

PETR BLAŽEK

**LIVING TORCHES
IN THE SOVIET BLOC**

**POLITICALLY MOTIVATED CASES
OF SELF-IMMOLATION IN 1966-1989**

Living Torches in the Soviet Bloc
Politically Motivated Cases
of Self-Immolation in 1966–1989

Petr Blažek

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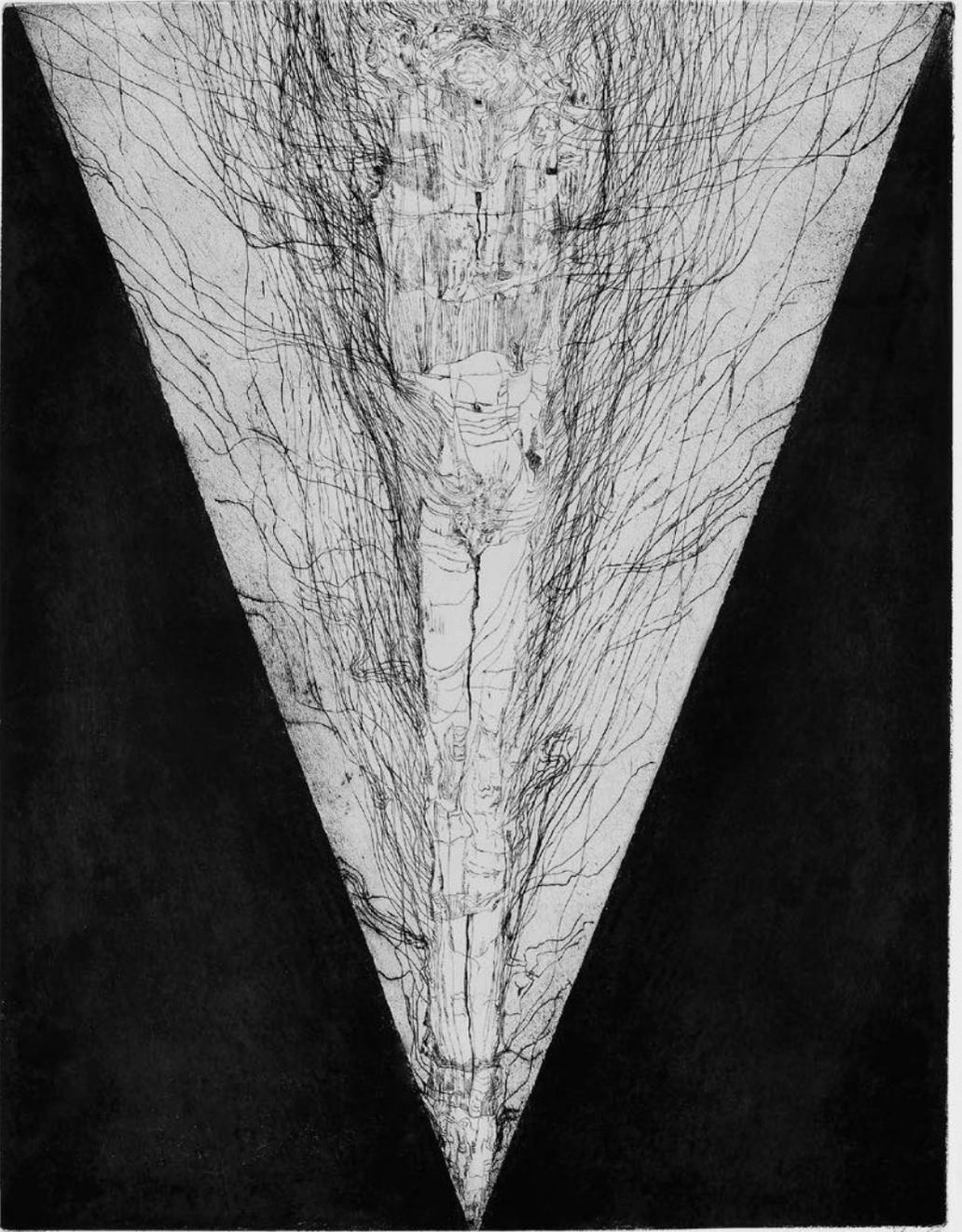
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Burning Bush

Fires burn in every corner of the night
But there in the desert is a salted place
Where a bush burned in broad daylight
Doves lose their ashen feathers there
And that's where the bush burns out
An angel appeared there, speaking in the flame
And now the wind, speaking words with ashes
Spreads our shame in all directions
Lo it was a phoenix on the thinnest branch
The pain sang alone and will take wing no more
A thin sheet of dressing, and on such a terrible wound
Perhaps only God can burn in its midst

Jan Skácel (1969)

For Kateřina

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FOREWORD

Resistance to communism took many forms. Most of them attracted the interest of academics before 1989, but it was only after the fall of the communist regimes and the collapse of the Soviet Union that the list of publications grew rapidly. Both organized opposition (including armed resistance) and its activities, as well as spontaneous forms of social resistance, such as strikes, demonstrations, graffiti on walls, etc., were examined.

For many years, however, historians neglected perhaps the most drastic form of protest – self-immolation. Although they mentioned individuals in their studies who chose to express their resistance in this way, they were not given much attention. It is certainly no coincidence that the author of the first book about Jan Palach was a journalist and that the figure of Ryszard Siwiec was unearthed for the wider public by a film director.

Historians find it difficult to confront events of this type, which not only require the use of non-traditional analytical tools, but also force them to try to understand actions that at first glance elude all possibility of comprehension. The cases of people who set themselves on fire for political reasons force us to ask ourselves extreme questions – about the value of a human life, the limits of self-sacrifice for a cause, and finally also about the indifference of the silent majority, which mostly failed to be stirred into action. Finding answers to these questions is usually not made easier by a limited groundwork of sources.

Petr Blažek has devoted many years to documenting cases of politically motivated self-immolation in the European countries of the Eastern Bloc. He managed to gain access to many previously unknown documents and in many cases gained the trust of the families of “living torches.” He has also described the various ways in which they have been commemorated, and visited places associated with the lives and deaths of this book’s protagonists.

The book *Living Torches* is the most extensive depiction of the chosen topic to date, and will certainly serve as a basis for further research for many years. However, its importance is not limited solely to its academic value. This work is also a kind of monument to those who chose unimaginable suffering to protest against evil, and in many cases to inspire others to resist.

Ryszard Siwiec ended his last message by exclaiming: “People who still might have a spark of humanity and human feelings in them, come to your

senses! Hear my cry, the cry of a grey-haired, ordinary man, a son of the nation, who loved his and your freedom more than anything, more than his own life. Wake up! It's still not too late!" Thanks to the work of Petr Blažek, we can now more clearly hear the challenge stemming from the actions of Ryszard Siwiec, Jan Palach and many others. What we do with this legacy is up to us. One thing is certain - after reading this book it is difficult to remain indifferent.

Łukasz Kamiński

INTRODUCTION TO THE CZECH EDITION

This publication summarizes the historical research I have conducted over the past 15 years on the phenomenon of politically motivated self-immolation in the Soviet Bloc.

My interest began with Jan Palach's drastic protest, whose echoes I was confronted with as a 15-year-old secondary school student at the beginning of 1989, when anti-regime street protests took place in the centre of Prague. At that time, I listened almost every evening to Radio Free Europe's broadcasts, in which Jan Palach was discussed on the 20th anniversary of his self-immolation. I also remember being intrigued by his alleged mysterious group of followers, whom he mentioned in his last letters.

In the early 1990s, I read a book by Jiří Lederer, who was the first to write a biography of the student¹ who decided less than five months after the August 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia to rouse others from the lethargy into which most of society at that time had gradually succumbed. However, Jiří Lederer, a journalist, did not have access to documents from the investigation of that period. He relied on the recollections of witnesses and newspaper articles.

I often remembered Palach's name while studying history at Charles University's Faculty of Arts in Prague in the second half of the 1990s. It often occurred to me then that I was studying not only at the same school, but even in the same field. The adjacent square, where the main seat of the faculty is and where I went to lectures and seminars, bore Palach's name. For 30 years, there has been a memorial to him on the facade of the building, and commemorative events are held there. Nevertheless, it did not occur to me at the time that I would later devote so much attention to Jan Palach's life story. I thought that after so many years, this case was already well-known and it would be impossible to find any new sources and information.

A fundamental turning point occurred in 2005 in connection with the amendment of the Archives Act, when it became possible to study the available documentation created by the security apparatus of the communist

1 The book was first published in German after Lederer went into exile. LEDERER, Jiří: *Jan Palach. Ein biografischer Bericht*. Unionsverlag, Zürich 1982. Unfortunately, this excellent journalist, who was repeatedly imprisoned in the 1970s, did not live to see the Czech edition. Cf LEDERER, Jiří: *Jan Palach. Zpráva o životě, činu a smrti českého studenta* (A report on the life, actions, and death of a Czech student). Novinář, Prague 1990.

regime almost without restrictions. At that time, I ordered documentation on Jan Palach for study in the research office of the then- Interior Ministry Archive. First, the archivists brought me 22 volumes of State Security (StB) documentation on a cart.

And then in 2007, when I started working in this archive myself, I discovered that the regular police force Public Security (Veřejná bezpečnost) also had a completely unknown investigation file, which until then the archivists had not made available with respect to the protection of personal data. This file was absolutely crucial – it contained, for example, the statements of eyewitnesses to Palach's protest, as well as the testimonies of his relatives, friends, and classmates. Based on the study of documents from the investigations of that time by Public Security and State Security, I decided almost 40 years after Jan Palach's protest that I would write a detailed historical reconstruction of it.²

While working on this topic, I often came across cases of Palach's predecessors and successors who came to light gradually in most of the states of the Soviet Bloc over more than 30 years. There were several dozen cases, which often had very similar features. In the meantime, a number of publications were issued about some of them, while others were almost unknown.³ Archive sources were available for a few of these cases; for others only the testimonies of eyewitnesses. In general, it is possible to say that the further east we move, the more difficult archival research and the availability of sources becomes. However, this rule does not apply across-the-board, as, for example, the possibilities for archival research in Ukraine and the Baltic states have significantly improved in recent years. Linguistic difficulties also complicate the situation. The literature and sources for these cases are in approximately 10 different languages.

It was often difficult to determine whether these cases had purely political motives or were just manifestations of imitation, where self-immolation

2 Cf BLAŽEK, Petr: „Pochodeň č. 1“. Rekonstrukce činu Jana Palacha (“Torch No. 1”. A reconstruction of the action of Jan Palach) In: BLAŽEK, Petr – EICHLER, Patrik – JAREŠ, Jakub et al: *Jan Palach '69*. FF UK (Faculty of Arts, Charles University) – ÚSTR (Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes) – Togga, Prague 2009, pp. 39–89; BLAŽEK, Petr: „Akce Palach“ (“The Palach Event”). An edition of documents from the Interior Ministry. In: *Ibid.*, pp. 349–608.

3 Fifteen years ago, the Polish historian Łukasz Kamiński was the first to tackle the subject of self-immolation in the Soviet bloc in an integrating way in a newspaper article. In addition to inspiring me, I am indebted to him for his selfless help in preparing a monograph on Ryszard Siwiec. Cf KAMIŃSKI, Łukasz: *Żywe pochodnie. Rzeczpospolita*, No. 14 (17.–18. 1. 2004), p. A10. Two studies by the British sociologist Michael Biggs were also very inspiring, in which he described from a global point of view the gradual spread of self-immolation as a radical form of political protest around the world. Cf BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing. Self-Immolations, 1963–2002*. In: GAMBETTA, Diego (ed.): *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, pp. 173–208, 320–324; BIGGS, Michael: *Self-Immolation in Context, 1963–2012. Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, No. 25 (Décembre 2012), pp. 143–150.

was only used as an external template. Finally, after much deliberation, for this publication I selected the stories of 21 people who protested against the communist regime in this shocking way. Like the case of Jan Palach, I focused on the historical reconstruction of these cases, which took place over time from the mid-1960s to the end of the 1980s in five states of the then-Soviet bloc. A total of eight cases took place in the Soviet Union (occurring on the territory of today's Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Latvia), seven cases of self-immolation took place in Czechoslovakia, two cases are from Romania and Poland, and one each from East Germany and Hungary. With the exception of three (Jan Béréš, Mykola Bereslavskiy, and Eliyahu Rips), all those involved subsequently died as a result of their burns.⁴

Several studies that have already been published in the past are printed in the book. This concerns an introductory study⁵ and portraits of Jan Palach,⁶ Jan Zajíc,⁷ Ryszard Siwiec,⁸ Vasyl Makukh,⁹ Romas Kalanta,¹⁰ Michal

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- 4 It exclusively concerns men. In Czechoslovakia, where the largest wave of cases in the Soviet Bloc was recorded in 1969, four women also attempted self-immolation according to the records of the security apparatus. However, there is no evidence of a clear political motive in any of these cases. For more details, see ČERNÝ, Milan: *Živé pochodné v roce 1969* (Living torches in 1969). *Česká a slovenská psychiatrie*, Vol. 99, No. 7 (October 2003), pp. 360–365.
 - 5 Cf BLAŽEK, Petr: Sebeupálení jako forma radikálního politického protestu ve světě (Self-immolation as a form of radical political protest in the world). In: SVOBODA, Libor (ed.): *Solitér. Pocta historikovi Václavu Veberovi* (Solitaire. A tribute to the historian Václav Veber). ÚSTR, Prague 2012, pp. 339–352.
 - 6 In addition to the aforementioned historical study on Jan Palach, I also used some passages from an exhibition catalogue, two other specialist articles, and a popularizing publication about local places of memory associated with Jan Palach. BLAŽEK, Petr – EICHLER, Patrik – JAREŠ, Jakub: *Jan Palach '69 Exhibition*. FF UK, Prague 2009; BLAŽEK, Petr: Jejich duše byly krásné (Their souls were beautiful). *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2015), pp. 63–70; BLAŽEK, Petr: Dokument doby (A document of the age). In: SOZANSKÝ, Jiří: *1969. Rok zlomu* (A watershed year). Symposium, Prague 2015, pp. 284–291; BLAŽEK, Petr: *Jan Palach. Průvodce místy paměti na území městské části Praha 2* (Jan Palach. A guide to places of memory in the Prague 2 district). Městská část Praha 2, Prague 2019.
 - 7 Cf BLAŽEK, Petr: Jan Palach a Jan Zajíc. In: DRAUS, Jan – SZYMANOWSKI, Maciej (eds.): *Żywe pochodnie. Świadectwa sprzeciwu i solidarności wobec agresji na Czechośćo- wację w 1968 roku*. Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warsaw 2018, pp. 21–31.
 - 8 Cf BLAŽEK, Petr: *Živá pochodeň na Stadionu Desetiletí. Protest Ryszarda Siwce proti okupaci Československa v roce 1968* (A living torch at the Tenth Anniversary Stadium. Ryszard Siwiec's protest against the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968). Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (ÚSTR), Prague 2008; BLAŽEK, Petr: *Ryszard Siwiec 1909–1968*. IPN, Warsaw 2010; BLAŽEK, Petr: *Ryszard Siwiec 1909–1968*. ÚSTR – IPN, Prague 2015; BLAŽEK, Petr: Polska żywa pochodnie. In: BRZOSTOWSKI, Ryszard – ZEMŁO, Mariusz: *Ryszard Siwiec pro memoria*. Polskie Towarzystwo Historyczne Oddział w Tarnowie. Tarnów – Dębica 2015, pp. 43–56.
 - 9 BLAŽEK, Petr – KINDLEROVÁ, Rita: *Živá pochodeň na Ukrajině. Sebeupálení Vasyla Omeljanyovych Makucha v Kyjevě 5. listopadu 1968* (A living torch in Ukraine. The self-immolation of Vasyl Omelianovych Makukh in Kyiv on 5 November 1968). *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (2016), pp. 73–90.
 - 10 BLAŽEK, Petr: *Živá pochodeň v Kaunasu* (A living torch in Kaunas). *Voknoviny*, No. 0 (2014), pp. 21–22.

Levčík,¹¹ and Josef Hlavatý.¹² Several other profiles, albeit in a significantly shorter form, were published within the framework of exhibitions about self-immolation as a form of political protest in the world¹³ and updated exhibitions about Jan Palach.¹⁴ These were published at the same time on websites dedicated to Jan Palach and other living torches.¹⁵ However, all the texts mentioned were significantly amended for this book, and above all supplemented with new results of historical research.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first presents an introductory study, where I approach from a historical point of view the phenomenon of self-immolation as a radical form of political protest, which appeared on a global scale in the first half of the 1960s. Here I deal with its transfer from a Vietnamese setting to various countries, including ones belonging to the Soviet Bloc. The second part consists of 21 biographical profiles, in which I present people who set themselves on fire for political reasons in the Soviet Bloc in the period 1966–1989. These profiles are arranged chronologically in the order in which specific cases were recorded. These are separate historical studies, which, nonetheless, are often related to each other due to the interconnected fates of these lives. Each profile is also supplemented with visual materials. The scope of the individual chapters varies, which reflects not only the varying significance and impact of individual cases, but also the different possibilities for current historical research in different countries and the level of research to date.

I am indebted to many people for their help in the preparation of this book. I greatly appreciate the trust of Jiří Palach, Jaroslav Zajíc, Marta Janasová, Ján Levčík, Aleš Plocek, and Wit Siwiec, who shared their memories and provided me with photos and documents from their family archives. For their help with historical research, I thank many colleagues, archivists, historians, and scholars, especially Eduard Andryuschenko, Volodymyr Birchak,

11 BLAŽEK, Petr: Slovenský následovník? Šest dokumentů k sebeupálení Michala Lefčíka 11. dubna 1969 (A Slovak successor? Six documents on the self-immolation of Michal Lefčík on 11 April 1969). *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2014), pp. 58–68.

12 BLAŽEK, Petr: První následovník. Sebeupálení Josefa Hlavatého 20. ledna 1969 (The first successor. The self-immolation of Josef Hlavatý on 20 January 1969). *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2013), pp. 95–102.

13 *Živé pochodně. Sebeupálení jako forma radikálního politického protestu ve světě 1963–2013* (Living torches. Self-immolation as a form of radical protest around the world in 1963–2013). The exhibition was held in 2013 at Charles's University's Faculty of Arts on Jan Palach Square in Prague as part of events commemorating the protest of Jan Palach.

14 The exhibition *Jan Palach 1969/2019* took place on Wenceslas Square in Prague on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Jan Palach's self-immolation.

15 Charles University's multimedia web project about Jan Palach and other living torches (www.janpalach.cz / www.janpalach.com) was created in the years 2011–2016. It exists in eight languages, including Tibetan. In 2018, it was taken over by the National Museum in connection with the preparation of a Jan Palach Memorial in Všetaty.

Jan Dvořák, Patrik Eichler, Martin Furmaník, Jiří Gruntorád, Michal Ježek, Marek Junek, Adam Hradilek, Rita Lyons Kindlerová, Ladislav Kudrna, Pavel Mašláň, János M. Rainer, Radek Schovánek, Jerguš Sivoš, František Stárek, Dmitry Treshchanin, Viktor Tupilko, Tomáš Vilímek, and Pavel Žáček. I am very grateful to my friend, the Polish historian Łukasz Kamiński, for the same thing and for writing the foreword. I thank all the authors of the photographs that are printed in this book. I thank the historians who reviewed this manuscript, Jaroslav Šebek and Michal Stehlík, for their valuable comments. I thank the editor Marie Bernardová for her careful work on the manuscript. I would also like to thank my colleagues from the publications department of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (ÚSTR), Tina Klauž and Jakub Bachtík, for their helpfulness during the publication of the book. I also thank the translators who rendered the abstract in eight languages. I am indebted to husband and wife Jan Majcher and Jana Majcherová for the book design.

Petr Blažek (2019)

INTRODUCTION TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

One of the reasons I decided years ago to write a book about the phenomenon of live human torches in the Soviet bloc was the significantly inaccurate portrayal of these radical political protests in Western literature. For example, the rare yet otherwise stimulating research by British sociologist Michael Biggs includes only a fraction of these dramatic cases.¹⁶

Thanks to the gradual opening of archives in the former satellite states of the Soviet Union, in Ukraine and Lithuania, it has become increasingly evident that the actual number of these acts was considerably higher. It is expected that this number will grow further as Russian and other as yet scarcely or entirely unexplored archives become accessible in the future. A characteristic feature of the Soviet bloc was the communist regimes' efforts to conceal these acts or to discredit their perpetrators. That is why most of the evidence for these cases can be found in the records of the security apparatuses.

The Czech version of this book was published in 2019,¹⁷ the same year the Jan Palach Memorial was opened in Všetaty, a project I was involved in.¹⁸ A Romanian edition followed in 2023¹⁹ and a Ukrainian one in 2025.²⁰ As in those editions, I have added only a few historical details. Otherwise, the text remains nearly identical to the original Czech version. Only some selected facsimiles of documents containing lengthy Czech texts were omitted, and at the request of the publishers, the graphic design of the book has been altered.

I would like to thank Ladislav Kudrna, Director of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, and Jiří Schwarz, President of Anglo American University in Prague, for their support of the English edition. I am truly honored that Karolinum Press, part of Charles University in Prague, where

16 Cf BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing. Self-Immolations, 1963–2002*. In: GAMBETTA, Diego (ed.): *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, pp. 173–208, 320–324.

17 BLAŽEK, Petr: *Živé pochodně v sovětském bloku: Politicky motivované případy sebeupálení v letech 1966–1989. Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, Prague 2019.*

18 A book about the Všetaty Memorial has been published in Czech and English, see BLAŽEK, Petr – MELKOVÁ, Pavla: *Hrana: Památník Jana Palacha ve Všetatech* (Edge: The Jan Palach Memorial in Všetaty). Národní muzeum, Prague 2020.

19 BLAŽEK, Petr: *Torțe vii în Blocul Sovietic. Cazuri de autoincendiere motivate politic în anii 1966–1989*. Fundației Culturale Momoria, Brașov 2023.

20 BLAŽEK, Petr: *Живі смолоскипи в радянському блоці: політично вмотивовані самоспалення в 1966–1989 роках*. Duch i litera, Kyiv 2025.

Jan Palach studied in 1968–1969, is the co-publisher of the English version. I am grateful for the care given to the final form of this publication by Stanislav Škoda, Head of the Publishing Department at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, editor Michael Stein from Karolinum Press, graphic designer Jan Šerých, and above all, the translator Cólín O'Connor.

Petr Blažek (2025)

STUDIES

In this cynical century in which we are often scared by others and others are scared by us, in a century in which we are often startled at our own small-mindedness, he made us ask a question that can make great people of us: What did I do for others, what is my heart like, what is my aim, and what is the highest priority in my life?

From the speech by Pastor Jakub S. Trojan at the funeral of Jan Palach
(25 January 1969)

SELF-IMMOLATION AS A FORM OF RADICAL POLITICAL PROTEST

In 2005, the English sociologist Michael Biggs published an important overview of self-immolation as a radical form of political protest in the world.²¹ He chose 11 June 1963 as the historical beginning of his research, when 66-year-old Thích Quảng Đức,²² an important representative of Mahayana Buddhism in Indochina, set himself on fire at a busy intersection in Saigon, thereby becoming the first Buddhist monk to protest in this shocking way against the suppression of their religious traditions. Two months later, other people in Saigon followed his example, including a 20-year-old nun. In accordance with their interpretation of matters, the Buddhists strived first and foremost to move the hearts of their enemies, which would make them observe religious tolerance, and they consistently presented their act as an altruistic sacrifice.²³

Politically motivated self-immolation can be defined as an extreme and radical form of protest, where an individual intentionally kills themselves (or at least risks death) by setting fire to their body using inflammable materials in the name of a collective cause. Most often, these cases occur during periods of systemic crisis for political regimes, and they mobilize a significant part of society. Unlike a suicide attack, with some exceptions, the goal of protests defined in this way is not to cause physical harm or material damage to someone else. In this context, the most similar form of radical protest is a long-term hunger strike.²⁴

21 This study is an extended version of the article: BLAŽEK, Petr: Sebeupálení jako forma radikálního politického protestu ve světě. In: SVOBODA, Libor (ed.): *Solitér. Pocta historikovi Václavu Veberovi*, pp. 339–352.

22 BIGGS, Michael: Dying without Killing. Self-Immolations, 1963–2002. In: GAMBETTA, Diego (ed.): *Making Sense of Suicide Missions*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005, pp. 173–208, 320–324.

23 Using this interpretation, their departure from life is close, at least in formal terms, to one of the types of suicidal behaviour described in 1897 by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim in his classic work on suicide. He defined four of its basic types: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic. According to his interpretation, altruistic suicide is typical of archaic societies. As an example, he cited suicides carried out as a result of tradition, such as sati, i.e. the self-immolation of women on a funeral pyre together with their deceased husbands, the suicides of slaves after the death of their master, or suicides by the sick and the elderly. Cf. ŠRAJER, Jindřich: *Suicidium, sebeobětování, nebo mučednictví?* (Suicide: self-sacrifice, or martyrdom?) Triton, Prague – Kroměříž 2009, pp. 38–39.

24 Cf. BIGGS, Michael: Dying without Killing, p. 174.

According to the French researcher Martin Monestier, such protests can be perceived as rational. Their purpose is to arouse a wave of public indignation, to expose an opponent to public outrage and to force them to accept the demands that are being made.²⁵ Self-immolation, however, also provokes negative reactions in society, which are mostly linked to religious or cultural interpretations of suicide. Subsequent imitations of this radical form of political protest, which were actually caused by psychological or other personal problems, are also quite common. This fact was used by the secret services of authoritarian regimes to discredit political opponents who protested in this shocking manner.²⁶

One essential feature is the public and media nature of these incidents, which often took place in busy squares or symbolic sites for this very reason. Consequently, the people who carry out these protests often leave written messages, in which they formulate the reasons behind their actions. They are mostly addressed to political representatives or the general public with a view to mobilizing them.²⁷ The burning monks were caught on the streets of Saigon by the cameras of Western journalists, who had been invited to the location in advance. Through the media, the Buddhists subsequently inspired followers from other cultural circles, who often only adopted the external form and strategy of the undertaking.²⁸

A combination of modern information technology and the easy availability of the means needed to carry out the act itself led to the rapid spread of this drastic form of protest.²⁹ If only five suicides by self-immolation were recorded on the European continent in the ten years before 1963,³⁰ this number rose to 117 in the following decade.³¹ According to Michael Biggs, the total number of self-immolations for the period 1963–2002, including failed attempts, ranged from 800 to 3,000 cases. In his study, however, he dealt with

25 Cf MONESTIER, Martin: *Suicides histoire, techniques et bizarreries de la mort volontaire des origines à nos jours* (A history of suicides. The history, techniques, and peculiarities of voluntary death). Dybbuk, Prague 2003.

26 Cf KAMIŃSKI, Łukasz: První živá pochodeň ve východním bloku. Ryszard Siwiec (1909–1968) (*The first living torch in the Eastern Bloc, Ryszard Siwiec /1909–1968/*). In: BLAŽEK, Petr – EICHLER, Patrik – JAREŠ, Jakub et al.: *Jan Palach '69*, pp. 115–127; DRAUS, Jan – SZYMANOWSKI, Maciej (eds.): *Žywe pochodnie. Świadectwa sprzeciwu i solidarności wobec agresji na Czechosłowację w 1968 roku*. Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warsaw 2018.

27 BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing*, p. 174.

28 For media coverage in the Western world of cases of self-immolation by Buddhist monks, see BLAIR, Anne: The Buddhist Crisis in South Vietnam and the American Press. *The Melbourne Historical Journal*, Vol. 20 (1990), pp. 27–43.

29 BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing*, pp. 182–183.

30 In the half century before 1963, *The New York Times* and *The Times* reported only 20 cases of self-immolation. BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing*, p. 187.

31 Cf MONESTIER, Martin: *Suicides histoire, techniques et bizarreries de la mort volontaire des origines à nos jours*.

only 533 cases, which had been convincingly documented by Western press agencies and selected major newspapers in dozens of different countries around the world. Their number gradually increased, and this not only ties in with imitations of this form of protest, but also with the rapid growth in the world's population. The rising trend also corresponds to an increase in the urban population, since, with some exceptions, self-immolations took place in cities.³²

Politically motivated cases of self-immolation were most often recorded in Asian countries where there were strong Hindu³³ or Buddhist traditions with an emphasis on the role of the victim,³⁴ and where there were also serious religious, national, or caste conflicts. The most cases were recorded in India, (South) Vietnam, and South Korea. In recent times, the number of self-immolations has also increased in China, where the practice has become a desperate means of protest by Tibetan Buddhist monks against the occupation of their country. Several waves of self-immolations within a short period of time have also occurred most often in the countries mentioned.³⁵

Thus, in the mid-1960s, self-immolation as a radical form of political protest began to be associated with opposition to the U.S. army's participation in the Vietnam War. Several cases of self-immolation in the United States contributed significantly to this. Although these cases were actually isolated events, they also had a significant impact abroad due to extensive media coverage of them.

On 16 March 1965, 82-year-old peace activist Alice Herz was the first to set herself on fire in Detroit. In her farewell letter, she directly referred to her

32 For the period 1963–1976, Michael Biggs used *The New York Times* and *The Times*, as well as reports from the Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), and Agence France Presse (AFP). He also studied Indian dailies published in English – *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*. He pointed out that he had to contend with censorship, especially in the case of authoritarian regimes. See BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing*, pp. 177–179.

33 In the Hindu tradition, the ritual self-immolation of widows together with their deceased husbands was common. The practice of sati, as this ritual is called, was only prohibited by the British colonial administration in 1829. See HAWLEY, John Stratton (ed.): *Sati. The Blessing and the Curse. The Burning of Wives in India*. Oxford University Press, New York 1994.

34 The Buddhist tradition is precisely the place where some authors look for an explanation as to why Thích Quảng Đức chose self-immolation as his form of protest. As a form of extreme asceticism, the first cases of self-immolation by Buddhist monks in China are described as early as the 5th century in biographical texts. A chapter of the Lotus Sutra scripture is also often mentioned, in which the Buddha tells about a bodhisattva whose body was exposed to fire for 1,200 years. See BENN, James Alexander: *Burning for the Buddha: Self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism*. Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism, No. 19, University of Hawai'i Press 2007. Self-immolation as a radical form of religious asceticism is also documented in the Russian milieu among the Old Believers. Cf ПУЛЬКИН, Максим Викторович: Дело о самосожжении старообрядцев. Март–май 1784 г. *Исторический архив*, No. 2 (2007), pp. 205–210.

35 Cf the tables printed in this introductory study.

Buddhist precursors. She died in hospital 10 days after her shocking act.³⁶ The protest of Norman Morrison, a Quaker from Baltimore who set himself on fire near the Pentagon building on 2 November 1965, engendered an extraordinary response.

The self-immolation took place near the office of US Defence Secretary Robert McNamara, who was present in the office at the time. Morrison, 31, was survived by his wife and three young children. Before his suicide, they had repeatedly been talking about the cases of Buddhist monks in Vietnam.³⁷ Days later, on 9 November 1965, 22-year-old Catholic Roger Allen Laporte sat down in a lotus position in front of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library building, which is part of the United Nations campus in New York, and set himself alight. He died the following day.³⁸

New waves of self-immolation by Buddhist monks in South Vietnam occurred in 1965, 1966, and 1967. This time, demands against American interference in the Indochina region were already surfacing. In May and June 1966 alone, there were 13 new cases against this backdrop. In October 1967, news spread around the world about 110 Buddhist monks who expressed their determination to successively burn themselves in a random order if the authoritarian South Vietnamese regime did not meet their demands.³⁹

Further cases, directly inspired by Buddhist monks, also appeared in other Asian countries (Sri Lanka, India, and South Korea) in the second half of the 1960s. A new massive wave of self-immolation occurred in the Vietnamese milieu in the mid-1970s after the unification of the country under communist rule. On 2 November 1975, 12 Buddhist monks and nuns set themselves on fire all at once in a local pagoda in protest against religious oppression. Compared to previous anti-American cases, however, relatively little was written about this incident in the Western press.⁴⁰

The spread of self-immolation as a radical form of protest in the world is also evidenced by three cases from the 1970s and 1980s. These took place in different countries around the globe and had almost nothing to do with the

36 BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing*, pp. 185–186.

37 For more on Morrison's protest and the fate of his family, see WELSH, Anna Morrison – HOLLY-DAY, Joyce: *Held in the Light. Norman Morrison's Sacrifice for the Peace and His Family's Journey of Healing*. Orbis Books, 2008.

38 BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing*, p. 186.

39 This event, which was reported on 5 October 1967 by *Rudé právo*, became the inspiration for Jan Palach for the strategy of an alleged group of volunteers who were also supposed to set themselves on fire according to a sequence drawn by lot. Cf. BLAŽEK, Petr: Pořadí, v jakém se hodlají upálit, má určit los. Vietnamská inspirace Jana Palacha (The order in which they are going to be burned is meant to be determined by lot. The Vietnamese inspiration of Jan Palach). In: PETRÁŠ, Jiří – SVOBODA, Libor (eds.): *Předjaří. Československo 1963–1967* (Early spring. Czechoslovakia 1963–1967). South Bohemian Museum in České Budějovice – ÚSTR, České Budějovice – Prague 2018, pp. 165–169.

40 Cf. BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing*, p. 206.

Number of self-immolations in individual states (1963-2002)

State / group	Number	% of total number	Ratio per million inhabitants
India	255	47.6	1.4
South Vietnam, Vietnam	92	17.3	8.0
South Korea	43	8.1	1.6
USA	29	5.4	0.2
<i>Kurds outside Turkey</i>	14	2.6	14.0
Romania	14	2.6	1.2
USSR, former USSR ⁴¹	12	2.3	0.1
China	9	1.7	0.0
Pakistan	9	1.7	0.3
France	5	0.9	0.5
Japan	5	0.9	0.1
<i>Lithuanians</i>	5	0.9	2.2
Czechoslovakia	4 ⁴²	0.8	0.5
East/West Germany	4	0.8	0.1
Turkey	4	0.8	0.2
Bulgaria	3	0.6	0.5
Chile	3	0.6	0.0
Taiwan	3	0.6	0.2
United Kingdom (UK)	3	0.6	0.1
Malaysia	2	0.4	0.3
Thailand	2	0.4	0.2
Other states	13	2.4	0.0
Total	533	100	0.3

Source: Biggs 2005

41 The original table compiled by Michael Biggs states that this is an “example from Lithuania.” In fact, there are more documented cases of political self-immolation in the Soviet Union. Cf KAMIŃSKI, Łuskaz: První živá pochodeň ve východním bloku. Ryszard Siwiec (1909-1968). In: BLAŽEK, Petr - EICHLER, Patrik - JAREŠ, Jakub et al: *Jan Palach '69*, pp. 115-127; DRAUS, Jan - SZYMANOWSKI, Maciej (eds.): *Żywe pochodnie. Świadectwa sprzeciwu i solidarności wobec agresji na Czechosłowację w 1968 roku*. Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warsaw 2018.

42 Michael Biggs herein included four cases from 1969: Jan Palach, Jan Zajíc, Evžen Plocek, and the then-obscure, uninvestigated case of Slovak Michal Levčík (wrongly named as Leučík), who set himself on fire in Košice on 11 April 1969. After several years of research, it is possible to add that there were actually also more cases of political self-immolation in the former Czechoslovakia. At the very least, the cases of Josef Hlavatý, Jan Béréš, and Bohumil Peroutka also belong to this group. However, these three cases involved individuals who had psychological problems or family conflicts, or issues with antisocial behaviour in the past. Nonetheless, their actions were

Vietnam conflict. They were directed against the military dictatorships that ruled these places at the time.

A very specific case occurred in Spain. In San Sebastián on 19 September 1970, Basque nationalist Joseba Elósegui doused himself in inflammable materials and set himself on fire, before throwing himself ablaze at the Spanish dictator Francisco Franco.

He was apprehended by police (seriously injuring two of them), and Franco escaped unharmed. Elósegui survived this peculiar assassination attempt. After the flames were extinguished, he was arrested and sentenced to seven years in prison. He lived to see the end of Franco's dictatorship and later even became a senator on repeated occasions.⁴³

In the early hours of the morning on the same day – 19 September 1970, 22-year-old student Kostas Georgakis set himself on fire in the centre of Genoa in protest at the military dictatorship in Greece. He had been inspired by the self-immolation of Jan Palach, which had resonated strongly in Italy. Kostas Georgakis had gone to Italy to study geology in 1967. He died in hospital a few hours after his protest.⁴⁴

The third case of self-immolation directed against a right-wing dictatorship took place in Chile. On 2 November 1983, Sebastian Acevedo, a 50-year-old communist and construction worker whose two children had been arrested by the secret police, set himself on fire in Concepción's Independence Square in protest against the military dictatorship. He died within a few hours as a result of his burns.⁴⁵

FIERY PROTESTS IN THE SOVIET BLOC

As of 1966, cases of self-immolation also occurred in the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Here, too, the obvious inspiration was the example of Buddhist monks, whose actions were often commemorated and portrayed by communist propaganda as protests against American imperialism. Like the Buddhists in South Vietnam, protesters in communist countries mostly wanted to jolt society in a shocking way and provoke wider resistance against authoritarian regimes that they saw as occupiers. However, their strategies,

also a manifestation of the desperation of that time, which was caused by the political situation, like the case of Evžen Plocek. Cf ČERNÝ, Milan: *Živé pochodně v roce 1969. Česká a slovenská psychiatrie*, Vol. 99, No. 7 (October 2003), pp. 360–365.

43 SULLIVAN, John: *ETA and Basque Nationalism. The Fight for Euskadi 1890–1986*. Routledge, London 2016, pp. 102–103.

44 KORNETIS, Kostis: *Children of the Dictatorship: Student Resistance, Cultural Politics and the 'Long 1960s' in Greece*. Berghahn Books, New York 2013, pp. 66–67.

45 HUNEUS, Carlos: *The Pinochet Regime*. Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder 2007, p. 392.

motives, and expectations were often very different, as were the responses and effects of their actions.

Waves of self-immolation involving three or more cases in 10 days (1963–2002)

Start of wave	State	Motive	Number
13 August 1963	South Vietnam	Buddhists versus the government	3
11 February 1965	India	Tamils versus the government	5
21 April 1965	Vietnam	Buddhists versus the government	3
29 May 1966	South Vietnam	Buddhists versus the government	13
3 October 1967	South Vietnam	Buddhists versus the government	3
22 October 1967	South Vietnam	Buddhists versus the government	4
16 January 1969	Czechoslovakia	occupation and start of “normalization”	3 (min.)
4 June 1970	South Vietnam	Buddhists versus the government	3
9 May 1971	South Vietnam	Buddhists versus the government	4
16 August 1971	South Vietnam	protest against fraudulent elections	4
29 May 1972	USSR (Lithuania)	anti-government protests	3
2 November 1975	South Vietnam	Buddhists versus the government	12
30 September 1978	Pakistan	anti-government protests	4
18 December 1987	South Korea	protest against fraudulent elections	3
19 May 1990	India	demand for the withdrawal of Sonia Gandhi’s resignation	7
19 September 1990	India	protest against the caste system	208 ⁴⁶
19 November 1990	India	protest against the caste system	15
29 April 1991	South Korea	protest against the government	9
16 April 1996	South Korea	protest against the government	3
15 February 1999	Western Europe	Kurds versus Turkey	7
24 March 2000	Romania	Miners’ anti-government protests	10
23 January 2001	China	(alleged) protests by the Falun Gong movement	7
Total	min. 323		

Source: Biggs 2005, adapted and supplemented⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Two cases of protests against the protests and one case of a Hinduist’s protest against Muslims are also included.

⁴⁷ The data for cases in Czechoslovakia in 1969 and in China in 2001 has been adapted. Further waves of self-immolation followed at the turn of 2010–2011 in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as in 2011 and 2012 in Tibet and India. Cf a list of cases of self-immolation, which has been added to the English version of Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_self-immolations (checked on 15 December 2019).

The first case in the Eastern Bloc is probably the self-immolation of Mykola Dyadyk, who set himself on fire on 7 April 1966 in front of Lubyanka, the main building and infamous prison of the KGB in Moscow. Other fatal cases of self-immolation were provoked by the August 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia, which involved the largest troop movements on the European continent in the post-war period. Such incidents were recorded not only in the occupied country itself, but also in several countries that the invading troops had come from (Poland, Hungary and the Soviet Union).⁴⁸

On 8 September 1968, using self-immolation to protest against the participation of Polish People's Army units in the August invasion of Czechoslovakia, Ryszard Siwiec, a Polish clerk, set himself on fire in Warsaw's central stadium in front of tens of thousands of people. Despite the chosen location, however, his action did not provoke the expected response and it completely sank into obscurity thanks to the efforts of the secret police to keep it a secret for 20 years.

The protest of Vasyl Makukh, who set himself on fire on a busy Kyiv boulevard on 5 November 1968 also garnered little response at the time. According to available documents, he wanted to protest in this way against the occupation of Ukraine and its Russification. In contemporary articles that were printed in Ukrainian and Russian émigré magazines, it was also mentioned that he rejected the August 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia as well.

On the other hand, the self-immolation of Jan Palach in the centre of Prague on 16 January 1969 met with a completely extraordinary response, both at home and around the world. The 20-year-old student's action, which took place less than five months after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the armies of the five Warsaw Pact states, made an impression on many people. This was helped not only by the chosen form of protest, but also by growing frustration among Czechs and Slovaks and sympathy for the violated country, which invoked violent aggression in the world. It was also crucial that, despite a gradual return to the rigid Soviet model, the media space in Czechoslovakia was still free enough for many articles to be published and a number of programs to be broadcast about the Palach protest in January 1969. The response to this event was so great that even the communist media in the Eastern Bloc reported on it. They were also prompted to do so by foreign radio stations broadcasting to the Soviet empire, which paid great attention to the tragic event in Prague.

Palach's protest provoked a relatively large wave of self-immolations (and not just in Czechoslovakia). There was one exceptional feature to this

48 Cf DRAUS, Jan - SZYMANOWSKI, Maciej (eds.): *Żywe pochodnie. Świadectwa sprze- ciwu i solidarności wobec agresji na Czechosłowację w 1968 roku*. Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, Warsaw 2018.

protest, which ties in with the chosen strategy. Following the example of the aforementioned Vietnamese Buddhists, the Prague student invented a group of volunteers in a random order, who were supposed to successively burn themselves until their demands were met. In this way, he significantly boosted the impact of his already shocking protest. A few days later, the public waited in suspense to see who would be his successor. It was a special game that – with the certain exception of Jan Zajíc – none of the other burning-torch protesters ever repeated, and not just in the Soviet bloc. Despite the fact that, according to available testimonies and archive documents, the supposed group mentioned in Palach's last letter did not exist at all, his example was eventually followed in the first months of 1969 by a number of other people in Czechoslovakia and abroad.⁴⁹

Jan Palach's followers did not know him personally at all. Some of them also made political demands, but most only adopted the form of the protest, and their decisions were preceded by personal or psychological problems. Some were found to have a criminal past, family conflicts, or a long-term addiction to alcohol.

These were often suicide attempts on a sudden impulse, whose authors did not even write farewell letters explaining their motives.⁵⁰

According to a contemporary report by Public Security, 10 suicide attempts by self-immolation were recorded in the Czech lands alone in the second half of January 1969, two of which ended in death (Jan Palach and Josef Hlavatý). Four other people tried to commit suicide in a different way during the period mentioned. With three of them, it is possible to see at least a certain connection with Palach's act (Blanka Nachácelová, Jiří Břešťanský, and Vlastimil Jurčák).⁵¹

49 Jan Zajíc tried to create a real group. On 8 March 1969, i.e. on International Women's Day, his classmate Eva Vavřečková (Eva Való after she got married) was supposed to set herself on fire on Wenceslas Square. Jan Zajíc asked several other Šumperk schoolmates if they would be willing to set themselves on fire on 16 March 1969. One of them was Jan Nykl, who accompanied Jan Zajíc and two other students to Prague on that fateful day. Cf. EICHLER, Patrik: *Následovníci Jana Palacha? Jan Zajíc (1950–1969) a Evžen Plocek (1929–1969)* (Jan Palach's Followers? Jan Zajíc /1950–1969/ and Evžen Plocek /1929–1969/). In: BLAŽEK, Petr – EICHLER, Patrik – JAREŠ, Jakub, et al: *Jan Palach '69*, p. 97; DORKO, Branislav: *Jan Zajíc*. Matice slezská, Opava 2012, pp. 93–96.

50 Cf. BLAŽEK, Petr: Pořadí, v jakém se hodlají upálit, má určit los. Vietnamská inspirace Jana Palacha. In: PETRÁŠ, Jiří – SVOBODA, Libor (eds.): *Předjaří. Československo 1963–1967*, pp. 165–169. The tragic cases in question are briefly described in a study by BLAŽEK, Petr: *První následovník. Sebeupálení Josefa Hlavatého 20. ledna 1969* (The first follower. The self-immolation of Josef Hlavatý on 20 January 1969). *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2013), p. 102; BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing*, pp. 185–186.

51 *ABS (Security Services Archive)*, f. H 1-4, arch. jedn. 920, Vyhodnocení bezpečnostní situace od 16. 1. do 29. 1. 1968 v souvislosti s pokusem sebevraždy upálením studenta FF UK v Praze Jana Palacha, únor 1969; *Ibid.*, f. O 12/3, inv. jedn. 3, Jurčák Vlastimil 10. 2. 1959 – sebevražda oběšením (vyšetřovací spis).

The attempted self-immolation of 22-year-old Miroslav Malinka on the night of 21–22 January 1969 is often remembered to this day. At around 20 minutes past midnight, a worker from the Pozemní stavby company in Vyškov set himself on fire on Brno's Náměstí Svobody right next to a catafalque set up to honour Palach's memory. Students who were present immediately extinguished the flames engulfing Malinka and transported him to Hybeš Hospital in Brno, where he was treated. He suffered relatively light burns, which he survived without major consequences. According to contemporary documents, he had burns on approximately 12 percent of his body. As the *Rudé parvo* newspaper stated, despite his young age, he was a habitual criminal who had been convicted in the past, mainly for repeated thefts, and he had once attempted suicide. He purportedly carried out this act in order to become known and to avoid a further conviction for theft, which was to happen in a few days.⁵²

According to a study by psychiatrist Milan Černý, who in 1969 analysed data that was also obtained from the Main Directorate of Public Security, the wave of self-immolations continued until the end of April 1969. According to this source, which, however, does not cite specific archive sources, there was a total of 29 suicide attempts by self-immolation in Czechoslovakia from January to April 1969. Of these, 25 were men and four were women.

A total of 10 people, i.e. less than a third, died as a result of burns. Almost 70 percent were people under the age of 30. Sixty-five percent were workers. According to Černý's conclusions, only the self-immolations of three people (Jan Palach, Jan Zajíc, and Evžen Plocek), had an "undoubtedly altruistic character, in the given case they were politically motivated."⁵³

It's possible on the basis of archival research to at least partially dispute this assessment, as political motives can also be proven in the borderline cases of Josef Hlavatý, Jan Béreš, and Michal Levčik.

52 Miroslav Malinka (born 30 December 1946 in Vyškov) later went to prison again. He was sentenced five times for purely criminal offences. The last sentence was 18 months in prison. On 16 April 1988, he committed suicide by hanging in Ostrava-Heřmanice prison. *ABS*, f. KS SNB Ústí nad Labem - vnitřní odbor 1960–1982 (L 2-1), inv. j. 81, Dálnopis KS SNB Brno o pokusu o sebevraždu Miroslava Malinky, 22. 1. 1969; *ibid.*, f. A 34/2, arch. jedn. 3259, Příloha k situaci o informaci, 26. 2. 1969; *ibid.*, f. S-SNV - odbor vnitřní ochrany, kt. č. 143, sebevraždy, úmrtí; (tos): Ministerstvo vnitra k brněnskému pokusu o sebeupálení, *Rudé právo*, 23. 1. 1969, s. 2; *ABS*, f. G/N 1-1 (KS SNB Brno - vnitřní oddělení), in. jedn. 69, Zpráva VB Brno KS SNB Brno o případu sebevraždy upálením na nám. Svobody, 22. 1. 1969.

53 ČERNÝ, Milan: Živé pochodně v roce 1969 (Living torches in 1969). *Česká a slovenská psychiatrie*, Vol. 99, No. 7 (October 2003), pp. 360–365. Srov. BLAŽEK, Petr: První následovník. Sebeupálení Josefa Hlavatého 20. ledna 1969, p. 102; BIGGS, Michael: Dying without Killing, pp. 185–186.

Selected cases of political self-immolation in the Soviet bloc (1966–1989)

Date	Name and surname	Born	Nationality	Place of protest	State
7. 4. 1966	Mykola Dyadyk	1940	Ukrainian	Moscow	USSR
18. 2. 1968	Josyf Kutsyaba	1909	Ukrainian	Moscow	SSSR
8. 9. 1968	Ryszard Siwiec	1909	Polish	Warsaw	PPR
5. 11. 1968	Vasyl Makukh	1927	Ukrainian	Kyiv	USSR
16. 1. 1969	Jan Palach	1948	Czech	Prague	CSSR
20. 1. 1969	Sándor Bauer	1952	Hungarian	Budapest	HPR
20. 1. 1969	Josef Hlavatý	1943	Czech	Plzeň	CSSR
26. 1. 1969	Jan Béréš	1952	Czech	Cheb	CSSR
10. 2. 1969	Mykola Bereslavskiy	1924	Ukrainian	Kyiv	USSR
25. 2. 1969	Jan Zajíc	1950	Czech	Prague	CSSR
9. 4. 1969	Evžen Plocek	1929	Czech	Jihlava	CSSR
11. 4. 1969	Míchal Levčik	1950	Slovak	Košice	CSSR
13. 4. 1969	Eliyahu Rips	1948	Latvian	Riga	USSR
28. 10. 1969	Bohumil Peroutka	1926	Czech	Vsetín	CSSR
13. 2. 1970	Márton Moyses	1941	Hungarian	Braşov	RPR
14. 5. 1972	Romas Kalanta	1953	Lithuanian	Kaunas	USSR
30. 9. 1972	Józef Dolak	1945	Polish	Wrocław	PPR
18. 8. 1976	Oskar Brüsewitz	1929	German	Zeitz	GDR
21. 1. 1978	Oleksa Hirnyk	1912	Ukrainian	Kaniv	USSR
23. 6. 1978	Musa Mamut	1931	Crimean Tatar	(Besh-Terek) Donske	USSR
21. 3. 1980	Walenty Badylak	1904	Polish	Kraków	PPR
2. 3. 1989	Liviu Babeş	1942	Romanian	Poiana Braşov	RPR
2. 3. 1989	Vytautas Vičiulis	1951	Lithuanian	Klaipėda	USSR

The case of the historian Bohumil Peroutka, who set himself on fire in the yard of a museum in Vsetín on 28 October 1969, can also be considered politically motivated as he and his colleagues had been threatened with dismissal from their jobs after publishing an article about the anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia and the role played by Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. Some circumstances of this incident are strongly reminiscent of the better-known case of Evžen Plocek. In both instances, it is possible to see feelings of doom and despair due to personal and political situations as motivation. The last self-immolation in the wave directly related to the August 1968 occupation and events in Czechoslovakia was that of Márton Moyses, a Romanian

citizen of Hungarian ethnicity, who – following the example of Jan Palach and Sándor Bauer – set himself on fire on 13 February 1970 in front of the headquarters of the Communist Party of Romania in Braşov.⁵⁴

One specific and unclear case is the alleged self-immolation attempt of 19-year-old textile worker Jan Polášek from the Mosilan national enterprise on 21 August 1969, which took place at noon⁵⁵ on Brno's Obránců Míru Street during a street demonstration held in connection with the first anniversary of the August 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia. According to the first report, the young man is supposed to have doused himself with approximately half a litre of benzine and set himself on fire. The flames were quickly extinguished and he suffered first, second, and third degree burns over approximately 40 percent of his body. After being transported for treatment, he purportedly told a doctor that he had set himself on fire in protest against the shooting of two demonstrators in Prague. According to another contemporary report by security forces, what happened was allegedly an accident which occurred while he was handling a petrol bomb that he was supposed to light in the passage of building No. 2. As he was running out of the passage, Polášek supposedly tripped and fell, breaking the bottle and unintentionally setting himself alight. Later, this event was supposedly meant to become the impetus for attacks by demonstrators against members of Public Security.⁵⁶ According to the final report by the investigation department of the regional administration of the National Security Corps (SNB) in Brno dated 7 November 1969, it was in fact supposedly an attempt at self-immolation, which was marked as a consequence of “Jan Polášek's impulsive action.”⁵⁷ The minimal public awareness of this case is also probably linked to the fact that a person with the same name, surname, and date of birth was recorded in the

54 Compare the respective profiles published in this book.

55 In the Interior Ministry reports from that period, there are various times cited, ranging from 11:30 a.m. to 12:15 p.m.

56 Souhrnná zpráva Federálního informačního systému k situaci v republice 21. 8. 1969 odpoledne (D 40). In: TŮMA, Oldřich et al.: *Srpen '69. Edice dokumentů* (August '69. A series of documents). ÚSD AV ČR – Maxdorf, Prague 1996, p. 171; Zpráva operativní skupiny Úřadu vlády ČSR o situaci v ČSR 21. a 22. 8. 1969 (D 56). In: *ibid.*, p. 204.

57 According to the cited report, Jan Polášek stated the following during the interrogation: “I did not talk to anyone about what I wanted to do, and I did not conceive of the notion until 21 August 1969, when I heard the news at around 11 a.m. on Czechoslovak radio about what happened in Prague. I was so shocked by the news about the shooting of people in Prague that I decided to commit self-immolation. If I had had the chance to think about it properly, I would definitely not have committed this act and I myself consider it imprudent.” Informace Odboru vyšetřování KS SNB v Brně a vyšetřování trestných činů souvisejících s usmrcením a zraněním osob v Brně 21. a 22. 8. 1969 (D 72). In: *ibid.*, p. 255; ABS, f. H 7/1, kt. 11, inv. č. 106, Rekapitulace případů vyšetřovaných v souvislosti s demonstracemi v Brně ve dnech 21.–23. 8. 1969. Cf. BŘEČKA, Jan: *Divoký západ si z našeho státu už dělat nedáme... Průběh demonstrací 21. a 22. srpna 1969 v Brně* (We will no longer turn our state into the Wild West ... the course of demonstrations on 21 and 22 August 1969 in Brno). *Paměť a dějiny*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (2009), p. 3.

State Security (StB) registry of files under the codename “Řehoř” as a secret collaborator on the issue of “free youth” in the years 1979-1985. Unfortunately, the agency file was not preserved in the Security Services Archive (ABS).⁵⁸

Other cases of self-immolation in the Soviet bloc were no longer directly related to Czechoslovakia, although the example of Jan Palach probably played a significant role in the form of protest that was chosen. Some of these cases from the 1970s and 1980s had a great resonance in the societies in question.⁵⁹

Several days of street riots, mainly involving young people, were triggered by the self-immolation of 19-year-old worker Romas Kalanta, who set himself on fire in Kaunas on 14 May 1972 in protest against the occupation of Lithuania. Thirteen people allegedly followed his example in Lithuania in the following weeks, but their cases have not yet been investigated and were apparently borderline instances, which probably had other reasons besides purely political ones. Another little-studied case took place in what is now Lithuania on 2 March 1989, when 38-year-old restorer and painter Vytautas Vičiulis set himself on fire in Klaipėda in protest against the Soviet occupation. The case of the Lutheran pastor Oskar Brūsewitz – who set himself alight in the town of Zeitz on 18 August 1976 in protest against the oppression of Evangelicals in the GDR and against the collaboration of the church leadership with the communist regime – gained a lot of attention in East German society.

One specific case is a fiery protest that was also directed against communists, but which took place in the West. On 10 February 1977, 27-year-old French bank official and far-right supporter Alain Escoffier set himself on fire, following the example of Jan Palach, during a demonstration against the visit of Soviet leader Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev to France. The husband of a refugee from the GDR entered the Paris office of Aeroflot on the Champs-Élysées, doused himself in petrol, shouted “communist murderers!” and set himself alight. He died after being taken to hospital. The incident helped the National Front unite the nationalist scene under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen, who attended Escoffier’s funeral.⁶⁰

58 At the request of the third section of the second department of the Regional Directorate of State Security (KS StB) in Brno, the file was registered on 7 September 1979 in the “secret cooperation candidate” category. Recruitment was meant to have taken place on 21 November 1979, and the file was later transferred to the “agent” category. It was filed in the archive on 23 July 1985 (arch. č. 427 114 BR). It was probably destroyed during the so-called shredding of December 1989.

59 More details on individual cases, sources, and literature can be found in the respective profiles published in this book.

60 KAMIŃSKI, Łukasz: První živá pochodeň ve východním bloku. Ryszard Siwiec (1909-1968). In: BLAŽEK, Petr – EICHLER, Patrik – JAREŠ, Jakub et al.: *Jan Palach '69*, pp. 115-127. This protest explains the popularity of Jan Palach among the contemporary French extreme right.

On 21 January 1978, 65-year-old engineer Oleksa Hirnyk set himself on fire near Kaniv, Ukraine. The protest took place next to the burial mound of the Ukrainian revivalist and artist Taras Shevchenko at a wonderful viewpoint over the Dnieper River. At this national pilgrimage site, the former political prisoner set himself on fire in the middle of the night to protest against the Russification of Ukraine. Oleksa Hirnyk spent more than 10 years in prisons, including almost eight years in the gulag. He conceived his act as a specific political protest, and he covered all of Taras Hill with leaflets containing Shevchenko quotations beforehand. There is now a small monument at the site commemorating Hirnyk's tragic protest, which the Soviet secret service managed to keep secret for a long time.

On 23 June 1978, the peasant Musa Mamut ended his life in the same way in protest against a new deportation from his homeland. As a Crimean Tatar, he was the only Muslim among the living torches in the Soviet bloc.⁶¹

On 2 March 1989, Romanian worker and painter Liviu Babeş, set himself on fire on a ski slope in Braşov in protest at the communist regime there. He died the same day shortly after being taken to hospital.

Other living torches in the Soviet bloc garnered little response from society, or even provoked no response at all. These cases mostly involved lone acts by individuals that the authorities often tried to cover up or portray as the alleged actions of psychopaths. The wider public only even learned about some of these instances after the fall of the communist regimes. Their tragic deeds are now commemorated by monuments and plaques. Although some protesters have been posthumously honoured with high state awards since the fall of communism, their actions are not unequivocally accepted by all their compatriots.⁶²

61 Cases of female self-immolation in the Muslim population living in the Soviet Union have been left out of this book. The motives behind these cases were not religious (Islam has generally interpreted suicide as unacceptable) and they were not primarily politically motivated. They were clearly related to the unhappy family situation of the women in question, who decided to leave the world in this shocking way. For example, as early as 1959, a total of 91 apparently occurred in Turkmenistan. A number of cases also happened in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in subsequent years. RO'Ī, Yaakov: *Islam in the Soviet Union. From the Second World War to Perestroika*. Columbia University Press, New York 2000, p. 546. Such cases of self-immolation by women are common in Pakistan and Afghanistan to this day.

62 Cf KAMIŃSKI, Łukasz: První živá pochodeň ve východním bloku. Ryszard Siwiec (1909–1968). In: BLAŽEK, Petr – EICHLER, Patrik – JAREŠ, Jakub et al: *Jan Palach '69*, pp. 115–127; STACH, Sabine: *Vermächtnispolitik. Jan Palach und Oskar Brüsewitz als politische Märtyrer*. Wallstein-Verlag, Göttingen 2016; CZABAŃSKI, Adam – CZABAŃSKI-ROSADA, Małgorzata: *The Self-immolation of Oskar Bruesewitz Compared to Other Suicides Committed as a Political Protest*. Petr Lang, Berlin 2018, pp. 120–123.

CASES OF SELF-IMMOLATION AFTER 1989

The highest number of self-immolations in a 10-day period in a single country was recorded in 1990. It took place in India, where massive protests broke out at the time after the central government launched a program to increase the number of reserved places in universities for students and staff from lower castes. The pursuit of positive discrimination brought about massive street protests by students.

According to research by Michael Biggs, more than 200 people set themselves on fire in September 1990 alone, and many of them died. Another wave of these cases erupted in just a few weeks.⁶³ The second conflict that resulted in cases of politically motivated self-immolation in India in recent decades was linked to language disputes. In 1964, the first Tamil set themselves on fire in protest against the imposition of Hindi, a year later five Tamils chose the same form of protest, and three others poisoned themselves.⁶⁴ The third conflict to engender new cases of self-immolation relates to separatist tendencies in the ancient region of Telangana. On 20 February 2010, a 19-year-old student, Siripur Yadaiah, set himself alight and died in hospital as a result of his burns. At least 10 people followed his example in the next two years.⁶⁵

In proportion to the population, the highest number of cases of self-immolation were recorded among Kurds living outside Turkish territory. A wave of these cases occurred in Western European states in February 1999 as a reaction to the arrest of the then-chairman of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, Abdullah Öcalan. He rejected this form of protest, however. His brother Osman responded in kind, calling on his compatriots to set fire to their enemies instead. Apart from a number of Vietnamese cases, this was a rare coordinated group act.⁶⁶

Although most cases of self-immolation did not have a significant impact, several of them played a crucial role and significantly influenced the political situation in the country where they took place, temporarily or even permanently. At the same time, they also played a fundamental role and inspired many other followers to take the same action. This includes the case of the Tunisian street trader Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire on 17 December 2010 in the city of Sidi Bouzid in protest against the confiscation of his vending cart by the local authorities. His desperate personal act surprisingly sparked mass street protests that led to the resignation of authoritarian President Ben Ali a few weeks later. The 27-year-old young man, who died on

63 BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing*, p. 185-186.

64 *Ibid.*, p. 186.

65 PRADESH, Andhra: Another suicide for Telangana. *Indian Express*, 30. 3. 2012.

66 BIGGS, Michael: *Dying without Killing*, p. 200.

Vážení čtenáři, právě jste dočetli ukázkou z knihy ***Living Torches in the Soviet Bloc***.
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