International Students' Day, 17 Nov: recalling Prague, 1939

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News

International Students' Day is observed every year on 17 November; 2026 marks the 87th anniversary of the 1939 events. In Nazi-occupied Prague, medical student Jan Opletal was shot during a protest on 28 October 1939 (Czechoslovak Independence Day) and died on 11 November. His funeral on 15 November turned into a large protest rally. On 17 November Nazi forces raided university hostels, executed nine people – eight student leaders and a lecturer – without trial, sent about 1,200 students to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp and closed Czech universities. In 1941 the International Students' Council in London proclaimed the date International Students' Day. It is not a UN-declared day, and no official theme has been announced for 2026. Do not confuse it with World Students' Day on 15 October (A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's birthday), which is also not a UN-declared day.

Key facts for the exam

Point	Details
Date	17 November (every year)
Origin	17 Nov 1939 – Nazi crackdown in Prague; Czech universities shut
Remembered	Jan Opletal – medical student (shot 28 Oct; died 11 Nov 1939)
Toll	9 executed; ~1,200 students sent to Sachsenhausen
First proclaimed	1941 – London, International Students' Council

Point	Details
1989 sequel	50th-anniversary march → 'Velvet Revolution'
In Czechia	'Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Day' – public holiday
2026 theme	None officially announced

Background

- History: After the 1938 Munich Agreement, Hitler turned the Czech lands into the 'Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia' in March 1939. As 28 October 1918 was the day Czechoslovakia was born, people protested peacefully on that day in 1939 – wearing black and boycotting trams and shops. A decision taken in Berlin on 16 November closed Czech universities for three years (in practice they stayed shut till the war ended).
- 1989 Velvet Revolution: On 17 November 1989, police attacked a peaceful Prague student march marking the 50th anniversary of the 1939 crackdown; nationwide protests followed and the communist regime fell without bloodshed – the 'Velvet Revolution'. Playwright Václav Havel became President on 29 December 1989. Today 17 November is the 'Day of Struggle for Freedom and Democracy' in Czechia and Slovakia.
- Indian Constitution: Article 21A (86th Amendment, 2002) made free and compulsory education for children aged 6–14 a fundamental right. Articles 19(1)(a), (b) and (c) – freedom of speech, peaceful assembly and association – apply to student bodies too, subject to reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2)–(4).

Tamil Nadu link: Tamil Nadu's students led the 1965 anti-Hindi agitation; in January 1965 thousands of students marched in Madras. Annamalai University student Rajendran, killed in police firing, is honoured with a statue at the university's entrance. Today the 'Pudhumai Penn' (girls) and 'Tamil Pudhalvan' (boys; launched 9 Aug 2024 in Coimbatore) schemes give ₹1,000 a month to government-school students in higher education.

Frequently asked questions

What is this news about?

International Students' Day is observed every year on 17 November; 2026 marks the 87th anniversary of the 1939 events. In Nazi-occupied Prague, medical student Jan Opletal was shot during a protest on 28 October 1939 (Czechoslovak Independence Day) and died on 11 November.

What are the key facts to remember for the exam?

Date: 17 November (every year); Origin: 17 Nov 1939 – Nazi crackdown in Prague; Czech universities shut; Remembered: Jan Opletal – medical student (shot 28 Oct; died 11 Nov 1939); Toll: 9 executed; ~1,200 students sent to Sachsenhausen.

What is the background to this news?

History: After the 1938 Munich Agreement, Hitler turned the Czech lands into the 'Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia' in March 1939.

Practice questions (with answers)

1. Czechoslovakia, scene of the 1939 student crackdown, split peacefully in 1993 into the Czech Republic and which country?

A) Slovakia

B) Slovenia

C) Croatia

D) Moldova

Answer: A – Explanation: Slovakia (capital Bratislava) – separate since 1 Jan 1993; Prague is the Czech capital. Slovenia and Croatia left Yugoslavia in 1991.

2. A 1989 student march marking 50 years of the 1939 repression sparked which peaceful revolution?

A) Orange Revolution

B) Velvet Revolution

C) Rose Revolution

D) Carnation Revolution

Answer: B – Explanation: Velvet Revolution – communist rule in Czechoslovakia fell; Havel became President. Orange – Ukraine; Rose – Georgia; Carnation – Portugal.

3. In which city did the International Students' Council proclaim 17 November as Students' Day in 1941?

A) Paris

B) Geneva

C) London

D) New York

Answer: C – Explanation: London – proclaimed in wartime along with exiled Czech students there. It is not a UN-declared day.

4. Annamalai University has a statue of student Rajendran, killed in police firing in 1965. Which agitation was he part of?

A) Vaikom Satyagraha

B) Anti-Hindi agitation

C) Quit India Movement

D) Temple Entry movement

Answer: B – Explanation: The 1965 anti-Hindi agitation – led by students; thousands of students marched in Madras that January.

5. Tamil Nadu's 'Tamil Pudhalvan' scheme gives ₹1,000 a month to whom?

A) Govt-school girls

B) Primary-school pupils

C) Private-school toppers

D) Govt-school boys in college

Answer: D – Explanation: Boys who studied Classes 6–12 in govt schools and join higher studies; launched 9 Aug 2024 in Coimbatore. Girls get 'Pudhumai Penn'.

Sources: Government of the Czech Republic – vlada.gov.cz (Autumn 1939 student demonstrations); Czech Embassy London – mzv.gov.cz/london (17 November 1989); City of Prague – praha.eu (Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Day); European Commission – Speech Repository, '17th November: International Students' Day' (speech-repository.webcloud.ec.europa.eu); DT Next – dtnext.in (When anti-Hindi agitation took to streets); The Tribune/PTI, 9 Aug 2024 – tribuneindia.com; Britannica – Velvet Revolution. © Shanmugam IAS Academy.