

## **Abstract**

Silesia greatly differed from other lands of the Bohemian Crown with regard to its specific political, administrative, religious and cultural development. This situation was caused partly due to the fragmentation of Silesian territory. In the Middle Ages, Silesia was divided among many independent principalities ruled by the members of the Piast Dynasty. During the 14th century the Silesian princes accepted the sovereignty of the Bohemian king. When the ruling dynasties died out, these principalities were inherited by the Crown. The king could then grant the principality to the members of noble families.

At the same time as the Habsburgs entered the Bohemian throne, reformation began to spread in Silesia. By the end of 16th century most of the Silesian princes had converted to Lutheranism. The only Catholic prince was the bishop of Wrocław as a master of Nysa principality. Approximately 90 percent of the Silesian inhabitants had become Lutheran by the end of 16th century. Confessional tensions were simmering throughout the Habsburg Monarchy. With the help of Bohemian estates, the protestant Silesian princes received the letter of majesty containing religious rights (1609).

Due to the violations of religious freedom, the Silesian princes and estates joined the Bohemian revolt (1619) After the defeat in the Battle of White Mountain, the treaty of Dresden spared most of the Silesian princes and estates and affirmed the earlier privileges (1621). In 1632, the protestant princes joined the alliance of Saxony, Brandenburg and Sweden against the emperor.

After the defeat of the protestant coalition and the closure of the Prague peace in 1635, Silesian princes had to submit to the emperor. The position of protestants has been weakened. And only the princes of Legnica, Brzeg, Wołów, Oleśnica and the city of Wrocław could keep the religious freedom, which was also guaranteed by the Peace of Westphalia (1648). After the departure of Swedish troops, a new phase of counter-reformation began.

When the Thirty Years War began in 1618, much of the Silesia's population was protestant; by the end of 17th century most Protestants in immediate principalities had converted, at least in name, or moved abroad. A lot of people emigrated to the surrounding countries. Counter-Reformation gained a great victory at least in Upper Silesia.

However, despite the violent counter-reformation measures, Silesia remained a biconfessional country throughout the whole era of Habsburg reign. The remaining Protestants welcomed the Prussian army, which began to occupy the Silesia in December 1740. In 1741, most of Silesia

was seized by King Frederick II the Great of Prussia and subsequently made the Prussian Province of Silesia. Principalities remaining under the Habsburg monarchy were reconstituted as the Duchy of Upper and Lower Silesia in 1742.

Dukes reigned in their principalities as beneficiaries of the Bohemian King. They had at their disposal great privileges. Some of Silesian masters, who came from ancient dynasties of Piast or Podiebrad, tried to reign like a sovereigns. But they were often in a bad economic situation. Sometimes, they were forced to sell off their lands to wealthier nobles.

The consequences of the defeat of the protestant estates were less devastating on the nobility of Silesia than the one of Bohemia. Yet, the conflict decisively affected the structure and character of the Silesian nobility. Wealthy and powerful members of the Austro-Bohemian aristocracy were rewarded for their loyalty and services to the Habsburgs with titles and land. The Liechtenstein, Wallenstein, Lobkovic and Auersperk also received the Silesian principality. But their rights were not comparable to the rights granted to the Piast princes. They were part of the court aristocracy and did not usually settle in Silesia. They served in court offices, in the army as well as in diplomacy. Within the Habsburg monarchy they built a vast dominion. They also sought recognition of the full status of the princes of the Holy Roman Empire. In this effort, unlike Piast and Podiebrad, they were successful.