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Crécy Forever. John the Blind's monument(s) against the background of regionalism, patriotism and nationalism in the 19th and 20th centuries

John the Blind, Count of Luxembourg and King of Bohemia, who died on the battlefield of Crécy in 1346, has been commemorated as a national hero in the later Grand-Duchy of Luxembourg and has left a rather more ambivalent image in the successor states of his kingdom. How has medieval history been romanticised and used for political purposes in the 19th and 20th centuries? First of all, at the Battle of Crécy, John of Luxembourg (Jan Lucemburský) did not support the French against the English – as later recounted – but the House of Valois against the House of Plantagenet in their bid for the throne of France. As Tom Sadler explains in this volume, John's military engagement in this conflict was of a more symbolical nature, and his death was immediately celebrated as that of a true knight – at a time when chivalrous values were already seen to belong to a bygone era. Five hundred years later he was again seen as the epitome of heroism and self-denial. His remains were – after some peregrinations – laid to rest in a sepulchral chapel built in the 1830s at the behest of Crown Prince Frederick William, future King of Prussia (1840-1861), at a former hermitage overlooking Kastel-Staadt and the River Saar. They would remain there until the end of the Second World War.¹

Close to the battlefield in today's Département de la Somme, a wayside cross – already mentioned in a document dated 1361 – marks the spot where John the Blind died. In 1846, the old cross was restored.² A publication entitled *Itinéraire au champ de bataille de Crécy* credits Dr. Boucher, a physician born in Fontaine-sur-Maie “distant à peine d'un kilomètre du théâtre de célèbre bataille” with this initiative.³ The author, Abbé Caron, relates his visit to the site of the battle in 1836, where he was overwhelmed by the *genius loci*:

“Et si je ne craignais de faire du romantisme, je vous retracerais ces funèbres images, ces apparitions mystérieuses dont est frappée l'imagination à l'aspect de ces lieux historiques, au souvenir de la lutte sanglante où il ne s'agissait de rien de moins que de savoir si la France conserverait sa nationalité, comme on dirait aujourd'hui, ou si elle deviendrait un fief mouvant de l'Angleterre, comme on disait alors.” Caron was impressed by the long-lasting local memory of this battle and its traces in place-names such as the *Chemin du Massacre* or the *Chemin de l'Armée*. Alongside the latter he found a decrepit cross, called “*la Croix de Bohème*” by the locals, which had fallen off its socle.⁴

While the renovation of this cross was fairly low-key, especially compared to the construction of John's mausoleum near Kastel, it attracted new attention in the early 20th century. Louis Léger, a professor of Slavic languages and literatures at the *École des langues orientales*, presented plans for the restoration of the cross to the members of the *Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-lettres* in October 1901.⁵ His main intention was to enclose the monument with a fence in order to protect it as well as to decorate the socle

with an inscription which would commemorate the last chivalrous deed of the King of Bohemia at the battlefield of Crécy. At the same time, he contacted several representatives of patriotic Czech political parties as well as cultural elites to raise the funds for the restoration,⁶ to promote his project among the wider public and facilitate the communication between French and local Czech representatives.⁷ Two years later, Léger proudly presented the results. The monument was elevated on a socle made by M. Millevoy, a sculptor from Amiens. The three-sided inscriptions on the plinth,

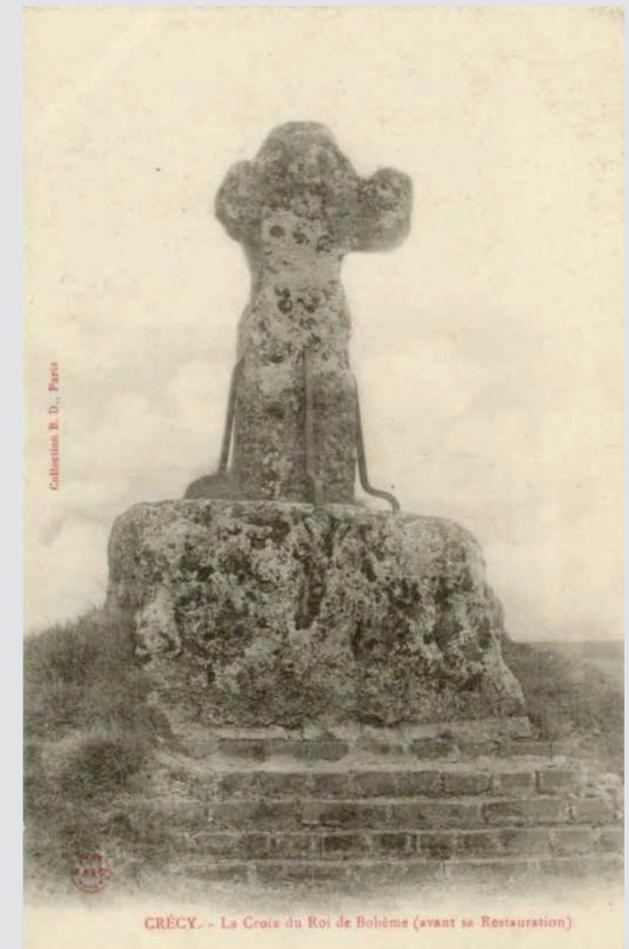


Fig. 1: The wayside cross before the restoration. Archives départementales de la Haute-Garonne, Albums photographiques - Première Guerre mondiale, no 46 Fl 45 157 : Crécy : la croix du roi Jean de Bohême (avant sa restauration), éditeur B.D ; Paris : imprimeur E. Le Deley, [entre 1914 et 1918]. - Carte postale : noir et blanc ; 14 x 9 cm.



Fig. 2: Postcard of the wayside cross turned monument after the restoration (interwar period). Private collection.

namely John's request to be led into battle („JE VOUS REQUERS TRES ESPECIALEMENT QUE VOUS ME MENIEZ SI AVANT QUE JE PUISSE FERIR UN COUP D'EPEE") and the narrator's comments: "JEAN FERIT UN COUP D'EPEE VOIRE TROIS VOIRE QUATRE ET SE COMBATTIT MOULT VAILLAMENT" and "LES VAILLANTS CHEVALIERS AVAIENT PLUS CHER A MOURIR QUE FUITE VILAINE LEUR FUT REPROCHEE" are taken from Froissart's chronicle. The socle also features heraldic arms and a relief depicting a sword with the inscription "CETTE CROIX RAPPELLE LA FIN HEROIQUE DE JEAN DE LUXEMBOVRG, ROI DE BOHEME, MORT POVR LA FRANCE LE 26 AOVT 1346".

Léger explains that the restoration of the cross did not use up the significant funds raised by subscription and notably by "Bohemia and Luxembourg". Therefore, the organisation committee

proposed building another monument in the village of Crécý itself.⁸ Around the same time, several monuments and commemorative plaques referring to the glorious history of the Czech nation or to eminent persons were inaugurated in the Czech lands. Therefore, it would be interesting to find out more about the donors of John the Blind's memorials, in particular the representatives and supporters of Czech patriotic parties, who used this type of historical monument as a political statement against the official narrative of the Austrian government and its policies that were suppressing the National Revival in the Czech lands. Luxembourg's municipal council also embraced the opportunity to underline their pro-French stance.⁹

The monument inaugurated in the village of Crécý-en-Ponthieu on 1st October 1905 does not have the shape of a cross but that of a tower – more in line with the laicist Third Republic. It displays an outsize reproduction of John of Luxembourg's equestrian seal and the coats of arms of the Kings of France, Luxembourg, Crécý-en-Ponthieu and Bohemia. The front inscription is similar to that on the battlefield cross: "A JEAN DE LUXEMBOURG ROI DE BOHEME ET A SES VAILLANTS COMPAGNONS D'ARMES MORTS POUR LA FRANCE A CRECY LE 26 AOOUT 1346." Though inspired by Froissart's "*vallants compagnons*", this decidedly national reading – at odds with 14th-century perceptions – is reinforced by another inscription: "A LA MEMOIRE DES FRANÇAIS MORTS EN DEFENDANT LEUR PATRIE LE 26 AOOUT 1346." The inauguration of the second monument commemorating the heroic death of John the Blind can be understood in the historical context as a mélange of nationalism, patriotism and local pride, as shown by the discourses of invited guests and local representatives addressed to the public.¹⁰

The expression "*mort pour la France*" used on both monuments predates the legal status created in the course of the First World War¹¹ and projects it back to a feudal lord of the late Middle Ages. The same dedication can be found on a plaque dated 1923, commemorating the Luxembourg volunteers who joined the ranks of the Marching Regiments of the Foreign Legion in the 'Great War'. The outside stone plaque, placed in the St. Maximin church in Thionville, aligns the battlefield of Crécý with those of Russia, Egypt, Italy, Germany and Spain (Napoleonic wars) and those of the Rivers Somme, Aisne, Marne and Meuse, emblematic of the Great War.¹²

Two years later, in 1925, a memorial was inaugurated in La Targette near Neuville Saint-Vaast (France), where the Second Battle of Artois had raged in 1915. Czechoslovak volunteers of the 1st Company and battalion C of the 2nd Marching Regiment of the Foreign Legion had participated in the attack of the 10th French Army Corps and suffered massive casualties. The memorial, created by Josef Hruška, was inaugurated by the President of the

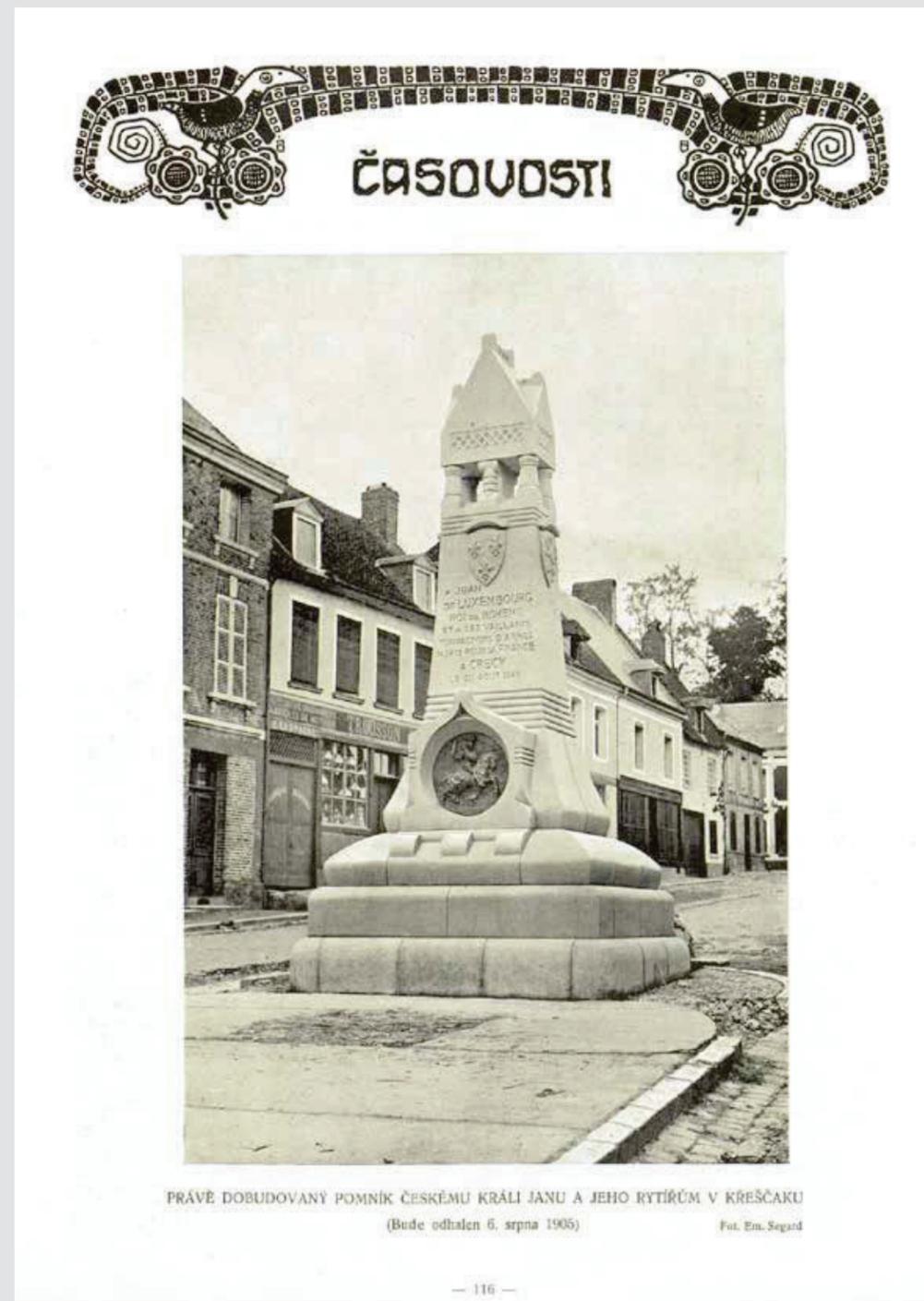


Fig. 3: Český svět ("Czech World") 1/18 (30.06.1905), p. 116, the headline reads "From the past to the present".



Fig. 4: Photograph of the commemorative plaque in St. Maximin, Thionville. Private collection.

recently founded Czechoslovak Republic T. G. Masaryk, Paul Painlevé, the French Prime Minister and Minister of War, Marshal Philippe Pétain and other representatives of both countries.¹³

The memorial bears the inscriptions “Ils ont choisi de mourir pour la Liberté” (front part) and “Ici le 9 Mai 1915 les Volontaires Tchécoslovaques ont combattu pour leur patrie et pour la France” (rear part). The same inscription in Czech is placed above the list of the names of the soldiers without a known grave. In 1938 a Czechoslovakian military cemetery was created here, gathering the

graves of soldiers around the memorial. On that occasion a copy of the cross of Crécy (but smaller in size) was added: a white stone recognisable by John the Blind’s equestrian seal. It almost looks as if it were a general’s gravestone, surrounded by those of his troops. The link to Crécy is also emphasised by the heraldic arms of the royal lion, which embellish the memorial – not in honour of King John but because they were the insignia of the 1st Company of Volunteers, fighting for independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Still, the resulting assemblage is striking in its blending of temporal layers. After the Second World War, the Czechoslovak volunteers who fought for France and England were added to the memorial with the aid of the local veterans’ organisations. The soldiers who fought in alliance with Western Allies remained a sensitive issue for Czechoslovak representatives as well as for the official historical narrative in the epoch before the Velvet Revolution of 1989.¹⁴

In Luxembourg, after 1945 – where the country had been occupied by Germany and young men recruited by force into the *Wehrmacht*, John the Blind became a forceful (though, given his defeat, paradoxical) symbol of military valour. On 20 October 1945, an agreement was concluded with France allowing the participation of Luxembourg troops in the occupation of the French zone in Western Germany: two Luxembourg battalions (c. 1200 men) were to participate in the occupation of the sectors of Bitburg and Saarburg and the municipality of Kastel-Staadt. The latter enclave was to be “totally reserved for the Luxembourg occupation”. The changing of the guard at Kastel on 13 November 1945 was accompanied by a mutual exchange of “*Croix de Guerre*” medals, to the French Generals Koenig and Montsarbert on the one hand, and to Prince Félix (the consort of Grand-Duchess Charlotte) and his son, Prince Jean, on the other. In his speech Prince Félix said that

“en cette journée unique dans l’histoire où Français et Luxembourgeois se rencontrent sur le sol de l’Allemagne vaincue, en cet endroit consacré par le souvenir de Jean l’Aveugle, le héros national luxembourgeois le plus populaire, il est impossible de ne pas évoquer des souvenirs historiques, de ne pas rappeler la journée du 26 août 1346, où Jean, comte de Luxembourg et roi de Bohême, accouru au secours de la France envahie, chercha et trouva une mort glorieuse sur le champs de bataille de Crécy plutôt que de reculer et de ses sauver par une fuite indigne de sa renommée et contraire à l’honneur de la chevalerie”.

John the Blind, he concluded, was “le représentant qualifié de l’amitié franco-luxembourgeoise” and their joint guard at his chapel the symbol of a new spirit: “une volonté éclairée et durable de mettre toutes nos forces, même les plus humbles, au service de la Paix européenne.” This example shows perfectly how historical remembrance is about selection and omission. While the National-Socialists had tried to emphasise that John the Blind was the son



Fig. 5: La Targuette (French National War Cemetery, Pas-de-Calais). Private collection.

and father of a ‘German’ emperor and (as King of Bohemia) a Prince-Elector of the Empire, this was no longer mentioned after the Second World War. Nor was the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453). Instead, John’s loyalty to the King of France was stressed by a member of the British Army (which Prince Félix and his son had joined in 1942). This new alliance was to be built on a “*pacifisme armé*”, overcoming the “*neutralité désarmée*” – the latter having been denounced two days earlier, when crossing the bridge in Echternach to occupy (a strip of) Germany, as “*humiliante servitude*”.¹⁵ The following year, the remains of John the Blind were ‘repatriated’ and laid to rest in Luxembourg Cathedral.

The memory of Crécy is thus not set in stone but it has been evoked for many different purposes. John the Blind was declared “*mort pour la France*” even before the official status existed – a

prototype of the modern soldier, dying for his fatherland. He was also a source of regional patriotism for local elites and moreover a source of patriotic pride for Luxembourgers and Czechs increasingly opposed to Austro-Hungarian rule. After the Great War, Crécy was likened to other, much larger battlefields. The death of Luxembourg and Czechoslovak volunteers fighting with the French was associated with the self-sacrifice of the hero of Crécy. Finally, after the Second World War, Crécy made it possible to overcome national humiliation and declare moral victory.

1 Michel Margue, Wem gehört Johann, Graf von Luxemburg und König von Böhmen? Grabstätte und Erinnerungspolitik in wandelnden Zeiten des Nation-Building, in: *Ewige Ruhe? Grabkulturen in Luxemburg und den Nachbarregionen/Concession à perpétuité ? Cultures funéraires au Luxembourg et dans les régions voisines*, ed. by Sonja Kmec, Robert Philippart and Antoinette Reuter. Luxembourg: capybarabooks, 2019, p. 295-303, open access: URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/10993/46337> (last accessed: 07.01.2022); Pit Péporté, Jang de Blannen. Johann der Blinde, in: *Lieux de mémoire au Luxembourg/Erinnerungsorte in Luxemburg*, vol. 1, ed. by Sonja Kmec et al. Luxembourg: Saint-Paul, 2007, p. 67-72.

2 Syndicat d'initiative de Crécy-en-Ponthieu, Fonds Debuissou 3651, reproduced by France Dubuisson et al., À nos grands hommes. URL: <https://anos-grandshommes.musee-orsay.fr/index.php/Detail/objects/3542> (last accessed: 07.01.2022).

3 Jean-Jacques Caron, *Itinéraire au champ de bataille de Crécy, lu à la Société des sciences morales, le 2 décembre 1836 (...)*, publié par le docteur Boucher. Versailles: Imprimerie de Klefer, 1849, [Avant-propos].

4 Ibid., p. 3, 27.

5 Compte rendu des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et Belles-lettres 45/5, séance du 23 Octobre 1901, p. 637-638. URL: https://www.persee.fr/doc/crai_0065-0536_1901_num_45_5_16967 (last accessed: 29.12.2021).

6 Léger was in correspondence with Dr. Vladimír Srb, Mayor of Prague (1901-1906) and deputy of the Austro-Hungarian Parliament (1907-1909), who promoted the idea of Franco-Czech friendship in order to loosen the close liaison between Vienna and Prague, see: Municipal Archive of Prague, Collection of Paper Documents PPL II, shelf no. 1994.

7 Český svět 1, no 15 (9 June 1905), article: *Louis Léger, slavista francouzský*, and *ibid.* 1, no 18 (30 June 30 1905), p. 115-117. In 1901, Jules Henri Lecomte, the mayor of Crécy sent the representatives of Prague a small amount of soil from the battlefield of Crécy; cf. the letter of Lecomte dated 24 July 1901. National Museum Prague - Historické muzeum, Historické sbírky, shelf no H2-15 840.

8 Compte rendu des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et Belles-lettres 47/3, séance du 29 mai 1903, p. 210-212. URL: https://www.persee.fr/doc/crai_0065-0536_1903_num_47_3_19371 (last accessed: 29.12.2021). The names of the committee members have been set in stone on that very monument, below the mention "SOUSCRIPTION INTERNATIONALE FRANCE - BOHEME - LUXEMBOURG 1905". For a detailed description see: René van der Krogt and Peter van der Krogt, *Statues - Hither and Thither*. URL: <https://vanderkrogt.net/statues/object.php?webpage=ST&record=frpi065> (last accessed: 07.01.2022).

9 Archives de la Ville de Luxembourg, Ville Luxembourg, LU 11 - IV/2, Inv. Nr. 0967 (1905/1906). See: Jacques Maas, Johann der Blinde, emblematische Heldengestalt des luxemburgischen Nationalbewusstseins im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, in: *Johann der Blinde: Graf von Luxemburg, König von Böhmen: 1296-1346* (Tagungsband der 9^{ten} Journées Lotharingiennes 22. - 26. Oktober 1996, Centre Universitaire de Luxembourg), ed. by Michel Pauly (Publications de la Section historique, 115; Publications du CLUDEM, 14). Luxembourg, 1997, p. 597-622.

10 For the schedule of the ceremony and the transcript of the discourses see: Louis Léger, *La renaissance tchèque au 19^e siècle*. Paris: F. Alcan, 1911, appendix "Le monument de Jean de Luxembourg à Crécy", p. 245-271.

11 Article 1 of a law dated 2 July 1915 stipulated that "*L'acte de décès d'un militaire des armées de terre ou de mer tué à l'ennemi ou mort des suites de ses blessures ou d'une maladie contractée sur le champ de bataille [...] devra sur avis de l'Autorité militaire, contenir la mention 'Mort pour la France'*", in: *Journal officiel de la République française* 184 (9 July 1915), p. 4653.

12 Thomas Kolnberger and Sonja Kmec, Transnational Soldiering, Burial and Commemoration across Borders. The Case of Luxembourgers in the French Foreign Legion, in: *Francia. Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte* 49 (2022, in print).

13 Joseph Fišera, *Památník a vojenský hřbitov čs.dobrovolníků v La Targette* [Monument and military cemetery of Czechoslovak volunteers in La Targette], 2000 (posted in Nov. 2009). URL: <https://www.csol.cz/clanky-a-reporty/z-cinno-sti-csol/archiv/2009/156-pamatnik-a-vojensky-hrbitov-cs-dobrovolniku-v-la-targette> (last accessed: 07.01.2022).

14 Ibid.

15 Speech by Prince Félix, dated 11 and 13 Nov 1945, reproduced in *Bulletin d'Information* (Luxembourg) 12 (30 Nov 1945), p. 8-9.