
Czech Peasantry: An Historical Overview, Part II

This week, we continue with our look at the life of the Czech peasantry, as chronicled in the book Komárov: A Czech Farming Village, by Zdenek Salzmann and Vladimír Scheufler:



Czech peasants preparing hemp, circa 1936 (Source: <http://www.probertencyclopaedia.com>)

“The unbearable oppression once again sparked several minor rebellions and, in 1680, a major one, coupled with petitions from the serfs to Emperor Leopold I. His official answer, given in a patent issued on March 22, 1680, did little but legalize the conditions against which the peasants were protesting and included a warning that military sanctions would be imposed if there were any further disobedience. Continued pressure, however, brought about the issuance of a second patent on June 28 of the same year setting forth the most important duties the serfs owed their lords. The patent limited the regular labor obligation to no more than three days in any given week except during emergencies, such as harvest. Sending (except at harvesttime) serfs to lands other than those to which they were bound was discouraged as was also physical punishment that could cause injury to health. Among still other provisions of this patent was a request addressed to the landlords not to expropriate farmsteads in those cases in which there were surviving children. This first serious attempt on the part of the emperor to regulate the relations between the feudal lords and their serfs thus eliminated only the very worst excesses, and sanctioned legally the heavy burdens that in the course of time had fallen upon the shoulders of the peasants.

There were some notable exceptions to the condition of general servitude exacted from the Bohemian peasantry. The most important was the special status accorded to the inhabitants of eleven villages in the Chodsko region near the city of Domažlice. Situated in the heavily forested frontier of southwestern

Bohemia, these villagers—known as the Chodové—were assigned to guard the means of approach to the kingdom, in particular the two important trails from Bavaria and the Palatinate. For these valuable services, dating back to the end of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century, they enjoyed special privileges reaffirmed in no less than twenty-four royal charters between 1325 and 1612. Directly subject to the king, they were obligated to pay a fixed tax to the royal treasury, but in every other respect they were free. They enjoyed considerable administrative autonomy and could move away from their villages, sell or bequeath their landholdings as they saw fit, and claim various other rights long since denied the rest of the peasantry. Most important of all, they were excused from all compulsory labor service.

In the course of the fifteenth century, however, the fortunes of the Chodsko peasants began to decline. With their importance as frontier guards progressively waning, their villages repeatedly came to serve as security given to noble families or to the city of Domažlice by Bohemian kings for debts they had incurred. Despite desperate legal efforts and valiant physical struggles to preserve their age-old rights, which suffered still more erosion during the Thirty Years War, the peasants of Chodsko eventually lost their privileged status completely. The end of their freedom came in the final years of the seventeenth century, when they were forced to submit to military strength and their courageous leader was publicly hanged.

The continuing struggle of the peasantry against their landlords forced the imperial government again to consider conditions in Bohemia and Moravia, and in 1717 Emperor Charles VI. issued a patent that on the whole confirmed the provisions of the document of 1680. In no way did the patent lighten the burdens resting on the serfs. Instead, it specified, for example, that they were due to begin their labor obligation on the land of their lords "early, that is, immediately after sunup, and to work conscientiously, according to the needs of the lord's land, until the proper time, that is, sundown, and not earlier, with two hours off for meals and rest."

A subsequent patent was issued by Charles VI for the Bohemian crownlands in 1738 to quell the ever-increasing unrest among the peasant serfs. In effect it reaffirmed once again the legal advantages that the landlords already possessed. The various provisions were weakened by many qualifications: for example, the length of a working day for a peasant using a draft animal during long spring and summer days was to be "at the most ten hours every day," but a statement was appended that "during the relatively short season of haymaking and harvesting the usual ten hours cannot be strictly observed."

Precipitated by extraordinary circumstances, the first serious blow to the feudal order was finally dealt in 1775. Catastrophic rains ruined the crops of 1770 and the succeeding year, and about a quarter of a million people, or one tenth of the population of Bohemia, died as a result of starvation and diseases that followed in its wake. The desperate situation brought the agrarian problem sharply into focus and resulted in the imperial government's beginning to press for a fundamental revision of serf—seigneur relations. The noble landholders, jealously guarding their privileges, were anything but cooperative in this effort and managed to frustrate whatever constructive moves the government initiated. After several years of obstinacy on the part of the landlords and of indecision on the part of the state, the serfs had had enough. Refusing to wait for a large-scale organized uprising planned for May of 1775, during which Prague was to be seized and the authorities forced to heed the demands of the long-exploited peasantry, the serfs rose spontaneously in January in several regions of Bohemia, attacking the residences of the lords and settling accounts with their hated officials. By April, the rebellion was militarily suppressed but, significantly enough, Maria Theresa promised a "general pardon" for all of the

rebels, and during the summer of that year issued a patent setting down the extent of the peasants' obligations toward their lords.

According to the amount of land tax they paid, serfs were classified into two large classes: those whose compulsory labor service included the use of their draft animals and those who worked manually. The former classification was divided into four categories, the lowest requiring labor performed with one draft animal three days per week, the highest labor performed with two pairs of animals three days a week with an additional three man-days of manual labor a week during the period between Saint John the Baptist's Day (June 24) and Saint Wenceslaus's Day (September 28). The second classification consisted of seven categories, in which obligations ranged from thirteen days per year (for landless to three days per week. These assessments were designed as the upper limits of compulsory labor service, and the serfs were given the option of continuing with their previous quotas of obligation if these were thought to be more advantageous. The merit of the patent was in setting forth a precise assessment the amount of robota required of the different classes of serfs according to property, but the lords were determined to evade its provisions in every possible way.

Of greater significance than the patent itself was a reform begun with Maria Teresa's enthusiastic support in 1776 and administered by Franz Anton von Raab, after whom it came to be known. The aim of the reform was the abolition robota and the distribution of manorial land to the peasant, who was to become a hereditary leaseholder of the land without having to pay for his lease. He was to have full possession of the land, his chief obligation being the payment of a rental fee to the lord. Even though it was argued by the proponents of abolition that the arrangement would enhance agricultural productivity and ultimately benefit the lords, the opposition of the landowners was such that the Raab system could be carried out only on estates under state control. But even though the benefits of this reform were thus limited to a small portion of the Bohemian peasantry, the seeds of destruction of the old system of personal servitude had been sown. Under the circumstances, the first radical step toward the emancipation of the largest social class in Bohemia was not long in coming.

In the historic patent of November 1, 1781, Emperor Joseph II restored to the peasants certain essential freedoms: the right to move from one estate to another or to settle wherever they pleased (subject to having satisfied their debts), to marry according to their own choice, and to pursue higher forms of education—all without the express permission of the lord. The patent further abolished the compulsory service due the lord by orphans and the children of peasants. However, it emphasized that compulsory labor service must still be rendered by the peasants unless money payments were substituted.

Welcome as the relief was, its benefits proved to be short-lived. While the large landowners began to increase their yields during the second half of the eighteenth century by introducing more rational methods of agricultural production, the peasants were put at an ever greater disadvantage by the conservative character of their operations. The clock was set back once again in 1821, when Emperor Francis I stopped all substitution of money payments in place of actual labor.

With the downfall of absolutism in March of 1848, the peasant question once again assumed a prominent place on the public agenda. In fact, the threat of an emperor to abolish for due compensation to the landowners, the obligations of the peasantry. With telling promptness an imperial decree was issued on March 28, which provided for the cessation of all compulsory labor service not later than March 31, 1849, the extent of compensation to be determined later. Similar legislation, with an even earlier deadline, was enacted in Moravia. After a fierce debate in the Imperial Parliament in Vienna as to

whether or not the peasants should be required to pay compensation, a vote on August 31 decided the issue in the affirmative. Finally, the bill providing for the abolition of serfdom was approved on September 7 and promulgated into law by an imperial decree of the same date.

Thus the year 1848 held historic significance for the Bohemian peasant: after centuries of servitude, he became a full-fledged owner of his land, eligible to exercise the franchise and to be represented in a legislative assembly of the law. Ironically, no sooner did the newly landed peasants receive the right to vote than they became fearful of being outvoted by the numerous landless elements of the rural population—the cottagers and agricultural workers. In the end, the bulk of the rural population did become enfranchised—all those paying a “direct tax” which included the landless peasants as well as many cottagers, but no farm laborers or domestics.

The problem of compensation was settled in the course of the next five years. Ultimately, just under a million peasants in the Czech lands fell within the scope of the compensation law, and the number of estates to which compensation due amounted to 1912. The share to come from the peasantry was to be paid over a period of twenty years. In most cases, the average sum owed by an individual peasant was below 10 guldens annually, an amount that did not impose an undue hardship. Yet the compensation provided the landowner with capital permitting him to introduce further improvements, which put the newly liberated peasant at an even more distinct disadvantage. Then, too, the fragmented and scattered fields, characteristic of peasant landholdings under feudalism, continued into the present century and prevented any substantial growth of agricultural production. However, in the worst situation of all was the landless peasant, whose hunger for land remained completely unsatisfied. His opportunity did not come until the birth of the Czechoslovak Republic at the end of World War I.”

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