



## Letter sent by František Palacký to Frankfurt<sup>1</sup>

To the committee of Fifty  
c/o President Soiron.

Gentlemen,

The post has just brought me the letter of 6th April in which you do me the honour of inviting me to Frankfurt to take part in your deliberations, the main purpose of which is to summon a German Parliament at the earliest possible moment. 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 Reich 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. While acknowledging with a sincere sense of gratitude the distinguished kindness and justice of the eminent assembly in this matter, I find myself all the more constrained on that account to reply with open confidence, straight-forwardly and without reserve.

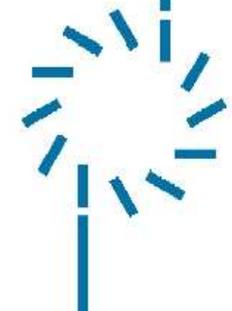
I am unable, gentlemen, to accept your invitation for my own person, nor can I send any other "trustworthy patriot" in my stead. Permit me to give you, as briefly as possible, my reasons.

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 Reich. 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 assentor, 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 colours, 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 desirable, not only in my own home but also in my neighbour's.

I am a Czech of Slavonic blood, 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 Czech 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 to 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 concerns internal affairs, 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

<sup>1</sup> In 1848, František Palacký was invited to it as delegate for Bohemia in the Frankfurt Parliament (*Nationalversammlung*). Palacký refused, as a Slavic Czech, to participate in a German Parliament and instead called a Pan-Slavic Congress in Prague. This is his letter of refusal to the Frankfurt conveners. The English translation given here is by William Beardmore. [SPIN note]



SPIN source text on  
the history of cultural  
nationalism in Europe  
[www.spinnet.eu](http://www.spinnet.eu)



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 appurtenance to the Reich Supreme Court of Justice never applied to it, and so on: that therefore the entire connection of the Czech lands with the German Reich 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.

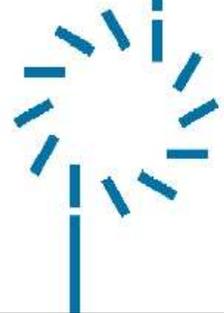
The second reason which prevents - me from taking part in your deliberations is the fact that, according to all I have so far learned of your aims and intentions as publicly proclaimed, it is your irrevocable desire and purpose to undermine Austria as an independent empire and indeed to make her impossible 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 civilisation itself. Will you be good enough to give me a brief and kindly hearing on this point too?

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 neighbours; 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 in-expressible 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 Slavonic 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 civilisation; 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.

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 neighbour 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 to remain so. Assuredly, if the Austrian State had not existed for ages, it would have been a behest for us in the interests of Europe and indeed of humanity to endeavour to create it as soon as possible.

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



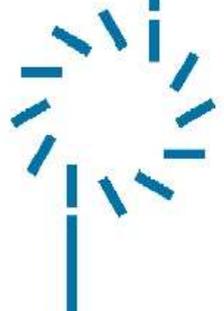


type — why is it that we have seen it at a critical moment lacking help and almost devoid of counsel in the face of an advancing storm ? It is because, in the unhappy blindness that has long afflicted her, Austria has long failed to recognise the real juridical and moral basis of her existence, and has denied it: the fundamental rule, that is, that all the nationalities and all the religions under her sceptre 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 neighbours should sacrifice themselves for its benefit, no nation is under an obligation to deny or sacrifice itself for the good of its neighbour. Nature knows neither dominant nor underdyoked 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 defence and protection against possible violations by neighbours 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 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 Slavonic races in Austria.

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 endeavours, gentlemen, seem now to me to be directed, as I have already said, not only towards ruinously undermining, but even utterly destroying, that centre to

whose authority and strength I look for salvation for the Czech 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 from 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 !

Finally, there is a third reason for which I must decline to take part in your deliberations : I regard all the attempts hitherto made to give the German Reich a new system of government based on the will of the people as impossible of achievement and as unstable for the future, unless you decide upon a real life-or-death surgical operation. By this I mean the proclamation of a German Republic, even if only in temporary form. All the draft schemes attempted so far for a partition of power between the semi-sovereign princes and the sovereign people recall to my mind the theory of the Phalansteries, which was likewise based on the fundamental rule that the persons



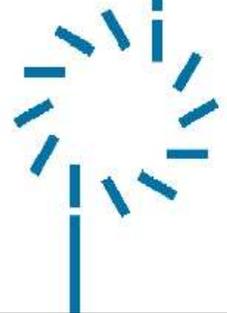


concerned would act like arithmetical figures and would not seek any other application than that allocated to them by the theory. It is possible that my opinion is unfounded, that my conviction is at fault—but I really hold that conviction, and may not for a moment let that compass leave my hand unless I wish in the storms of the present day to perish without help. As to the establishment of a republic in the German Reich—this is a matter wholly outside my competence, so that I have no desire even to express my opinion on it. I must, however, reject expressly and emphatically in advance the idea of a republic within the frontiers of the Austrian Empire. Think of the Austrian Empire divided up into sundry republics, some considerable in size and others small—what a delightful basis for a universal Russian monarchy!

In conclusion, to sum up these somewhat lengthy but only general remarks, 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 Reich be attached to the Austrian Empire, that is to say, that Germany should be incorporated in the Austrian State on the conditions above referred to. As that, however, is not in accord with German national sentiment and opinion, nothing remains but for the two Powers—the Austrian and German Empires, to organise themselves on an equality side by side, to convert their existing ties into a permanent alliance of defence and defiance; and, should it be of advantage to both sides, to institute also a common customs union. I am ready at every moment with pleasure to give a helping hand in all activities that do not endanger the independence, the integrity and development of the power of the Austrian Empire.

Accept, gentlemen, the expression of my sincere regard and attachment.

František Palacký  
Prague, 11th April, 1848.



SPIN source text on  
the history of cultural  
nationalism in Europe  
[www.spinnet.eu](http://www.spinnet.eu)