
The University and the Republic 1918-2018

The Beginnings of Mutual Relations

The anniversary of the origin of the Czechoslovak Republic is also the anniversary of Charles University, which was a major public institution and experienced one of the highlights of its existence during the inter-war period. The university accepted its current name in November 1918. It entered the new state as one of two Prague universities, differing, since their division in 1882, only in the adjective referring to the teaching language ("Czech University of Karl-Ferdinand" and "German University of Karl-Ferdinand").

The Czech university's support of the new state arrangement was practically immediate, sincere and effective in its impact. On 29 October the academic senate met in an extraordinary session and, after a speech by the Chancellor identifying the current academic year as "extremely memorable", a statement conceived on the previous day by the body of professors of the Faculty of Law was accepted. In this statement the senate "as the senate of a university of the free state of Czechoslovakia, it enthusiastically welcomed its establishment and ceremonially acknowledged it with loyal devotion under all conditions". This statement also included a challenge to the National Committee of Czechoslovakia to immediately initiate effective assistance to the Czech University towards establishment of another two universities – in Moravia (specifically in Brno) and in Slovakia. On the same day the present members of the academic senate annulled suspension of T.G. Masaryk, which had been forced by the Prague Governor's Office in August 1915, with "enthusiastic agreement". The university's representatives were also present when the first Czechoslovak president was greeted at Wilson Station on 12 January 1919. Masaryk subsequently helped overcome potential bitterness by being personally present during installation of the new chancellor Karl Hermann-Otavský.

During the following months and years experts linked to Charles University could be seen in many other spheres of public life, not only in Prague. They were also members of Czechoslovak delegations at the peace talks in Paris (for instance lawyers and future ministers Jan Krčmář and Jan Kapras, ethnographer Lubor Niederle, and geographer Viktor Dvorský, who was present at the creation of the borders of the new state), they assumed posts in the newly established ministries and in other offices or helped create the diplomatic body of the young republic. As a result, courses for consular and diplomatic services were opened at the faculties of philosophy and law, the medical faculty opened a special semester for medics-legionaries in the summer holidays and military courses for students of pharmacy. The current professor of the faculty of theology, František Kordač, was appointed the Bishop of Prague and members of the academic community also sat in legislative bodies, in parliament and in the senate. Several tens of docents (associate professors) and professors of Charles University, some newly appointed, truly assured the first years of tuition at universities in Brno and Bratislava. In their post-revolution enthusiasm, few appreciated the simple fact that everything was possible to a great degree thanks to the liberal environment of the Habsburg monarchy in the period between 1867 and 1914. When comparing the situation at Warsaw University for instance, it is clear that this was not such a matter of course under Central European conditions.

The Nineteen Twenties

The relationship towards newly established Czechoslovak universities was essential to the university policy during the inter-war period. But the relationship between the Czech and German university was of primary importance in the nationally tense environment of the first post-war years. From the formal aspect this was anchored in the law dating from February 1920 called "lex Mareš" after its translator, professor of physiology at the medical faculty, František Mareš. The act left no doubt as to which university had the leading position – the German university was to exist in Prague alongside Charles University, which bore the name of its founder, and was also to be relieved of the relevant claims to tangible historic heritage in the form of insignias and the university archive. Even though the relationship between both universities remained tense, a certain *modus vivendi* was successfully achieved in more peaceful years. And some members of the German university were involved in public life in a consensual manner, including occupation of ministerial posts (lawyer Robert Mayr-Harting and Slavic professor Franz Spina).

The material situation of Charles University gradually improved until the economic crisis. Outwardly the most visible trace of this improvement was the opening of new buildings for the faculties of philosophy and law in Old Town and the faculty hospitals and other workplaces of the Medical Faculty in New Town, or the decision to establish Czech university clinics in Motol. Expansion of the university's tangible facilities went hand-in-hand with the growing number of students, which ranged from around six thousand in 1918, to practically double in the first half of the nineteen thirties. The number

of pedagogues increased similarly from three hundred to seven hundred in the last inter-war years. During the nineteen twenties, both Prague universities became a refuge for a number of students and pedagogues initially from territories in East Europe affected by civil war (particularly Ukrainians and Russians), and subsequently students of Jewish origin from Hungary and Poland, where numerus clausus applied. The number of foreign students frequently ranged above 10% overall.

As well as offering education as a form of securing earnings, Prague also attracted young people by means of a range of well-known names in various sectors. We can mention for instance physician Josef Plenář and Ladislav Syllabus, philologists Josef Zubatý and Vincenc Lesný, historians Josef Pekař and Josef Šusta and natural scientists František Závěšek and Viktor Trkal. Their scientific activities frequently enjoyed the support of members of the Czech political and economic elite – one of the most significant examples being the archaeological expeditions of Bedřich Hrozný to Turkey, which received financing from President Masaryk as well as the Škoda Company in Plzeň. The rising number of female students had a parallel in the slower, but also rising number of women in the pedagogic body. After historian Milada Paulová became the first female to become an associate professor in 1925, women were also awarded a degree as associate professor in other branches during the inter-war period. Paulová also became the first extraordinary professor at Charles University in 1935.

Pre-war Relations

It was only in comparison with the conditions during the war and the situation after 1948 that a number of students became aware of the positive points of the academic culture during the First Republic. Not even critical and polemical spirit professor Václav Černý hesitated to use the poetic title of “*officina humanitatis et libertatis*” for Charles University in his memoirs. However, the “workshop of humanity and freedom” was unable to avoid the consequences of the economic crisis and the darker points of the nationalism of the nineteen thirties, most visibly during the so-called “*insignia affair*” during the term of office of Chancellor Karel Domina, who sympathised with the hard right. Street fights between Czech and German students in November 1934 accompanied by anti-Semitic incidents, were the result of a dispute concerning the issue of university insignias by the German university, but the background of the conflict was much broader. The collections of art and the university archive should actually have passed into the hands of Charles University along with the insignias –the situation was *de iure* the result of adoption of *lex Mareš*.

The Karolinum (a complex of buildings, now the seat of Charles University), which was used by both universities, remained another latent point of the conflict. The chancellor’s office of Charles University was temporarily moved to the new building of the Faculty of Law after it was opened and a building-historic survey was commenced in the Karolinum preceding the planned renovations leading to the jubilee in 1948. This work was to have been partially financed by a nationwide collection of funds initiated by Chancellor Domino. The contemporary standing of Charles University was also emphasised by the agitated circumstances of the election of Masaryk’s successor, when right-wing Bohumil Němec, professor of the Faculty of Natural Science, stood as counter-candidate against Edvárd Beneš, docent of sociology at the Faculty of Philosophy on 18 December 1935.

The geopolitical situation in Central Europe during the second half of the nineteen thirties gradually not only paralysed the sporadic preparations for the university’s jubilee, but also the majority of academic life. A number of excesses occurred following Munich, the most typical of which was tearing down the statue of T. G. Masaryk in the building of the Faculty of Philosophy and the gradually rising persecution of students of Jewish origin. The first racially motivated measures were adopted during the so-called Second Republic and were completed after the occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia and creation of the protectorate. At this time the standing of Charles University was basically unsustainable. As one of the most important symbols of the tradition of Czech learning and culture, it became, similarly to universities in other European countries occupied by the Nazis, an undesirable institution whose days were numbered. Furthermore because the existing German university bore the official name of Karls-Universität and was accepted into the association of Reich universities.

The formal reason for liquidation of Czech university education was the mass participation of students in demonstrations on 28 October 1939, during which medic Jan Opletal was fatally shot, and then another demonstration after his death. On 17 November nine members of the student movement, led by docent Josef Matoušek, were executed and over a thousand more students of Prague universities and their colleagues in Brno and students of the mining school in Příbram were transported to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Most of them were released after several years, but of course the declared reopening of universities in the protectorate did not occur.

Several hundred students joined the Czechoslovak foreign resistance. And it was thanks to their activities that persecution of the Czech student youth had a broad international response, leading to declaration of the international day of students on 17 November in 1941. Students serving in Czechoslovak foreign armed forces, particularly medics, were permitted to complete their studies at British universities, particularly at Oxford. A number of pedagogues from Charles University also joined the foreign and national resistance, for instance historian Otakar Odložilík and botanist Vladimír Krajina. Some of them paid for their involvement in the resistance with their lives (for instance physicist Václav Dolejšek and physician Alexander Gjuríč), others fell victim to racial persecution (for instance historian Bedřich Mendl and Germanics expert Arnošt Kraus). A total of twelve professors and fourteen docents of Charles University died in

concentration camps or were executed. There were also members of the academic body among leading representatives of the protectorate, but they were between the millstones and never stooped to activism of the type of Emanuel Moravec (ministers of the protectorate government Jiří Havelka, Jaroslav Krejčí and Jan Kapras, state president Emil Hácha).

Liberation, Stalinism, Gradual Liberalisation

After the war the German university was symbolically dissolved valid retroactively from 17 November 1939. Its property was assumed by Charles University, which immediately renewed its activities in the first post-war days. Under complicated conditions it was necessary to quickly ensure tuition of several years of graduates of secondary schools, who had previously not had the opportunity to enrol in university – compared to pre-war numbers this was nearly twice the number of students. This phenomenon was also linked to the creation of new faculties – medical faculties in Plzeň and Hradec Králové and a pedagogic faculty in Prague. The university also faced a great challenge, the celebration of the 600th anniversary of its existence, which was conceived as a magnificent national celebration, one of the most important of the “eighth” year. Thanks to this, it was possible to obtain sufficient funds from the state to renovate the Karolinum, or at least the great hall and the adjoining areas.

Professor of the Faculty of Law, Karel Engliš, was appointed chancellor for the jubilee year of 1947/1948. He had been appointed Minister of Finance several times during the First Republic and openly stated his support of defence of academic freedoms. He repeatedly became the target of attacks by Communist Minister of Information Václav Kopecký and resigned after the February Putsch. During the dramatic days of February, students of Prague universities were the only ones who endeavoured to openly protest against assumption of powers by the communists, during the so-called march against the castle on 25 February 1948. The date of the important jubilee was drawing closer. At least some basic continuity was achieved by election of a chancellor, mathematician Bohumil Bydžovský. He had previously been a deputy of Karel Engliš as the deputy-chancellor and, as soon as his representative activities ended in spring, he withdrew from public life. The jubilee celebrations were negatively affected by the demonstrative absence of representatives of some of the West European universities and the first purges of the body of professors and the students. The speech by Edvard Beneš in Vladislav Hall on 7 April 1948 on the occasion of presentation of the renewed deed of foundation (the original was lost in April 1945) was the president's last public appearance.

In the meantime the activities of action committees, interfering radically into the staff of the academic body, started running at full blast. So-called student screening took place in 1949 and became a tool to exclude about 10% of students. These were to be replaced by so-called politically reliable graduates of so-called labourer courses. Even so the number of students at Charles University fell to below pre-war numbers for over a decade. Synchronisation of universities and their transformation according to the Soviet model was culminated by the University Act from 1950, which eliminated academic freedoms (starting with election of the chancellor) and made studies subject to regulations of a more secondary school character. The inner operation of the chancellor's office and the individual faculties was to be significantly influenced by the relevant committees of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia for the next four decades and traditional student associations were replaced by Czechoslovak Youth Association organisations. A large part of the scientific activities was transferred from universities to the newly created Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. The negative impact of separation of tuition and research went hand-in-hand with the restriction of contact with foreign universities and scientific institutions.

Hope for some improvement after Stalin's death finally became tangible along with events in spring 1956. Students of Charles University also responded to Chruščov's criticism of the cult of personality and bold appearances by František Hrubín and Jaroslav Seifert at the Convention of Writers, by issuing requests for democratisation of conditions. The student spring celebrations, which nearly one hundred thousand people attended in Prague on 20 May, were enthusiastically responded to. Party bodies responded by imposing personal sanctions and Karel Krejčí, an expert in Polish studies who defended the students as the deputy-chancellor of Charles University, was for instance forced to abandon his pedagogic activities.

Following a short-lived relaxation of conditions, the screws were tightened again in 1956. At Charles University this took place in the form of incomplete screening in 1958-1959. Younger pedagogues, accused of “positivism” were sanctioned at the Faculty of Philosophy and older professors linked to the period of the First Republic were collectively retired – paradoxically at the time when the inter-war discoveries of Jaroslav Heyrovsky receive the most important scientific award, the Nobel Prize. However, the nationwide importance of Charles University was reduced to its lowest point.

Liberalisation in the nineteen sixties was slow, but gradually affected all of society. Most of the pedagogues and students of Charles University gradually acknowledged it and were able to celebrate the student spring celebrations again from 1965 (and even declare American poet Allen Ginsberg the king of the celebrations). One of the most significant expressions of restoration of at least some academic freedoms was election of the chancellor, physician Oldřich Starý, in 1966-1969. And this was no idle talk – rehabilitation of members of the academic body affected by the purges was initiated and some important proscribed pedagogues, such as Jan Patočka, were able to return to the university lecture halls, even though this was only a short-lived event. They even received the opportunity to address the general public on the pages of the Charles University magazine, the popularity of which reached its peak at the time.

Prague Spring and Normalisation

The anniversary of the Czechoslovak Republic was also the year of the Prague Spring and 28 October 1969 was completely overshadowed by the August occupation. The university also recognised Masaryk's ideals of the First Republic by means of a lecture and publication by the Director for History at Charles University and the Archive of the Charles University František Kavka "Charles University and Fifty Years of the Czechoslovak Republic", the conclusion of which was clear: "The efforts for a humanistic content of socialism are a dignified contribution in 1969 to the republic's jubilee and confirmation of the clairvoyance of the great Czech thinker and statesman: that states are sustained by the ideals from which they were born." A student of the Faculty of Philosophy, Jan Palach, endeavoured to arouse the depressed public once more in January 1969 with his fiery gesture. The funerary procession starting out from the courtyard of the Karolinum was also one of the last massive protests against the occupation and the character of the impending regime, apart from the student strikes. When important physician Josef Charvát was elected chancellor of Charles University, normalisation Minister of Education Jaromír Hrbek refused to confirm his position. Another wave of purges among pedagogues and students also began at this time. The end of the nineteen sixties, which was originally to have healed old wrongs, conversely initiated a wave of new wrongs.

During the nineteen seventies and eighties Charles University did not recognise the legacy of the First Czechoslovak Republic, for instance Masaryk's statue in the courtyard of the Faculty of Philosophy was symbolically replaced with Lenin. The natural and medical sciences were naturally subject to less ideological pressure. There was stronger ideologisation of some of the humanities, the staff of which was more significantly affected. The response came in the form of seminars in residences, secret courses and samizdat publications. The theoretical culmination was the activities of philosophers Jan Patočka, Ladislav Hejdlánek, and Radim Palouš in the position of speakers of Charta 77. It was only during the political relaxation of the second half of the nineteen eighties as a result of the situation in the Soviet Union that more official free-thinking activities could be held within the academic community itself. The number of student magazines and persons involved in independent intellectual initiatives grew rapidly. The commemorations of the twentieth anniversary of the death of Jan Palach resulted in the so-called Palach Week, which a number of people from the academic environment, particularly students, attended.

17 November 1989 and the Post-Velvet Period

The circumstances of the demonstrating in memory of the anniversary of closure of Czech universities by the Nazis, which resulted in such a strong response from the public that the existing regime collapsed quite quickly, were an irony of fate. The gathering at Albertov on 17 November had a considerably tense symbolism – the speakers included not only the former colleagues of Jan Opletal, but also the former chancellor of Charles University from 1956, Miroslav Katětov. The response by security forces against demonstrators at Národní třída could raise questions in regard to the parallel with student demonstrations in autumn 1939, the demands by students were initially also reminiscent of the demands of their predecessors from the period of the Prague Spring, but quickly radically exceeded them. Leaflets, printed materials and documentary film from the end of 1989 continue to show the significant position assumed by the rediscovered references to the First Republic of Czechoslovakia and its chief representatives in the reasoning and symbolism of the counter-regime movement at the time.

If we view the situation of the university at the turn of 1918/1919 and 1989/1990 objectively, which is now possible, we can see a number of parallels (and also differences). The role of Charles University in the public sphere was undoubtedly strengthened. In the first case this was the result of its natural standing as the only university in the newly formed state, in the second case this was the significant involvement of members of the academic community, particularly students, in the bloodless change in regime. As T. G. Masaryk attended installation of the first chancellor of Charles University in the Czechoslovak state in 1919, Václav Havel symbolically opened the academic year with students of the Faculty of Physical Education and Sports at Charles University and the University of Chemicals and Technology on 2 October 1990. Similarly to the period after the origin of the Czechoslovak Republic, Charles University also provided a number of experts for important administrative posts during the first post-November years, not least of which included Minister of Health (Pavel Klener), Minister of the Environment (Bedřich Moldan) and Minister of Education (Petr Vopěnka, Petr Piňha).

Charles University recognised important public figures in 1990 by issuing honorary doctorates, which are otherwise reserved for acknowledgement of scientific and pedagogic qualities (Cardinal František Tomášek, musicians Rudolf Firkušný and Rafael Kubelík, Chairman of the European Community Jaques Delors and Václav Havel). This was a repetition of the situation in 1919, when honorary doctors of Charles University included Woodrow Wilson, Georges Clemenceau, Petr Bezruč, Otokar Březina and Alois Jirásek. Legislative changes in the university sector after 1918 were the result of geopolitical changes and did not significantly change the internal organisation of the university, while legislative changes after 1990 conversely primarily dealt with the issue of renewal of academic freedoms. Election of the chancellor or deans or representation of students in academic senates is an absolutely inherent part of academic operation today.

Charles University recognises the traditions of Czech statehood during regular academic holidays (7 April, 28 October, 17 November) and during jubilees of figures or events linked to it (2009 – Kutná Hora Decree, 2015 – Master Jan Hus,

2016 – Charles IV). Similarly to 1948, the celebrations of the “half” anniversary of establishment of Prague University were a true nationwide event – the only celebrations of this important date, which took place during the 19th and 20th centuries according to their original plans. The organisers of these celebrations, led by Chancellor Karel Malý, prepared a number of exhibitions, conferences and other accompanying events culminating in a celebratory session on 7 April 1998 in Vladislav Hall, with the attendance of the president, representatives of the government, the Parliament, Senate and other guests, including the chairman of the Association of European Universities.

The name Charles University is currently one of the most powerful Czech brands and its articulation in the academic environment has (at least in the European scope) usually induced a response similar to cases when the word “Škoda” is spoken in the transport sector or “Budvar” in the food industry sector. As the oldest and biggest Czech public university, it continues to be a flag bearer among its younger sisters. Its symbolic standing is also confirmed by its actual results, including placement in the international rating of universities. If we let the numbers briefly speak for themselves, then the number of students compared to the number in 1989 has more than doubled (it exceeded 40,000 after 2000 and ranges to around 50,000 in recent years). The number of foreign students from all over the world (currently 17%, which is one of the indicators of successful involvement of the university in international academic collaboration) is rising. The number of faculties stabilised at seventeen over fifteen years ago, whereas one of the great post-November challenges was successfully managed – integration of the theological faculties into the university association.

Democratisation and a return to academic freedoms at the turn of 1989/1990 opened a chapter in the history of Charles University which has not yet closed. If we look back at the elapsed century, this is certainly the longest uninterrupted period during which the university has been able to develop in peace without any significant upheaval of a political and social nature. This is not to say of course that this has been a period without mistakes or complications, but if we compare the elapsed thirty years to a number of preceding historic milestone periods (1918 – 1938/39 – 1945 – 1948 – 1968 – 1989), we can appreciate it and not become complacent in the notion that this is a guaranteed matter of course.

PhDr. Marek Ďurčanský, Ph.D., Head of the Institute of History at Charles University