
International Students' Day 2013

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On Sunday 17 November, members of Charles University in Prague gathered to commemorate International Students' Day. 17 November, also known as Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Day, is a state holiday in the Czech Republic. It remembers two important moments in Czech history in 1939 and 1989.

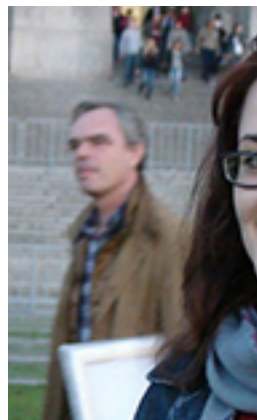
In March 1939, Nazi forces occupied the Czech lands, establishing the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. On 28 October 1939, the anniversary of the founding of the Czechoslovak state, Czechs in Prague held a protest against the Nazi occupation. German soldiers ended the demonstrations with force, and a student of Charles University's Medical Faculty, Jan Opletal, was shot during the struggle. He later died of his wounds and his funeral, held on November 15, was widely attended by students and sparked another anti-Nazi protest. In retaliation, on November 17, the Nazis forcibly closed all Czech universities and colleges; they also sent hundreds of students to concentration camps, and executed 9 student leaders. As a result, November 17 was chosen to mark International Students' Day by the International Students' Council in 1941.

On 17 November 1989, students of Prague were involved in a mass demonstration, celebrating International Students' Day and remembering the 50th anniversary of Opletal's death. A large number of protestors continued to march down the streets of Prague after the demonstration's official end, until they were stopped and beaten by riot police on Národní třída. The demonstration and its brutal repression by police sparked a series of protests and demonstrations over the following weeks; and rumours that a student had died on November 17, although false, popularised anti-Communist sentiment among the Czech population. By the end of 1989, the harsh Communist regime had been replaced, and Czechoslovakia began the transition to democracy.

An official observation of the date took place outside of the Hlávka Hall of Residence, near Charles Square, where Opletal lived as a student. Wreaths were lain on the sidewalk, and official speakers, including Jiří Rusnok, outgoing Czech Prime Minister, spoke about the importance of observing the remembrance. "The death of Jan Opletal and the events of 17 November are of timeless significance," Rusnok said. "It is therefore our duty to pass this message on to those generations born to freedom and who have not been tested as have previous generations. It is only in this way that we can preserve our liberty."

Professor Václav Pavlíček, head of the Hlávka Foundation, and Professor Václav Havlíček, the Rector of the Czech Technical University, were some of the other officials who spoke outside of the dormitory. Havlíček described students as a constant element in the evolution of democracy, speaking about their vital role in some moments of Czech history. Professor Václav Hampl, Rector of Charles University in Prague, also attended the event. He opened his speech by thanking those who took a stand against the Nazis 74 years ago, despite the danger they knew their actions would put them in. "However much our times are, fortunately, far from as dramatic as the times marked by both anniversaries, I see a lesson for the present day being that the value of scholarship, education and science is just as great for freedom and the development of society as a whole, if not greater, than it was in the past," Hampl stated.

Hampl and Havlíček also spoke and laid wreaths at a separate observation, organised by students, on Žitná Street, at the site where Opletal was shot. A minute's silence was also held, to pay further respect to the memory of Opletal.



Natalie James is an undergraduate history student at University College London, currently studying at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. Her interests include history, literature, politics, and current affairs. She joined the online magazine I-Forum to become more aware of and involved in student life at Charles University in Prague, and also to meet other likeminded Erasmus students.