

## **Palach's Legacy: An Appeal to Czechoslovaks in the 1989 Struggle for Freedom**

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The Soviet-led military intervention and occupation of Czechoslovakia on August 21, 1968, had two consequences, initially contradictory. It became a great impulse to the development of a broad-based social and political movement of the public, which involved almost everyone in society.

In the glorious “Czechoslovak Week,” from August 21 to 26, 1968, “people, acting spontaneously, led by no one, and organized by no one, wrote a new chapter in the world history of nonviolent resistance, of civil protest ” (as Petr Pithart put it). And for a historic moment the antagonism between those “above” and those “below” receded into the background, and it seemed that a community of interests predominated above all else, that there was no longer an “us and them” situation, that society, with the exception of a handful of collaborators, was united.

That things were indeed different gradually became clear in the implementation of the act of capitulation called the “Moscow Protocol” of August 26. At first all the unpleasant steps of what was still the Dubček leadership – the most palpable of which was the annulment of the Vysočany Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party – were presented as necessary tactical concessions made to achieve the quick withdrawal of the occupying forces. Gradually it became clear that “normalization” according to the Soviet prescription had been begun by Dubček and his colleagues with the signing of the Moscow Protocol, although at first it was still a moderate form of normalization. The shattering of the illusion of “unity” occurred in mid-October, with the signing of the agreement on the temporary basing of Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia and other acts taken by the regime to consolidate its power, including concessions made under Soviet pressure. The so-called “realist policy” of the reform leadership began to mark the path and formulate the instructions for a “politically realist” way out for the proverbial man in the street in all matters of top-level politics as well as in the daily life of ordinary people. The forces willing to restore totalitarian power according to the Soviet recipe were formed almost before the eyes of the traumatized population, which had gradually been pacified and disoriented by its “national heroes”.

It became obvious that all the democratizing freedoms from before the military intervention had feet of clay if the “leading role of the Party,” that is to say, the determining role of the center of power, was preserved. Examples abounded of how easy it was to amend or quash a law, cancel the registration of an association, suspend the publication of a periodical or completely close it down, to organize the dismissal or resignation of bothersome people, and to substitute for them compliant puppets or the kinds of people who harbored the illusion that the only good option one has is the choice of the lesser of two evils. And thus the sense of having no way out, of disappointment and disgust, began to spread, helping to create the psychological conditions in society for the restoration of the authoritative regime without mass conflicts. The original slogan of solidarity, “We are with you, so you be with us!,” began to sound increasingly like a desperate, urgent admonition (But you have to be us!), and would soon fall silent when it met with less and less response, eventually to fall only upon deaf ears.

In was in this situation that Palach’s decision evolved to take a step that would, he hoped, rouse his fellow-citizens to defend themselves and the country against the Soviet lie, which threatened to become the Czechoslovak truth. He hoped to rouse civil society to self-defense. Palach’s human torch truly did shake the country; for a short time almost everyone was horrified.

But that was all. Although new student protests flared up, the squabbles of those in retreat about the preservation of this or that freedom or this or that politician continued. Everything was tried in order to unite the students with the workers. It was at this time that the underground activity of the leftwing Revolutionary Youth Movement began. And twice, in March 1969, people in the streets, in spontaneous outbursts of joy about the victory of the Czechoslovak ice-hockey team over the Soviets, let it be known what they thought about the “Russkies”.

The last big act of protest comprised leaflets and demonstrations to mark the first anniversary of the military intervention. By then, however, the regime was determined to teach everyone, particularly the youth (who, longer than anyone else, refused to retire into their own little private worlds), an object lesson in whom the street belongs to. In August 1969 it was not Soviet troops or Soviet tanks, but the emergency units of the Czechoslovak security forces, the tank corps of the Czechoslovak army, the Czechoslovak police and members of the Czechoslovak People’s Militia, which, by force or the threat of force, broke up the commemorative

demonstrations in Bohemian, Moravian, and Slovak cities. The man in charge of those operations was the Prime Minister of the Federal Government, Oldřich Černík, who, only the year before, had been taken away in handcuffs to Moscow. The operations were given blessing in law by another hero of the Prague Spring, perhaps its best known, Alexander Dubček, who was still Chairman of the Federal Assembly. On the basis of this decree permitting the use of force, which Dubček had signed, people who were demonstrating with his name still on their lips were beaten, arrested, and convicted.

At that time radio, television, and the press in Czechoslovakia were already consolidated, that is, “had been brought into line,” and the lesson given to the people was celebrated in these communications media as “repelling the enemy’s assault.” Exactly a year to the day since the glorious “Czechoslovak Week,” everything that had been said, solemnly proclaimed and solemnly sworn with a promise of solidarity in August 1968 or later, was now clearly outlawed. The Soviet lie, defeated in the Czechoslovak Week, now became the Czechoslovak truth, and was heard continuously from all the information channels that only the year before had become so famous the world over.

In short, nothing remained even of the Party reform program except the federalization of the state, though deformed to suit the tenets of real-existing Socialism. The orientation to democracy, the path to political pluralism, seemed blocked for at least the next fifty years. But the pluralism of human lives persisted; people who did not capitulate remained to carry on the social and political movement of 1968–69, which was marked by illusions of many shades. They worked the experience of civil uprising into a well-rounded concept of the indivisibility of freedom and into the program and carrying out of a patient non-violent daily struggle for the implementation of human and civil rights for all.

In addition, the children of the late 1960s had by now become adults. For them, Palach’s sacrifice had, in the twenty years of their growing up under the Normalization regime, become an appeal to take a public stand. In many ways they were better prepared than their historic predecessors of the late 1960s. And the times had changed as well. The times were now ripe, not simply for some sort of updated reform of “real-existing Socialism,” but for democracy for all. It was only necessary to overcome the fear of the regime. On Sunday, January 15, 1989, Palach Week began. It was a lesson in the fact that “Communism means beating people up,”

as Ludvík Vaculík cogently argued in one of his masterful essays at the time. It was, however, also a week of raising one's head and loudly declaring one's will to get involved in public affairs. Eleven months later, the time was finally ripe for self-liberation.

The three documents that follow are from January and February 1989. They express the mood in Czechoslovakia at the beginning of the "annus mirabilis," as 1989 has often, and rightly, been called. They are records of just how much Palach's living torch of twenty years before had now become an appeal to citizenship, and also why Palach Week – the clash between the public and the instruments of oppression used by the powers that be – was such an important step in the struggle to regain freedom.