

## **Lucian George, bursary visit to Prague in 2018**

My name is Lucian George and I am a 2<sup>nd</sup>-year DPhil in History. In 2018 I was lucky enough to win the Europaeum-funded Oxford-Prague study bursary to help finance an extended research trip to Prague, during which I was affiliated with the Charles University. This brief report is a token of my immense gratitude to the Europaeum for giving me the opportunity to immerse myself in the Czech world and to pursue my research on it at a more fruitful pace than the hurried archival missions that historians typically undertake.

My desire to spend such an extended period in Prague can be explained by the nature of my DPhil project: a comparative history of grassroots political engagement in the Polish and Czechoslovak countrysides of the interwar period. Like many other countries in the region, Poland and Czechoslovakia were once home to vibrant agrarian populist movements. More than merely electoral forces, these movements managed to penetrate every sphere of rural life, developing vast networks of auxiliary associations that sought to give practically every rural group an outlet for civic activism. This boom in rural associational life remains considerably understudied in both countries, but especially so in the case of former Czechoslovakia. By comparing the two and trying to excavate the grassroots experiences of this peasant politics in different regions of each country, my project hopes to shed light on why levels of rural unrest in Poland considerably exceeded those in Czechoslovakia.

Having written my MA dissertation on Polish rural unrest, by the time I started my DPhil I already had extensive experience of Polish archives, as well as boasting a number of contacts in Polish universities. None of this can be said for my knowledge of Czech academia and Czech sources, where I was only beginning to find my footing when the Europaeum offered me this bursary. The long period of time I was able to spend in Prague thanks to the Europaeum and the benefits that came from being affiliated with its university went a long way to make up for this imbalance. Before even leaving the UK, I was able to find a wonderfully open and supportive supervisor, Dr Jakub Rákosník of the Social and Economic History Institute, whose early advice and suggestions proved vital in helping me to orient myself in my quest for relevant Czech historiography and for the right primary sources in Prague's archival collections. Upon arrival I also decided to sign up for what turned out to be an extremely fun and stimulating course on Czech folklore with the effortlessly entertaining and ever-irreverent Dr Petr Janeček. A folklorist and, simultaneously, natural teller of folk-stories, Dr Janeček is the type of professor who likes nothing better than to give his classes in the streets of Prague, whose buildings and layers of historical meaning and symbolism he would expertly unpack and enliven. An additional advantage of being plugged into the university network was the greater ease of finding out about people who either shared my research interests or who could advise me on research strategies and places to look for sources.

Given why I decided to go in the first place, however, it is not surprising that most of my stay in Prague was taken up by solitary source-gathering expeditions to the city's various archives and libraries. Putting aside the thrill of untapped material that can be uncovered here (and even the smallest and most provincial Czech archives seem to be particularly rich in this), these missions were often rich in adventure for other reasons, too, giving me a chance to explore different neighbourhoods of the city and highly diverse forms of institutional architecture. Czech archivists and librarians were, moreover, a constant pleasure to deal with, unfailingly happy to help out foreign researchers such as myself with various tips and suggestions. Because I was in the Czech Republic for several months, I was able to collect the bulk of the primary sources that my project will require, as well as being able to get to know more archives, to experiment with more ideas and to seek out connections that I would otherwise have failed to notice or have the time to pursue.

Living in Prague for a prolonged period offered plenty of other more inexpressible benefits, many of them directly related to the ultimate quality of my DPhil. Most obviously, it made it much easier for me to improve my spoken and reading fluency in the Czech language. It also gave me the chance to get to know Prague like a native and to take advantage of the many cultural opportunities on offer, to visit all sorts of exhibitions and museums, and to explore the Czech Republic beyond its capital, too. Even when I thought of these trips as simple leisure, there would often be serendipitous discoveries on the way that will hopefully feed back into my research. The imagination is often an under-appreciated asset for qualitative research and in my experience nothing will stimulate it as much as travel.

If I were to offer one piece of advice to future Oxford-Prague bursary-holders, it would be this: be brave and try to speak to as many people and to ask for as many people's advice as possible once you are in the field. I made the mistake of delaying this until the latter half of my trip, that is until I felt like I had found my bearings and would not make a fool out of myself by asking obvious questions. Most researchers and archivists, however, will be flattered that you have decided to take an interest in their country and will go out of their way to help. Given that their help and advice are often very useful, it is often best to get it as early as you can.