



## Ernest (Arnošt) Denis (Nîmes 1849 – Paříž 1921)

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Biography – Students

*Ernest Denis* was born to the family of a wine merchant, Antoine Denis, in the southern French town of Nîmes. Little Ernest himself had heard the testimony of his grandparents, who were persecuted for their non-Catholic faith. It seems this is what later sparked Ernest's aversion to violence and intolerance. From his father he inherited a reverence for consistent work and a sense of duty to his fellow men, and to his homeland.

In 1865, he left his hometown high school as one of its best pupils. In 1867, he joined the prestigious college *École Normale Supérieure*, where he began to study history. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870, he did not hesitate to enlist in the army as a volunteer. However, in September of the same year, the Prussian army defeated the French at Sedan. The Prussians captured Emperor Napoleon III and France entered into a period of chaos. The French regions of Alsace and Lorraine were forcibly annexed to the newly established German Empire (1871). After the war, the republic was established (i.e. French Third Republic; Constitution of 1875). The new regime literally opened a "window to Europe" – from France towards the East. France's primary goal was to break out of isolation and enter into cooperation with the nations that could help the country realize its revenge for the lost Alsace and Lorraine regions.

It was Ernest Desjardins, Denis's favorite professor from the *École Normale Supérieure*, an epigraphist and connoisseur of Austria-Hungary, who steered the young historian towards Prague. Through Desjardins, Denis met Emile Picot (Desjardins's brother-in-law and a consul in Transylvania), who during the war in 1870 helped the French soldiers who escaped from German captivity in Prague. And this might be what led Denis to submit an application for study abroad in Prague. The young Denis possessed only fragmentary information about the Czech lands and spoke neither German nor Czech. In 1872, he finally enrolled at Charles University in Prague, where he studied with occasional intermissions for three years. By way of his predecessor Louis Leger (French Slavist), Denis was introduced to František Palacký. Denis's closest Prague friend became Soběslav Pinkas (a Francophile and professor of drawing), who inducted Denis into Czech political and intellectual circles. The opinions of the Old Bohemian F.L. Rieger particularly resonated with Denis. Denis soon abandoned his original intention to learn German well and to become acquainted with the style and structure of the modern German university education (although outside Germany, namely in Prague) for the study of Czech history<sup>1</sup>. This was mainly due to the warm reception by the people of Prague. Denis wrote a number of publications about Czech history: his primary interest – the Hussite period (*Huss and the Hussite Wars*, 1878) – broadened to the George of Poděbrady period (*George of Poděbrady, Bohemia in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century*, 1885) and the Habsburgs (*The End of Bohemian Independence*, 1890 and *Bohemia after the White Mountain*, 1903). He became the first continuator of Palacký's national history. Denis's publications stood out mainly for their narrative style and the elaborate profiles of personalities. For Denis, the criterion for the evaluation and interpretation of history are his morality and conscience. Despite his romanticized style, Denis remains the only historian (and on top of that a non-Czech one) capable in the 19<sup>th</sup> century of writing voluminous and comprehensive works and thereby chronologically and systematically (i.e. with anti-German sentiment) continuing Palacký's *History of the Czech Nation in Bohemia and Moravia*.

After his return from Bohemia (1874), Denis received his doctoral degree from Paris University (his dissertation topic was Jan Huss), which entitled him to teach at the university level (1878 in Bordeaux and

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<sup>1</sup> He also specialized in contemporary German history (*Germany, 1789–1710 a Germany, 1810–1852*, 1898 and *German Confederation*, 1898).

1881 in Grenoble). In 1896, he was temporarily appointed professor at the Department of Contemporary History at the Sorbonne, and since 1906, he held permanently the position of head of the department.

During the war years (1914–1918), Denis was able to fulfill his vision – to serve his French homeland in a way that would ensure its future influence in Slavic Central Europe, where – according to Denis – Czechs were the most advanced of the Slavic nations. Under the Czech leadership, they ought to break free from Austro-Hungarian subjection and create a strong Czechoslovakia, which would defend the democratic and liberal values following the model of republican France. For this purpose and in collaboration with the Czech colony in Paris, T. G. Masaryk and Edvard Beneš, he began publishing the journal *La Nation Tchèque* (Czech Nation, 1915–1918) and *Le Monde Slave* (Slavic World, 1917–1938).

The Franco-Czechoslovak alliance was cemented by the establishment of the Paris Institute of Slavic Studies (Institut d' études slaves, 1919) and the Department of Ernest Denis for Slavic History at the University of Sorbonne (Chaire d' Ernest Denis, 1921) – in the house where Ernest Denis had his office. Denis was present for the opening of the French Institute in Prague in 1920 (Institut d'Ernest Denis). Recognized for his achievements, Denis was enthusiastically received by both the Czechoslovak public as well as by President Masaryk and Prime Minister Karel Kramář. However, due to illness, Denis had to end his visit to Czechoslovakia prematurely. He died in 1921, ill and exhausted, but knowing that his vision of Franco-Czechoslovak alliance was fulfilled.

The Czechoslovak and French Association for the Ernest Denis Memorial is credited with the construction of two Denis statues – one in his hometown of Nimes and second on the Lesser Town Square in Prague (1928). In this way Denis's cult penetrated the Czech schools<sup>2</sup>, where money was collected specifically to finance his Prague monument. The train station in Prague Těšnov<sup>3</sup> is named after Denis, and a Denis street or Denis square can be found today in many Czech towns.

Ernest Denis was perceived by the Czechoslovak public as one of the creators of the Czechoslovak state, along with T. G. Masaryk, Edvard Beneš and M. R. Štefanik. As a professor, researcher and a supporter of moral values, Denis participated – in the spirit of Masaryk's conception of state – in the formation of the young Czechoslovakia: individual responsibility of citizens, sense of duty, respect for the truth, and conscience are Denis's legacy to today's generation.



## Ernest Denis (1849 – 1921)

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<sup>2</sup> These collections did not take place in Slovakia. MARÈS, A. *Lieux de mémoire en Europe centrale*, Paris: Institut d'études slaves. 2009, p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> In the 1980's the station was demolished.