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**National Romanticism: The Formation of National
Movements** | Balázs Trencsényi, Michal Kopeček

Letter to Frankfurt, 11 April 1848

František Palacký

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Full text

- 1 **Title:** Letter to Frankfurt, 11 April 1848 (Psaní do Frankfurta dne 11. dubna 1848)
- 2 **Originally published:** *Národní noviny* (National Newspaper), Prague, Nos. 10 and 12, 1848
- 3 **Language:** Originally written in German, it was published in Czech in *Národní noviny*

- 4 The authorized Czech version was published in František Palacký, *Spisy drobné*, vol. I, edited by B. Rieger, (Prague: Bursík a Kohout, 1898), pp. 16–22.

About the author

- 5 See **František Palacký**, *A History of the Czech nation in Bohemia and Moravia*, pp. 50–51.

Context

- 6 In 1848 the Czech national movement finally went beyond being a prevalently cultural endeavor and entered the political arena. The main aims of the political agenda of the Czech liberals (František Palacký, František Ladislav Rieger, **Karel Havlíček**, František Augustin Brauner) were to achieve the establishment of a constitutional system and to gain political autonomy for the Czechs in the Habsburg Empire. Palacký, a well-known scholar in the German-speaking world, was invited to take part in the ‘Board of Fifty’ in Frankfurt that was charged with the preparation of the German constituent assembly.
- 7 The main reason for this invitation was to win over the Czechs—as a tolerated minority inside the Austrian territory—for the building of a modern ‘Greater German’ nation-state. Especially Austrian liberals supporting the Greater German idea, such as **Viktor von Andrian-Werburg** and Franz Sommaruga, did their best to help the Czechs get representation in the Frankfurt Parliament. They proposed a couple of resolutions about the linguistic and cultural needs of non-German minorities. They nevertheless had no doubts that the Czechs should be part of Germany and should help in the realization of the German national idea. The incorporation of the Bohemian Lands in the ‘Greater German’ polity had its historical logic, as the lands of the Bohemian Crown had been part of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation since the Middle Ages. There were, however, many practical arguments as well. In the years of its major political influence, from 1840 to 1870, and again around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the supporters of the Greater German idea not only stressed the economic and cultural significance and superiority of the Germans in Bohemia, but employed a geopolitical argument as well. For them the territory of Bohemia and Moravia was a natural link between the northern and southern German lands.
- 8 For the Czech liberal nationalist movement formed in the *Vormärz* era, however, the Greater German program was unacceptable. Palacký refused the invitation to the Frankfurt assembly and

instead formulated his own idea of the *raison d'être* of Austria and the aims of Czech national politics in the Central European context. His letter was a clear refutation of the idea of a Greater Germany from the Czech point of view, based on the proof of the sovereignty of the Bohemian Lands and above all on the liberal tenet of the equal 'natural rights' of all nations in Austria. He presented an alternative geopolitical perspective that contested the Greater German one, arguing that for the small nations, west of expansionist Imperial Russia, the only possibility of survival was in their political unity. The "vital artery of this necessary union of nations," a central axis, and hence the focus of the central governmental power, should have been the Danube. Vienna, therefore, was to maintain its leading role in an empire that, however, had to reformulate its national policy.

9 Palacký's 'Letter to Frankfurt' became the most important political statement of the Czech national movement in 1848, and a point of reference for the subsequent development of Czech national politics. His letter has been perceived as the first draft of the Czech concept of the federalization of the Austrian Empire, which became the basic tenet of Czech liberal politics. Palacký himself elaborated this idea during his work in the Imperial Diet in Vienna and Kremsier (Cz. Kroměříž) from June 1848 to March 1849. Especially in his last constitutional draft, presented in January 1849, he came very close to other liberal supporters of ethnic federalism in the Diet, such as the Bohemian German Ludwig von Löchner and the Slovene Matija Kavčič. The concept of federalization delineated the ideal relationship of the Czechs to the Austrian state. Once the Czech national idea finally prevailed in the 1830s and 1840s, Palacký—asserting the need of the Empire for 'national existence'—made the conjunction of national consciousness and loyalty to Austria feasible. The concept of an Austrian federation became a necessary condition in mainstream Czech political thought until the Great War (see **František Palacký**, *Idea of the Austrian State*, and **Tomáš G. Masaryk**, *The New Europe*).

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11 Gentlemen,

12 The post has just brought me the letter of 6 April in which you do me the honour of inviting me to Frankfurt to take part in the deliberations, the main purpose of which is to summon a German Parliament. It was a pleasant surprise to me to find in that letter full and authentic evidence of the confidence which the most distinguished men of the German Empire continue to have in my

opinions; for in inviting me to a Diet of 'German patriots' they themselves acquit me of the unjust accusation so repeatedly brought against me of having shown myself an enemy of the German nation. It is with a sincere sense of gratitude that I acknowledge in that the noble kindness and justness of that excellent assembly; I consider myself therefore to be all the more obliged to answer it with full trust, directly and without reservation.

13 I am unable, gentlemen, to accept your invitation for my own person, nor can I send any other 'trustworthy patriot' in my stead. Permit me to give you, as briefly as possible, my reasons.

14 The object of your assembly is to establish a federation of the German nation in place of the existing federation of princes, to guide the German nation to real unity, to strengthen the sentiment of German national consciousness, and in this manner expand the power and strength of the German Empire. Although I respect such effort and the sentiments upon which it is based, I cannot, precisely for the reason that I respect it, participate in it in any manner whatsoever. I am not a German—at least I do not feel myself to be one—and you would assuredly not desire to call me in to join you as a mere assenter, a 'yes-man' without a mind or will of his own; for in that case I should at Frankfurt either have to deny my true feelings and appear in false colors, or if it came to the point, raise my voice loudly in opposition. For the first I am too forthright and direct of speech, for the second I am not shameless and ruthless enough. I cannot therefore bring myself to break in with hostile notes upon a consensus and harmony which I regard as gratifying and desirous, not only in my own home but also in my neighbor's.

15 I am a Bohemian of Slavonic origin [*Ich bin ein Böhme slawischen Stammes*], and with all the little I possess and all the little I can do, I have devoted myself for all time to the service of my nation. That nation is a small one, it is true, but from time immemorial it has been a nation of itself and based upon its own strength. Its rulers were from olden times members of the federation of German princes, but the nation never regarded itself as pertaining to the German nation, nor throughout all the centuries was it regarded by others as so pertaining. The whole union of the Bohemian lands, first with the Holy Roman (German) Empire and then with the German confederation, was always a mere dynastic tie of which the Czech nation, the Czech Estates, scarcely desired to know anything and to which they paid no regard. This is an actual fact equally well known to all German historians and to myself; and if anyone is still prepared to doubt it, I offer to make the matter in due time perfectly clear and certain. Even if it were to be fully accepted as true that the Bohemian Crown had at one time been in feudal

relationship with the German Empire (a contention which Czech publicists, however, have always denied), it cannot occur to any real historian to doubt, in so far as internal affairs are concerned, the one-time sovereignty and independence of the government and land of Bohemia. The whole world is well aware that the German Emperors had never, in virtue of their imperial dignity, the slightest to do with the Czech nation; that they possessed neither legislative, nor judicial, nor executive power either in Bohemia or over the Czechs; that they never had the right to raise troops or any royalties from that country; that Bohemia together with its crown lands was never considered as pertaining to any of the one-time ten German states; that appertenance to the Imperial Supreme Court of Justice never applied to it, and so on: that therefore the entire connection of the Bohemian lands with the German Empire was regarded, and must be regarded, not as a bond between nation and nation but as one between ruler and ruler. If, however, anyone asks that, over and above this heretofore existing bond between princes, the Czech nation should now unite with the German nation, this is at least a new demand—devoid of any historical and juridical basis, a demand to which I for my person do not feel justified in acceding until I receive an express and authentic mandate for so doing.

16 The second reason which prevents me from taking part in your deliberations is the fact that, according to all I have so far learned of your aims and intentions as publicly proclaimed, it is your irrevocable desire and purpose to undermine Austria as an independent empire and indeed to make her impossible for all time to come—an empire whose preservation, integrity and consolidation is, and must be, a great and important matter not only for my own nation but also for the whole of Europe, indeed, for humanity and civilization itself. Grant me there, too, a brief, favourable hearing.

17 You know, gentlemen, what Power it is that holds the entire East of our Continent. You know that this Power, now grown to vast dimensions, increases and expands of itself decade by decade in far greater measure than is possible for the countries of the West. You know that, secure at its own centre against practically every attack, it has become, and has for a long time been, a menace to its neighbors; and that, although it has unhindered access to the North, it is nevertheless, led by natural instinct, always seeking, and will continue to seek, to extend its borders southwards. You know, too, that every further step which it will take forward on this path threatens at an ever accelerated pace to give birth to, and to establish, a *universal monarchy*, that is to say, an infinite and inexpressible evil, a misfortune without measure or bound, such as

I, though heart and soul a Slav, would nonetheless profoundly regret from the standpoint of humanity even though that monarchy be proclaimed as a Slavic one. Many persons in Russia name and regard me as an enemy of the Russians, doing me the same injustice as those in Germany who regard me as an enemy of the Germans. I am not, I would declare loudly and publicly, an enemy of the Russians: on the contrary, I observe with pleasure and sympathy every step forward which that great nation makes within its natural borders along the path of civilization; but with all my fervid love of my own nation I always pay greater respect to the good of humanity and learning than to the national good, and for this reason the bare possibility of a universal Russian monarchy has no more determined opponent or foe than myself—not because that monarchy would be Russian but because it would be universal.

18 You know that in the south-east of Europe, along the frontiers of the Russian empire, there live many nations widely differing in origin, in language, in history and morals—Slavs, Wallachians, Magyars, and Germans, not to speak of Turks and Albanians—none of whom is sufficiently powerful itself to bid successful defiance to the superior neighbor on the East for all time. They could only do so if a close and firm tie bound them all together as one. The vital artery of this necessary union of nations is the Danube. The focus of power of such a union must never be diverted far from this river, if the union is to be effective and remain so. Assuredly, if the Austrian State had not existed for ages, it would have been in the interests of Europe and indeed of humanity to endeavor to create it as soon as possible.

19 Why is it, however, that we have seen this State, which by nature and history is predestined to be the bulwark and guardian of Europe against Asiatic elements of every possible type—why is it that we have seen it at a critical moment lacking help and almost devoid of counsel in the face of an advancing storm? It is because, in the unhappy blindness that has long afflicted her, Austria has long failed to recognize the real juridical and moral basis of her existence, and has denied it; the fundamental rule, that is, that all the nationalities and all the religions under her scepter should enjoy complete equality of rights and respect in common. The rights of nations are in truth the rights of Nature. No nation on earth has the right to demand that its neighbors should sacrifice themselves for its benefit, no nation is under an obligation to deny or sacrifice itself for the good of its neighbor. Nature knows neither dominant nor subservient nations. If the bond which unites a number of diverse nations in a single political entity is to be firm and enduring, no nation can have cause to fear that the union will

cost it any of the things which it holds most dear. On the contrary, each must have the certain hope that in the central authority it will find defense and protection against possible violations by neighbors of the principles of equality. Then will every nation do its best to confer upon that central authority such powers as will enable it successfully to provide the aforesaid protection. I am convinced that even now it is not too late for this fundamental rule of justice, this *sacra ancora* for a vessel in danger of foundering, to be publicly and sincerely proclaimed in the Austrian Empire and energetically carried out in all its sectors by common consent. Every moment, however, is precious; for God's sake do not let us delay another hour with this! Metternich did not fall merely because he was the greatest foe of liberty but also because he was the bitterest, the most determined, enemy of all the Slavic races in Austria.

20 When I direct my gaze beyond the frontiers of Bohemia, natural and historical considerations constrain me to turn not to Frankfurt but to Vienna, to seek there the centre which is fitted and predestined to ensure and defend the peace, the liberty, and the rights of my nation. But *your* endeavors, gentlemen, seem now to me to be directed, as I have already said, not only towards ruinously undermining, but even utterly destroying, that center to whose authority and strength I look for salvation for the Bohemian lands and not alone for them. Or do you think that the Austrian State can continue to exist when you forbid it in its hereditary domains to maintain an army of its own independent of Frankfurt as the joint head? Do you think that the Austrian Emperor or any sovereign who succeeds him will be able to maintain his position if you impose upon him the duty of accepting all the most important laws for your committee, and in this manner make the imperial Austrian Parliament and the provincial Diets of the united Kingdoms mere shadows without substance and power? And suppose that Hungary, following her own instincts, should sever her connection with the State, or what is much the same thing, should withdraw within herself—would such a Hungary as refuses to hear of racial equality within her borders be able to maintain herself free and strong in the future? Only the just is truly free and strong. A voluntary union of the Danubian Slavs and Wallachians, or even of the Poles themselves, with a State which declares a man must first be a Magyar before he can be a human being is wholly out of the question; and much more so is a compulsory union. If Europe is to be saved, Vienna must not sink to the role of a provincial town. If there exist in Vienna people who ask to have

your Frankfurt as their capital, we can only cry: Lord, forgive them, for they know not what they ask!

21 Lastly, there is a third reason I must refuse to participate in your meeting—and that is that I consider all existing projects to give the German Empire a new system on the basis of the national will to be impossible and short lived in their performance, if you do not resolve to use real, life-and-death, medical methods. By that I mean the declaration of a Republic of Germany, even if it were only of a transitional form. All the prescriptions that have been attempted so far to divide power between the half-rule of the princes and the full-rule of the people, remind me of phalansterism,¹ which is also based on the fundamental rule that those whom it concerns will behave as numbers in calculations, and will not seek any validity other than what theory provides them. Perhaps my view is unjustified, perhaps I am wrong in my conviction—I honestly admit that I myself wish that it were so—but this is my genuine conviction, and I cannot relinquish this compass for even a moment if I do not want to drown in the tempest of the times without aid. As for the establishment of a republic in the German Reich, that is a matter entirely beyond the scope of my competence, and I have no wish therefore to express my opinion on it. From the borders of the Austrian Empire, however, I must in advance reject, resolutely and emphatically, any thought of a republic. Imagine an Austrian Empire divided up into a number of republics, large and small—what a lovely basis for a universal Russian Monarchy!

22 In conclusion, to sum up these somewhat lengthy but only general re-marks, I must briefly express my conviction that those who ask that Austria (and, with her, Bohemia) should unite on national lines with Germany are demanding that she should commit suicide—a step that has neither moral nor political sense. It would, on the contrary, be much more justifiable to demand that the German Empire be attached to the Austrian Empire, that is to say, that Germany should be incorporated into the Austrian State under the aforementioned conditions. As that, however, is not in accord with German national sentiment and German thinking, nothing remains but for the two Powers to organize themselves on an equality side by side, to turn their existing attachment into a eternal union for defense and resistance, and, if it is also to their mutual territorial benefit, to set up a customs union between themselves. I am glad to give a helping hand at any time to all means that that are not a threat to the independence, integrity and development of the powers of the Austrian Empire, particularly to the east.

Bibliography

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Notes

1. Or phalansterianism: a system of phalansteries—communes—proposed by the French social reformer and mathematician Jean Baptiste Fourier (1768–1830) as a means to achieve universal harmony in society.

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František Palacký

By the same author

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