

Exhibition

Jan Palach '69

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Organizers of the exhibition:
Faculty of Philosophy & Arts, Charles University
National Museum

Partners:
The Archive of Security Forces
Slovak Film Institute
The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes
ETNA spol. s r. o.

(Photo: Viktor Portel)

Jan Palach '69

In January 1969, the 20-year-old student Jan Palach set himself on fire on Wenceslas Square (Václavské náměstí) in Prague. He wanted to provoke his fellow citizens to rise up against the impending „normalization“ period. Even though he did not succeed in reversing those political developments, his actions became deeply engraved into the memory of society. However, ever since his death he has most often been remembered primarily as a symbol - whether as a „torch“, a victim, or a national hero. This exhibition hopes to offer a different perspective, placing the life and actions of Jan Palach in historical context. It endeavors to place his story in the context of the Prague Spring and the impending „normalization“, to present Palach's life and the intellectual background from which he came, and to describe the planning and

performance of his action as well as the response it evoked from society. We are aware that an historical perspective has certain limitations. It is not able to focus on the more universal questions which, in the final analysis, are the most important addressed by Palach's action to this day. Nevertheless, we selected this approach because it is only fairly recently that several important archives have been opened which have a bearing on Palach's actions and make it possible only now to clarify many essential facts. Also, we believe a sober view of these events may be the best way to „prepare the soil“ for those more universal questions. Should this exhibition succeed in being such an inspiration, its purpose will have been fulfilled.

The Authors



Alexander Dubček with steel workers in Ostrava, 20 September 1968 (Source: ÚSD AV ČR)

From the Prague Spring to the August Occupation

Since the start of the 1960s, Czechoslovak society had been gradually waking up to a new life. The majority of political prisoners were released, the first plans for reform were being drafted at academic institutions, and the previously banned novels and films of the “New Wave” began to be available. President Antonín Novotný, a man connected with the show trials of the 1950s, tolerated a certain amount of liberalization in the beginning, but by 1966 he had once again instituted a harsh policy of persecution. At the same time, however, an intraparty opposition had been created which removed him from the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in January 1968, replacing him with Alexander Dubček. The brief eight-month period during which the democratizing reforms were accelerated at an unusually rapid pace is primarily connected to Dubček. By the end of March 1968, censorship was no longer and the media had begun to investigate matters from the recent past which had previously been taboo; it was due to the influence of such reporting that Novotný now had to resign the office of the presidency. He was replaced by the pro-reform Ludvík Svoboda. Other state offices were also gradually occupied by reform-oriented politicians. In April 1968, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ) approved an Action Program in which it presented its plans for reform.

These unexpected events of the spring of 1968 prompted spontaneous public enthusiasm, which came to be symbolized by the May 1st celebrations. However, politically active members of the public were demanding much more extensive reforms than the party was willing to allow at the time. Even the greatest reformers in the KSČ leadership took a dim view of the activities of the Club of Engaged Non-Partisans (Klub angažovaných nestraníků), the creation of the political prisoners’ association K 231, or the attempt to revive social democracy. The manifesto “Two Thousand Words” literally started a panic in the KSČ Central Committee. By then Czechoslovak politicians had already experienced several negotiations with representatives of the Soviet Union, who were calling for the reforms to stop. Even though Dubček promised to intervene, he took no visible steps. Soviet diplomatic pressure was therefore replaced by a military solution: In the early morning hours of 21 August 1968, Czechoslovakia was occupied by the armies of five Warsaw Pact states. However, the invasion prompted nationwide resistance, thanks to which the occupiers did not succeed in establishing a collaborationist government. President Svoboda and several other politicians then traveled to Moscow and convinced the kidnapped representatives of the KSČ to sign a capitulation agreement with the Soviets.

Antonín Novotný giving a New Year’s speech, 1967 (Source: ČTK, Photo: Jiří Rublič)

The KSČ leadership at the head of the May 1st parade, 1968. In the first row, from right to left: Kučera, Piller, Kriegel, Dubček, Svoboda, Husák (Source: ČTK)

The KSČ action program presented a plan for the reforms the party wanted to achieve during the next two years (Source: ÚSD AV ČR)

For a brief time in the spring of 1968, Alexander Dubček became the most popular personality in Czechoslovakia (Source: National Museum)

The writer Ludvík Vaculík was the author of the manifesto “Two Thousand Words” (Source: National Museum)

Vinohradská třída in Prague, 21 August 1968 (Source: National Museum)

Occupying tanks in Prague, 21 August 1968 (Source: National Museum)

Soldiers also shot at the National Museum. People standing in front of the building took cover (Source: National Museum)

Anti-occupation posters in Brno (Source: National Museum, Photo: Dušan Blaha)

Graffiti from the days of August in Vsetín (Source: National Museum)



On 28 October 1968 a demonstration took place in Prague; participants clashed with police (Source: National Museum)



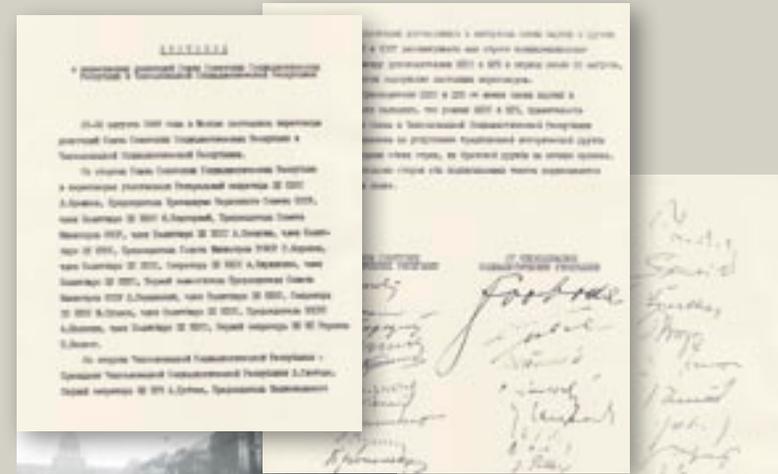
Autumn 1968 – The End of Hope

On 26 August 1968, the Czechoslovak delegation in Moscow signed the so-called Moscow Protocol. In it, the delegation agreed, among other steps, to abolish the conclusions of the party's extraordinary XIVth convention, held in Prague's Vysočany district, which had taken a clear stand against the occupation. The delegation committed itself to purging the top management of all the media organizations, to renewing censorship, and to preventing the occupation from being discussed at the UN Security Council.

When the politicians returned to Czechoslovakia, the public no longer placed much trust in them, and they did not want to speak openly about the results of the negotiations. Alexander Dubček once again reached out towards a part of the public, assuring citizens in an emotional speech that reforms would continue, albeit at a slower pace. However, in reality, policy was already headed in a completely different direction. On 6 September 1968, František Kriegel was removed from the head of the National Front, having been the only politician who refused to sign the Moscow Protocol. Not long afterward, state television director Jiří Pelikán and state radio director Zdeněk Hejzlár lost their positions. Zdeněk Mlynář, one of the main authors of the Action Program, resigned as Secretary of the KSČ Central Committee in the autumn of 1968.

On 18 October 1968, the National Assembly approved a treaty on the temporary continuance of the Soviet soldiers, legalizing the continued presence of 75 000 Soviet soldiers on the territory of the ČSSR. The government made another concession on 8 November 1968 when it temporarily halted publication of the critical journals Reportér and Politika. The ascendancy of conservatives was completed at a meeting of the Central Committee of the KSČ from 14–17 November 1968. They succeeded both in occupying several important posts and in pushing through a resolution establishing a plan for further "normalization". The Slovak politician Gustáv Husák had acquired a strong position in the party. In December 1968 he proposed replacing the presumptive candidate for the chair of the new Federal Assembly, Josef Smrkovský (a Czech), with a representative of the Slovaks in order to maintain the federative principle. The public demonstratively stood up for Smrkovský, who was one of the favorite personalities of the Prague Spring, but Smrkovský rejected their support. The conservatives thus gained another victory, which was definitively sealed in April 1969 through the election of Gustáv Husák as First Secretary of the Central Committee.

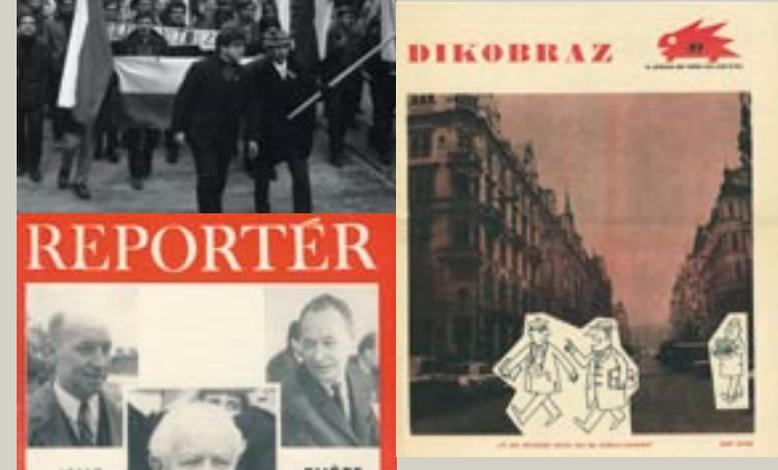
First and last pages of the Moscow Protocol through which the Czechoslovak Government committed itself to actual subordination to Moscow (Source: ÚSD AV ČR)



At the 28 October 1968 demonstration in Prague, 77 people were detained. During subsequent demonstrations on 6 and 7 November 1968 in the capital, 167 people were detained. On those same days there were also demonstrations in Brno and České Budějovice (Source: National Museum)



On 8 November 1968 the publication of the "overly critical" weekly Reportér was halted for one month. Cover from 18 September 1968; clockwise from the upper left - Oldřich Černík, Alexander Dubček, Josef Smrkovský and Gustáv Husák; President Ludvík Svoboda is in the center (Source: National Museum)



Response of the humor magazine Dikobraz to the measures of 8 November 1968 (Source: National Museum)



Publication of the journal Politika was halted along with Reportér. Cover from 3 October 1968: Gustáv Husák (on the left) and Alexander Dubček (Source: National Museum)



Front page of the daily Práce, 19 October 1968, reporting on the ratification of the treaty on the temporary continuance of Soviet troops (Source: National Museum)



Student-run Majáles Festival in Prague, May 1966 (Photo: Miloš Šindelář)

The student movement in Czechoslovakia

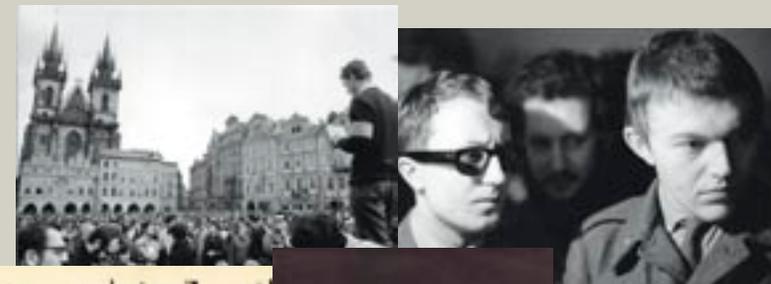
Student life in Czechoslovakia had been harshly suppressed after February 1948, but starting in the first half of the 1960s, it began to gradually liberalize. Active students gathered around the journals published by various faculties and around the committees of the Czechoslovak Youth Union, while at some schools completely new, independent committees sprang up, such as the club Kličoživ – Klika opozičních živlů (the “Pressure-Group of Opposition Elements”) at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University. The student-run Majáles Festivals, which were watched by hundreds of thousands of people in the streets of Prague, exemplified this liberalization in the mid-1960s.

However, by 1966 the leadership of the regime was returning to a harsher course of action. Two events symbolized that return: The expulsion of student leaders Jiří Müller and Lubomír Holeček from the Czech Technical University; and above all, the “Strahov events” of October 1967. After one of the regular failures of electricity at the dormitories in Strahov, the students took to the streets, where they were brutally dispersed by police. The disproportionate intervention provoked great controversy, even in the leadership of the KSČ, and became one of the inducements for discussing the removal of Antonín Novotný. For the students themselves,

the events constituted a definitive break with the pro-regime Czechoslovak Youth Union. In the spring of 1968, independent Student Academic Councils and other organizations sprang up at the faculties, and the Union of College Students of Bohemia and Moravia was established.

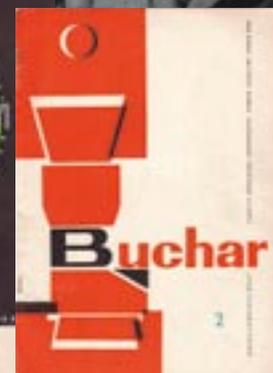
The students markedly intervened into statewide affairs. In March 1968 they held public youth meetings at which they confronted representatives of the reform process with a sharp critique of the KSČ and the demand that opposition parties be allowed. Moreover, these meetings were broadcast on the radio, thanks to which the radical opinions of the students could be heard by the greater public. After the August occupation and throughout the autumn of 1968, the students were the most active group in resisting the oncoming “normalization”. They organized strikes that took place from 18–21 November, occupying faculties throughout Czechoslovakia in support of the “Students’ 10 Commandments”, in which they presented a series of demands to the KSČ leadership. However, none of the demands were ever successfully implemented, and feelings of hopelessness had begun to spread among the students and the rest of society by the end of 1968.

Student demonstration on the Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí) in Prague, 3 May 1968 (Source: National Archive)



Lubomír Holeček (on the left) and Jiří Müller had to join the army after being expelled from their studies. They were released from military service at the start of 1968 (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Müller)

Response of the journal Student to the “Moscow Protocol” of 26 August 1968 (Source: Libri Prohibiti)



During the second half of the 1960s, student life was primarily concentrated around the student journals. Covers of the journals Buchar and Ekonom (Source: Libri Prohibiti)

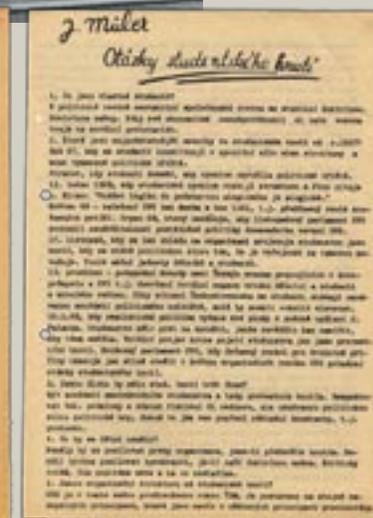
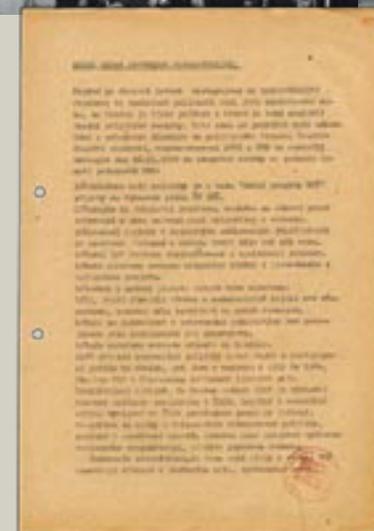
Majáles Festival in 1968 (Photo: Miloš Šindelář)



The building of the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design (Vysoká škola umělecko-průmyslová) in Prague during the November strikes of 1968

The college student strike was also supported by some high schools (Source: National Archive)

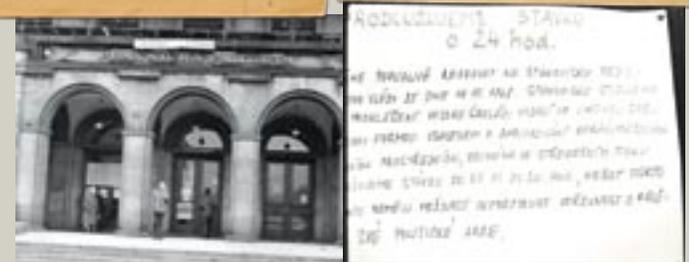
Flier with points of the “Students’ 10 Commandments” approved by the Union of College Students of Bohemia and Moravia on 11 November 1968 (Source: ABS)



Text by Jiří Müller on the student movement, published 19 April 1969 in the journal Elixir (Source: ABS)

Law Faculty of Charles University on strike, November 1968

The strike occupying the faculties was to have ended on 20 November 1969. However, due to a misinterpretation by politicians, the students managed to extend it for another 24 hours. (Source: National Archive)





Jan Palach with his grandfather (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)

Jan Palach

Jan Palach participated in the strikes occupying the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University as a 20-year-old student. Until 16 January 1969, the story of his life had not been essentially much different from that of his peers. Jan Palach was born on 11 August 1948, several months after the communist putsch. He grew up in Všetaty, a small town not quite 50 kilometers from Prague. His father, Josef Palach, had run a confectionary and sweet shop there since the mid-1930s. Josef's wife Libuše was a homemaker. Both parents actively participated in local life, attending the Sokol calisthenics society and performing in amateur theater. Josef Palach was a member of the National Socialist Party, while Libuše Palachová was a member of the evangelical choir in the nearby town of Libiše. The couple tried to raise their sons, Jan and their first-born, Jiří (1941), in the spirit of the First Republic and patriotic traditions.

At the start of the 1950s, like the majority of small business owners, the Palachs had to close the sweet shop and a few years later, the confectionary. Josef Palach was then only able to do manual labor in the "Mlýny a pekárny" enterprise in Brandýs nad Labem, while Libuše Palachová began work as a sales clerk in a "Restaurace a jídelna" stand at the Všetaty train station. Despite these experiences, Libuše Palachová joined the KSČ in 1957, for one reason only – she wanted to make sure her sons could access higher education in the future. In 1962 the family experienced a great shock when Josef Palach died of a heart attack. The older son Jiří was already grown, so Libuše Palachová remained at home with Jan. In 1963, Jan Palach began his studies at the gymnasium in Mělník. His teachers remember him as an average pupil, but he excelled in history and civics. He appeared before the graduating committee in June 1966.

Josef Palach with his parents in front of his sweet shop, 1930s (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)



Jan Palach on a walk with his parents (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)



Jan Palach with his older brother Jiří and their mother, 24 June 1950 (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)



Jan Palach as a child (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)

The elementary school in Všetaty - Jan Palach is in the third row, in the center (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)



Jan Palach on his brother Jiří's motorbike (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)

Jan Palach in his father's Sokol outfit (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)



Swimming during a family trip to Kostelec nad Labem (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)



Evaluation of Jan Palach by the elementary school in Všetaty, elaborated in March 1969 at the request of the police (Source: ABS)



Evaluation of Jan Palach by the gymnasium in Mělník, elaborated at the request of the police in February 1969 (Source: ABS)

Jan Palach's CV, written as required on the back page of his college application, 1966 (Source: Charles University Archive)

Photograph of Jan Palach from the graduation tableau of the Mělník Gymnasium, 1966 (Source: ABS)

Student in Prague

After graduation, Jan Palach wanted to study history at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University. Even though he did well on the entrance exams, he was not accepted due to the high number of applicants. He therefore registered to study agronomy at the University of Economics (VŠE). Even though it was not the field he dreamt of, he was able to complete 16 exams during his two years of study at VŠE and to make his mark on student life there. In the summer of 1967 he participated in a work trip to Kazakhstan, and a year later became the organizer of a similar work team, this time traveling to the Leningrad area. In the spring of 1968 he helped found the Student Academic Council at VŠE.

Jan Palach experienced the Prague Spring at VŠE. This period marked a fundamental turning point in his life. He had always been interested in politics, distributing various typewritten letters to his colleagues (a letter by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, texts by Ludvík Vaculík, or transcripts of speeches from writers' conferences) but during 1968 his interest grew exponenti-

ally. In the spring of 1968 he attended many discussion sessions and student meetings. Jan Palach spent the summer of 1968 on a trip to the USSR, returning on 17 August. Good news awaited him at home – the announcement that he had been approved for transfer to the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University. However, this was soon followed by a shock: The occupation of Czechoslovakia. Jan Palach spent the first night of the occupation in Všetaty, but on the morning of 21 August he left for Prague (despite his mother's urging him to stay) and spent the next several days there. After returning to Všetaty, he and his friends wrote anti-occupation slogans on the streets there.

At the start of October 1968, Jan Palach visited the West for the first time. As a reward for organizing the work team to the USSR he had received a trip to France, where he helped harvest grapes. He returned to Czechoslovakia on 19 October 1968, exactly one day after the National Assembly approved the treaty on the temporary continuance of the Soviet forces.



VŠE students in front of the Main Station in Prague after returning from the USSR (Jan Palach is sitting first on the left), 1967 (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)



Jan Palach (on the left with camera) on a student trip to the USSR, 1967 (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)

Report on a boy beaten by occupying soldiers stationed at the foot of the statue of St. Václav, 22 August 1968 (Photo: Jan Palach)



Jan Palach's enrollment "index" from VŠE (Source: Charles University Archive)

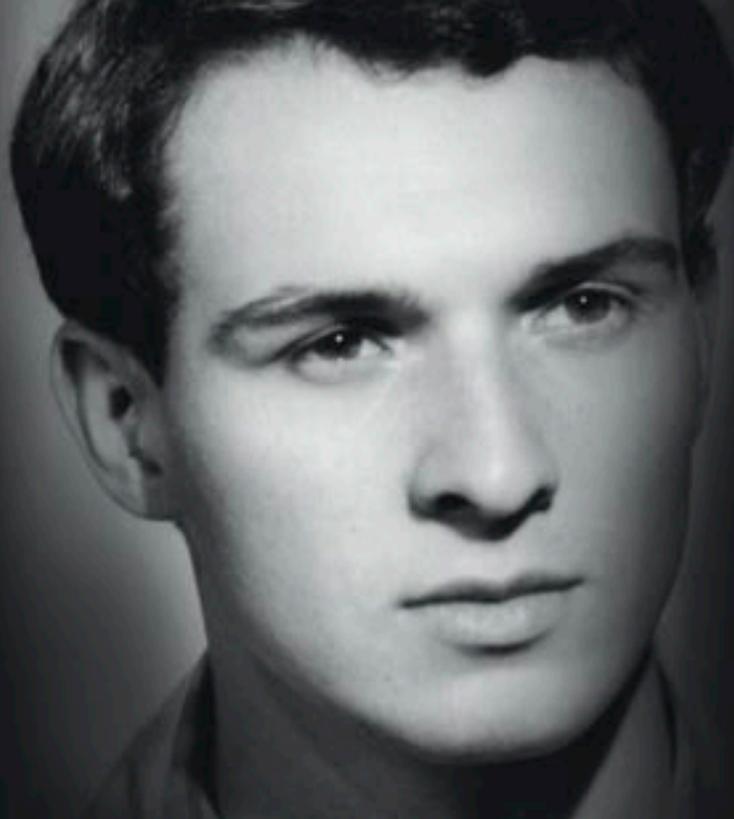
Tanks on Na Poříčí street in Prague, 22 August 1968 (Photo: Jan Palach)

Slogans against the occupation written by Jan Palach with his friends in Všetaty, August 1968 (Source: ABS)



Letter sent by Jan Palach to his mother from France, October 1968 (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)

Postcard sent by Jan Palach to his brother's family in 1968 from Tbilisi (Source: Personal archive of Jiří Palach)



Preparing the Action

In October 1968, Jan Palach matriculated at the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University (FF UK). His friends recall that he participated in several demonstrations in the autumn of 1968. He was meant to actively join the strikes occupying the faculties in November 1968, but those strikes did not succeed. During subsequent interrogations, his friends said a change in his behavior occurred during this period. For quite some time Jan Palach had been contemplating radical action in order to spur the public to resistance. He considered various forms of protest, as is documented by a proposal he made to Lubomír Holeček at a gathering of FF UK students at the start of January 1969 to occupy the building of Czechoslovak Radio and broadcast a call for a general strike. Given the failure of the strikes that had occupied the faculties, he proposed that a small group of students take the initiative and lead the broader public on to resistance. Theses appear in this document which Palach later also used in his letter "Pochodeň č. 1" ("Torch No. 1"). The demands include, for example, the abolition of censorship. Palach

evidently did not receive an answer to his call for action and decided on another form of protest, one which would be incomparably more shocking than the violent occupation of a single building and which would not require lengthy, complicated preparations. As investigators later determined, Palach took all the concrete steps to prepare for his action during a matter of hours. On the morning of 16 January 1969, he left Všetaty for Prague. He seems to have arrived at his dormitory around 8 AM. In his room he wrote out a rough draft of his letter and then made four copies. He signed it as "Pochodeň č. 1" ("Torch No. 1"). In the letter, he stated that he was a member of a group whose members had decided to set themselves on fire in order to wake the public out of its lethargy. There are two demands related to freedom of speech: The abolition of censorship, and a ban on the distribution of the occupiers' publication, Zprávy. He also called on people to go on an unlimited strike in support of these demands. If the demands were not met by 21 January 1969, another "torch" would go up in flames.

Jan Palach's proposal to occupy the building of Czechoslovak Radio and broadcast a call for a general strike, which he evidently gave to Lubomír Holeček at a student meeting 6 January 1969 (Source: ABS)

Dear Colleague,
After some consideration I have decided to communicate my proposal for an eventual student action to you in this way. Under the current situation it is clear that isolated student actions, whether strikes or demonstrations, are ineffective. It is easy to see that without the assistance of the "mass media" no effective action on a nationwide scale can be called for (e.g., a general strike). I propose an action that might seem crazy at first glance (maybe it is crazy). Instead of a demonstration, it seems more effective and practical to me to occupy the radio and broadcast a call for a strike, for the abolition of censorship, and in favor of Smrkovský (for example).

I believe the atmosphere today is favorable towards such an action (Colotka is a candidate for Smrkovský, the Central Committee declaration, etc.). Another such favorable situation may never occur. The action itself could be carried out by a rather small group, and then on our instructions a mass of students could gather around the radio (the VŠE building, with 3 000 students, is close by).

If this suggestion seems crazy to you, please throw it away and don't mention it to anyone. If it does not seem crazy, do what you consider appropriate. Because I hate anonymity, and in order to reduce the suspicion that this is a provocation, I am including my address below

Jan Palach
kolej UK Spořilov 5/6

P.S. January '68 started from above, January '69 can start from below.

Letter "Torch No. 1" sent to the Czechoslovak Writers' Union (Source: ABS)

Given that our nations have found themselves on the brink of hopelessness and resignation, we have decided to express our protest and to awaken the national conscience. Our group is composed of volunteers who are determined to set themselves on fire for our cause. I had the honor to draw number one, and therefore I have earned the right to write these first letters and to make my appearance as the first torch.

Our demands are: 1) the immediate abolition of censorship 2) a ban on the distribution of Zprávy. As you can see, our demands are not extreme, rather the opposite. If our demands are not met within five days, that is by 21. 1. 1969, and if the people do not come out in sufficient support of these demands (through an open-ended strike), another torch will go up in flames.

Torch No. 1

P.S.: I believe our nations will not need any more light. January 1968 started from above, January 1969 must start from below (if it is to start at all).





Diagram sketched on 11 February 1969 by eyewitness Ing. Josef Půhoný, who observed Jan Palach's self-immolation from the window of his office on the corner of Wenceslas Square and Mezibranská street (Source: ABS)

Torch No. 1

Jan Palach's shocking protest was seen by many random eyewitnesses whose testimonies have been preserved in the police investigation files. On the basis of these testimonies, we can precisely reconstruct Palach's action from the moment when, at just before 2:30 PM on Thursday, 16 January 1969, he arrived at the fountain by the ramps leading up to the National Museum. In his hands were two plastic containers with four liters of gasoline in them. He took off his coat next to the railing and pulled out a bottle labeled "ether" from his briefcase. He opened the bottle with a knife and held it up to his face. He then poured gasoline over himself and set himself on fire by the fountain.

Josef Kříž, a driver from Brno, was sitting in his car several meters away from the scene and noticed a figure on fire: When I saw the person mentioned on fire, the flames were already so powerful I could barely see the expression on his face However, before I could do anything, the man on fire ran from the wall beneath the Museum to the railing near my

vehicle, jumped over from the sidewalk side of the railing, dashed around my vehicle and the MB 1000 vehicle on my left, and then dashed into the road, where he ran along the electric streetcar rail that ran at that time from the bottom of Wenceslas Square up to the Museum. Random witnesses put out the fire only after the young man fell into the road not far from the "Dům potravin" building. Palach called on the onlookers to open the briefcase he had left by the fountain and to read his letter. Several minutes later an Interior Ministry ambulance, which happened to be driving past, stopped at the scene. The burned Jan Palach, who was still conscious, was first transferred to the hospital at Karlovo náměstí. He was not admitted there, but was sent to a specialized clinic on Legerova street. Firefighters and police investigators also arrived at the scene soon after to interrogate the initial eyewitnesses and take photographs. Two hours later, ČTK released the news that J. P., a student at the Philosophical Faculty, had set himself on fire.

Diagram sketched in March 1969 by police investigator on the basis of testimony by eyewitness Věra Miláčková (Source: ABS)

In the late morning of 16 January 1969, Jan Palach purchased two plastic containers and had them filled with gasoline at the filling station. (Source: ABS)

Photographs from the scene taken on 16 January 1969 by police (Source: ABS)

The place in front of the National Museum where Jan Palach set himself on fire (Source: ABS)

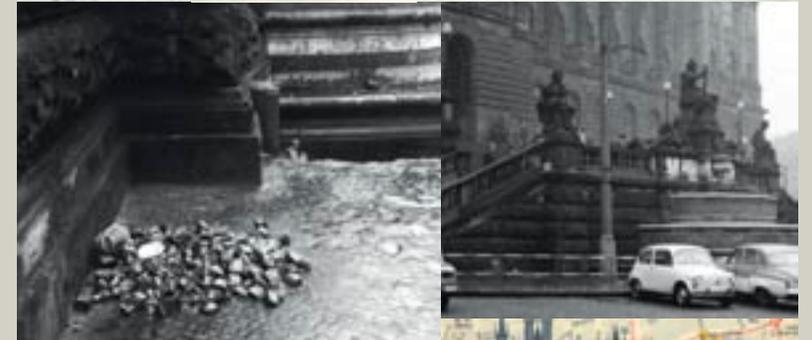
A police lineman points out the place to which the burning Jan Palach ran (Source: ABS)

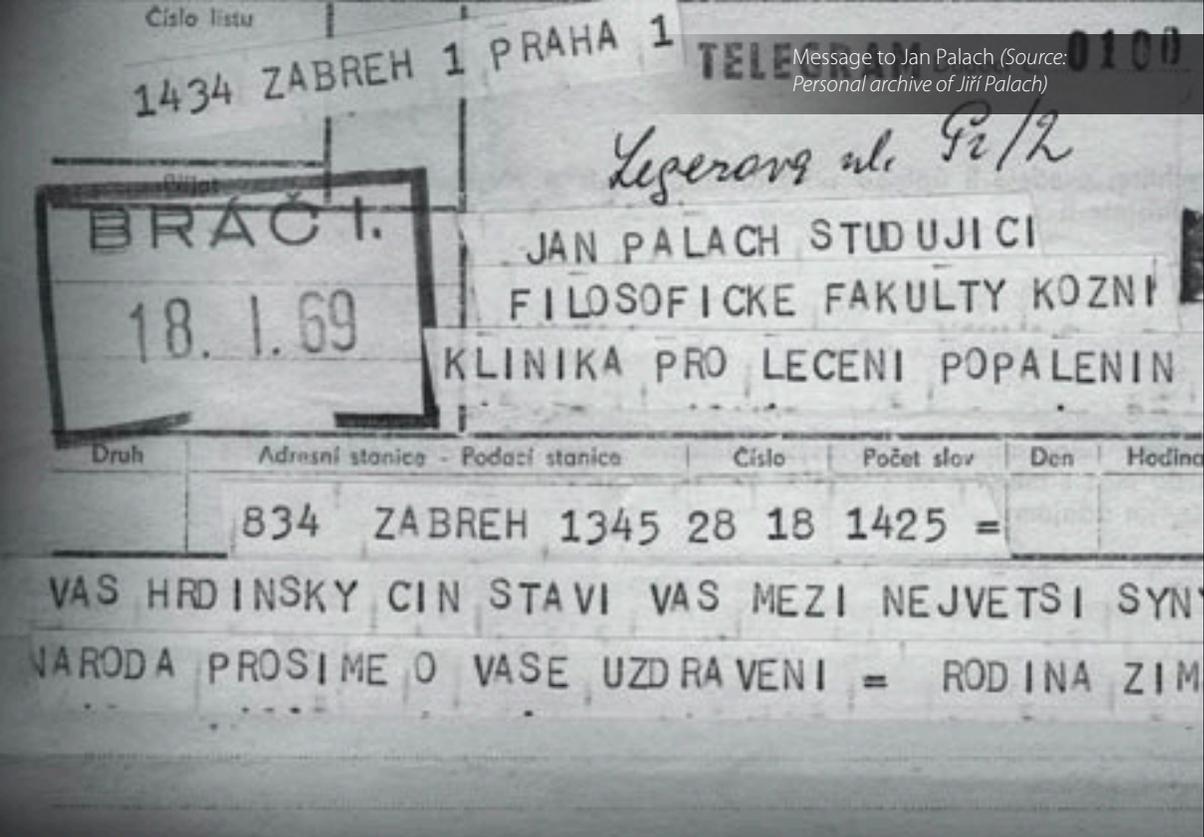
Copy of police notes on Jan Palach's action of 16 January 1969 (Source: ABS)

On Friday, 17 January 1969, the daily *Práce* ran an article on Jan Palach's action. (Source: ABS)

Map of the center of Prague from that time showing places related to Jan Palach's action

1. The housewares store at Na Poříčí 22, where Jan Palach bought two plastic containers.
2. Jan Palach had the containers filled with four liters of gasoline at the filling station at Opletalová 9.
3. Jan Palach arrived at the fountain by the lower ramps of the National Museum just before 2:30 PM.
4. The burned Jan Palach was transferred by ambulance first to the hospital at Karlovo náměstí, but could not be admitted there.
5. The plastic surgery clinic of Faculty Hospital No. 10, Legerova 61, where Jan Palach died on 19 January 1969 at 3:30 PM.
6. On 25 February 1969, in a building at Wenceslas Square 39, Jan Zajíc set himself on fire and perished.

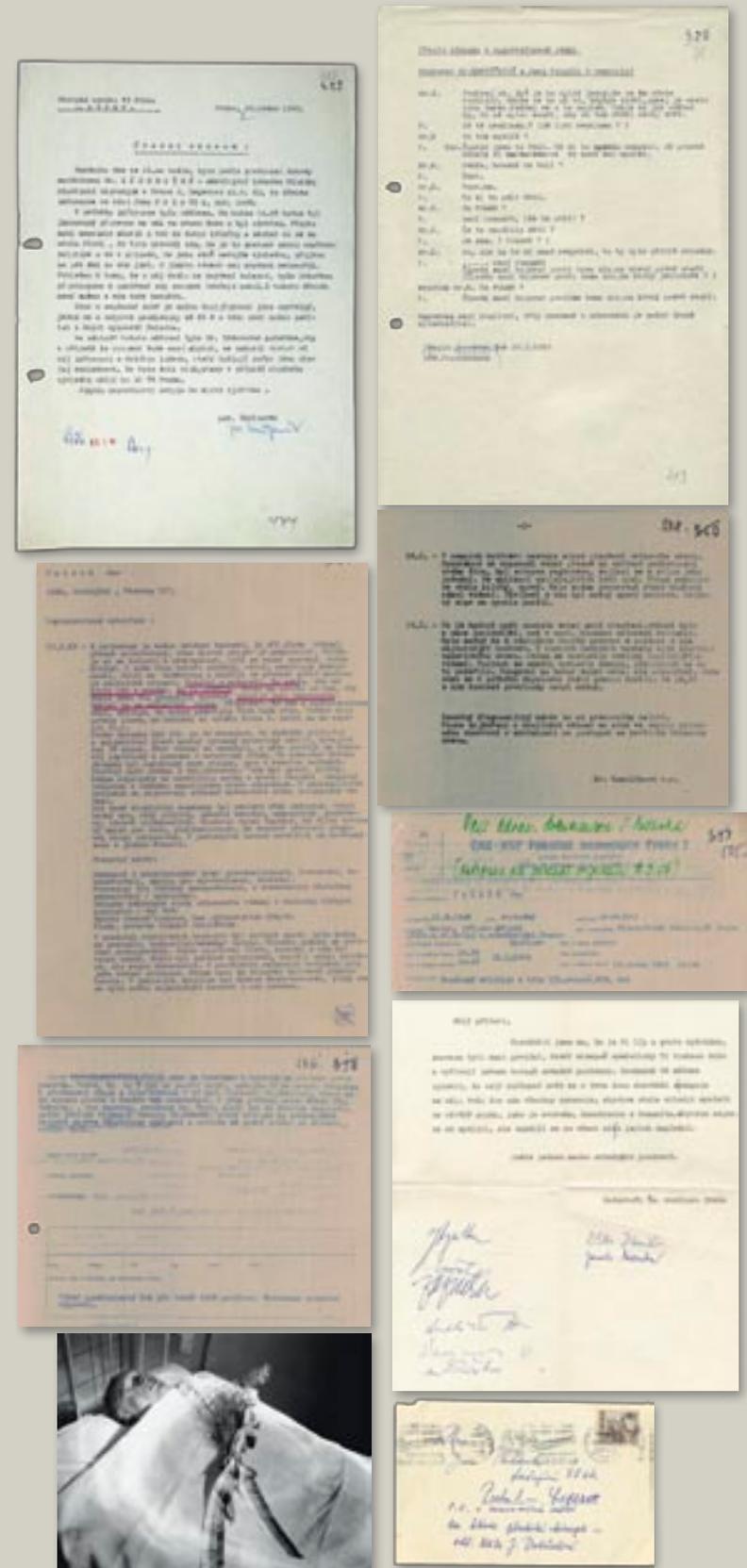




Legerova street

Jan Palach was admitted at 2:45 PM to the hospital in Legerova street. After being transferred to the trauma room he was treated by Dr Marta Zádorožná, who discovered second and third-degree burns on almost 85 % of his body. She considered it unlikely that he could live much longer with such burns. Several hours after Palach's action, the clinic was besieged by journalists seeking information on the state of his health. Jarmila Doležalová, head of the burn department, therefore decided to close the clinic, permitting visits only by Palach's mother, Líbuše Palachová, and his brother Jiří. She would not even admit the police investigators who wanted details on his potential followers into his room. She only took a tape recorder from them, onto which any eventual testimony by Palach was to have been recorded, but for reasons which are unclear the device was never used. According to the recollections of the medical staff, Palach insisted that a group of his followers really did exist. However, he refused to say who the members were. On 17 January

1969, psychiatrist Zdenka Kmuničková recorded a brief interview with Jan Palach on a cassette recorder (evidently a different one than that provided by the police). In this interview, Palach repeated his demands from the letter and emphasized that his action was intended to wake people up. When Dr Kmuničková asked him whether his followers should abandon their intentions in order to not have to endure similar pain, he answered: *It hurts, but Hus also died on the woodpile*. On Sunday, 19 January 1969, Radko Vrabec, the attending physician, called Palach's acquaintance Eva Bednáriková and asked her to come to the hospital immediately, as Jan Palach wanted to speak with her. According to her testimony, Palach asked her to bring the student leader Lubomír Holeček to him. When she returned with Holeček to the hospital, Palach allegedly asked them to send a message to the other members of his group not to set themselves on fire. After they left his room, Palach's state of health significantly deteriorated and he died at 3:30 PM.





Even after the flames were put out, Ryszard Siwiec continued to call out that he was protesting the occupation of Czechoslovakia (Source: *Institute for the National Memory, Warsaw*)

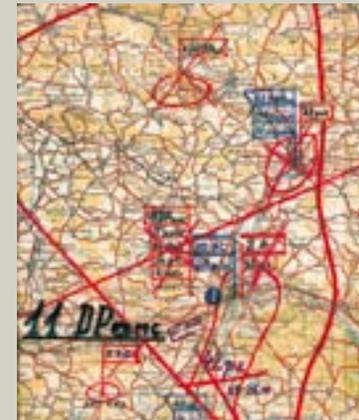
The First Living Torches

When Jan Palach was taken to his hospital room, he emphasized to the nurses that he was not a suicide, but had set himself on fire in protest like the Buddhists in Vietnam. He was referring to an event from 1963, when photographs were published around the world of a Buddhist monk who had set himself on fire to protest the suppression of Buddhist traditions in pro-American South Vietnam. Sixty-six-year-old Thich Quang Duc took a seat in the lotus position at a busy intersection in Saigon on 11 June 1963, doused himself with gasoline, and lit himself on fire. He did not perceive his action as suicide, but as a proxy sacrifice to move the heart of the people. Other monks followed his example, and as a result the leader of the South Vietnamese regime, Ngo Dinh Diem, was removed from power in November 1963. Communist regimes exploited the Buddhists' self-immolation for its propaganda value. Of course, the actions were reported on as protests against American imperialism and their religious motivation was left aside. Now at the end of the 1960s, the communists themselves

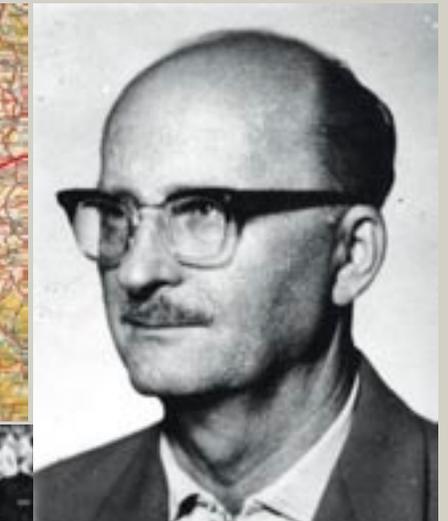
were confronted with this radical form of political resistance. The first living torch in Eastern Europe was Ryszard Siwiec, who set himself on fire on 8 September 1968 in Warsaw to protest Poland's participation in the occupation of Czechoslovakia. The 59-year-old bureaucrat from Przemysl carefully prepared his action. He typed up fliers and tape recorded a message in which he charged the Soviet Union with imperialism. He acquired tickets to a harvest festival at the 10th Anniversary Stadium in Warsaw at which the top leadership of the state and party would be present. In the stands he covered himself with solvent and set himself on fire. After the fire was put out, Siwiec was transferred to the hospital, where he died after four days. The secret police succeeded in suppressing the tragic event. (By all accounts Jan Palach knew nothing of Siwiec's self-immolation). The Polish bureau of Radio Free Europe did not broadcast the news of his action until March 1969, when it acquired new testimony as to the event.



Part of a commentary in daily Rudé Právo on the self-immolations in South Vietnam, 28 June 1963 (Source: *Authors' archive*)



Malcolm Brown took this snapshot of a Buddhist monk committing self-immolation in Saigon on 11 June 1963. The reporter David Halberstam was also an eyewitness to the event, which he described in *The New York Times* (Source: *ČTK*)



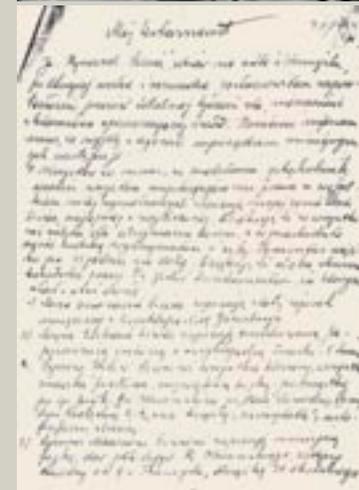
Military map with locations of the Polish units on Czechoslovak territory in August 1968 (Source: *Institute for the National Memory, Warsaw*)



Ryszard Siwiec, a 59-year-old bureaucrat from Przemysl, (Source: *Personal archive of Wit Siwiec*)



Photograph of Ryszard Siwiec on fire, taken from a film recorded by the secret police at the Stadium of the Decades (Source: *Institute for the National Memory, Warsaw*)



Occupying Polish units in Czechoslovakia, 21 August 1968 (Source: *Institute for the National Memory, Warsaw*)



Ryszard Siwiec's last will and testament, written in April 1968 (Source: *Institute for the National Memory, Warsaw*)

Civic Militia Report on self-immolation of Ryszard Siwiec, 8 September 1968 (Source: *Institute for the National Memory, Warsaw*)

Commemorative march through Prague, 20 January 1969 (Photo: Miroslav Hucek)



Society's reaction

On the evening of 16 January 1969, the radio broadcast the news of the self-immolation of a student, J. P. Hundreds of new items, reportages and commentaries on Palach's action followed over the next few days in both the domestic and foreign media. The public was both shocked and shaken by Palach's radical protest, but instead of the political activity that he called for in his final letter, people withdrew into themselves. In February 1969, literary critic Jindřich Chaloupecký noted: *This action, announced as a political one, has fallen out of political context. People are occupied by it to an immeasurable degree, both internally and externally, but they are expressing themselves through silence. The crowds at Palach's funeral had an enormous physical power, but everyone remained quiet, turned inward.*

One of the first actions to support Palach's demands was a hunger strike initiated by a group of young people beneath the ramp of the National Museum on 18 January 1969. The hunger strikers remained in their tents in the freezing weather for four days, after which the

hunger strike ended.

On 20 January 1969, the day after Jan Palach's death, a commemorative march through Prague was joined by several tens of thousands of people. The action, organized by the Union of College Students of Bohemia and Moravia, began at Wenceslas Square and ended in front of the building of the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University, where several speakers spoke from its gallery. Similar mourning events took place in many other towns throughout Czechoslovakia. Just as in August 1968, the main gathering place for the public became Wenceslas Square in Prague. In front of the statue of St. Václav, which was covered with fliers, portraits of Palach, and candles, an honor guard stood with a flag. A death mask of Jan Palach was exhibited at the fountain in front of the National Museum and dedicated to the students by the sculptor Olbram Zoubek. Poets also responded to Palach's action in January 1969; the poems published in newspapers and journals impressively captured the atmosphere of the day.

The hunger strike at the National Museum began on 18 January 1969. (Photo: Dagmar Hochová)

Hunger striker (Source: National Museum)

Hunger strikers' tents in front of the National Museum, 20 January 1969 (Photo: Miloň Novotný)

March on 20 January 1969 (Photo: Jiří Všečeka)

Participants in the commemorative march in Prague, 20 January 1969 (Photo: Miroslav Hucek)

Náměstí Krasnoarmějců ("Red Army Square") in front of the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University was spontaneously renamed Jan Palach Square on 20 January 1969 (Source: ABS)

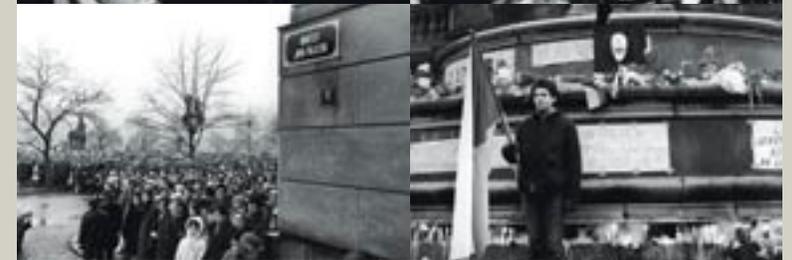
The square was marked with enamel signs bearing its new name a few days later, but they were removed before long (Photo: Miloň Novotný)

Honor guard before the fountain of the National Museum (Photo: Dagmar Hochová)

The songwriter Bohdan Mikolášek composed the song "Ticho" ("Quiet") in response to the march of 20 January 1969. It was later used in the film of the same name by the director Milan Peer (Source: Libri Prohibiti)

Front page of the daily Svobodné slovo, 21 January 1969 (Source: ABS)

Questionnaire of the Charles University journal, 24 January 1969 (Source: Authors' archives)





Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev and Alexander Dubček photographed in February 1968 (Source: ČTK, Photo: Jiří Rublič)

The regime's reaction

During the second half of January 1969, the leadership of the state and the Communist Party were trying both to mend the situation, which was like a re-opened wound, and to keep a shocked society under control. Even though most politicians expressed regret over Jan Palach's action, they simultaneously rejected the form of his protest. At several meetings with representatives of the college students, they said their demands were impossible to meet.

On 19 January 1969, the security services were put on their highest state of alert since the August occupation. The Office for Press and Information issued an order to editors on 20 January 1969 that they publish only official communications. Sixteen foreign journalists were deported. On that same day in Bratislava there was a meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Slovak Communist Party under the leadership of Gustáv Husák. The resolution adopted at the meeting was bluntly threatening. On the other hand, the Czech government made an agreement with the college students that there would first be a commemorative march through Prague and then a public farewell to Jan Palach.

Palach's action was condemned only by the dogmatists around the Libeň-based organization of the KSČ, who alleged he had been manipulated. This thesis was developed primarily by Czechoslovak MP Vilém Nový, who gave an interview to the foreign press agency AFP on 29 February 1969 in which he first publicly explained his theory of "cold fire", alleging that someone had convinced Palach to douse himself with a material that could be set alight without actually burning him, but that something went wrong and he was injured. Nový said "right-wing" authors and commentators bore responsibility. It was soon proven that his claims were a lie. A letter sent on 23 January 1969 from the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev and the Chair of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin, to Alexander Dubček and Oldřich Černík clearly proves the source of this analysis of the "manipulated student". In the letter, the Soviet representatives expressed their great uneasiness over the situation in Czechoslovakia, labeling Jan Palach a *victim of provocateurs who had forced him to this tragic act*.

Flier with information on the first meeting of representatives of the college students with the Czech government after Jan Palach's action, 17 January 1969 (Source: ABS)

The position of government and party representatives was also reflected in the responses of the Western press agencies. These were summarized by ČTK (Source: ABS)

The Czech government and President Ludvík Svoboda asked many famous personalities to go on radio and television to convince potential followers of Jan Palach not to take similar action. The poet Jaroslav Seifert also issued an appeal to young people (Source: ABS)

Rudé právo, 23 January 1969 (Source: ABS)

Gustáv Husák preparing to speak to television viewers immediately after being elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the KSČ, 17 April 1969 (Source: ČTK, Photo: Jiří Kruliš)

Copy of one of the disinformation fliers on the alleged manipulation of Jan Palach (Source: ABS)

Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev and Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin called Jan Palach a victim of provocateurs on 23 January 1969 (Source: National Archive)

Czech translation of the letter from Brezhnev and Kosygin (Source: National Archive)

Vilém Nový (on the left), a member of the Central Committee of the KSČ, in discussion with Ota Šik, 1 April 1968 (Source: ČTK, Photo: Jiří Rublič)

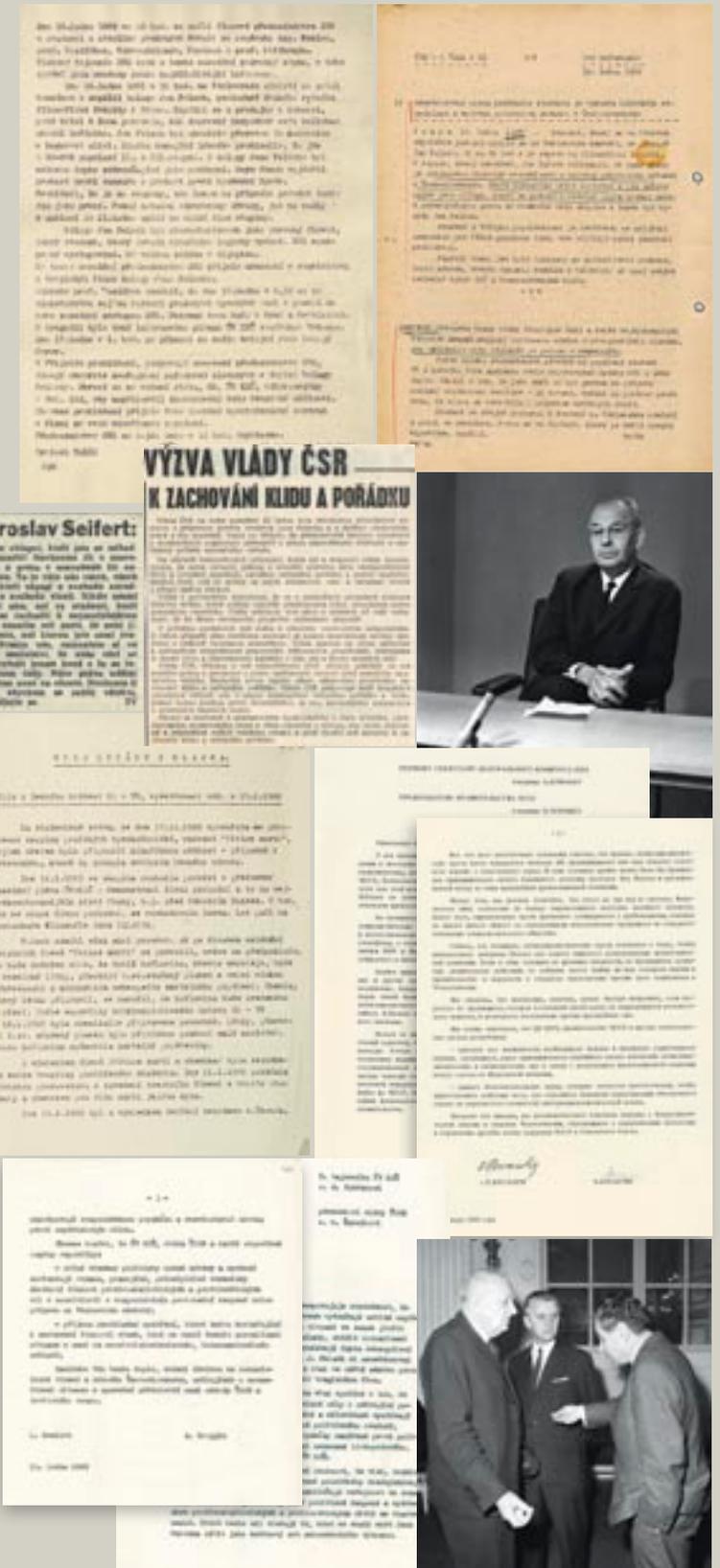


Photo from the demonstration on 26 January 1968, preserved in the State Security files (Source: ABS)



Street demonstrations

One of the most visible responses of the public to Jan Palach's action was the many street demonstrations that took place. In many towns several tens of thousands of people participated in peaceful, commemorative marches. Most of these were organized by representatives of the college students and the security forces did not intervene. However, in the center of Prague there were also several spontaneous demonstrations against the occupation of Czechoslovakia and the oncoming "normalization".

On 17 January 1969, people gathered on Wenceslas Square at spots where fliers with information about the tragic event had been posted, primarily at the statue of St. Václav and near the scene of Palach's action. On the evening of the next day, the first spontaneous demonstration took place in the center of Prague, attended by a thousand people, most of them young. According to the police report they chanted various slogans such as "Abolish censorship!" "Ban Zprávy!" "Russians go home!"

as well as abusive slogans against Brezhnev and Husák. Similar street demonstrations also took place on the day after Jan Palach's funeral. On 26 January 1969 at around 5:00 PM, several hundred people gathered at the statue of St. Václav. From there the march headed for Můstek, passing through the center of town into Karmelitská street. Gradually more and more people joined the demonstration, which was estimated to total roughly 3,000 people. After security forces intervened, some of the demonstrators returned to the center of Prague, where they clashed with police once more. Finally the demonstrators were pushed into Opletalová street. A total of 193 persons were detained, most of them young workers. On 27 January 1969, groups of young people once again gathered on Wenceslas Square. In the evening hours a final demonstration then took place in the center of Prague, attended by approximately 2,000 people. The next day barriers were set up around the statue of St. Václav to prevent people from gathering there.



Cover of an album with photographs of the Prague demonstration on 26 January 1969 (Source: ABS)

These students are leaving the campus of the dormitory in Brno-Husovice to pay their respects to the memory of Jan Palach. On 21 January 1969, the dormitories were renamed for him (Source: ČTK, Photo: Emil Bican)



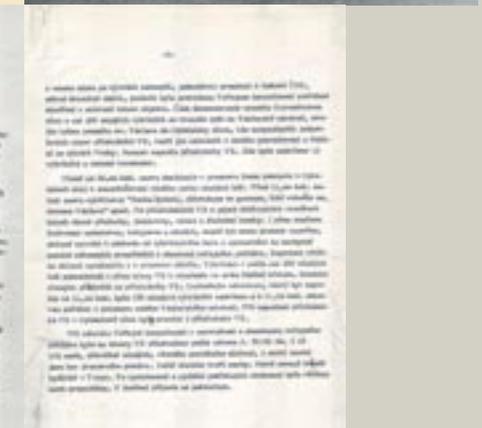
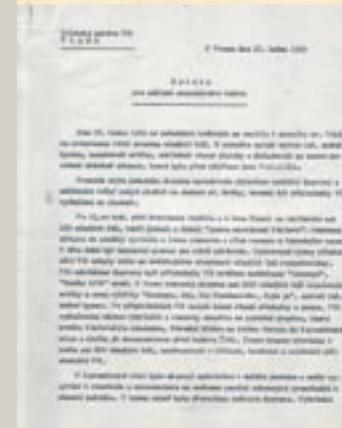
Security forces did not intervene against the commemorative gatherings. This photograph shows a march through Ostrava by students, instructors and employees of the Bářská College on 21 January 1969 (Source: ČTK, Photo: Věněk Švorčík)



First page of the orders issued 24 January 1969 by Colonel Josef Hrubý to the head of the police administration on security measures for Jan Palach's funeral (Source: ABS)

Photographs from the demonstration on 26 January 1969 preserved in State Security files (Source: ABS)

Report from the Prague Municipal Police Administration on the demonstration that took place in the center of the capital on 26 January 1969 (Source: ABS)





The catafalque with Jan Palach's coffin was displayed next to the statue of Jan Hus in the Karolinum (Photo: Miroslav Hucek)

25 January 1969

The funeral of Jan Palach was planned for Saturday, 25 January 1969. It was organized by the Union of College Students of Bohemia and Moravia (SVS), which earned the consent of the authorities thanks to the peaceful conduct of the commemorative march on 20 January. SVS wanted to bury their colleague at the Slavín cemetery, but were not able to get official consent. The Olšanský cemetery was thus chosen as Jan Palach's final resting place. The coffin with Palach's remains was on display in the Karolinum as of Friday, 24 January 1969, where tens of thousands of people came to bid farewell to the deceased student. During the late morning of 25 January 1969, the commemoration continued, and shortly after noon the funeral began in the Karolinum courtyard. Speeches were made by the Rector of Charles University, Oldřich Starý; the Dean of the Philosophical Faculty, Jaroslav Kladiva; and students Zdeněk Touš and Michael Dymáček. Education Minister Vilibald Bezdíček also spoke; he and Sports Minister Emanuel Bosák were the only government representatives at the funeral.

However, both men were practically unknown to the public as they had only taken office on 8 January 1969. No truly important state or party officials attended the funeral. After the service the coffin was transferred into the hearse, which was followed by a procession that crossed Ovocný trh and Celetná street onto the Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí), ending in front of the Philosophical Faculty building. The final farewell at Olšanský cemetery was attended only by family, invited guests and journalists. The evangelical priest Jakub S. Trojan delivered a graveside sermon emphasizing that Jan Palach had sacrificed himself for others: *"In this cynical century, in which others often horrify us, and we horrify them, and in which we are often startled by how petty we all are inside, he led us to ask a question that can make us great: What have I done for others, what kind of heart do I have, who am I following, whom do I serve, what, for me, is life's greatest value?"*

People waited almost eight hours in order to pay their respects to Jan Palach's memory (Photo: Miroslav Hucek)

Call by the Prague Student Action Committee and the Presidium of the Union of College Students of Bohemia and Moravia (Source: ABS)

This unique color photograph of the funeral of Jan Palach was preserved in the State Security files (Source: ABS)

Honor guard by Jan Palach's coffin
Tens of thousands of people passed through the courtyard of the Karolinum
Education Minister Vilibald Bezdíček giving the eulogy
The hearse on the Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí)
Lowering the coffin at Olšanský cemetery
The procession ended in front of the building of the Philosophical Faculty
Honor guard for Jan Palach by the statue of St. Václav

Pass to the funeral in the Karolinum and the funeral at Olšanský cemetery (Source: ABS)

Funeral service in the Karolinum (Photo: Miloš Novotný)

Photo of Libuše Palachová (in the center), Jiří Palach (on the left), and his wife Ilona next to him (Source: ABS)

Funeral procession on the Old Town Square (Staroměstské náměstí) (Photo: Miloš Schmiedberger)

View into Pařížská street (Photo: Miloš Schmiedberger)

People waited at the Rudolfinum for the hearse carrying Jan Palach's coffin (Photo: Miloš Novotný)

Pastor Jakub S. Trojan by Jan Palach's grave (Source: ABS)



Jan Zajíc during the hunger strike in front of the National Museum; photo from the film "Tryzna" ("Memorial") in which he was randomly captured (Source: Slovak Film Institute)

Jan Zajíc and Evžen Plocek

According to the available testimonies and archival documents, the group mentioned in Palach's final letter apparently did not exist at all. Of course, during the first months of 1969 many other people followed Palach's example who had never known him personally. However, it turned out that most of them merely following the form of his deed and were not politically motivated.

On 20 January 1969, a 25-year-old worker, Josef Hlavatý, set himself on fire and died five days later. He told doctors he had set himself on fire to protest the Soviet occupation. The worker Miroslav Malinka also attempted self-immolation with an express reference to Palach's action (on 22 January 1969 in Brno), as did the 16-year-old apprentice Jan Bereš (on 26 January 1969 in Cheb). Of course, Hlavatý, Malinka and Bereš all suffered from significant personal or family problems, and their actions were therefore condemned by the general public. Only Jan Zajíc and Evžen Plocek, whose idealistic motives were never doubted, are therefore considered Palach's successors. Jan Zajíc, an 18-year-old student at the railway technical school in Šumperk, participated in the hunger strike in front of the National Museum in Prague on 21 January 1969. He did not return to his native Vítkov in the Opava region until after Palach's funeral. According

to all accounts, the overwrought atmosphere in the capital had a strong effect on him. During the hunger strike, Jan Zajíc had spoken of the possibility of sacrificing himself just as Palach had if none of the other college students would do so, but the other hunger strikers talked him out of it. After returning to Šumperk, he began to contemplate this option again and even spoke publicly of his plan. He would not allow himself to be convinced otherwise by his friends, taking the train to Prague with one of them, Jan Nykl, on 25 February 1969. He set himself on fire in the hallway of the building at Wenceslas Square 39 and died on the spot. People learned of his action and the declaration he wrote both from the media and from various fliers posted around.

The last known living torch of 1969 was Evžen Plocek of Jihlava, a 39-year-old father, union member and delegate to the Vysočany Congress of the KSČ. He set himself on fire on the main square in Jihlava on Good Friday, 4 April 1969. He left fliers at the site with the following slogans: *The truth is revolutionary – Antonio Gramsci and I am for showing a human face, I cannot bear heartlessness.* – Evžen. However, his action received no response outside of Jihlava, as the media were not permitted to report on it.

Jan Zajíc (Source: ABS)

Jan Zajíc's declaration "To the Citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic", which he left at the scene of his action (Source: ABS)

Police communiqué on Jan Zajíc's action, 25 February 1969 (Source: ABS)

Funeral of Jan Zajíc in Vítkov, 2 March 1969 (Photo: Miroslav Hucek)

Photo from the file of the investigation into Jan Zajíc's self-immolation (Source: ABS)

The funeral of Jan Zajíc was conducted according to the church's rules for the funeral of an unmarried young man. (Photo: Miroslav Hucek)

Jan Zajíc was not a member of any group, but he did try to convince other people in his circle to set themselves on fire in protest. He left a suitcase with the necessary materials for one of them at the Main Station in Prague (Source: ABS)

On 26 January 1969, the 16-year-old apprentice Jan Bereš attempted self-immolation in Cheb; his personal data have been redacted from the police report (Source: ABS)

Police notes on the self-immolation of Josef Hlavatý, 20 January 1969 (Source: ABS)

The funeral procession with the coffin of Evžen Plocek passing through Jihlava; several thousand people participated, 11 April 1969 (Source: ČTK, Photo: František Nesvadba)

Evžen Plocek (Source: Authors' archive)

Evžen Plocek worked in the Motorpal enterprise in Jihlava. This is where the final viewing began (Source: ČTK, Photo: František Nesvadba)



Cover of the recording "Kde končí svět" ("Where the World Ends"), designed by Jaroslav Šerých. The recording was published by the Ariston collective several weeks after Palach's action. In 1970 members of State Security investigated the circumstances of its release (Source: Personal archive of Jaroslav Šerých)

The "Palach Crackdown"

Police investigators researched the circumstances of Palach's action in detail for several months. They were mainly interested in whether anyone else besides Palach had participated in his self-immolation. They interrogated many witnesses, commissioned several expert evaluations and wrote many reports for the Interior Ministry leadership. In June 1969 they halted the criminal proceedings against a "person or persons unknown" due to their failure to find any concrete evidence as to the existence of the group Palach mentioned in his final letters. The leadership of the State Security forces (StB) was also interested in the investigation from the beginning, but did not have very much influence over its approach or conclusions. The secret police renewed their interest on the first anniversary of Palach's action. In February 1970, Major Jiří Dvořák proposed an agency/operative elaboration and documentation of the suicide of the student Jan Palach. Several weeks later an investigative unit was registered with the cover name "Palach" and all the documentation discovered was filed there.

The StB focused not only on reviewing the previous investigation, but also tried to discover materials for targeted political counter-propaganda. They contacted several witnesses and secretly recorded their testimonies. They also investigated the circumstances of the publication and distribution of the recording "Kde končí svět" ("Where the World Ends"), which included the speeches made at Palach's funeral in addition to several older poems. State Security members also attempted to prevent public commemoration of Palach's action on an annual basis. In October 1973 they forced his relatives to agree to the exhumation of his remains and to the destruction of the grave at the Olšanský cemetery. Even though State Security was literally obsessed with the idea that a group of "living torches" did exist, it never discovered any reliable evidence for this claim. Security forces were regularly on alert in connection with the anniversary of Palach's action. However, their concern that there might be street demonstrations during "Palach week" was not fulfilled until 20 years later.

Very valuable sources regarding Jan Palach's action have been preserved in the police files from 1969. First page of the protocol from his mother's interrogation dated 3 March 1969 (Source: ABS)

Resolution of the police investigators to halt the criminal proceedings related to Jan Palach's action (Source: ABS)

Secret police report on confiscating fliers on the first anniversary of Jan Palach's death in January 1970 (Source: ABS)

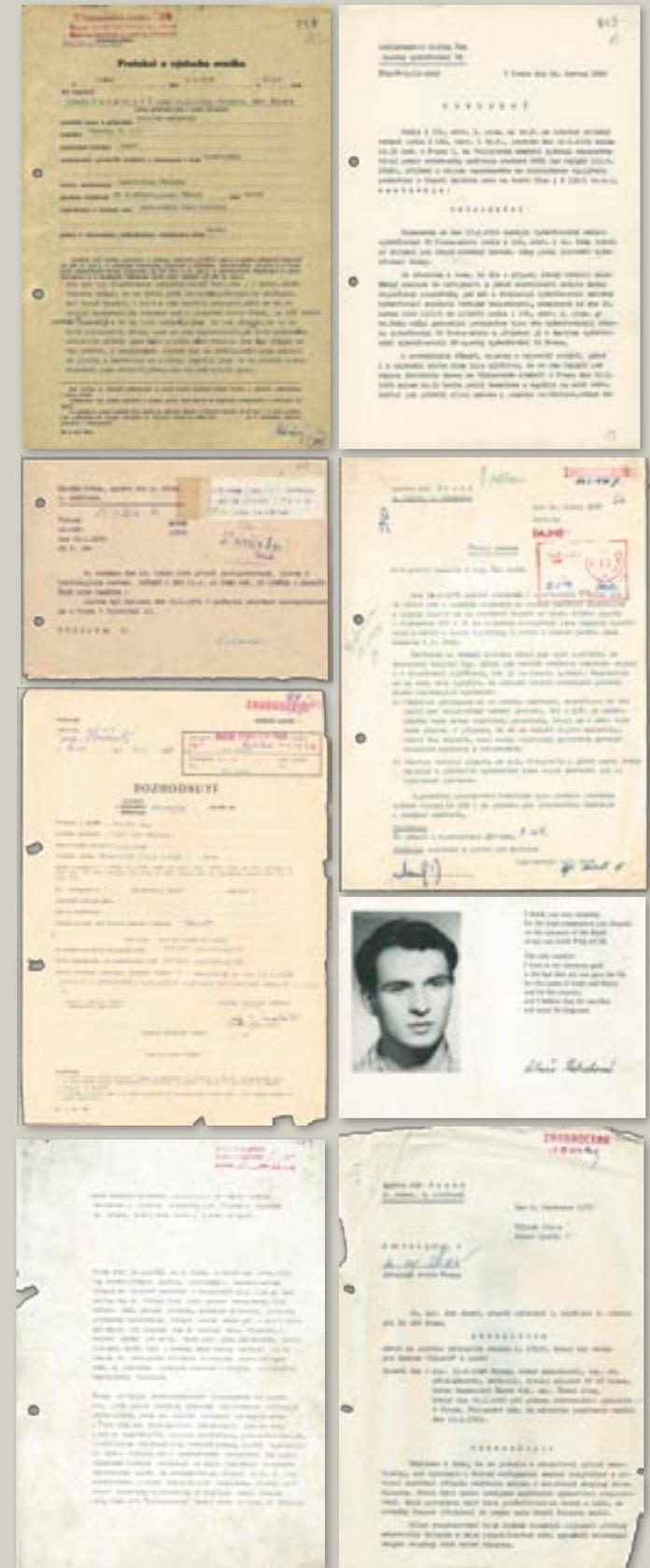
State Security notes on finding a photograph of Jan Palach on a bulletin board at ČKD, 15 January 1970 (Source: ABS)

Decision to establish an investigative unit on Jan Palach's action, 5 February 1970 (Source: ABS)

State Security monitored Libuše Palachová's correspondence for many years. They also confiscated a letter in which she thanks a correspondent for expressing condolences (Source: ABS)

State Security propaganda article prepared for use in the press, 25 January 1972 (Source: ABS)

Proposal by State Security agent Captain Josef Bín to establish an investigative unit (Source: ABS)



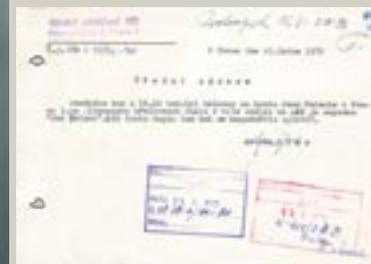
Jan Palach's grave at Olšanský cemetery (Source: ABS)



The "Grave Crackdown"

Several months after his death, reminders of Palach were erased from the collective memory. While Libuše Palachová had received a telegram expressing condolences on 19 January 1969 from Ludvík Svoboda, Alexander Dubček, Josef Smrkovský and Oldřich Černík, by the first anniversary of Palach's death in January 1970 his name was not publicly remembered anywhere in Czechoslovakia. Several attempts to erect a monument to him ended in failure and their initiators soon became objects of secret police interest. On the basis of a State Security plan (with the cover name "Grave"), Jan Palach's final resting place at Olšanský cemetery was gradually destroyed. At the start of the 1970s it continued to be visited by a large number of people bringing flowers, lighting candles and leaving written messages. The bronze plaque at the grave, designed by the sculptor Olbram Zoubek, was removed in July 1970 and melted

down after several months. In October 1973, after an extended period of blackmail by the secret police, Libuše Palachová and Jiří Palach finally agreed to the exhumation and subsequent cremation of Jan Palach's remains. Under the supervision of members of the secret police, employees of the Olšanský cemetery administration dug up Palach's remains in the early morning hours of 22 October 1973 and had them cremated at the crematorium in Strašnice. A new tomb with the name of Marie Jedličková appeared at Palach's gravesite. Libuše Palachová received the urn with his ashes. It was not until the end of March 1974 that she was able to lay it to rest at the cemetery in Všetaty. It was only possible to renovate Jan Palach's grave at Olšany after the fall of the communist regime. On 25 October 1990, the urn with his ashes was solemnly transferred from Všetaty to Prague.



The death mask of Jan Palach was created by the sculptors Olbram Zoubek and Antonín Chromek (on the right). After the secret police intervention, copies of the cast were not allowed to be publicly displayed (Source: National Museum, ABS)

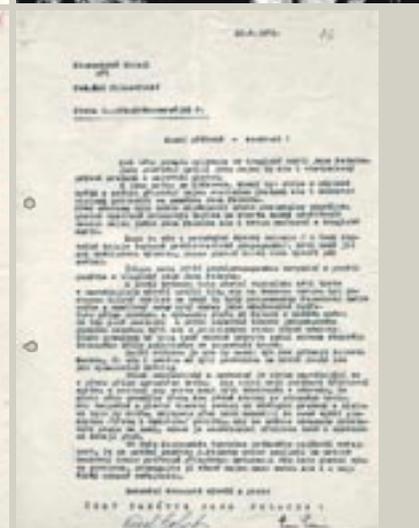
Members of the police monitored Jan Palach's grave for several years (Source: ABS)

In April 1969, Palach's fellow citizens in Všetaty wanted to build a memorial to him. Their efforts were later investigated by State Security (Source: ABS)

The sculptor Olbram Zoubek created this bronze plaque for the grave. This photograph was taken by the secret police, which had the plaque destroyed in 1970 (Zdroj: ABS)

An article on the renovation of Jan Palach's grave published in the Občanský deník on 26 October 1990 (Source: Authors' archive)

State Security informer "Dalibor" delivered a letter to the secret police which he intercepted at the dormitory Na Větrníku. The authors of the letter called on students to take care of Jan Palach's gravesite (Source: ABS)



This square near the Eiffel Tower in Paris, previously named "Place de Varsovie" (Warsaw Square), was renamed Jan Palach Square in 1969 (Source: ČTK)

PLACE
JAN PALACH



The response abroad

International attention had been drawn to Czechoslovakia during the Prague Spring period and most of all after 21 August 1968, when the occupied Central European nation earned the sympathy of almost the entire world. In January 1969, Jan Palach's action drew that attention back. The world public was moved by the exceptional nature of his protest, which was unlike anything in Europe. Condolences over the death of Jan Palach were expressed by UN Secretary-General U Thant, while Italian PM Mariano Rumor paid tribute to his memory and Indian PM Indira Gandhi declared that Palach belonged among the world's great martyrs alongside Mahatma Gandhi. On the day of Palach's funeral, Pope Paul VI also spoke out. Even though he did not agree with the form of his protest, the Pope said we can appreciate its value, because it places self-sacrifice and love for others above all else. Students organized commemorative processions in many Western European

cities. The largest of these occurred in Rome, Milan, Florence, Vienna and Amsterdam. In Italy a collection for a memorial to Palach was initiated in January 1969. One year later a statue was unveiled and the Roman square on which it stands was renamed Piazza Jan Palach. Memorials also were erected in other cities and squares, and streets all over the world were named in his honor. Jan Palach also had his followers abroad. Four days after his action, a 17-year-old student, Sándor Bauer, set himself on fire in Budapest in front of the National Museum in protest against the communist regime in Hungary and the occupation of Czechoslovakia. In April 1969, in Riga, the same action was undertaken by a young, talented mathematician named Ilja Rips, who survived the attempt thanks to intervention by police officers. The Lithuanian student Romas Kalanta and the East German evangelical pastor Oskar Brüsewitz also employed Palach's form of protest for similar reasons.

The Roman daily Il Tempo initiated a collection to build a memorial to Jan Palach shortly after his death. On 18 January 1970, Mayor Clelio Darida unveiled the memorial (Source: ABS)

The evangelical pastor Oskar Brüsewitz from the East Germany town of Rippicha provoked the regime through many of his actions. In 1976 Brüsewitz was reproved by the pro-regime leadership of the church, which wanted to transfer him to a different workplace. Brüsewitz decided to undertake a radical protest. On 18 August 1976 he arrived at the square in Zeitz, placed fliers on the roof of his car expressing his protest against the regime, and set himself on fire. He died in hospital on 22 August 1976 (Source: Robert Havemann Gesellschaft)

Like many young Lithuanians, 19-year-old Romas Kalanta was unhappy about the Sovietization of his country. On 14 May he decided to undertake a radical protest, setting himself on fire in the center of Kaunas. Even though he did not leave behind a letter, his action was generally perceived as a protest against the Sovietization of Lithuania

The 20-year-old mathematician Ilja Rips also protested through self-immolation against the occupation of the ČSSR. He set himself on fire on 13 April 1969 in the center of Riga, but police officers put the fire out. After his action he was detained in a psychiatric treatment facility and then imprisoned. Today Eliyahu Rips is a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem (Photo: Adam Hradilek)

Grave of the Hungarian student Sándor Bauer (Photo: Attila Lukácsi)



The memorial to Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc on Wenceslas Square in Prague was unveiled on 16 January 2000. It was designed by the artist Barbora Veselá (Photo: Viktor Portel)



Tradition

The names of Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc appeared irregularly in the press for several months following their actions. During the next 20 years their memory was kept alive to a great extent only by Czechoslovaks in exile and the exile press. In London, Jan Kavan founded the agency Palach Press, which distributed news about events in the dissident movement at home and helped distribute exile literature. In Paris, the French Committee for the Support of Charter 77 was awarded the Jan Palach Prize. The memory of Jan Palach did not return to the public eye in Czechoslovakia until the 20th anniversary of his protest and death in 1989. On Sunday, 15 January 1989, several independent initiatives (České děti/Czech Children, Charta 77/Charter 77, Mírový klub Johna Lennona/The John Lennon Peace Club, Nezávislé mírové sdružení/The Independent Peace Association and Společenství přátel USA/Society of Friends of the USA) held a

commemorative gathering at the statue of St. Václav in the center of Prague. The action was banned by the authorities and representatives of opposition groups were detained. However, people came to the square anyway and the demonstrations continued during the next few days. The majority of them were brutally dispersed. At the end of "Palach Week", on 21 January 1989, the state authorities blocked the performance of a commemoration at Palach's grave in Všetaty. A few months later, students called out Jan Palach's name during the march on 17 November 1989 which started the fall of the communist regime. On 20 December 1989, the square in front of the Philosophical Faculty in Prague was again renamed after its former student. In 1991, Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc were awarded the Order of Tomáš G. Masaryk, First Class, in memoriam.

The meeting to commemorate the 20th anniversary of Jan Palach's self-immolation was meant to be just one of many peaceful demonstrations against the regime. However, unlike earlier gatherings, it was unexpectedly violently dispersed by the state authorities. Cordons of members of the National Security Corps (SNB) and police vehicles are ready to intervene, 15 January 1989 (Source: ČTK, Photo: Zuzana Humpálová)



Intervention by SNB forces – the detained demonstrators are lying down on the sidewalk on Wenceslas Square (Source: ČTK)



Memorial plaque to Jan Palach on the building of the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University in Prague and a plaque to Jan Zajíc on the building of the Industrial Middle School in Šumperk. Both are works by the sculptor Olbram Zoubek and were unveiled in 1991 (Photo: 1. Charles University Archive, 2. Patrik Eichler)

Memorial to Evžen Plocek on Masaryk Square (Masarykově náměstí) in Jihlava (Source: ČTK, Photo: Luboš Pavlíček)



The journalist Jiří Lederer was the author of the first in-depth book ever devoted to Jan Palach's action. His reportage was first published in 1982 in Switzerland. Six years later the writer Lenka Procházková prepared its samizdat publication in Czechoslovakia (Source: Authors' archives)

In 1990 the Czech version of Lederer's book was published (Source: Authors' archives)

In 1991, students of the Philosophical Faculty of Charles University prepared a collection of texts and photographs entitled *Ve jménu života Vašeho* (In the Name of Your Life) (Source: Authors' archives)



In 1980, Czechoslovak emigrants in Switzerland published a collection of poems, brief musings and testimonies entitled *Živé pochodně* (Living Torches) (Source: Authors' archives)

Miroslav Slach taught Jan Palach history at elementary school in Všetaty. In 1994 he published a book of memories of Jan Palach (Source: Authors' archives)

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