

## T. G. Masaryk and the Russian Aid Operation in Czechoslovakia

Petr Kaleta / e-mail: kaleta@ped.muni.cz

Department of History, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

Kaleta P. (2019). T. G. Masaryk and the Russian Aid Operation in Czechoslovakia. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 11/1, 23–31.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/cphpj-2019-003>

*An important chapter in the history of independent Czechoslovakia after the First World War was the Russian Aid Operation (Ruská pomocná akce, RPA), thanks to which around 25,000 Russian, Ukrainian, and other émigrés fleeing Bolshevik Russia made it to Czechoslovakia. The operation was made possible primarily thanks to the support of President Masaryk, who had an intimate understanding of Russia who had strong contacts with members of Russia's democratic intelligentsia. As a result, secondary schools and universities in Czechoslovakia welcomed a large number of young Russian and Ukrainian émigrés who, it was hoped, would form the foundations for a new democratic Russia after the anticipated defeat of the Bolshevik revolution.*

Key words: Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk; Russian Aid Operation; Czechoslovakia

Since the early 1990s, the question of Russian and Ukrainian émigrés in Czechoslovakia has been one of the most important and, even today, most topical subjects of Czech historiographical research relating to Russia and Eastern Europe. In this time, Czech and Slovak (and naturally also Russian) historians have managed to explore a large part of this important period in Czechoslovak history. Today, we have relatively detailed information on, among other things, the leading figures in the Russian and Ukrainian émigré community or the community's educational, cultural, and social institutions and associations.<sup>1</sup> In addition, many

<sup>1</sup> Cf. e.g.: Veber V. et al. (1993). *Ruská a ukrajinská emigrace v ČSR v letech 1918–1945* (sborník studií – 1). Praha: Univerzita Karlova v Praze; Veber V. et al. (1994). *Ruská a ukrajinská emigrace v ČSR v letech 1918–1945* (sborník studií – 2). Praha: Univerzita Karlova Praze; Veber V. et al. (1995). *Ruská a ukrajinská emigrace v ČSR v letech 1918–1945* (sborník studií – 3). Praha: Univerzita Karlova v Praze; Veber V. – Sládek Z. – Bubeníková M. – Harbulová L. (1996). *Ruská a ukrajinská emigrace v ČSR v letech 1918–1945*. Praha: Univerzita Karlova v Praze; Sládek Z. – Běloševská L. (1998). *Dokumenty k dějinám ruské emigrace v Československé republice (1918–1938)*. Praha: Slovanský ústav AV ČR; Kopřivová A. (2001): *Střediska ruského emigrantského života v Praze (1921–1952)*. Praha: Národní knihovna ČR – Slovanská knihovna; Anikina T. et al. (2008). *Dom v izgnanii. Očerki ruskoi emigracii v Čechoslovakii 1918–1945*. Praga: Izdatelstvo RT+RS servis; Babka L. – Zolotarev I. (eds.)

important archival documents have been published. We have quite in-depth information about the life of Russian refugees in Prague, but we still know significantly less about the Russian émigré community in Brno. And the subject of Ukrainian émigrés is still awaiting a comprehensive study and analysis.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the less numerous Belarusian émigré community has been relatively well studied.<sup>3</sup> But the volume of archival materials covering the full range of topics related to Russian and Ukrainian émigré life is so large that it will provide work for dozens of researchers to study the issue from various angles for the next several decades. Most publications mention T. G. Masaryk's indispensable role within the RPA but do not look at his involvement in more detail. This paper will outline the Czechoslovak president's role within this organization, based among other things on his correspondence with Russian and Ukrainian émigrés.

As a new European country formed just prior to the official end of fighting in the First World War, Czechoslovakia – like its newly founded neighbors – faced many difficulties in its early days: It had to assert its borders, deal with the question of its German and Hungarian minorities, endure the difficulties of the Czechoslovak-Polish conflict, quickly transform and stabilize its economy, and address numerous other issues. The country nevertheless succeeded in resolving its main problems relatively quickly, and by the early 1920s Czechoslovakia was a confident Central European state fully recognized by the major European powers and the United States of America. The country's two leading representatives, President T. G. Masaryk (1850–1937) and Prime Minister Karel Kramář (1860–1937),<sup>4</sup> had an unusually close (but not uncritical) relationship with Russia<sup>5</sup> and closely followed the tragedy that played out at the end of the Russian Civil War. These facts played an important role in Czechoslovakia soon taking an active

---

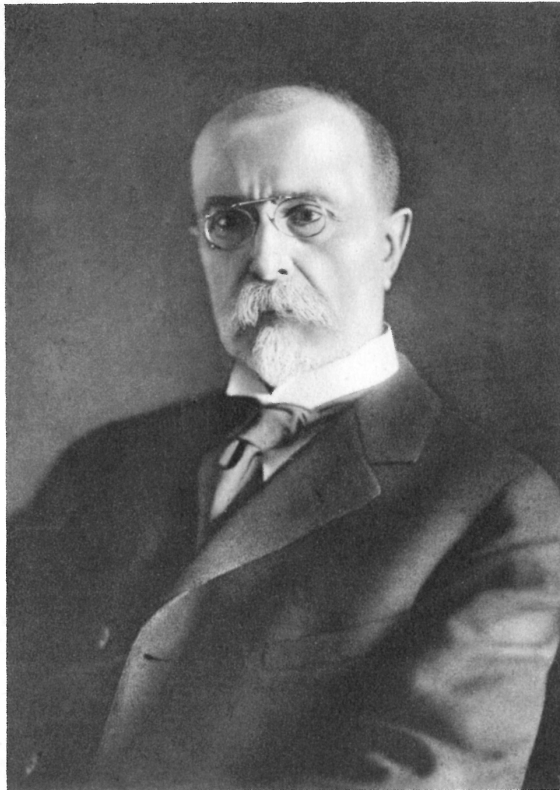
(2012). *Russkaja akcija pomošči v Čechoslovakii. Istorija, značenije, nasledije*. Praga: Nacionalnaja bibliotěka Češskoj respubliky – Slovjanskaja bibliotěka – Graždanskoje objediněnije “Russkaja tradicija” and more.

<sup>2</sup> Examples include Zylinskij B. (1995). *Ukrajinci v Čechách a na Moravě 1917–1945*. Praha: X-Egem; Zylinskij B. (2000). *Ukrajinci v českých zemích v letech 1945–1948*. Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR.

<sup>3</sup> Kolenovská D. – Plavec M. (2017). *Běloruská emigrace v meziválečném Československu. Studie a dokumenty. Sociopolitický aspekt*. Praha: Nakladatelství Karolinum.

<sup>4</sup> On Masaryk's and especially Kramář's ties to the Russian émigré community, see, e.g., Vlček R. (2012). Sopotavlenie vzgljadov T. G. Masaryka i K. Kramarža. Raznica v ponimanii pomošči ruskim emigrantam. In Babka L. – Zolotarev I. (eds.), *Russkaja akcija pomošči v Čechoslovakii. Istorija, značenije, nasledije*. Praga: Nacionalnaja bibliotěka Češskoj respubliky – Slovjanskaja bibliotěka – Graždanskoje objediněnije “Russkaja tradicija”, pp. 19–28.

<sup>5</sup> Masaryk's systematic academic interest in Russia culminated in the publication, just prior to the First World War, of the first of two volumes of (Russia and Europe, first published in German in Jena in 1913). Of immense significance was his ten-month mission in Russia following the 1917 February Revolution, when he helped to establish an independent Czechoslovak fighting force.



Fec. Arch. Vaněk, MR. P. S. Praha.

*T. G. Masaryk.*

Photograph of T. G. Masaryk (postcard, 1920s).

stance on the international scene as a sovereign democratic state hoping to launch an extensive international aid operation for starving Russia.

The Czechoslovak public could read about their politicians' plans to begin talks for supplying aid to Russia in an open letter from President Masaryk to Foreign Minister Edvard Beneš from late July 1921, in which Masaryk responded, among other things, to a plea for help published by the writer Maxim Gorky (1868–1936): "Dear Minister, I have just read Gorky's call for aid to starving Russia. [...] I would like to help according to my abilities, but a merely private undertaking would be impossible and make no sense. It would become bogged down in small-scale philanthropy. What is required here is a large-scale organization, which is only possible if the European states – and of course the

Russian state as well – take up the matter and assume responsibility. [...] For such a new and large operation, we cannot forget the numerous Russian citizens living among us in Europe whom we are supporting already. I have just launched a new operation for the support of Russian academics. Here, too, we have heard Gorky's call for help."<sup>6</sup> Masaryk's open letter to Beneš on the subject of aid for starving Russia was published on August 5, 1921 in several leading Czech newspapers.<sup>7</sup> Masaryk counted on Czechoslovakia's full participation in the operation he described, but it should be organized on a broad international scale. At the time, a significant portion of Czechoslovakia's political scene was debating the nature of aid for Russia.

After discussing the matter with Masaryk, Foreign Minister (and later Prime Minister) Edvard Beneš (1884–1948) exerted significant international efforts aimed at organizing an international aid operation under the auspices of the International Red Cross and the League of Nations. On July 30, 1921, the Czechoslovak government contacted the chairman of the International Red Cross, and on August 3, 1921 it sent a special note to all diplomatic missions in Prague calling for an international conference aimed at coordinating joint aid for Russia. Thanks to this initiative, on August 15, 1921 a conference of the International Red Cross was held in Geneva with the participation of 80 representatives from 22 countries and aimed at launching a coordinated effort by Europe and the United States in support of Russia.<sup>8</sup>

One problem right at the outset, however, was that the United States, which was organizing its own aid operation, was not interested in a coordinated effort of this type. After the American representative, Herbert Hoover (1874–1964), rejected the function of commissioner, the operation's leadership went to the Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen (1861–1930), who headed negotiations with the Soviet government. The result was the signing of two conventions on August 27, 1921. The first established a commission consisting of representatives from the Soviet government and from the relief operation, which was the only organization allowed to decide on the distribution of supplies for Russia. In the

<sup>6</sup> Hájková D. – Quagliatová V. – Vašek R. (2013). *Korespondence T. G. Masaryk – Edvard Beneš 1918–1937*. Praha: Masarykův ústav a Archiv AV ČR, v. v. i., letter from T. G. Masaryk to Edvard Beneš, Capri, 28 July 1921, no. 183, p. 267; see also Vašek R. – Fejlek V. (2007). *T. G. Masaryk: Cesta demokracie II. Projevy – články – rozhovory 1921–1923*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Praha: Ústav T. G. Masaryka, o. p. s., Masarykův ústav – Archiv AV ČR, v. v. i., p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g.: Mezinárodní pomoc hladovějícímu Rusku. *Lidové noviny* 29, no. 388, August 5, 1921, p. 1; Československo na pomoc Rusku. *Československá republika* 242, no. 213, August 5, 1921, p. 4; Jak pomoci Rusku. *Národní listy* 61, no. 213, August 5, 1921, p. 3, and other periodicals.

<sup>8</sup> Olivová V. (1992): Politika Československa v ruské krizi roku 1921 a 1922. In Olivová V. (ed.), Masaryk, T. G. – Beneš, E. *Otevřít Rusko Evropě. Dvě stati k ruské otázce v roce 1922*. Praha: H & H, pp. 39–41.

second convention, the Soviet government entrusted Nansen with the authority to negotiate with the European governments in its name. This convention was met with a highly negative response in Europe, primarily because it made Nansen the Soviet government's de facto spokesman. The League of Nations rejected Nansen's request, and the "Nansen operation" thus continued its activities as a private volunteer organization coordinating the Red Cross's humanitarian aid efforts for Russia, but its activities were significantly limited in nature. After the failure of the Nansen operation, Czechoslovakia began its own independent aid efforts.<sup>9</sup>

The Russian Aid Operation was launched in Czechoslovakia in September 1921 after the Czechoslovak embassy in Constantinople received instructions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to transport 1,000 students and 4,000 agriculturalists to Czechoslovakia from Constantinople, Gallipoli, and Lemnos.<sup>10</sup> After their arrival, the émigrés initially settled exclusively in Prague, where they soon founded tight-knit Russian communities in the districts of Dejvice, Bubeneč, and Strašnice, although during the interwar period the largest concentration of Russian émigrés was in Prague's Vinohrady district.<sup>11</sup> The second largest center of Russian émigré life was Brno. Here, the Orthodox Church of St. Wenceslas soon became the center of life for a significant portion of the émigré community, and refugees joined the city's newly founded Russian organizations. Russian and Ukrainian refugees settled elsewhere in Czechoslovakia as well, especially in the country's other cities with institutions of higher learning, namely Příbram and Bratislava.

By early 1922, Masaryk could say of the RPA: "In order to help the current suffering and with a view to our modest means, we have decided to specialize our aid operation. To this end, we have sent aid to Russian academics in St. Petersburg; we are also looking after a certain number of Russian children. In Prague, we are organizing a Russian university. So far, we have attended to around 1,400 students and 60 Russian professors. The guiding idea is to reacclimatize members of the Russian intelligentsia, and especially young people, to systematic work and thus to help them escape the vagaries and demoralization of their dreadful exile. Sometime in the future, a large number of trained and educated members of the Russian intelligentsia might be able to return to Russia. It would be possible to bring all [Russian] students from other countries to Prague, but we would need the financial support to do so."<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 41–42.

<sup>10</sup> Sládek Z. (1993). Ruská emigrace v Československu. (Problémy a výsledky výzkumu). *Slovanský přehled* 79, no. 1, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Kopřivová A. (2001). *Střediska ruského emigrantského života v Praze (1921–1952)*. Praha: Národní knihovna České republiky, Slovanská knihovna, pp. 24–46.

<sup>12</sup> Masaryk T. G. (1992). Pomoc Rusku Evropou a Amerikou. In Olivová V. (ed.), *Masaryk, T. G. – Beneš, E. Otevřít Rusko Evropě. Dvě stati k ruské otázce v roce 1922*. Praha, p. 21.

At first, the task of implementing the RPA was entrusted to politically-oriented private organizations. A leading position among these groups was held by the Committee of Zemstvos and Towns for the Aid of Russian Citizens Abroad, known by its Russian abbreviation Zemgor (Zemsko-gorodskoi komitet pomoshchi rossiskim grazhdanam za granitsej). Though Zemgor was headed by leading members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, the Union for a Cossack Renaissance played an important role as well. Ukrainian émigrés were looked after by the Ukrainian Civic Committee and several other organizations.<sup>13</sup> The RPA underwent a fundamental reorganization in 1926, when control over the organization passed from Zemgor and the Ukrainian organizations to the Czechoslovak Red Cross and most of the educational funding was entrusted to the relevant ministries. The main reasons for this important change were an attempt at “depoliticizing” the operation and a new view of Russia’s future. Hopes for the émigrés’ return home had slowly faded, and along with them the Czechoslovaks’ political goals had changed as well.<sup>14</sup> Our estimate of the total resources expended on the RPA in Czechoslovakia amounts to something over half a billion crowns. Initially, the funding was provided without proper documentation, and the various organizations could use the money as they saw fit (within the framework of their organizations’ objectives). No accounting was required until 1924. The largest amounts provided as part of the RPA were in the first years of the program (1922–1923: 120 million, 1924: 99.65 million), with decreasing subsidies in the subsequent years (1928: 30 million, 1931: 7.5 million, 1934: 2.96 million).<sup>15</sup>

What kinds of organizations received funding through the RPA? Primarily, the money went to support Russian and Ukrainian educational institutions established in Czechoslovakia. Among colleges and universities, the main recipients were the Russian Law Faculty, the Russian Teaching Institute of John Amos Comenius, the Russian Institute of Agricultural Cooperatives, the Business College, and the Russian People’s University, which was an unconventional type of school. These schools had difficulties in Czechoslovakia because many of them did not receive state accreditation as institutions of higher learning. Most Russian émigrés also studied at Czechoslovak colleges and universities. Russian secondary schools in Czechoslovakia included a Russian high school (*gymnasium*) in Moravská Třebová that had been moved there from Constantinople, and another gymnasium in Prague’s Strašnice district. Besides these institutions, Russians living in Czechoslovakia also had their own trade schools, primary schools, and preschools.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Sládek Z. (1993). *Ruská emigrace v Československu*, pp. 4–5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>16</sup> Veber V. – Sládek Z. – Bubeníková M. – Harbulová, L. (1996). *Ruská a ukrajinská emigrace v ČSR v letech 1918–1945*. Praha: Univerzita Karlova v Praze, pp. 15–17.

The main Ukrainian educational institution in Czechoslovakia was the Ukrainian Free University, which had moved to Prague from Vienna, but this school, too, lacked full recognition as a Czechoslovak institution of higher learning. Another Ukrainian school was the Ukrainian Academy of Economics in Poděbrady, which operated as a four-year Ukrainian postsecondary school. The Ukrainian Higher Pedagogical Institute of M. Drahoňanov was a two-year school for the training of primary school teachers and other educational professionals; in 1925, the school was transformed into a gymnasium with headquarters in Řevnice (later in Modřany). Prague was also home to the Ukrainian Studio of Visual Arts.<sup>17</sup> Also receiving RPA funding were Russian and Ukrainian teaching institutions and student organizations, scientific institutions and organizations, cultural associations, and more. In its first five to eight years, the operation definitely fulfilled its purpose, for a large number of Russian émigrés in Czechoslovakia graduated from secondary school and went on to learn a trade or to study at university. This was because most of the émigrés were quite young, most of them young men aged 18 to 28 (i.e., born in the years 1893–1903). Other age groups were significantly smaller.<sup>18</sup>

Masaryk's correspondence with Russian and Ukrainian émigrés – individuals as well as leading representatives of various émigré institutions – includes numerous examples of refugees asking Czechoslovakia's president for help, as well as letters in which figures from Russian scientific and cultural life express their gratitude, either for themselves or in the name of their fellow citizens.

But Masaryk also received letters from Russian émigrés living outside of Czechoslovakia. One such letter was written by four leading Russian authors representing the Russian émigré community in France, Ivan Alekseyevich Bunin (1870–1953), Dmitry Sergeevich Merezhkovsky (1865–1941), Ivan Sergeevich Shmelyov (1873–1950), and Zinaida Nikolayevna Gippius (1869–1945). In their letter, dated February 12, 1924, they wrote among other things: “Highly esteemed Mr. President – In view of the difficult material conditions of life abroad, we Russian writers and émigrés turned to Kramář with a request that he intercede with you regarding aid for us. We have now received word that you have taken Dr. Kramář's intercession into consideration and that you have generously agreed to support him before the Czechoslovak government. Our letter to Dr. Kramář stated the motives that gave us the courage to seek help from the government of that consanguineous country sympathetic to our cause, which, in the hour of our great suffering, has provided and continues to provide such unforgettable aid to the representatives and guardians of Russian culture in exile. These motives, highly esteemed Mr. President, are known to you. In hope of the benevolent

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. 17–18.

<sup>18</sup> Koprřivová A. (1997). Bludné cesty ruské emigrace. In Terlecký N., *Curriculum vitae*. Praha: Torst, p. 179.

settlement of our petition, we express to you and your government in advance our heartfelt gratitude and affirmation that we shall never forget that, through our persons, Russia has once again received proof of the brotherly sensibilities that join our two nations in the name of a grand future. [...].”<sup>19</sup>

The wave of émigrés coming to Czechoslovakia also included members of various ethnic and religious groups. One large group besides Russians were Ukrainians, whose scientific and cultural life was, as has already been remarked, very diverse. But members of the previously mentioned Belarusian exile community found asylum here as well. For instance, Masaryk received a letter of gratitude and a plea for help from two leading representatives of the Ukrainian émigré community in Czechoslovakia – the historian, lawyer, and politician Andrey Ivanovich Yakovlev (1872–1955) and the lawyer and politician Stanislav Severynovych Dnistryansky (1870–1935), the latter of whom had been living in Czechoslovakia since 1919. In their letter from 12 June 1931 requesting Czechoslovakia’s aid for Ukrainian and Belarusian émigrés, they wrote: “[...] The government of the Czechoslovak Republic has supported them [Ukrainian and Belarusian students – author’s note] in all possible ways in their efforts at completing their education. Graduation courses have been organized for those who have not completed secondary school; a Ukrainian gymnasium has been founded. Persons with a secondary school diploma were given the chance to go to Czech universities. And several Ukrainian schools were founded as well – a Ukrainian university in Prague, the Ukrainian Academy of Economics in Poděbrady, the Ukrainian Pedagogical Institute in Prague. Needy Ukrainian and Belarusian students have been given scholarships allowing them to study. The results of this support are enormous: Thanks to the brotherly help from the Czechoslovak nation, 931 Ukrainian and more than 150 Belarusian students graduated from Czech universities by the end of 1930. In addition, more than 500 students have graduated from Ukrainian schools of higher learning in the Czechoslovak Republic. The Ukrainian and Belarusian nations [!] have been enriched by around 2,000 highly qualified intellectuals and culture workers who had previously suffered during the war of liberation, who will be needed in the future, and for whom [our nations] will forever be grateful to the Czechoslovak nation and its governmental representatives. [...].”<sup>20</sup>

Russian and Ukrainian émigré leaders perfectly understood T. G. Masaryk’s role within the RPA. His death in 1937 shook the émigré community, for with him it had lost its moral support. Czechoslovakia was occupied less than two years later, followed soon thereafter by the start of the Second World War, which

<sup>19</sup> Doubek V. (2016). *Korespondence T. G. Masaryk – Slované. Rusové a Ukrajinci*. 2. svazek. Praha: Masarykův ústav a Archiv AV ČR, v. v. i., letter from I. A. Bunin, D. S. Merezhkovsky, I. S. Shmelyov, and Z. N. Gippius, Paris, February 12, 1924, no. 154, p. 224.

<sup>20</sup> Doubek V. (2016). *Korespondence T. G. Masaryk – Slované. Rusové a Ukrajinci*. 2. svazek, letter from S. S. Dnistryansky and A. I. Yakovlev to T. G. Masaryk, Praha, June 12, 1931, no. 390, p. 469.



significantly affected the lives of Russian and Ukrainian émigrés. In September 1937, the Association of Russian Émigré Organizations in the Czechoslovak Republic (Obyedinenie russkikh emigrantskikh organizatsii), a grouping of 43 professional, scientific, and cultural organizations, expressed their condolences to the political leaders of Czechoslovakia and honored the memory of T. G. Masaryk. In so doing, they repeatedly emphasized that the RPA would forever be indelibly associated with the name of the President-Liberator. In his letter of condolence to the new president, Edvard Beneš, written on the occasion of an official gathering in memory of President Masaryk on 23 September 1937, the association's president, professor Alexey Stepanovich Lomshakov, noted among other things: "[...] Russians in Czechoslovakia feel the immense grief of our national brethren as our own and are deeply moved by the passing of your unforgettable predecessor. Our shining memories of the noble, valiant, and genial President-Liberator, T. G. Masaryk, shall forever be preserved in our grateful hearts and be passed on from generation to generation among our children as a testament of our great love and undying devotion."<sup>21</sup>

Masaryk's support for the RPA in Czechoslovakia was of fundamental importance for its successful implementation. His correspondence with émigré associations, groups, and individuals represented a significant portion of his presidential agenda and his private correspondence. He knew many Russian and Ukrainian émigrés in person and provided ongoing financial support for others. He succeeded at his main goal – to educate a large intelligentsia for a democratic Russia so that the country might, following its immense suffering, develop on a solid economic and cultural foundation. But Masaryk, like his contemporaries, could not have guessed that the Bolshevik regime would remain in power in Soviet Russia for many decades to come, and that the Russians who had received their education in Czechoslovakia or in other European countries would remain in exile. Those who dared to return – for instance on the basis of Soviet promises of amnesty – often found themselves sentenced to death or, if they were lucky, sent to prison or into exile. As a lifelong critic of communism and Bolshevism, Masaryk felt it his moral duty to help revitalize Russia's democrats as they prepared to fight the forces of Bolshevism. Despite new developments in the USSR that democratic Europe could not have anticipated, the Russian Aid Operation in Czechoslovakia can be assessed positively, for not only did it help to preserve the Russian and Ukrainian intelligentsia, but many of the refugees who stayed in Czechoslovakia after completing their studies enriched Czech science and culture, the country's economic life, and many other areas of human activity.

---

<sup>21</sup> *Pamjati T. G. Masaryka*. Praha [1937], pp. 12–13.