
CU opens exhibition 'Novembers'

In the Carolinum building of the Charles University, exhibition 'Listopady/Novembers' was inaugurated on November 17, 2014. The opening was attended by presidents of five Central European states. It is probably the largest exhibition organised to commemorate this year's anniversary of the students' day. It focuses not only on the Velvet Revolution and November 1939 but also on wartime events which led to the declaration of International Students' Day and traces the transformation of this holiday during the rule of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia.

On November 17, 1939, after the funeral of the medical student Jan Opletal and anti-German demonstrations, universities were closed, nine student representatives executed, and over one thousand students sent to a concentration camp. Yet even so, hundreds of university students managed to leave the country, join the Czechoslovak army abroad, and eventually make sure that November 17 was declared an International Students' Day and celebrated world-wide.

"We want to present not only the dramatic wartime events but also the way November 17 had been used as an instrument of diplomacy and propaganda. Czechoslovak students played a crucial role in this process and during the war, November 17 was commemorated in all inhabited continents," explains Petr Cajthaml, head of the Archive of the Charles University and one of the authors of the exhibition.

This is also why after the war, international student congresses were meeting in Prague and the newly created International Union of Students established its headquarters in the Czechoslovak capital. After the 1948 communist takeover, the Union became politicised and Western organisations withdrew their membership.



"During the following forty years, the International Students' Day was misused and misappropriated by the communist regime. Only on the 50th anniversary, in November 1989, it was adopted by independent-thinking students and thanks to them, the holiday gained a new meaning," says the historian Jakub Jareš, the other author of the exhibition.

The exhibition also presents the lives of people who in the past 75 years experienced and co-created November 17 as demonstrating students, prisoners of concentration camps and communist prisons, Czechoslovak soldiers abroad, or members of university management.

A substantial part of the exhibition consists of contemporary radio and television broadcasts. "We have managed to acquire, for example, speeches of Emil Hácha and Edvard Beneš which immediately react to the execution of student leaders and the closing of universities. The two speeches have a completely opposite charge: the first is resigned and appeasing, the other decisive and rousing," adds Jakub Jareš.

Visitors of the exhibition will be able to listen to unique recordings of radio plays about November 17 which were created in England by Czechoslovak students during the war. "Some of them are almost ridiculously theatrical but I suppose that goes with the high emotions of the wartime," claims Petr Cajthaml.

The exhibition also includes video recordings from November 1989 and a recording of Radio Free Europe programme which first broadcast information about the 'dead student' from Národní třída.

Listopady/Novembers

Charles University Exhibition on the Occasion of November 17 1939 and 1989 Carolinum (the cloister/Křížová chodba)

Ovocný trh 3, Prague 1

17. 11. 2014 – 28. 2. 2015

Open daily 10am–6pm (on November 17 since 3pm)

Entry free

Exhibition is presented in Czech and English.