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# Student Reading Associations During Post-Revolutionary Neoabsolutism<sup>1</sup>

**Študentska bralna društva v času  
postrevolucionarnega neoabsolutizma**

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## **ABSTRACT**

How did student associations survive under Austria's harsh post-1848 regime? This article reveals how two student groups in Prague – one Czech, one German – adapted to heavy state control while preserving their educational and cultural goals. Despite censorship, surveillance, and shrinking membership, these associations navigated legal loopholes and shifting policies to maintain a fragile civic presence. Their story challenges the idea that the 1850s were a purely repressive era and highlights how civic life endured even under neoabsolutism.

### **Keywords**

students, student associations, Prague, neoabsolutism, revolution of 1848, Habsburg monarchy, reading association, national conflict

## **IZVLEČEK**

Kako so študentska društva preživela pod ostrim avstrijskim režimom po letu 1848? Članek razkriva, kako sta se dve študentski društvi v Pragi – eno češko, drugo nemško – prilagodili strogemu državnemu nadzoru in hkrati ohranili svoje izobraževalne in kulturne cilje. Kljub cenzuri, nadzoru in upadanju članstva sta ti dve društvi iskali zakonite možnosti za delovanje in se odzivali na spreminjajoče se politične okoliščine. Obstoj takšnih primerov postavlja pod vprašaj predstavo, da so bila petdeseta leta 19. stoletja zgolj obdobje represije, in izkazuje, da se je civilno življenje ohranjalo tudi pod neoabsolutistično oblastjo.

### **Ključne besede**

študenti, študentska društva, Praga, neoabsolutizem, revolucija 1848, habsburška monarhija, bralno društvo, narodni konflikt

## **INTRODUCTION**

*Naučný slovník*, the first public Czech encyclopedia published during the 1860s and 1870s, defined the term “Spolek” (association) as the necessity of people uniting to accomplish their goals. It also described the negative attitude of the post-revolutionary neoabsolutist regime toward associations. The author of the entry presented the typically very critical position toward the neoabsolutist regime: in his opinion, the associations were an important part of citizens’ rights.<sup>2</sup> In many ways, this reflects how historiography has often described the 1850s: as a decade of repression and the restriction of civil life.

However, the picture is more complex. While associations were curtailed and placed under surveillance, they were not entirely destroyed. In fact, the regime preserved certain associational forms, particularly those connected to education and cultural life, because it also sought to modernize state structures and strengthen its legitimacy. Therefore, I argue that it laid the foundations of 19th-century civil society, which was closely connected with numerous associations, though only the high- and middle-class groups were able to fully take advantage of the legal system in the second half of the 19th century. This legal system, grounded in liberal principles of human rights, sharply contrasted with the neoabsolutist regime that characterized the Habsburg monarchy of the 1850s.<sup>3</sup>

The ambivalence of the coexistence of repression and modernization shaped student associations in Prague. By examining their legal frameworks, activities, and adaptations, this article argues that the 1850s should not be seen as a purely anti-progressive era, but rather one in which civil life survived in restricted yet meaningful ways.

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2 “Slovník.” In: *Slovník naučný*, vol. 8 (S–Szyttler), eds. František Ladislav Rieger and Jakub Malý, 901. Prague: I. L. Kober, 1870.

3 Kučera, Rudolf. “Občanská společnost: Koncept a Jeho Historizace.” *Dějiny – Teorie – Kritika*, 2 (2007), 219–231. <https://doi.org/10.14712/24645370.2459> (access: September 2025).

## **THE END OF THE REVOLUTION AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE POST-REVOLUTIONARY REGIME**

The revolution of 1848–1849 provided a major impetus for building elements of civil society. After the initial revolutionary successes in the spring of 1848, many associations and clubs were founded. However, while the number of new organizations was high, many were short-lived and remained unofficial in the power vacuum created when state institutions withdrew from control of public space. Lacking an official legal basis, these associations prompted numerous liberal politicians – who often embraced legal formalism – to describe the situation as chaotic and to seek the restoration of order, sometimes even in cooperation with the still-reserved state institutions.<sup>4</sup>

This situation changed with the Pentecostal Storm of June 1848 when fights broke out after repeated provocations from both sides. Some of the student guards tried to fight the Austrian army under the command of General Alfred von Windischgrätz, who did not hesitate to bombard Prague from Prague Castle and burn the Prague mills. However, this radical action led to the isolation of the fighting students. After the mediation of the liberals from the Czech-speaking milieu, they surrendered to the victorious army. This action led to crucial changes in Prague's revolutionary environment, as Windischgrätz declared martial law in the city, bringing an end to the changes begun in March 1848. Most associations, clubs, and media organizations were dissolved or banned, and all activities had to be approved by army officials. The majority of the leaders of the Czech-speaking liberal milieu did not participate in the events. However, Windischgrätz, as a sworn enemy of any kind of revolution, had them imprisoned and permitted their release only after they had been elected to the Constitutional Parliament in Vienna and the government had intervened. Due to martial law, both the

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4 On the limited willingness of "liberals" to participate in the revolution, see: Mommsen, Wolfgang J. *1848. Die ungewollte Revolution. Die revolutionären Bewegungen in Europa 1830–1849*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998; Štaif, Jiří. *Obezřetná elita: Česká společnost mezi tradicí a revolucí 1830–1851*. Prague: Dokořan, 2005.

Slavic Congress and Diet of the Bohemian Kingdom had to end early or were never convened. The Bohemian Diet was an essential institution in the eyes of Czech liberal leaders, and many of them thought this was a disaster that helped the revolution to be defeated. František Palacký, in particular, never forgave the radicals.<sup>5</sup>

Martial law ended in July, but public life changed. The revolution became less visible in Prague's streets, and the willingness to take radical revolutionary action declined. The definitive end of the revolutionary environment was marked by the revelation of the May Conspiracy in May 1849. Although the planned uprising never came close to being realized, the state used its mere existence as an opportunity to deal with potentially radical elements that could oppose the regime. Part of this agenda was the dissolution of most of the existing student associations, such as Liberalia, Teutonia, Slavia, Praga, Hilaria, Philadelphia, Marcomania, Vingolf, Fidelia, and Českomoravské bratrstvo. Many student leaders were imprisoned, and participants in the conspiracy were sentenced to long prison terms.<sup>6</sup> This new state of siege lasted until 1853, and the state administration used it to tighten rules for civil society and lay the foundations for a new regime.<sup>7</sup>

This regime, often called "Bach's absolutism" after Alexander Bach, the Minister of the Interior, was a very ambivalent period in the history of the 19th century. Traditional historiography describes this period as a time of increasing state oppression to limit political or national progress. However, contemporary historiography offers a more nuanced view of the decade of the 1850s. The new regime was not able to renounce all of the revolutionary programs; indeed, some of them were even used to its advantage, such as the abolition of *roboty* (the obligation of peasants to work for landowners), or university reform, which established a different system of university study and organization, one that approximated Prussian reforms from the beginning of the century and introduced academic self-gover-

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5 *Ibid.*, 255–268; Urban, Otto. *Česká společnost 1848–1918*. Prague: Svoboda, 1982, 47–54.

6 Kutnar, František. "Studentstvo v politickém životě doby Bachova absolutismu." *Acta Universitatis Carolinae. Historia Universitatis Carolinae Pragensis*, 10/1 (1969), 49–50.

7 On the May Conspiracy and its consequences, see: Štaif, *Obezřetná elita*, 382–389.

ment, although this remained limited during the 1850s. The new regime also favored economic progress and pursued a liberal economic policy, which was considered to have the potential to restore state power in international relations.<sup>8</sup>

The regime's strong bureaucratic approach, which relied on expanding the bureaucracy to strengthen its rule, could be understood as part of the Europe-wide process that the British historian Christopher Clark called the "European Revolution in Government." According to Clark, most of the European post-revolutionary regimes of the 1850s extended their governance to new fields of everyday life. Although the Habsburg monarchy had a long tradition of bureaucratic governing since the Enlightenment reforms, it also changed its bureaucratic system dramatically under post-revolutionary neoabsolutism, which built a sophisticated structure of the state administration. Establishing this structure cost the regime a large amount of resources, but it became the backbone of the state administration until the collapse of the monarchy.<sup>9</sup>

## **THE LEGAL CONTEXT**

The legal situation during the revolution of 1848–1849 was complicated. The April Constitution confirmed the right to form associations, but the first specific act was published in March 1849 as an imperial patent (No. 171), regulating the exercise of the right of association and assembly. According to this law, every association had to inform the state administration about its founding and provide statutes. The state could forbid the association, but approval was automatic if the state did not react. This act represen-

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8 On neoabsolutism, see: Pokorná, Magdaléna. *Jen žádný rámus, pánové!: česká společnost v padesátých letech 19. století*. Prague: Academia, 2024; Urban, *Česká společnost*, 100–139; Judson, Pieter. *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, 218–268. On university reforms, see: Aichner, Christof, and Brigitte Mazohl, eds. *Die Thun-Hohenstein'schen Universitätsreformen 1849-1860. Konzeption – Umsetzung – Nachwirkungen*. Wien, Köln, and Weimar: Böhlau Verlag, 2017.

9 Clark, Christopher. "After 1848: The European Revolution in Government." *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 22 (2012), 171–197. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080440112000114> (access: September 2025).

ted a major achievement of liberal attempts to secure freedom of assembly. However, the gradually emerging neoabsolutist state did not respect the act in all its nuances, and several similar acts, such as the Provisional Municipal Act, remained as remnants of the revolution. This remnant was replaced in November 1852 by a new imperial patent (No. 253), officially called the Association Act (*Spolkový zákon*). It restored the pre-revolutionary system, in which an association could exist only if the state administration approved it. The approving authority differed according to the type of association. Besides the police directorate, the student association also had to be approved by the university administration. Despite these restrictions, the act still provided possibilities for existing associations to continue and for new ones to be founded.<sup>10</sup>

The police administration then divided associations into 18 groups with different control regimes and prohibited political associations and activities. Student associations could belong either to the 14th group ("museums and associations for arts and sciences") or the 15th group ("reading and entertainment associations"). Since this article seeks to explore the broader sense of civil society, it primarily deals with the associations from the 15th group, which includes two associations that could be considered "student associations." The historian Eva Drašarová recognized 16 (possibly 15, as the situation of one is not clear in the archive documents) reading associations in the Bohemian Kingdom, most of them located in the city of Prague, and four of them in Pilsen district.<sup>11</sup>

This legal framework confirms that post-revolutionary neoabsolutism preserved certain civil rights, which were intended to support economic growth based on economic liberalism while preventing challenges to the political and social order. In this regard, the regime could even be very

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10 Drašarová, Eva. "Soupis právních předpisů a dokumentů ke spolčovacím právu z fondů Státního ústředního archivu v Praze od poloviny 18. stol. do roku 1918." *Sborník archivních prací*, 40/2 (1990), 298–299.

11 Drašarová, Eva. "Společenský život v Čechách v období neoabsolutismu – spolky padesátých let 19. století." *Paginae historiae: sborník Státního ústředního archivu v Praze*, 0 (1992), 128–169.

supportive, since it considered economic growth a part of the efforts to maintain the existing system.

## **THE FOUNDING OF STUDENT READING ASSOCIATIONS**

A reading association is a kind of organization that has a long history connected to 18th-century learned societies. In the context of the Czech national movement, these associations often provided Czech-written literature that helped foster national consciousness.<sup>12</sup> The role of literature and education in general in building the Czech national consciousness led the Czech historian Jiří Štaif to describe the Czech National Revival with an educational metaphor: the Czech national agitators were trying to educate a Czech-speaking population so the people would awaken and recognize themselves as Czechs.<sup>13</sup> The first reading association in the Bohemian Kingdom was founded in Radnice in 1818, and its library still exists today, though under a different legal status. Because reading associations were initially meant to work in a broad sense, inspiration could also come from bourgeois associations, such as the Měšťanská beseda in Prague, which helped to establish a self-confident Czech bourgeois milieu, and the Juridisch-Politischer Leseverein founded in 1841 in Vienna, which played a crucial role in the spread of liberal thought in broader Viennese circles.<sup>14</sup>

Their history began in the fall of 1848, when many associations were founded in Prague during the renewal of public life after the lifting of martial law. Nevertheless, the situation was complicated for two reasons. Student life was controlled due to the students' engagement in the Pentecostal

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12 Vyskočil, Aleš. "Čtenářské spolky." In: *Akademická encyklopedie českých dějin*, vol. 3 (Č/2: česko-pruské vztahy – čtyři pražské artikuly). Prague: Historický ústav AV ČR, 2012, 368–369.

13 Štaif, Jiří. *Modernizace na pokračování. Společnost v českých zemích (1770–1918)*. Prague: Argo, 2020, 95–103.

14 Suchá, Pavla. "Antonín Puchmajer a Česká čtenářská společnost v Radnicích." In: *Jeden jazyk naše heslo bud'*. Radnice-Plzeň: Spolek divadelních ochotníků and Studijní a vědecká knihovna Plzeňského kraje, 2001, 109–115; Štaif, *Obzřetná elita*, 99; Brauneder, Wilhelm. *Leseverein und Rechtskultur. Der Juridisch-politische Leseverein zu Wien 1840–1990*. Wien: Manzsche Verlag- und Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1992.

Storm, and students were nationally divided between Czechs and Germans. The national struggle began in April 1848 and slowly developed to shape public life in Prague. It emerged because of different views on the political status of the Czech lands: while the German-speaking milieu preferred to be a part of a united Germany, the Czech-speaking population favored remaining within a reformed Habsburg monarchy. However, many people tried to overcome this struggle with different levels of success, and there was still a large ambivalent or restrained population.<sup>15</sup>

The national conflict was also reflected in the founding of the student associations. The internal records of the Redehalle der deutschen Studenten ("Reading Hall of the German Students") trace the first ideas of establishing this association back to a meeting on September 19, 1848, where German students discussed their relationship with Czech students. Although the national conflict persisted, the German students continued to organize themselves, forming an association that would defend their interests. One member, the law student Hieronymus Roth, publicly suggested establishing a Lese- und Redehalle der deutschen Studenten ("Reading and Lecture Hall of the German Students," referred to below as "LDS").<sup>16</sup> The historian Gregor Gatscher-Riedl has interpreted this as an attempt to mock Czech nationalists, since it took place on November 8, 1848 – the anniversary of the Battle of White Mountain from the 17th century, considered to be a disaster in the Czech national narratives.<sup>17</sup> However, I think it was just a coincidence because the very next day, on November 9, 1848, the idea for the Akademický řečnický a čtenářský spolek ("Academic Speaking and Reading Society," referred to below as "AČS") was presented in the great hall of the Carolinum. These actions were not formal acts of founding but rather announcements of preparation. Both associations were

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15 The Czech-German national struggle is a part of many syntheses about the revolution of 1848. See, for example: Štaif, *Obezřetná elita*, 214–268; Urban, *Česká společnost*, 32–38.

16 Russ, Viktor Wilhelm. *Die Lesehalle der deutschen Studenten zu Prag 1848–1862*. Prague: Verlag der Lese und Redehalle der Deutschen Studenten in Prag, 1873, 6–7.

17 Gatscher-Riedl, Gregor. "Lese- und Redehallen deutscher Studenten in Prag 1848–1938. Erste Formen studentischer Breitenorganisation und Bildungsarbeit." *Einst und Jetzt, Jahrbuch des Vereins für corpsstudentische Geschichtsforschung*, 66 (2021), 151–182.

then officially founded in January 1849, and there were again similarities between them: the LDS was founded on January 6 and AČS on January 9, both in Hôtel de Saxe on Hybernská Street.<sup>18</sup>

Because both associations considered the creation of a library as a crucial part of their activities, they needed significant financial resources. Fundraising was therefore crucial for their functioning. During Christmas 1848, the LDS started a fund-raising campaign to support the association's finances. The biggest donors included the Archbishop of Prague Alois Josef, Freiherr von Schrenk und Nötzig and the outgoing rector of the university, prelate Joseph Zeidler, who contributed 50 and 40 gulden respectively.<sup>19</sup> The association later also gained support from Alois Borrosch, a parliamentary deputy of the Imperial Diet and wealthy Prague factory owner, who sided with German national liberals in the Diet. On the other hand, the AČS was supported by national Czech deputies. Two of them, František Palacký and František Trojan, collected approximately 500 gulden among Czech deputies and another 205 gulden among Czech parliamentary committees, which provided a crucial start-up fund for the new association.<sup>20</sup> The associations' reliance on parliamentary deputies illustrates that, despite the political repression of the late 1840s and 1850s, the liberal political elites supported modernizing projects, including the creation of libraries. Their approach, though the parliament was disbanded in March 1849, also shaped the state administration, which did not abandon all kinds of modernization.

The rivalry between the two associations, the LDS and AČS, is reflected in these patterns of support. The situation was additionally complicated by the national question. Although the LDS was declared to be German, membership was not restricted to a specific nationality. Indeed, its own

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18 Russ, *Die Lesehalle*, 8. On the beginning of the AČS, see: Slavík, František Augustin. *Stručný dějepis čtenářského akademického spolku v Praze*. Prague: Nákladem čtenářského akademického spolku, 1869, 3–7.

19 Loebel, Alfred H. *Das Gründungs-Semester der Lese- und Redehalle der Deutschen Studenten in Prag: 1848–1898*. Prague: Verlag der Lese- und Redehalle der Deutschen Studenten in Prag, [c. 1898], 9.

20 Slavík, *Stručný dějepis*, 6.

internal records claimed it was open, though several members of its preliminary committee took part in nationalist events during the revolution – most notably the German Congress that took place in November 1848 in Eger, which was one of the main events in opposition to the politics of the Czech-speaking deputies, who supported the AČS. Similarly, František August Slavík, the first historian of the AČS, declared in his *Stručný dějepis čtenářského akademického spolku* that the LDS was founded by German secessionists from AČS, who believed that AČS would be an anti-German and Czech nationalist association. He dismissed this claim as a lie. The internal records of the LDS declared as a reason for its founding a lack of support for German students in Prague and animosity from Czech nationalists, with a specific mention of Pan-Slavism. By contrast, the AČS was officially an anational association, supporting both nationalities equally.<sup>21</sup> Archival records confirm that it used both languages, though more of its internal documents were in Czech, and this only increased over time.<sup>22</sup> At its founding meeting, the association opened with a speech by its new president, Anton Heinrich Springer, a lecturer in art history at the university and a nationally moderate German-speaking intellectual with connections to Prague's moderate elites and a supporter of the federalization of the monarchy. The second speaker was the radical journalist Karel Sabina.<sup>23</sup>

The rivalry between the two associations reflected the growing national divisions among students. Each sought to promote its own cultural and political orientation, which deepened the boundaries between Czechs and Germans. At the same time, both the LDS and AČS still fulfilled the general role of student associations by organizing readings, lectures, and cultural activities that contributed to education and civic life. The national question, therefore, both divided students and stimulated their associational activity, which demonstrates the ambivalent role of nationalism following the initial founding of the associations.

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21 *Ibid.*; Loebel, *Das Gründungs-Semester*, 5–7; Gatcher-Riedl, "Lese- und Redehallen deutscher Studenten," 154.

22 AUK (Archiv Univerzity Karlovy), Věstudentský archiv (VSA), Akademický čtenářský spolek (AČS).

23 Slavík, *Stručný dějepis*, 5. Regarding Springer during the revolution, see: Štaif, *Obezřetná elita*, 383.

Despite their rivalry, there were several attempts to unify the associations or at least promote closer cooperation, proposed mainly by the university authorities. The most significant initiatives took place in 1852, launched by the AČS, and 1859, both resulting in the promise of deeper cooperation between the two associations.<sup>24</sup> These gestures show that, despite significant antagonism, collaboration between the associations remained possible.

## **THE STATUTES OF THE AČS AND ITS PROBLEMS DURING THE NEOABSOLUTISM ERA**

After its founding, the first event held by the AČS was a lecture by its president, Anton Springer, about Goethe's *Faust*.<sup>25</sup> The documents in the archive of AČS also shed light on the complicated evolution of its statutes. The law required all associations to have statutes outlining their structure, leadership, rules for membership, and primary purpose.

The AČS published its first statutes in early 1849, which were clearly affected by the ongoing revolution. The association's stated primary purpose was "*the scientific education of the members in general, and the constitutional and oratorical education in particular.*"<sup>26</sup> Though this might seem rather innocuous, it framed the possible activities of the association and shaped its work. The statutes then listed four specific activities: the possession of journals; the establishment of the library supporting the association's purpose; lectures on the subject of scientific content in general and state subjects in particular; and disputations, speeches, and declamations.<sup>27</sup>

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24 *Die Lese- und Redehalle Deutscher Studenten in Prag: 1848–1938.* [S.l.]: [c. 1978], 9–10; Slavík, *Stručný dějepis*, 11.

25 Slavík, *Stručný dějepis*, 6.

26 AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1849, Stanovy řečnického a čtenářského spolku.

27 *Ibid.*

These points of the statutes were approved at the first general assembly on January 20, 1849. Only one speaker had a critical comment about the declamations, but the clause in question remained in the statutes.<sup>28</sup>

These four activities represent a revolutionary attitude toward public matters, characterized by a vital interest in state policy and its functioning. The revolutionary period was also marked by liberal efforts to promote education in matters regarding politics and law. The *Kapesní slovníček novinářský a konversační* ("Pocket Dictionary for Journalists and Conversationalists"), which aimed to explain new terms appearing during the revolution, described the term "disputation" with examples that significantly attacked the practices and policies of the pre-revolutionary regime. Although the term certainly reflects the old tradition of academic disputation as carried out at universities since the Middle Ages, I consider it important that contemporary actors recognized its rebellious potential.<sup>29</sup>

Even more important was the term "politics," which had special resonance during the revolutionary period because the revolutions stimulated interest in public matters. Another lexicon, *Slovník pro čtenáře nowin, w němž se vysvětlují slova cizího původu* ("A Dictionary for Readers of the News, in Which Words of Foreign Origin Are Explained"), explained that the term "politics" originated from Ancient Greek knowledge of how to administer municipalities but was now "more often used as resourcefulness in achieving certain civic goals."<sup>30</sup>

The association's rules of procedure also reveal this political interest. They set up regulations for several of the association's activities, such as lectures and the organization of the library. The most important provisions for the purposes of this article dealt with "parliamentary exercises." These

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28 However, the use of "declamations" in the statutes is complicated, as the term did not appear in the Czech version nor in later versions of the text. AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápis z 20. ledna 1849.

29 Ritter, Ludvík. *Kapesní slovníček novinářský a konversační*. Prague: Jaroslav Pospíšil, 1850, 209–210.

30 Klácel, František Matouš. *Slovník pro čtenáře nowin, w němž se vysvětlují slova cizího původu*. Brno: Karel Winiker, 1849, 137.

were meant to be discussions about different topics that included people with opposing views, because “*the chairperson must do as much as possible to ensure that a speaker who speaks in favor of the topic is always followed by someone who speaks against it.*”<sup>31</sup> Although this format seemingly followed the tradition of disputation that was mentioned above, it also reflected a new, keen interest in parliamentary discussion that took place at the beginning of 1849 in Kremsier, where Czech deputies, such as František Ladislav Rieger, became renowned discussants. I understand this as part of a greater fascination with the revolutionary events that shaped contemporary society, which could be understood with the term “*revolutionary culture.*”<sup>32</sup> The spirit in which the AČŠ initially operated clearly illustrates the progressive tendencies within student associations, which in the early post-revolutionary moment could still be tolerated by the regime.

However, the rules of procedure faced a more complicated approval process. At the first general assembly, members decided they were “*badly prepared*” and postponed the vote. It took place instead on March 24, when most of the paragraphs regarding parliamentary exercises were rejected to simplify the procedures. They were finally adopted in November 1849, but in a very different context: the state of siege following the revelation of the May Conspiracy. During this period, the association had to deal with new challenges. One of them was a new law, which the protocols of the AČŠ called “*Disciplinary Act*” (*Disciplinační zákon*). On October 17, the AČŠ agreed to send a deputy to the new Czech governor, Karl Mecséry, to address the matter.<sup>33</sup>

These statutes became problematic with the revolution’s defeat, when the neoabsolutist regime started to secure its position and prevent further

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31 AUK, VSA, AČŠ, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1849, Jednací řád akad. řečnického a čtenářského spolku.

32 On the situation in parliament, see: Štaif, *Obezřetná elita*, 332–352; Urban, *Česká společnost*, 69–80. On revolutionary culture, see: Katschuba, Wolfgang, and Carolla Lipp. “*Revolutionskultur 1848. Einige (volkskundliche) Anmerkungen zu den Erfahrungsräumen und Aktionsformen antifeudaler Volksbewegung in Württemberg.*” *Zeitschrift für Württembergische Landesgeschichte*, 39 (1980), 141–164.

33 AUK, VSA, AČŠ, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 24. března, 17. října a 16. listopadu 1849.

revolutionary attempts. Limited activities and financial problems led to disputes in the AČS, which culminated in the exclusion of several prominent members: Jan Palacký, son of the leading Czech politician František Palacký, as well as Ludvík Aull, Antonín Zeithammer, and Prince Rudolf Thurn-Taxis. According to Slavík, the president of the AČS explained that “*more such eccentricities were not repeated, and the President’s dignity was not insulted,*”<sup>34</sup> although the protocols made no mention of this. Nevertheless, I do not want to omit the possibility that the AČS needed to eliminate exposed personalities. Police reports had already commented on the unreliability of Palacký and Aull.<sup>35</sup> Later, during the 1850s, the AČS faced a decreasing number of members and financial difficulties. Direct pressure against the association led to restrictions on its activities: only individual study in the library was allowed, and the state administration monitored the collection to prevent access to radicalizing books. In 1853, the Police Directorate banned a book entitled *The Importance of the Present Age*, published in 1848, which almost certainly emphasized the importance of the revolution.<sup>36</sup> That same year (but not dated), the AČS sent a list of books for state review. In 1857, approximately 30 books were removed from the library. Though direct state intervention is not mentioned, most of the removed books were published in 1848 and did not need to be approved by state censorship at the time of publication. The majority were also related to the topic of religious freedom and interconfessional dialogue, themes that the government did not support after the sanction of the Austrian Concordat in 1855.<sup>37</sup>

These pressures led to the necessity of a change of statutes after the new Association Act of 1853. The documents in the archive of the AČS offer only a limited view into the discussions about this change. However, they do show that on 31 January 1853, the committee discussed the possibility of dividing the association into three sections – Law, Philosophy, and Mathematics–Science – but these plans were never incorporated into the

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34 Slavík, *Stručný dějepis*, 10.

35 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 27. února 1852; Kutnar, “Studentstvo,” 50.

36 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton 3, Archiv, Part II, 1853, “Die Bedeutung des gegenwertigen Zeitalters.”

37 AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1858.

statutes. This proposal was signed by a new librarian of the AČS, Julius Grégr, then a law student and later an influential politician and the leader of the Young-Czech Party.<sup>38</sup> The preparation of the new statutes took a long time: on January 5, the committee decided to present them to the general assembly and tasked the new association secretary, Josef Vaněk, to make corrections.<sup>39</sup> The records for much of the year are missing, but on October 10, the state administration finally corrected them so the general assembly could approve them during October 1853 (the exact date is not recorded). At this meeting, their author Vaněk was elected president.<sup>40</sup>

The new statutes changed the association's primary purpose to "*encouraging and fostering scientific endeavors, especially for the individual education of its members.*"<sup>41</sup> These new statutes left out the term "constitutional," which was strongly associated with the revolution, and also omitted a clause promoting "oratorical education," which confirmed that the association could not organize debates. Therefore, the AČS also attained different means to achieve this new purpose, namely: "*the reading of (1) public journals of scientific or any useful content and (2) appropriate works in various branches of literature.*"<sup>42</sup> The statutes did not mention lectures and discussions, effectively reducing the association's activities to individual study in libraries. The AČS also needed to stay trouble-free in the eyes of the state administration, because in early 1853 it petitioned the Prague Governorship to be allowed to continue its work, and a negative response would have meant its dissolution. These changes watered down the association's mission, but their approval also shows that the regime preferred to limit rather than abolish such associations.

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38 AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1853, Programm základních pravidel sborů jednotlivých; AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 31. ledna 1853.

39 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 5. ledna 1853.

40 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 10. října 1853; and the next protocol from 1853.

41 AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1853, Statuten des akademischen Lesevereins in Prag.

42 *Ibid.*

To strengthen its standing, the AČS decided to join a fundraising campaign by the academic gymnasium named after Franz Josef Stiftung, which was established after an unsuccessful attempt on the emperor's life on 18 February 1853. Similarly, the AČS donated 200 gulden to a new state loan on 21 July 1854. I argue that these gestures were intended to demonstrate loyalty, since these campaigns were recognized as an expression of devotion to the emperor. Such acts reveal how associations adapted to survive: the regime tolerated them as long as they aligned with official displays of loyalty.<sup>43</sup>

In this context, a decision of the committee on November 19 appears striking: they decided to buy busts of "excellent men" (*výtečných mužů*), which mostly referred to a group of nationalist politicians. Though it is not specified whose busts were bought, I expect they were all people who were not considered problematic by the state administration, although this could also be a sign of the association's self-confidence.<sup>44</sup> The purchase of these busts can be understood as a double-edged gesture, both a cautious assertion of cultural pride and a demonstration that the association remained within acceptable limits.

In this way, the association's role was simultaneously curtailed and sustained: its original political ambitions were diluted, but its existence as an educational and cultural body preserved. This duality exemplifies how the regime combined repression with modernization.

## **LESE- UND REDEHALLE DER DEUTSCHEN STUDENTEN IN THE PERIOD OF NEOABSOLUTISM**

The LDS faced similar issues during the 1850s because of state politics toward the student associations. Shortly after its foundation, on February

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43 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 5. března, 21. července 1854. For reflections on the assassination attempt, see: Pokorná, *Jen žádný rámus*, 186–198.

44 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 19. listopadu 1853.

14, 1849, the first lecture took place on “Antique and modern art.” The association also engaged with very topical and controversial issues in its weekly lectures. One lecture, “Does the state of siege put an end to freedom of the press?” (*Hört mit dem Belagerungszustand die Presse-Freiheit auf?*), reacted to the situation of several cities in the monarchy that had been put in a state of siege during the last year (most importantly Prague in summer and Vienna after the October Revolution 1848), and discussed the issue of press freedom, one of the most significant achievements of the revolution. Another lecture, “Does a state have the right to intervene in a neighboring state if a revolution has broken out there?” (*Hat ein Staat das Recht der Intervention im Nachbarstaat, falls dort die Revolution ausgebrochen ist?*), reflected the European dimension of the revolution and the legacy of the Holy Alliance. In contrast, a lecture entitled “Is the emancipation of the Jews in Austria’s interest?” (*Liegt die Emanzipation der Juden im Interesse Österreichs?*) discussed a topic strictly related to the Habsburg monarchy, and can be seen as a precursor of the antisemitism of the late 19th century. However, the content of the lecture was not preserved. The lectures lasted until the planned pause on May 1 (the beginning of Easter holidays) but were never resumed because of the start of a state of siege in May 1849.<sup>45</sup>

On 7 January 1849, the LDS was acknowledged as an official student association by Prague University. This formed a strong connection between the university and the association, and university authorities even acted as its protectors.<sup>46</sup> In the context of the new reform of university study that established greater self-government, this recognition represented an important success, even if the neoabsolutist regime did not always respect its own regulations. This official recognition highlights how student associations could be both feared and integrated. They were controlled from above, and at the same time drawn into the processes of modernization.

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45 *Die Lese- und Redehalle Deutscher Studenten*, 5; Pokorná, Magdaléna. “Svoboda tisku: Interpretace pojmu v diskursu let 1848–1851.” In: *Symboly doby: historické eseje*, eds. Milan Hlaváčka and Jakub Raška, 191–209. Prague: Historický ústav, 2019; Pokorná, Magdaléna. “Cenzura: Interpretace pojmu v diskursu let 1848–1851.” In: *Symboly doby: historické eseje*, eds. Milan Hlaváčka and Jakub Raška, 211–220. Prague: Historický ústav, 2019.

46 Gatcher-Riedl, “Lese- und Redehallen deutscher Studenten,” 155.

The LDS also faced complications with its statutes. The original version defined the association's purpose as the "*promotion of scientific education without political ulterior motives and national arrogance.*"<sup>47</sup> In 1853, the LDS was required to change its statutes to comply with the new law, though the details are not preserved. That same year, the association sent an address to Emperor Franz Josef I, wishing him a speedy recovery after an assassination attempt. The state administration also controlled the LDS library: in 1856, the authorities removed "The Evangelium of Freedom" from the library, likely because it was perceived as opposing the privileged position of the Catholic Church after the 1855 Concordat.<sup>48</sup> Similar to the AČS, the fate of the LDS was complex. Its statutes were revised, its library censored, and its activities curtailed, yet it was not dissolved. Instead, it persisted as part of the university's intellectual life, tolerated – and in some ways even supported – as long as it remained within the regime's carefully drawn boundaries.

## **CONCLUSION**

The period of neoabsolutism was a challenging time for civil society and associations, especially those connected to students who had a revolutionary reputation in the eyes of the new establishment. The associations were controlled, there was always a representative of the state administration at official meetings, and their activities were limited to individual study. In 1852, the AČS wanted to publish its own journal, but that was never realized. Similarly, in 1853, the LDS could not publish an annual anthology to celebrate its fifth anniversary.<sup>49</sup> This control is perhaps most clearly visible in the dramatic decline in membership: in the case of the AČS from 500 members in 1849 to 69 in 1851, although it again reached 500 members in 1863.<sup>50</sup> The LDS experienced a decrease from 371 members in 1849 to 187 in 1852 and then to 104 members in 1855. As a result of this, the associations

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47 *Die Lese- und Redehalle Deutscher Studenten*, 6.

48 AUK, VSA, Lese- und Redehalle der deutschen Studenten, nro. 1363, "Evangelium der Freiheit."

49 Slavík, František August. *Dějiny českého studentstva*. Prague: F.A. Slavík, 1874, 91.

50 *Ibid.*, 91.

also lacked financial means because they could not collect enough membership fees.<sup>51</sup>

At the same time, the regime did not choose to abolish student associations entirely. Fearful of their revolutionary potential, it sought to contain them, but the modernizing dimension of neoabsolutism also valued certain forms of education and associational activity. The duality of the 1850s with regard to student associations can be seen in fundraising campaigns, the complex role of nationalism, and certain reforms pursued by the state administration. Perhaps most strikingly, the university reforms of the 1850s allowed elements of academic self-government, and associations were tolerated in reduced form because they could be made to serve broader state goals. This contradiction points to the article's central argument: neoabsolutism combined repression with modernization, producing an ambivalent form of progress in which civic life persisted within closely defined limits.

In addition to the complicated nature of the regime, it is also worth noting that many historians have overlooked the fact that it evolved, so that by the end of the decade the situation slowly began to change. In 1857, the state administration allowed the AČS to organize a benefit concert for its activities, and its approved program contained "national songs." On 2 December 1858, the general assembly decided to make František Palacký an honorary member, and the senate of the university became a protector of the association. In March 1859, a committee decided to buy missing volumes of Palacký's *Geschichte von Böhmen* (published in Czech as *Dějiny národu českého v Čechách a v Moravě*).<sup>52</sup> Though a preserved program did not reveal specific songs, this contrasts with the revolutionary period, when songs often carried overt political symbolism.

The changing atmosphere was symbolized by the celebrations that were permitted in 1859 for the 100th anniversary of the birth of Fridrich Schiller,

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51 *Die Lese- und Redehalle Deutscher Studenten*, 6, 10.

52 AUK, VSA, AČS, carton not marked, Protokoly schůzí výboru ak. čt. sp. a valných hromad, Zápisy z 2. prosince 1858 a 24. března 1859; AUK, VSA, AČS, Korespondence spolku 1848–1862, carton 37, 1857.

several of whose texts inspired the emancipation and progress of civic society. As Schiller was regarded as a German symbol with a very nationalistic meaning, he became problematic for Czech nationalist students, who on 10 November spontaneously interrupted a parade by shouting the names of famous figures of Czech history, such as Jan Žižka, Emperor Charles IV, and František Palacký, and singing national songs, such as “Kde domov můj” or “Hej Slované.” This interruption led to an extensive investigation, during which investigators reported the supposed existence of a secret student association called Czechia. Although there was precedence for such a secret society from the early 1850s in the Brotherhood of Red Flag, Czechia did not exist and was merely an invention of a paranoid state administration.<sup>53</sup> These developments indicate that by the end of the 1850s, the most repressive features of the regime were beginning to recede.

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53 Kutnar, “Studentstvo,” 90. On using national songs during demonstrations, see: Agnew, Hugh. “They’re Singing Our Song.” *Historica*, 65/1 (2024), 98–121. <https://doi.org/10.5507/ho.2024.007> (access: September 2025).

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## **POVZETEK**

Članek preučuje usodo študentskih bralnih društev v habsburški monarhiji v obdobju postrevolucionarnega neoabsolutizma v petdesetih letih 19. stoletja. To je bil čas, ko je avstrijska država po revoluciji leta 1848 odpravila številne državljanske svoboščine, hkrati pa je ohranila in selektivno podpirala določene oblike društvenega povezovanja, da bi lahko spodbujala gospodarsko modernizacijo in ohranjala politični nadzor.

To tematiko članek raziskuje na primeru dveh praških študentskih društev: *Lese- und Redehalle der deutschen Studenten* (LDS) in *Akademický čtenářský spolek* (AČS). Obe društvi sta razvili različne strategije preživetja pod nadzorom neoabsolutističnega režima. LDS, ki je izhajal iz nemško govorečega študentskega okolja, je poudarjal znanstveno izobraževanje in povezave z univerzitetnimi oblastmi, kar mu je v določeni meri zagotavljalo institucionalno zaščito. AČS, ki je bil tesneje povezan s češkimi liberalnimi krogi, pa je že od začetka združeval ambicije političnega samoizobraževanja, razprav in razvoja knjižnic. Razkol med študenti glede narodnih vprašanj je poglobljajal rivalstvo med društvoma, saj je LDS zagovarjal nemški kulturni prostor, medtem ko je AČS postopoma postal pomemben forum za češko kulturno in intelektualno usmeritev. Prav tako pa je pri obeh društvih mogoče slediti podobni poti: od revolucionarne pobude in široko zastavljenih ciljev k previdnejšemu, depolitiziranemu delovanju, ki se je osredotočalo predvsem na knjižničarsko dejavnost in skrbno nadzorovane kulturne aktivnosti. Kljub represiji pa so imela ta društva pomembno vlogo pri ohranjanju kulturnega in izobraževalnega življenja ter pri subtilni krepitvi državljanske identitete.

Neoabsolutizem v Avstriji članek prikazuje kot kompleksno ureditev, ki je združevala avtoritarni nadzor z modernizacijo in omogočala določeno mero državljanskega udejstvovanja v strogo določenih okvirih. Ta dvojnost je v nasprotju s tradicionalno historiografsko predstavo o petdesetih letih 19. stoletja kot izključno zatiralskem desetletju in izpostavi študentska društva hkrati kot žrtve in kot akterje v novem političnem kontekstu.