Bohemian Rhapsody: on the two Defenstrations of Prague

If anyone gets thrown out of a window at an EU summit in Prague, panic.
By Jonn Elledge

Half a millennium ago today, on 31 October 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of a church in Wittenberg, and kicked off the Reformation. He also, as it happened, kicked off well over a century of religious violence in Europe, a hot new diplomatic trend that would only abate once the imperial age began and we all started fighting about gold rather than god.

Anyway. Since both relate to the battles between the two halves of western Christendom, the 500th anniversary of Luther’s protest seems like a great moment to regurgitate my favourite fact about European history. It’s this:

The event commonly referred to as the “Defenestration of Prague”, which in 1618 was the first, farcical act in the horrific Thirty Years War, should more properly be known as the “Second Defenestration of Prague”. In other words, twice in European history have major wars begun after someone got themselves chucked out of a window in Bohemia.

Yep.

The First Defenestration of Prague was, compared to what came later, a relatively small and local affair, so no wonder it’s been largely forgotten by history. On 30 July 1419, some Hussites – a sort of pre-Lutheran Christian reform group – were marching the streets of the city, to protest the fact that some of their number were being held prisoner by the town council.

Just as they were passing the town hall, though, a stone was thrown from an upstairs window, and allegedly hit the group’s leader, the Hussite priest Jan Želivský. The Hussites weren’t very impressed by that, on the whole. Enraged, the protesters stormed the town hall, climbed up to the council room, and chucked half a dozen local noteworthies out of a window.

All this had three significant effects. One was that the noteworthies in question died, fairly quickly, shortly after hitting the ground. Another was that the Bohemian King, Wenceslaus IV, was so shocked by the news he promptly snuffed it too. (Disappointingly from the perspective of a good story, he’s not the Good King Wenceslas of the Christmas Carol: that one lived in the 10th century. Boo.)

The third and most significant effect, though, was that the defenestration was the trigger for the
The Hussite Wars, and for the next 15 years the Hussites and Catholics would march around central Europe beating the holy crap out of each other. The internet is a bit vague on exactly how many people died – but what is clear is that the whole thing was pretty horrible, and an object lesson in the fact that throwing people out of Prague windows at times when religious tension is running a bit high is A Bad Idea. If they had any sense, the Bohemian people must have looked at each other and agreed to never let this happen again.

So anyway, 199 years later, it happened again.

In the early 17th century, central Europe was still dominated by the Holy Roman Empire, a patchwork of Germanic statelets, theoretically ruled over by the Austrian branch of the Habsburgs. This patchwork was religious as well as political: the Habsburgs were Catholic, but many of their subjects weren’t, so since the Peace of Augsburg of 1555, the rule had been that princes got to choose the religion of their States, and the emperor had to lump it.

By 1618, though, the heir to the throne was Ferdinand, a big fan of Catholic counter-reformation. He ordered Catholic officials to do away with a few Protestant chapels in the distinctly un-Catholic Bohemia. The result was an angry meeting at Prague Castle, at which a crowd of Bohemians accused the imperial regents of violating the Bohemians’ religious liberties. Said regents were promptly found guilty, and tossed out of a third storey window, falling 70 feet to the ground. Remarkably, none of them were hurt (Catholics said they were saved by angels or possibly the Virgin Mary; Protestants retorted that they’d actually been saved by a dung heap). This was of little comfort, however, since the whole thing was the trigger for what would become the largest war Europe had ever seen. It would last until 1648, eventually pulling in France, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, the Spanish Empire, and all the major German states. Around 8m would die, and the Holy Roman Empire was never the same again.

All in all then, none of this was very funny – so long as you discount the fact that:

a) The Thirty Years War started with three men being non-fatally tossed out of a window into a literal pile of shit, and

b) this wasn’t actually the first time it had happened.

It’s difficult to know what lesson to draw from all this, so I’m going with: if anyone gets thrown out of a window at an EU summit in Prague, panic.