



Ernest Denis (1849 – 1921)

Biography Teachers

Ernest Denis was born to the family of a wine merchant, Antoine Denis, in the southern French town of Nîmes. There was a long Huguenot (French Protestant) tradition in his family. Ernest Denis himself had heard the testimony of his grandparents, who were persecuted for their non-Catholic Faith after the fall of Napoleon in 1815¹. 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. He graduated from the Institute Jauffret in Paris and in 1867, he joined the prestigious college École Normale Supérieure, where he began to study history. This was where the young Denis solidified his republican worldview. And while he strayed from the faith of his ancestors, the principles that his father instilled in him - hard work and sense of duty – have only matured inside of him. When the Franco-Prussian War broke out in 1870, he did not hesitate to enlist, witnessing the first failures of the French army as a volunteer for a Light Infantry Battalion. 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). Denis, as well as his French contemporaries, were deeply marked by this costly peace treaty (Versailles, 1871) and desired revenge. The empire fell, the Commune fell, and a republic (i.e. French Third Republic; Constitution of 1875) was established. 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.

In 1871, Denis – a fresh graduate – left the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and began working as a grammar school history teacher in Bastia, Corsica. However, this republican patriot was not about to settle for a career in the "South of France - dreadful with its cowardliness and indifference."² He wanted to travel abroad to perfect his language skills and to learn about the culture of foreign nations, so that he could better serve his country. 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.

¹ CHROBÁK, T. – OLŠÁKOVÁ, D. Ernest Denis, Praha: Eva, Milan Nevole, 2004, p. 9.

² Ibid., p. 14.

The young Denis possessed only fragmentary information about the Czech lands, obtained for example from the following publications: Louis Blanc's preface to *The History of Ten Years* – a reference to Jan Hus (John Huss), and Georg Sand's *Consuelo* – an episode about Hussites. It seems unlikely that Denis was familiar with the Czech deputies' Memorandum of December 8, 1870, condemning the Prussian aggression, before arriving in Prague³. In fact, he 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 (he saw in Rieger the French Republican Minister Gambetta). It seems that the Czech intellectuals quickly understood whom they had in their midst, and with the vision of the future Czech-French political cooperation, they encouraged Denis's research in Czech history all the more. Denis felt the same way about the purpose of his research, only from the other, French perspective.

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 history⁴. This was mainly due to the warm reception by the people of Prague⁵. 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 syntheses stood out mainly for their narrative quality (Michelet's School) and the psychological profiles of personalities. For Denis, the criterion for the evaluation and interpretation of history are his morality and conscience. His approach thus contrasts with the modern descriptive and non-interpretive approach of Jaroslav's Goll's positivist school (the late 19th century). Despite his romanticized style, Denis remains the only historian (and on top of that a non-Czech one) capable in the 19th century of writing voluminous synthesized 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 1881 in Grenoble). In 1896, he was temporarily appointed professor at the

³ VANČURA, J. Arnošt Denis, Praha: Zlatoroh, 1924, p. 31.

⁴ He also specialized in current German history (*Germany, 1789–1710 a Germany, 1810–1852*, 1898 and *German Confederation*, 1898).

⁵ MARÈS, A. Louis Léger et Ernest Denis, Profil des deux bohémisants français au XIXe siècle. FERENUHOVÁ, B. *La France et l'Europe centrale (1867–1914) / Francúzsko a stredná Európa (1867–1914)*, Slovanské štúdie n° 2 (actes du colloque des historiens tchèques, slovaques et français à Bratislava les 12 et 13 novembre 1992). Bratislava: Academic Electronic Press, 1995, p. 62.

Department of Contemporary History at the Sorbonne, and since 1906, he held permanently the position of head of the department. At the same time he published his works about modern German history (*Germany, 1789 –1810* and *Germany, 1810–1850*) and about *Bohemia after the White Mountain* (1908).

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. He was convinced that the Czechs were the most advanced of the Slavic peoples. For this reason, they had to be at the forefront of the struggle for the independence of the Slavs in Central Europe. According to Denis, it was therefore necessary to develop 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). Along with Louis Eisenman (historian and Denis's successor as the chair of the Ernest Denis Department), Denis tried to influence the French intellectuals and politicians in recognizing the legitimacy of these French and Czech visionaries. In the final years of the First World War, the French, respectively the Allied Commission asked Denis for an expert assessment of the objectives and goals of the war (Comité d' étude) as a specialist in the geography and history of the Slavic nations. Even here the French Czechophile lobbied for unified Czechoslovakia. Denis had personally met several times with Edvard Beneš and T. G. Masaryk, both on the French, and in the last year of his life also on the Czechoslovak, soil. In 1920, he was enthusiastically received by both the Czechoslovak public as well as by President Masaryk and Prime Minister Karel Kramář.

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). 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 schools⁶, where money was collected specifically to finance his Prague monument. The train station in Prague Těšnov⁷ is named after Denis, and a Denis street or Denis square can be found today in many Czech towns.

⁶ These collections did not take place in Slovakia. MARÈS, A. *Lieux de mémoire en Europe centrale*, Paris: Institut d'études slaves. 2009, p. 177.

⁷ In the 1980's the station was demolished.

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.

Denis’s most important works⁸:


- *Hus et la guerre des hussites* (Huss and the Hussite Wars), 1878
- *Origines de l'Unité des Frères bohêmes* (The Beginnings of the Unity of Bohemian Brethren), 1885
- *Georges de Podebrad* (Georg of Poděbrady), *La Bohême pendant la seconde moitié du XV siècle* (Bohemia in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century), 1887
- *Fin de l'indépendance bohême* (The End of Bohemian Independence), 1890
- *L'histoire générale du IVe siècle à nos jours* (General History from the Fourth Century to Present), collective four volume work, 1891–1894
- *L'Allemagne 1789–1810* (Germany, 1789–1810), 1896
- *L'Allemagne 1810–1852* (Germany, 1810–1852), 1898
- *La Bohême depuis la Montagne blanche* (Bohemia after the White Mountain), 1903
- *Qui a voulu la guerre ?* (Who Wanted War?), in collaboration with Émile Durkheim, 1915
- *La grande Serbie* (Great Serbia), 1915
- *La guerre. Causes immédiates et lointaines. L'intoxication d'un peuple* (War – Current and Historical Causes. Intoxication of a Nation), 1916
- *Les Slovaques* (Slovaks), 1917
- *L'Allemagne et la paix* (Germany and Peace), 1918

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⁸ CHROBÁK, T. – OLŠÁKOVÁ, D. *Ernest Denis*. Praha: Eva, Milan Nevole, 2004, p. 97.

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