

Between Menace and Utility: Handguns in Early Sixteenth-Century Bohemia

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Abstract

In 1500, the first Bohemian Land Ordinance was completed; within it was an article that forbade anyone from hunting with a firearm. However, only twenty-four years after the 1500 constitution, firearms had apparently been involved in so much social violence that a specific firearms Ordinance was promulgated in 1524. Ultimately, the handgun had shifted from a rural nuisance to a violent, social problem.

After briefly establishing how the legal mechanisms within the Ordinance functioned, the article proceeds to investigate how firearms were viewed in early sixteenth century Bohemia. Using the Ordinance itself and other judicial and extrajudicial sources, the article examines the vocabulary used to describe firearms and the deviant actions for which they were used. It not only investigates where it was unacceptable to use firearms but also where the law permitted their use, why these instances were exceptional, and if the same qualities that saw firearms labelled negatively also made them suitable for particular controlled uses. Here one must also consider who was eligible to use a firearm in those extraordinary circumstances and how any breach of this trust was punished. Furthermore, to save the article from becoming too parochial, it will make frequent reference to contemporaneous developments regarding firearms elsewhere in Europe, to ascertain whether or not Bohemia was part of a wider trend concerning how firearms were perceived. Ultimately, therefore, the social perception of the firearm, of a new menace and instrument, will be placed firmly within both the Bohemian and European contexts.

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