

Zizka



A Companion Guide to the
Film *Blind Courage*, with
Scriptural References and
Questions for Discussion.



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Introduction

When you go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you, you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, so that you may be remembered before the Lord your God and be saved from your enemies. (Numbers 10:9)

This is a film about a warrior and a war, but a warrior who fought on the side of an oppressed people—the Hussites of Bohemia—against the forces of Pope and Emperor.



It is also a film about ordinary people who, in defense of their religious beliefs were able to defend themselves against their enemies because of their determination and great leadership.

Jan Hus (c.1372-1415) was well known for his sermons in the Bethlehem Chapel Prague, in what is now the Czech Republic. Impressed with writings of the Englishman John Wycliffe, Hus became a staunch supporter of reform in the Church. He was eventually burned at the stake for his beliefs. His followers, known as Hussites, were persecuted by the forces of both the Pope and the Emperor Sigismund. The latter fought hard to defend the Catholic church and felt it justified violently suppressing all opposing views.

When the Emperor began a march to take Prague, the capital of Bohemia, the Hussites resolved to defend their city. They met on September 29, 1419, on a large plain outside of the city. There the Eucharist was celebrated. It is said that 40,000 people from surrounding towns and villages were present. It was a peaceful beginning to nineteen years of war that resulted in the loss of many lives.

“He Never Lost a Single Battle”

Jan Zizka, the blind leader of the Hussite forces, is said to have “rallied all of Bohemia” in the defense of Prague. They were both men and women, untrained and poorly armed, but they were to become an invincible force.

Remarkably, Jan Zizka was blind, but his courage, determination and faith provided and inspired his forces that, we are told, “defeated more than 100,000 of the finest knights of the age.”

A Hus/Zizka Timeline

- c. 1360 - Birth of Jan Zizka.
c. 1372 - Birth of Jan Hus/John Hus.
1400 - Ordination of John Hus.
1407 - Hus's sermons against the immorality of the clergy denounced at Rome: Hus forbidden to preach.
1409 - Czech nation given control of Prague University where Wycliffe's doctrine was popular.
1410 - Zizka fights on the Polish side in the Battle of Tannenberg.
1411 - Hus excommunicated.
1412 - All Hus's followers placed under interdict.
1413 - Hus writes *De Ecclesia*. First ten chapters copied from Wycliffe.
1414 - Hus leaves for the Council of Constance having appealed for a hearing. He is imprisoned first in the castle of the bishop of Constance, then in the convent of the Franciscans.
1415 - July 6. Hus burned at the stake.
1419 - Eucharist in the field outside of Prague. The beginning of the Hussite Wars.
1420 - Zizka founds the town of Tabor in Bohemia and leads his followers to war and victory over the emperor Sigismund at Visegrad (now part of Prague).
1421 - Zizka blinded at the siege of Rabi. Battle of Kutna Hora.
1423 - Disagreeing with the extreme beliefs of the Taborites, Zizka formed his own group, although still allied with the Taborites.
1424 - Zizka marches on Prague, but an armistice was called to prevent the two Hussite groups coming to civil war. Zizka died suddenly on campaign.
1434 - End of the Hussite Wars formally declared by the Emperor Sigismund.

The Man Behind the Machine—Jan Zizka

Zizka started as one of four Hussite commanders, but his ability and natural leadership qualities soon placed him in the first position. He had experience with both large scale battles and guerrilla warfare—a valuable asset. Zizka was a strong disciplinarian. He was able to pull together an effective army from ordinary people.



. . . a mighty man of
valor, a warrior. . .
(I Samuel 16:18)

A statue of Jan Zizka stands on top of Vitkov Hill in Prague. It is over 27 feet in height and is one of the largest equestrian statues in the world, weighing 16.5 tons.

Read More About Zizka and His Times:

Turnbull, Stephen. *The Hussite Wars 1419-36*, Men-at-Arms Series. Osprey, 2004.

Spinka, Matthew. *John Hus: A Biography*, (out of print, but worth a trip to your local library,) and, by the same author: *The Letters of Jan Hus*, Manchester, 1972; and *Jan Hus at the Council of Constance*.

Fudge, Thomas A. *The Magnificent Ride: The First Reformation in Hussite Bohemia*. Ashgate, 1998.

Heymann, Frederick G. *John Zizka and the Hussite Revolution*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1955.

Kaminsky, Howard. *A History of the Hussite Revolution*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967.

Zizka on the Web

www.bartleby.com/65/zi/Zizka-Jo.html

archiv.radio.cz/history/zizka.html

www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0853465.html

user.intop.net/~jhollis/janzizka.htm

guide.travel.cz/264 (Czech Republic site with information on the Hussite Wars and various historic sites)

www.radio.cz/en/article/37448

The Communion Controversy

The Restoration of the Chalice to the People



Chalice, or communion cup, from Chichester Cathedral, England, 12th century.

In both the Eastern Liturgy and the Catholic Mass, the elements of bread and wine are consecrated to become the body and blood of Christ. The faithful could receive both “kinds” or “species” of Communion in the West until the Council of Constance in 1415 when, for a variety of reasons, the cup was withheld from the laity. It was one of the practices, later upheld by the Council of Trent (1545-1563), that the Reformers opposed. It was a major concern of the Hussites. In the East, the Orthodox never denied the chalice, although it is not passed from person to person. Instead, the consecrated bread is placed in the chalice with the wine and a portion of each is given by spoon to the recipient.

The Taborites and Utraquists. Tabor is a town in what was South Bohemia. It is 55 miles south of Prague and was founded in 1420 by Jan Zizka, who made it his stronghold for the extreme wing of the Hussites. They sought to convert by force. The Taborites subscribed to no theology, had no churches and denied transubstantiation. The Taborites were sometimes violent, cruel and “professed extreme social doctrines.” The moderate Calixtines, also called Utraquists, were granted permission to receive Communion under both kinds by the Roman Catholic Council of Basle, but the Pope did not confirm the decision. The Utraquists eventually pulled away from the Taborite cause.

Jan Zizka also became disenchanted with the Taborites for their fanaticism and separated himself to form another party, but at the same time, he did not fail to assist them. They helped him as well by garrisoning towns Zizka captured but did not have the manpower to hold. This was an advantage for the Taborites. Ten years after the death of Jan Zizka, the Utraquist Catholics defeated the Taborites at the Battle of Lipany in 1434. Their leader, Jan Rohac, was hanged. After this, the Taborites disappeared from history.

The Die is Cast and a Holy War Begins . . .

Prepare war: Stir up the warriors.
(Joel 3:9)

Right: Michaelmas, 1419. The Eucharist is celebrated in a field outside the city of Prague. At this service the people received Communion under both kinds. Even before Jan Hus, Jacob of Mies, a professor at the University of Prague, advocated Communion under both kinds. Three Roman Councils condemned this as unacceptable. Those Catholics who supported giving the chalice to the laity were known as Utraquists.



A Pope Tells How Zizka Did It



Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Pope Pius II.

From a Contemporary Account:

They camped in the field with their women and children, who accompanied the army, as they had a large number of wagons with which they drew up a wall-like fortification. When they moved out for battle, they formed two lines of wagons, which enclosed foot troops, while the horsemen remained outside without moving off to any distance. If the battle was about to begin, the drivers . . . quickly encircled part of the enemy army and formed an enclosure with their vehicles. Then their enemies, squeezed between the wagons and cut off from their comrades, fell victim to the swords of the foot troops or the missiles of the men and women who attacked from the wagons. The mounted troops fought outside the wagon stronghold but moved back in whenever the enemy threatened to overpower them, and they then fought dismounted as if from the walls of a fortified city.

(Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Pope Pius II, *Historia Bohemorum*, 1457.)



*Top: A Hussite Waggenburg, or fortress, of four wagons around a camp. The horses are inside the perimeter. The goose and chalice flag of the Hussites flies over the camp. *Osterreichische National Bibliothek.**

Center: War wagons moving into position. This was a remarkably speedy maneuver. Perhaps the key advantage of the wagon-fortress was its mobility, permitting the establishment of a defensive position from almost anywhere.

Right: Anatomy of a War Wagon: Two war wagons in position with three men in each. Actually, a wagon could hold anywhere from 15-20 men. One side of the wagon had a door that let down to become steps for the soldiers. Small firearms and arrows could be shot from holes in the side of the wagon.



Questions for Discussion after Viewing the Film

The Lord is a warrior. (Exodus 15:3)

The Hussite Cause

Do not quarrel with anyone without cause. (Proverbs 3:30)

1. How were the followers of John Hus divided?
2. The Hussites wanted to live in freedom, but they did not tolerate anyone who did not share their beliefs. Was their cause truly just?
3. Would Jan Hus have approved of the ways his followers interpreted Christianity? If “no,” then why not?
4. What was the chief symbol of the Hussites, and why was it chosen?
5. Why was the Eucharist in the field outside of Prague so important?

Jan Zizka

Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. (Isaiah 56:4)

1. Zizka was one of four commanders. What was there about Jan Zizka that made him a leader over all the troops?
2. In what did he disagree with the Taborites? Why did he continue an alliance with them after all?
3. What do you think were his strengths, his weaknesses?
4. In what ways can Jan Zizka be described as a Christian leader? How would you describe him?
5. If you could meet him today, what would you ask him?

Friends and Enemies

1. Although Zizka disagreed with them, the Taborites were willing to help him. Name a way in which they assisted. Why do you think they did this?
2. How did children assist in the wars? Was this right?
3. Who was the Pope who wrote about Jan Zizka?
4. Who was the Emperor who was Zizka’s enemy?



***Take hold of
shield and
buckler, and
rise for my
help! (Psalm 35:2)***

The shield used by a medieval archer could be so large and heavy that two men (shield-bearers) were needed both to carry it and to place it in position on the ground in front of the archer.

This shield bears the Hussite symbol of a chalice, referring to the reception of Communion under both kinds demanded by Jan Hus.

Another Hussite symbol was the goose. “Hus” is the Czech word for “goose.” Also, before his execution, Hus is alleged to have said, “You, this day burn a goose, but a hundred years hence a swan will arise, whom you will not be able to roast or boil.” It was displayed on Hussite banners.



Carnage of War.

Zizka, after his victory over the town of Kutna Hora, is seated on his horse ahead of the war wagons. Prisoners were led away through the bodies of their fallen comrades.

A painting from the Vlassky Dvur Museum, Kutna Hora, Czech Republic.

The Call to War

He trains my hands for war, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. (Psalm 18:34)

1. What convinced the Hussites that war was inevitable?
2. Why did Zizka agree to be their leader? What were his beliefs?
3. What qualities do you think a Christian soldier should possess?
4. Zizka instituted one of the first military codes of conduct. What are appropriate rules for warfare? Is there a danger of people fighting for a just cause to become abusive of those they defeat? When is violence appropriate to defend the faith?
5. Did Jesus ever mention war?

The Battles

1. Zizka was always on the move. The enemy's fighting force was mostly mercenary and they fought specific battles. Why did Zizka rarely go on the offensive?
2. Describe the ways Zizka used his troops.
3. How did he use the "war wagons?" Can you describe them?

Zizka's Strategy

Do you think that mere words are strategy and power for war? (2 Kings 18:20)

Consider the following observations:

1. Zizka made the most of his resources.
2. The "war wagons" were like the wagons used daily by the people.
3. The people had complete confidence in Zizka.
4. Were there other incidents of clever "strategies" in Biblical warfare? Can you think of any?

The Tools of War



Zizka had at his disposal mostly short firearms and the tarasnice, actually a gun about 4-5 feet in length. It could be mounted in a wagon, with special care taken to deal with the recoil. Zizka employed larger guns, such as a Haufnitze, or howitzer, when in a siege position, but these took too long to reload to be effective in combat. He acquired these larger weapons, along with bombards, or field cannon, as booty taken from the enemy. Bows and arrows were both effective and fast. In close combat, men used the long-handled flail and the hooked halberd, a pole arm. Today's rifle with bayonet is a modern pole arm. Women hurled stones from the wagons onto the enemy. *Left: Firing a tarasnice.*

Relating to the Story

Many fell slain because the war was of God. (I Chronicles 5:22)

1. Many tales were told of vicious slaughter by merciless Hussite warriors. Zizka personally ordered women and children to be spared in most cases. Dr. Smahel, who is interviewed in the film, has said that “once ethical principles are dropped, the war or the violence can't be stopped.” Do you agree with him? If not, why not?
2. Zizka did have rules of conduct for his soldiers. These kept unity among the forces under his command. Can you suggest other areas in life where rules of conduct can make a difference?
3. Castles and towns could be taken by letting the people inside starve—a long process. It was faster if someone inside would open the gates. Zizka preferred the latter because he had to be mobile. Do you think he had any other reason for preferring it this way?
4. The Hussite War continued for ten years after Zizka's death. What do you think was the result for the Czech people?
5. Consider the position known as “Christian Pacifism.” Is it a viable opinion in today's world?

Some Biblical Passages Related to War You Might Wish to Consult:

I Samuel 19:8, Job 5:20, Psalm 27:3, Psalm 55:21, Psalm 68:30, Psalm 140:1-2, Proverbs 20:18, Jeremiah 48:4, Micah 4:3, 2 Corinthians 10:3-4, Revelation 17:14.



Prague (Praha), Czechoslovakia

Situated on the banks of the Vltava River, Prague is 150 miles northwest of Vienna, Austria. At the time of the Reformation, it was the capital of Bohemia. The area was settled by Slavs in the 6th century, and in the 10th century it was ruled by the “good” King Wenceslaus. After World War I, Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia and Slovakia were joined to create the modern Czechoslovakia, now divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

Left: Prague from a tinted 19th century photograph.