term of his regency would end. Does this, then, mean that the tension between the two had become dangerous and incapable of a friendly settlement? If so, George's insistence on the King's return to Prague for the wedding might in itself assume a sinister aspect, as George's enemies were not slow to point out. Actually, there is little or nothing in the sources that would indicate renewed or acute friction between Regent and King during the latter's residence in Prague in the fall of 1457. On the contrary, it rather seems that George used it to rebuild the temporarily damaged relationship in his own interest and that of the country.

In this attempt he seems to have been remarkably successful. It is one of the sources most hostile to George which tells us that "poor Ladislav loved George to the end of his life".[8] This could, of course, and was indeed, interpreted as simply showing the double-faced, scheming char-

[4] For the best presentation of the material on which these remarks were based see Urbanek, *Vek* II, 757 ff.

[5] Urbanek, *op. cit.* III, 177 ff.

[6] Urbanek, *Konec Ladislava Pohrobka,* Rozpravy ceske akademie ved, tr. I, 67, Prague 1924, pp. 86 ff. (quoted from now on as Urbanek, Konec). See also Bachmann, Geschichte Böhmens II, Gotha 1899, in regard to differences in Ladislav's and George's foreign policy, pp. 446 f. and 464.

[7] See Archiv cesky XV, 212.

[8] Peter Eschenloer, in Scriptores rerum Silesiacarum VII, 5.

acter of the regent. Yet the argument which we also find — that George was in a pretty hopeless predicament from which only the King's death could free him, will hardly stand up to scrutiny. All that can be maintained is that the older frictions may not have been completely forgotten by either the King or the Regent.

But from saying that Ladislav's death may have appeared to George as an event perhaps personally regrettable but in its outcome politically convenient, it is clearly a wide step to claiming that he brought this death about. Regicide, after all, was a terrible crime, unforgivable and barring all hope for salvation, even in this period when many of the ideas of medieval political theology were about to break down. And let me just say right-away that George's most important spiritual advisor, John Rokycana, whose role as a church reformer and as an ethical and humane religious thinker of high rank is only now gaining the recognition it deserves, was as likely to encourage George toward committing this murder (or to commit it himself) as Saint Thomas More, had he lived long enough, would have been likely to encourage anybody to murder Edward VI. From my own studies of Rokycana the man, the theologian, the moral philosopher and the church leader, I feel that it is utterly absurd even to consider him as potential killer.[9] On the contrary, Rokycana's life-long devotion to George would appear to me as a strong testimony for the great King's basic probity.

From George's own life much could indeed be inferred in regard to his character. Yet no general deductions of this kind could really be considered as a fully sufficient proof for either the guilt or the innocence of George. The more people tried to rely on such search for motives and character, the more freely they let themselves be influenced by their deep-seated if in some cases not fully conscious prejudices, among whom religion and nationalism were prevalent. This was true especially in the early period, during George's life time, but it did not cease to be true even much later.

From the first period after Ladislav's death we have, of course, a number of official documents, such as a report which the regent, on the very day of the King's death, sent to the Hungarian Estates.[10] While this says nothing about the causes, plague ("Pestilencz") is given as cause in an entry in the Viennese city records and in a message sent by George of Podebrady to the City Council of Vienna.[11] Yet the rumor of a violent death, of murder, and especially of poisoning, was afoot before very long. In January 1458 George considered it necessary to

[9] See Heymann, "John Rokycana, Church Reformer between Hus and Luther", *Church History*, September 1959, pp. 240-280.

[10] I. Kaprinai, *Hungaria Diplomatica temporibus Mathiae*, Vienna 1767, II, 109.

[11] *Copey-Buch der gemeinen Stadt Wienn*, ed. Zeibig, Fontes rerum Austriacarum VII, Vienna 1853, pp. 51 and 59 f.

have this rumor refuted during a meeting of the Austrian Estates.[12] This was done in a speech presented by one of the regent's most capable friends and diplomats, Jost of Einsiedel, in which he also referred to the dignitaries who had been around the King during his illness. Among them were a bishop, counsellors, chamberlains, physicians and others, most of whom, as the speaker emphasized, were not Czechs, which indicated that they were Germans, particularly Austrians. Surely many of them would regard the Czech heresy with considerable aversion.

It may seen peculiar that the report — it is not the text of the speech itself but a summary contained in the proceedings of the Austrian Estates — does not contain a single name. At the time, presumably, it was taken for granted that the Austrian barons and clergy knew who among their numbers had been around the King during those fateful days. It is less easy to understand that all the later charges, many of them levelled at times when George, as the heretic King, had become the victim of a fierce concentric attack from Breslau, Vienna, Rome and Buda, never went beyond quoting anonymous witnesses. We can, therefore, perhaps understand that George himself, after the single attempt to justify himself and his entourage, decided to eschew any further discussion and gave corresponding instructions to his subordinates.[13]

Indeed it was a well-nigh hopeless task to check the rumors contained at the time in popular street ballads sung in the inns and wine cellars of Vienna and elsewhere. There were a good many of these, and remarkably one or two of the earliest ones merely express sadness about the King's death without referring to a violent cause at all. One of them, however, has by its truly dramatic quality achieved more fame than all others and was often quoted. In this song, though, Ladislav is not poisoned as in most other sources that assume his violent death. Instead we hear how, by accident, Rokycana has become aware that the King of France has promised his daughter to Ladislav only on condition that he drives all heretics from his country. "Der Rockenzahn", as his name is germanized, thereupon mobilizes a whole group of Czech heretics, leading among them of course "Girsich", otherwise Jiri of Podebrady. The young King, faced with this assembly of sinister enemies, implores them on his knees to spare his life, promising them, and especially his "dear father George", to give them all his lands, all his power, and to retire into a monastery. But there is no pity among those "Herren auss Boehmerlandte" — those lords from the Czech country, they throw themselves on him and choke him to death. Surely God will revenge the horrible deed.[14]

[12] J. Chmel, *Materialien zur österr. Geschichte*, Vienna 1838, II, 147 ff.

[13] F. Palacky, *Zeugenverhör über den Tod König Ladislaws*, Abhandlungen der kgl. böhmischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, V. Folge, vol. 9, Prague 1856, p. 15 (quoted from now on as Palacky, *Zeugenverhör)*.

[14] Printed e.g. by H. C. Senckenberg in *Selecta iuris et historiarum*, vol. V, Frankfurt 1739, 42-49. For other such songs see the bibliographical footnote in

This sort of popular poetry was, of course, well-nigh unbeatable as political propaganda. But beside it there were some voices of far greater authority who either simply expressed their doubt in the official explanation — death from an attack of bubonic plague — or went beyond this and openly declared that Ladislav must have been poisoned.

A voice whose utterance, at first glance, seems quite damaging to the repute of George comes from a man who, one might think, ought to have known. He was one of the King's secretaries, called Johann Roth or Rode, and his letter was directed to Eneas Sylvius. The Czechs claim that Ladislav died of the plague, but, Roth declares, he himself knows better. He is not going to say anything now, but in good time the truth will emerge. For who, he then argues, could believe that a most sturdy adolescent in the best of health could, within a mere 37 hours, die of a natural death? [15]

This, indeed, becomes the main argument of the accusers. Another one, the Breslau town secretary and chronicler Peter Eschenloer, was also in Prague at the time. In his first account no mention is made of poisoning. This was left to his famous history of Breslau from 1440 to 1479, especially to the German edition which was written many years after the event. As those years had passed, the duration of the sickness had contracted. "*Binnen zwenzig stunden was er gesund und tot.*" — "Within 20 hours he went from full health to his death." But the King was so strong, he continues, "he could have withstood any illness or epidemics for several days". Therefore he must have been poisoned. And as a symptom for this he relates that the King, while lying in state, showed a swollen stomach.[16] He also claims — and this claim is later repeated by another man of Breslau, George's most fanatical enemy, Canon Tempelfeld, that before Ladislav's death all his chamberlains had been removed from the King's presence — a claim refuted by other sources, even some of those not too friendly to George.[17]

Eschenloer's story was written at a time when the city of Breslau was in a fierce, long drawn-out war with George of Podebrady, the Czech heretic whom the Catholic German city was never willing to acknowledge as its lord. But his arguments were ever more widely shared, especially in German countries, until a certain Jacob Unrest, a clergyman and author of a history of Carinthia and one of Austria, writing at the very end of the 15th century, shows that he really knows all the details.[18] The

Urbanek, *Konec*, 167, and A. Kraus, *Husitstvi v literature, zejmena nemecke*, vol. I. Prague 1917, 106 ff.

[15] Palacky, *Zeugenverhör*, pp. 19, 20, 44.

[16] P. Eschenloer, *Geschichten der Stadt Breslau*, ed. Kunisch, vol. I, Breslau 1827, p. 38 ff.

[17] *Archiv für österreichische Geschichte*, vol. 61, p. 165. See for a critical treatment of this special issue also Urbanek, Konec, 165 f.

[18] Chronicon Austriacum, ed. Hahn, in *Collectio monumentorum ineditorum* I, Braunschweig 1725, p. 549 f. A. Kraus (*op. cit.* I, 107), draws attention to the ancient origin of the story.

murder was committed by Gursich, which is Jiri, though not of Podebrady but of Holewarsy (a mix-up with the later Czech condottiere Holubar), as well as "his damned wife and his cursed daughter". They invent a very intricate way of cutting an apple so that one side of it is poisoned while the other which they eat themselves is not touched by the poison. It is Commines' story again, but without the motive of spurned love.

Among other versions which, still near-contemporary, vent the possibility of poisoning as cause of Ladislav's death, two at least must still be mentioned. One is a long passage in Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini's biography of the Emperor Frederick III repeated by him, in almost the same words, near the end of his slightly later and more famous Historia Bohemica. But it also has to be emphasized that the very first time he took notice of the event, in a letter of January 1458, nothing but the "most cruel plague" (crudelissima lues) seemed responsible for the King's death.[19] In his two greater works, both finished in the summer of 1458, Aeneas still starts with those reports that list the symptoms of the plague. There are some of them — like the King's deep depression and signs of a temperature — which in few other places are mentioned as clearly as in this report. Yet he also relates that the German doctors — again no names — claim to have *seen* traces of poison in the King's urine — a rather unreliable diagnosis without the help of chemical analysis, not available at the time. Cardinal Piccolomini professes his inability to decide for one or the other theory, but he is quite aware of the "*semper aliquit haerel*", and the man whom he seems to suspect in the first place is not George of Podebrady but Rokycana — the great heresiarch. Doubtlessly Rokycana, more than anyone else, had, by the strength of his personality and his devoted labors, secured the survival of the Hussite-Utraquist, the heretical church. To him, so says Aeneas, "*mors regis jucundissima fuit*" — the King's death was most pleasing to him. Indeed — in relation to Rokycana Aeneas' religious animosity was overwhelming, and could not be repressed in favor of even an attempt at objectivity. Not quite so in regard to George of Podebrady. While Aeneas mentions also various causes of disagreement between Ladislav and George, he nevertheless reports, without any expression of scepticism, the scene — often quoted by later writers — in which the dying young King places the charge for his lands and peoples trustingly into the hands of the man who, on the grounds of Aeneas' own story, might conceivably have been his murderer. In the long run the lightly sleeping suspicion of regicide could at least be awakened as an instrument of pressure against George, and this was then done, too, after the final break between Pius II and King George, though much more assiduously by Pius' successor Paul II.

[19] Historia rerum Friderici imperatoris, in *Analecta Monumentorum omnis aevi Vindobonensia*, ed. A. F. Kollar, vol. II, Vienna 1762, p. 468 ff, for the earlier notice see Palacky, *Zeugenverhör*, p. 31.

A similar attitude to that of Aeneas Sylvius we meet in the case of the Viennese Canon and Professor Thomas Ebendorfer of Hasselbach. Ebendorfer does not outright accuse but he clearly questions the "official version". Specifically he mentions assumptions intended to make the plague diagnosis appear doubtful. He says that the King had had no headaches, that he had shown suspicious black spots in his face and back (which incidentally agree quite well with the plague diagnosis) and that no precautions had been taken after the King's death to prevent infection. His claims were taken from the report of one of those German doctors who came to Vienna after Ladislav's death. Their free and unhindered departure from Prague to Vienna is, however, in itself an important fact which should not be lost sight of.[20]

If, indeed, the diagnosis for plague were as poorly supported as that for poisoning we should perhaps now be in deeper doubts. Fortunately, we have much more precise information, both from Czech and German sources. The most important among the first-named are the so-called Old Annalists, a collection of Czech chronicles from 1378 to 1461, generally, and especially for the period in question, a sober, precise and with exceptions remarkably reliable source. From this we hear that the first symptoms, notably headaches, started at least three full days before the King's death, a period more than enough in length for bubonic plague to fell a strong man. Here we also find precise dates about the time and place of the outbreak of buboes, specifically in the groins. These statements are supported by the Czech magister Simon of Slane in his "Chronicae annotationes", fragments of which have come down to us.[21] More details, and additional support for the longer duration of the illness, are contained in the very clear and detailed report given at the time of the death by a German, a man whose business it was to inform the Bavarian dukes about events in the neighboring kingdom.[22] An even earlier outbreak of deep depression — a rather characteristic symptom — is finally reported in a well-known Hungarian source.[23]

If those events had occured at a time in which medical observation, medical diagnosis and medical autopsy had been fairly fully developed and could have been relied upon to prevail over the passions and prejudices of political, national and religious struggles, then presumably the issue would have been cleared up early enough. But this could hardly be expected in an age when contemporary writers saw elements of con-

20 Chronicon Austriacum, in *Scriptores rerum Austriacarum*, ed. Pez, vol. II, p. 885. See also *Zeugenverhör* 35.

21 *Stari letopisove cesti*, ed. Palacky, re-edited by J. Charvat in Dilo F. Palackeho II, Prague 1941, p. 151 f. Slightly different versions in the edition from the Breslau MS ed. Simek, in *Prameny a texty k dejinam csl.*, Prague 1937, 120 f., and in *Stare letopisy c. z rukopisu Krizovnického*, ed. Kanak and Simek, Prague 1959, for Simon of Slane see Palacky, *Zeugenverhör*, p. 12 f.

22 *Fontes rerum Austriacarum*, vol. 42, ed. Bachmann, Vienna 1879, p. 204 f.

23 Antonio Bonfini, *Rerum Ungaricarum Decades*, ed. Juhasz, vol. III, Leipzig 1936, 200 f.

siderable significance in the appearance, before the event, of comets with red tails, or in the supposedly unusually ferocious behavior of the lions which then, as the animals in Bohemia's coat of arms, were always held in the royal menagery in Prague.[24] Nor can we be surprised that Zdenek of Sternberg, leader of the Catholic grandees of the Kingdom, should later, when a complete break had occurred between him and the King, suddenly claim that the man whom he had helped to make King was himself a regicide.[25]

This, of course, presents a break in the original national alignment. It occurs on both sides. The above quoted Bavarian Correspondent is not the only German judging without prejudice. In a note received from Prague by the city council of Frankfurt the matter is summed up with the words: "People talk many things from which little can be gained, but all those who are men of reason say that this was a natural death." [26]

But the matter is not buried by any means. In the 16th and 17th centuries only weak echoes appear, and for a considerable time, as in all matters of Czech medieval history, authors tend simply to copy Aeneas Sylvius. But the issue comes to the fore again in the late 18th and early 19th century, with the revival of Czech (and Magyar) historical studies and the general development of historical literature. And here it seems remarkable how strongly the old prejudices — nationalism and religion — raise their head again. They do not always go hand in hand. Thus one of the first attempts dealing with the issue in detail, comes from a German Protestant named Schulz, a man writing in 1806 in an old Lusatian historical journal.[27] The very title of his essay: "Attempt at saving the honor of George Podiebrad, King of Bohemia and Margrave of Lusatia, against the attack of treasonous regicide" indicates the elements of his thoughts: the wish for complete honesty combined with that regional, in this case Lusatian patriotism, characteristic for the period of early Romanticism. At the very same time Franz Kurz, Priest and Canon of an Austrian Convent and a historian who generally tries to be objective, even in relation to the Czech religious reform, writes after quoting Aeneas Sylvius: "It can hardly be doubted that he (Ladislav) was poisoned. Who actually committed the treacherous assassination remained unknown" — a formula which to the average reader leaves hardly more than the doubt whether the criminal was Rokycana or George and his wife.[28] Utterances of this kind, especially among Austrian writers, became more frequent toward the middle of the 19th century.

[24] The sources in Urbanek, *Konec*, 159.

[25] *Archiv Cesky*, XX, 555 f., see also Urbanek, *Konec* 177, and the related passages in the *Dialogus* of Jan of Rabstein, several editions, the last one ed. Ryba, Prague 1946.

[26] J. Janssen ed., *Frankfurts Reichscorrespondenz*, Freiburg 1866, vol. II, 138.

[27] *Neue Lausizische Monatsschrift*, vol. VI, Görlitz 1806, pp. 294-345.

[28] *Oesterreich unter Kaiser Friedrich IV*, Vienna 1812, vol. I, 194 f.

It was in this situation, that Bohemia's greatest historian, Frantisek Palacky, tried to establish the truth in what he hoped would be a fully authoritative way. He called his little work an "interrogation of witnesses", and thereby indeed he correctly describes his own attitude toward the authors of those early statements, treating them very much as if they were still alive.[29] Palacky, at this time, had already written a large part of his main work, the History of the Czech People, and had turned from German to Czech as his main language of publication. But in this little book he preferred to use his equally masterful German to make the content accessible to a larger public. This was most important to him. None of the earlier Czech historians had established with so much emphasis the picture of King George as one of the truly great figures of Czech history, as a constructive and at the same time wise, humane and remarkably tolerant statesman. How could this picture be maintained if he had really reached his commanding position through murder? This helps to explain why Palacky's investigation was not written exactly "sine ira et studio", that he gave some slightly shadowy witnesses for his own view a rather exaggerated weight, and that in the face of as unpleasant a witness as Johannes Roth he fell into an angry, almost hectoring tone. He furthermore used the services of a young physician to discuss the medical picture, and while some of Dr. Lambl's statements are undoubtedly correct he spent too much of his space in discussing details of the history of syphilis, only to confirm that this was an illness which Ladislav had *not* died from. In the outcome Palacky's book, though it provided a highly valuable compilation of quotations from the sources, seemed to fall a little flat, and some among Palacky's contemporaries felt that his arguments had not always been fully convincing. Yet one of those who said this, Georg Voigt, the biographer of Aeneas Sylvius, summed it all up by calling the suspicion of Ladislav's murder "a hypothesis which the historian who wants to approach the figure of George of Podebrady must never permit himself to consider even in the back of his mind".[30]

This was 1861, and the basic attitude thus prescribed by Voigt was maintained also by Adolph Bachmann, that German historian of the late nineteenth century who, more than anybody else after Palacky, collected, published and used new source material referring to the Podebradian age.[31] This was, perhaps, all the more remarkable as his general judgment about George of Podebrady as a ruler was by no means very favorable and often in strong disagreement with Palacky's views.

[29] See above, note 13.

[30] "Georg von Böhmen, der Hussitenkönig", *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. V, 1861, p. 421.

[31] For Bachmann's last summary of his view on this subject see his *Geschichte Böhmens*, vol. II, Gotha 1904, 464 f.

It was not until long after Palacky's death that his work on the death of Ladislav was sharply challenged. The challenger's name was Erhard Kanter, and his little book appearing in 1906 was actually a by-product of the attempted biography of an early Hohenzollern margrave of Brandenburg.[32] It breathed all the blustering Teutonic pride and much of the Anti-Czech and Anti-Slav prejudice which, while very far from general, nevertheless characterized a few among the historians of a time in which Treitschke was considered supreme. Kanter began his pretended investigation by calling his work with disarming simplicity "*Die Ermordung Koenig Ladislavs*" (The murder of King Ladislav). This title, harshly eliminating all question marks, characterizes the whole endeavor. It purports to be a point by point answer to Palacky. Yet the manner in which he treats his sources (or rather those that Palacky provided him with, for his own knowledge of the sources was rather incomplete), is often quite phantastic. In the early part of the book Kanter interprets practically every move of George, reaching back over a number of years, as mere preparations for the great crime. He knows even when and where the final arrangements were made between George, the Hungarian party of the Hunyadis, and the Austrian of Eizinger which led in all details to the murder and its utilization by the planners. He refers repeatedly to "the Day of Skalice" where he says the play had been written just as it was later performer.[33] There never was such a day. It is true that in March 1457 a meeting took place between George and Eizinger at a place called Holic, but other than the mere fact there is absolutely nothing in the sources to support Kanter's construction.[34] Nevertheless he goes on to argue: since those plans, supposedly made at Skalice, were treasonous, and since the king "probably" knew about them, George had to fear the King's vengeance just as this had been true for Lazzlo Hunyadi. Thus he had to kill the king to save himself. Altogether a nice circular argument.

In the further answers to Palacky all the symptoms reported by various sources that indicate a natural death, especially the headaches, are to Kanter simply inventions, fabricated by contemporary Czech chroniclers and witnesses in order to be able to deny the charges of the Austrian doctors. Similarly all sources that indicate an earlier beginning of the sickness — at least three days before the actual death — are simply considered as lies. On this basis, then, a German medical professor named Dieudonne, introduced as a specialist in the field of epidemiology, is quoted as saying that bubonic plague in a non-epidemic period could not possibly have killed a man within 36 hours.[35]

[32] E. W. Kanter, *Die Ermordung König Ladislaws, 1457*, Munich 1906, of his biography of Albrecht Achilles only a torso was published.

[33] Pages 12, 14, and especially 51.

[34] See for details Urbanek, *Konec*, 88, and *Vek*, III, 183.

[35] Kanter, 58 ff.

Withal it cannot be denied that Herr Kanter's little book was written with considerable skill — with the skill, indeed, not of a historian (though he wears this mask) but of a political pamphleteer who is willing to use every weapon, including manifold forms of innuendo, in order to finish off George of Podebrady once and for all. If Palacky had written with a mixture of warmth and anger, Kanter writes with a sort of personal hatred toward his victim, the great Czech King, a hatred which seemed to revive and to match in a most astonishing way the feelings uttered by the great haters of King George who were his contemporaries, the men from Breslau, George's rival Zdenek of Sternberg or Pope Paul II.

In view of all this, of course, there had to be answers again. The first one came from the pen of the leading Czech historian of this time, Vaclav Novotny, in a concise review article [36] which found its mark with cool precision. One of his most convincing repartees relates to Kanter's question why the later King George never put forward any witnesses who could have supported the claim for a natural death. It is indeed very obvious that just if he had been unscrupulous enough to commit such a crime, he could with equal lack of scruples have found — by money and use of force — the witnesses who would have come out in defense of his claim to be innocent.

A few years later, in 1924, a lengthier, far more thorough treatment came along, this time written by Rudolf Urbanek, the Czech historian who has devoted the greater part of a long life — he is now in his mid-eighties — to the Podebradian age. In a very comprehensive study [37] he has put before us the whole history of the short life of Ladislav, of his relationship to the Emperor, to Ulrich Eizinger, and to the Hunyadis, finally to George of Podebrady. His exploration is more complete and far less emotional than that of Palacky, but the results he ends up with are the same. Thus all that was perhaps needed in order fully to restore George's reputation was a knowledgeable and responsible discussion of Ladislav's illness from the medical point of view. This, too, was finally provided in an article by G. Gellner, published in 1934.[38] A careful investigation, it ended with the diagnosis of an almost certain case of bubonic plague which had been endemic in Prague and was to remain so for a long time.

Has the story of this long drawn-out issue thereby reached its end? The answer is no. Quite recently, in a rather surprising way, George's innocence has again been questioned, if cautiously so, and this time neither on a national nor a religious basis, for the author is a Czech and certainly not an Anti-Hussite. In the official "Survey of Czechoslovak

[36] "Ueber den Tod des Königs Ladislaus Posthumus", *Vestnik spolecnosti nauk*, 1906, X.

[37] See above note 6.

[38] "Nemoc Ladislava Pohrobka", *Cesky casopis historicky*, 1934.

History" of which Volume I was recently published by the Czechoslovak Academy of Science,[39] the concise passage dealing with our problem reads like this:

"George of Podebrady [after the tragedy of the Hunyadis in Hungary] managed to deal with the King very skillfully and to remove the danger of a clash. Nevertheless the tension — so usual between members of the ruling feudal class — was considerable, and out of it emerged the accusation that George had had Ladislav poisoned. Indeed, in 1457, the seventeen year old king suddenly died amidst preparations for his wedding with a French princess. While it is not possible to prove that George was responsible for Ladislav's death, there would be nothing astonishing in it. In such ways, after all, were struggles for the throne quite generally decided among the feudal magnates."

The author of this chapter — the brilliant and highly influential Joseph Macek, youngest Academician and author of an already large number of books devoted largely to the Marxian analysis and re-interpretation of Czech, Hussite and Reformation history, has introduced a new element into the whole discussion. Macek's motto is "*Cosi fan tutte*", thus they all do it. If George should have done it, what does it matter? He would only have acted in style. Now in purely historical terms Macek's claim of murder as very usual in the circles of the high nobility seems to me to be open to some doubt, if we do not exactly concentrate on Italy and the Borgias. I think that the *suspicion* of murder, especially in the case of the death of a relatively young person of high rank, was a good deal more common than murder itself.

Macek's purpose, it seems, is in parts to "*épater le bourbeois*" and especially the bourgeois historian. Thus, after serving as a bone of contention between Catholic and Heretic — and we might well use the term Protestant without committing too bad an anachronism — and also after marking the even older dividing line between Slav and Teuton, the issue of Ladislav's death is now even made to serve, though certainly in a not very serious way, as an occasion for Marxian social analysis contra Bourgeois superficiality or gullibility.

But by thus reconsidering a suspicion that had become very nearly extinguished, Macek also lowered, to some extent, the historical rank and significance of George of Podebrady, not so much in moral terms which in this connection do not seem to matter to him, as by identifying him completely, in his historical role, with the feudal nobility from which he originated. Yet it might be argued that George's great and in some ways tragic significance was rather the reverse: the fact that he rose above — and in the end had to fight — the feudal nobility in his endeavor

[39] *Prehled ceskoslovenskych dejin*, publ. by the Historical Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Science, vol. I, Prague 1958, p. 273.

to establish a state at least potentially more modern, streamlined, and enlightened than most of the other states of his time.

Wether the short passage, light as it makes of the whole issue, will really serve to revive the controversy may perhaps be doubted, though it still remains to be seen how in the future Czech Marxian historiography will deal in detail with King George and his age which so far, with the exception of some minor contributions, have been left in the hands of the older generation.

Meantime our little historiographical study shows perhaps two things — first, how difficult a task has faced the historical author, even if he sincerely strove to be objective, when powerful influences resulting from religion, nationalism and Weltanschauung tended to prejudge his thoughts and to pull him in this or that direction; and second how limited a help he receives even now from the auxiliary sciences which he might call upon in a case like this: from source criticism, from medicine, from mass psychology, from the analysis of the individual human mind. There is then no absolute certainty in the final, the scientific sense. In the last instance, with all the sources in front of him carefully studied and sifted, the historian will still, to some extent, remain and write under the influence that his almost instinctive understanding of human personality, in the great role of a historical figure, is bound to exert upon him.