
Charles University in the history of the nation and state

Charles University in Prague is the oldest university in central and south-eastern Europe. The time at which it was founded was one of a blossoming of European universities; the founder of our institution, Charles IV, played a key role in this. Charles himself was exceptionally well-educated, and had been strongly influenced by his long periods of residence in Paris, where he came into contact with the rich intellectual culture of France, as well as his subsequent sojourn in Italy. Charles valued education; this is evident not only from the fact that he founded our university, but also from the fact that throughout his life he surrounded himself and communicated with exceptionally well-educated people.

When Charles founded the university in Prague in 1348, no institution of higher education existed in the greater part of the European continent that lay north of the Alps and east of the borders of France. From the very start our university was, in its deed of foundation, endowed with the same privileges as enjoyed by the universities of Paris and Bologna. In another document Charles expressed his wish that the university enjoy the same success as those in Paris and Oxford. As you can see, Charles set a very high standard for his university – it was to be the equal of the foremost institutions of its type in the known world.

Witness to the role played by the university at this very early stage is the fact that many of its former students attained high office, frequently in places very far removed from the borders of the Bohemian Lands. At the same time, the community of the Prague university shared the fortunes of the society living in the state of Bohemia. At historic moments it was at the centre of events, and sometimes paid a not inconsiderable price for this.

* * *

The Prague university experienced a period of considerable development during the second half of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century. Certainly, university grounds, too, saw ethnic disputes, which in 1882 resulted in the division of the university into two parts – Czech and German (the Faculty of Theology did not open until 1891/1892). This division necessitated the building of separate Czech faculties. These new buildings, constructed at great cost, but with extraordinary intensity and speed, continue to serve the needs of the university today. Within these buildings was formed the life of the individual faculties, institutes, departments and other facilities. A number of new departments and specialisations were set up very quickly in both the medical and natural sciences, as well as the humanities. There was a rapid growth in number of university students – for example, in 1891/1892 the Faculty of Arts had 141 students, a number which had grown to 1,486 by 1905/1906¹. This growth was due to the dynamic growth in the number of good-quality secondary – grammar and comprehensive – schools.

The general growth of education, the rise of the Prague university and other institutions of higher education (Prague Technical University, Academy of Fine Arts) took place at a time when the Bohemian Lands (and, indeed, the Austro-Hungarian monarchy as a whole) were experiencing, despite the occasional depression (the crisis of 1873-1879), times of unheard-of economic development – a railway network was built at breathtaking speed, countless new factories sprung up and large towns and cities expanded at a quite remarkable speed. Educated people – technicians, doctors, lawyers, secondary-school teachers, qualified specialists in administration – were needed everywhere. In other words – economic development went hand-in-hand with the development of higher education and education in general; they were two sides of the same coin. At this time the university in Prague made a massive contribution to the transformation of Czech society into one that was modern and educated.

A large number of illustrious individuals were active at both the Czech and German universities, many of whom earned the respect of society at large. Five professors of the university became ministers in the government of the Austrian part of the Dual Monarchy and several were elected to the Czech parliament or Imperial council, one of whom was Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. It was Masaryk who led efforts to establish a new, Czechoslovak state; together with him stood Milan Rastislav Štefánik, who was awarded a doctorate at the Prague university, and Edvard Beneš, who in 1913 became a private associate professor of the university.

Figures who belonged to the university's academic community, or who arose from it, made a significant contribution to the creation, governing and building of the new state. The success of the, unfortunately short-lived, state was built on the existence of well-prepared, educated elites – and Charles University made an incalculable contribution to this.

The ethos of the high appreciation of society of education, educational institutions and, specifically, universities, was transferred from the Dual Monarchy era to the First Czechoslovak Republic. The potential contained in the university in Prague facilitated the creation of new universities in Brno and Bratislava. The Czech Charles University gained major

1 Josef PETRÁŇ, Česká filosofická fakulta 1882-1918, in: Jan HAVRÁNEK (ed.), *Dějiny Univerzity Karlovy III, 1802-1918*, Praha 1997, s. 298.

new buildings, saw further growth in the numbers of its teachers and students and became part of the backbone of the new state.

* * *

Despite all the political, ethnic and social problems of the period, the university in Prague experienced a long period of relatively peaceful and dynamic development between the mid-19th century and 1938/1939. The events of the year 1939 had a drastic effect on Charles University. The execution of nine students on 17 November 1939, the closure of Czech universities, the imprisonment of many students and their removal to concentration camps: this was only the beginning. Many university teachers lost their lives; many others experienced imprisonment and persecution. With its attack on universities and the educated classes, the totalitarian Nazi regime was attempting to achieve total control over and the decimation of the Czech nation. It is evident that the totalitarian regime was well aware of the role and strength of education and the danger that it represented.

Major purges and interventions by a totalitarian regime also affected Charles University during the Communist coup of February 1948 and the subsequent period, with the humanities being particularly affected. The so-called 'normalisation' period after 1968 was also a difficult one for the university. Despite all of this, the considerable commitment of many people working at the university ensured that its many centres maintained their quality as well as their connection with the outside world, even if communication was restricted in a variety of ways.

* * *

The final days of the so-called 'normalisation' regime began on 17 November 1989, when a student procession made its way from Albertov to Národní street. Since that time our society has enjoyed freedom and democracy, as well as a secure existence as part of the European Union. Recent events that have occurred not far from the borders of the European Union are an emphatic reminder of the fact that these values cannot be taken for granted; the defence of these values has claimed many victims in the past, and they must continue to be protected with great vigilance.

While not all here will agree with me, I would say that no previous generation in our country has enjoyed such favourable conditions as the current one. While today's freedom and democracy have their weaknesses, dark sides and shortcomings, of which we are well aware, I would say that, despite these, freedom is amongst not only the most important values of human existence, but also the best environment for the fostering of good education.

* * *

The years since 1989 have seen the creation of many new universities and a massive rise in the number of university students. We must, however, ensure that this is not accompanied by a decline in the quality of study and the mere handing out of diplomas, rather than the fostering of education. It is the mission of Charles University to not only maintain, but also to improve the quality of its output – not only in teaching, but also in science. This includes caring for our country's cultural richness and ensuring that a cultured atmosphere is created within our country. It is only in this way that a good basis for life in this country can be ensured. In this, the illustrious past and tradition of Charles University can serve as an inspiration and obligation for today.

As in the past, the community of Charles University cannot today think of its own prosperity alone. As in the past, Charles University must be one of the institutions forming the backbone of our society and our country. This means not only enjoying academic freedoms, but also advocating their preservation and positive deepening, because only a free, self-confident and open university can fulfil its mission. At the same time, though, this entails a responsibility towards society as a whole and the state for the reason that it is on university soil that the prosperity of both grows. Responsibility for directing society and the country along the right path has always been particular to the university community, even in difficult times, and for this it often paid a high price – and this continues to apply, with no less urgency, today.