
Jan Palach Week

Jan Palach Week

Last week, students at Charles University in Prague have gathered to commemorate Jan Palach Week. Many Erasmus students studying at Charles University in Prague may already be familiar with the name of Jan Palach: the square in front of the main building of the Faculty of Arts is named after him, and the building is also the site of a commemorative plaque for him. Palach was a student at the Faculty of Arts, and became known throughout Czechoslovakia and the world when he committed an act of self-immolation on Wenceslas Square on January 16, 1969. Palach's self-immolation was an act of protest, and he died of his injuries several days later, on January 19.

Palach, just 20 years old at the time of his death, lived a fairly normal life up until the time of his protest. He grew up in Všetaty, a small town around 50 km north-east of Prague, and studied at the University of Economics before coming to study at Charles University in Prague. During his time at university, Palach was a witness to the Prague Spring, a period of political liberalisation following Alexander Dubček's appointment as head of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Censorship was virtually abolished, and Dubček's government planned a series of extensive reforms. During this period of liberalisation many Czechs became genuinely enthusiastic about the proposals for reform; a great number of public meetings and discussions were held, and during the spring of 1968 Palach also began to attend a number of these meetings. However, Soviet leaders in Moscow were not impressed with the reforms occurring in Czechoslovakia. Leonid Brezhnev, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union at the time (acting as Soviet Premier), urged Dubček to repeal his promises of reform. When this did not happen Soviet soldiers, along with troops from Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and East Germany, occupied Czechoslovakia on August 20, 1968. Immediately after the invasion, Palach took part in several demonstrations in Prague. In November, he also took part in another street demonstration and a strike held by students throughout Czechoslovakia. However, these demonstrations had little effect. A feeling of despair spread throughout the country as leading politicians made concession after concession to the hardline Communists in an attempt to save some of the Prague Spring reforms. In October 1968, the Czechoslovak National Assembly approved the Treaty on the Temporary Stay of the Soviet Armed Forces, which legalised the presence of 75,000 Soviet soldiers in Czechoslovakia, who remained in the country until 1991. Shortly afterward, in November, press censorship was also reintroduced.

On January 6, 1969, Palach sent a letter to student leaders suggesting a general strike; however, he received no reply. On January 16, Palach set himself alight at the top of Wenceslas Square. He suffered extensive first degree burns, and died several days later in hospital. In a letter to the Czechoslovak Writers' Union, Palach stated that his protest was intended to wake national consciousness. Following Palach's act of self-immolation, several street demonstrations and student protests occurred. Several more protestors also committed acts of self-immolation, inspired by the actions of Palach. Despite their protests, however, political repression continued to grow.

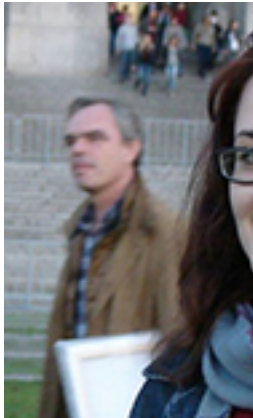
In the 1970s, Czechoslovakia became one of the most hardline and conservative regimes in the Soviet Bloc. However, Palach was not forgotten, and January 1989 saw several illegal demonstrations marking the 20th anniversary of his death. The demonstrations in January 1989 commemorating the death of Jan Palach were the first of a long series of growing protests throughout 1989, which culminated in the collapse of the repressive Communist regime at the end of the year. Every year since 1990, memorial ceremonies for Jan Palach have taken place.

This year, the 45th anniversary of his death, students and citizens gathered at the main building of the Faculty of Arts to remember Palach. The event was also attended by Charles University's current rector, Professor Václav Hampl, and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Michal Stehlík, who both gave short speeches to the crowd. Wreaths were laid beneath Palach's memorial plaque, and a minute of silence was held before students lit candles in his memory.

The main building of the Faculty of Arts is housing a small exhibition on Palach as well, and the Faculty has also been involved in the creation of a multi-lingual website detailing the events of Palach's protest, its historical background, and its significance. The website can be found at janpalach.cz.

The legacy of Palach is undoubtedly a difficult one to deal with. The extremity of Palach's self-immolation is certainly shocking, and for many it is difficult to understand both the extremity of the act and the motivations behind it. In his speech, Rector Václav Hampl warned those gathered against committing "cheap acts"; Michal Stehlík, Dean of the Faculty of Arts also warned against relativising Palach's act of protest. Student activist Heda Čepelová highlighted the importance of Jan Palach, along with Jan Opletal and the remembrance of International Students Day, as being central to the current Czech students' movement. Although she highlighted the importance of Rector Václav Hampl's message, for

her, Palach remains a reminder of what the role of students in current affairs should be, and the importance in speaking out against unpopular politics.



Natalie James is an undergraduate history student at University College London, currently studying at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague. Her interests include history, literature, politics, and current affairs. She joined the online magazine I-Forum to become more aware of and involved in student life at Charles University in Prague, and also to meet other likeminded Erasmus students.