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The Students of Prague--Another Breed

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Two weeks ago, as I began writing this report on my pre-Christmas talks with Czechoslovakian students, the words Jan Palach spoke to a fellow Prague student from his death-bed still sent chills through me as I typed them again: "My act has fulfilled the purpose but let nobody else do it. It will be better if they do not do it any more. Let the living make their efforts in the struggle. I say goodbye. We may still see each other."

Palach's self-immolation, an act of heroic desperation protesting the Russian occupation of Czechoslovakia and the government's go-slow attitude on promised reforms, shocked the world. His heroism fused again, as was his purpose, the lagging spirit of his countrymen into a steely determination to resist Soviet demands. But even such a shock as this wears off, and the subsequent rash of immolations from mentally unstable young people tainted the purity of Palach's startling sacrifice. The young student's martyrdom, which current writers have compared to the death by fire of Bohemian religious martyr Jan Hus in 1415, may actually have made the struggle of the living more difficult. An element of hopelessness, which even Stalinism had not introduced to the stubborn Czechoslovakian psyche, seems now to be gnawing at the national spirit.

Last week a friend of Palach's, speaking at the Bertrand Russell Congress in Stockholm, soberly warned the West against romanticizing the Czechoslovakian events. "I know how difficult it is to understand us," he said. "After twenty years under Stalinism one had learned to live in a special way, which I would call minimalism. One had the minimal possibilities to do what the law allowed. One doesn't even know what happiness is, for our outlook is hopelessness. That is our real problem, not so much the Soviet occupation."

These post-Palach statements are hard to couple with my pre-Christmas impressions of the Prague young people, who despite the gray wintry gloom and the Russian occupation seemed to be filled through and through with realistic determination...to endure and to overcome. I cannot judge how the mood may have changed. An American journalist recently returned from Prague tells me that the students realize, despite Palach's sacrifice, that it is now politically impossible for the government to make the concessions they demand. A Slovak journalist friend who visited Bonn recently talked still of an optimistic

future for his occupied land: "What the government needs now is quiet. I'm not pessimistic. The students and workers are working out a real program now, instead of going from day to day, from action to action. Things are moving slower since the August invasion, but they are still moving."

Although the students' wish to be better informed about government negotiations with the Russians is understandable, he added, "some of them don't seem to understand that secrecy is what the Russians demand...even the Western powers negotiate in secret with the Russians." The Soviet Union, he believes, is nonetheless operating from a position of relative weakness. "They lost more than we did by their invasion and occupation. They misjudged us badly, and in the spring heads will fall in Moscow. The Russians now have to keep their military strength more dispersed, which is harder for them and more expensive. They can't afford to leave our country for another one or two years, but they have unified our warring elements, the conservatives and liberals." Palach's death, he added, "was of course a hero's act, But it complicated the situation."

Jan Palach's sacrifice betrayed an extreme that was not discernible in the talks I had with Prague students. But I recall, too, this warning from a German journalist: "It's difficult to make an outsider, even an interested one who reads more than the newspaper accounts, understand the depression of the Czechoslovakians now. I remember how disappointed some Czech writers were after Guenter Grass was here recently...Grass was delighted at how well things were going and didn't grasp the underlying desolation. Of course there is still freedom of speech and relative freedom of the press, but the Czechs and Slovaks never had it as bad as the East Germans. And pointing to that doesn't remove the longing for what might have been."

Rock-bottom economic conditions help to create the pervading gloom. Before Christmas, the Prague population queued up ten and twenty deep in front of almost every shop--but the shelves inside were almost bare of goods. "People are buying like mad this season," one woman told me. "If they have any money, they figure they might as well spend it." Such reckless indulgence is prompted by despair, and a fear that the Christmas just past might be the last for a sort of carefree gaiety. "As far as business is concerned," the older woman continued, "it already feels like the first days after the war here. People don't go shopping now. I need some kitchen chairs--the ones I've had for twenty years are breaking down--but I can't go to a shop and buy them. I have to go from shop to shop and plead with the manager to tell me when some are coming in. If one shop is expecting a shipment, I'll check in every day until they arrive."

Such bare necessities as coal are in short supply. Czechoslovakia's North Bohemian mines once produced great quantities of brown coal for industrial use, and other mines produced at least some of the nation's black coal for heating, but organization and transport difficulties have virtually hog-tied the native production now. The night air of Prague still tastes of coal dust, but many apartment-dwellers are shivering because the landlord can't heat without coal, and some schools are forced to close because they can't warm the schoolrooms.

Political realities plague the students more than the economic pinch, however. The romantic, utopian attitudes which Prague students find disturbing (and slightly hare-brained) in the German leftist movement is clearly missing from their conversations. There seemed to be no trend toward self-destruction among Palach's classmates at the philosophy faculty of the Charles University...and the philosophy faculty students are counted as left militants in the CSSR spectrum of politically active youth.

I spent several afternoons talking with bearded, somewhat shabbily-clothed young men in the student council room of the philosophy faculty, and two evenings chatting in the lobby of my hotel and in the Vltava youth club with students from the technical university. (The recorded and live music there was beat, and the Beatles' "Hey Jude" was then as popular in Prague as in the West.) Although they, like the leftist German students, were averse to having their pictures made, they talked openly and freely. In all my conversations in Prague, the Czechoslovakians never seemed to fear reprisal for free speech. The one occasion on which I felt uneasy... when the same large blonde woman sat near me for tea at the hotel and in a restaurant for drinks that evening...was shrugged off as a coincidence by my Czechoslovakian companions.

Unlike West German students, the Prague young people were reluctant to talk of "escalation" tactics in their fight for realization of the January 1968 reform program. By no means content with the current occupation and the trend toward compromise, they seemed nonetheless to respect the pressure under which Alexander Dubcek and his fellow reformers stand. "The students are disappointed that Dubcek and other leaders have compromised," a Czech journalist told me, "but they support him still--not with their whole hearts but with understanding." In December the students talked of pushing constantly, but not with a sudden shove that would break the nation's delicate balance and lessen the likelihood of forward steps on the tightrope.

The student movement in Czechoslovakia is ideologically more diffuse but popularly more firmly rooted than that of West Germany or of the United States. "Student demands are not those of the students, but those for the people," one university leader told me. By going to the factories and explaining to the workers the reasons behind their strikes and protests, the students have won a common basis with the workers. Their solidarity, which one journalist described as "not in unity but in common cause," admittedly has fewer historical hindrances than, for example, the West German student-worker relationship. Workers and students speak the same language in Czechoslovakia, while in West Germany the high-flown theoretical rhetoric of students is usually unintelligible to the common laborer. "We've never had the class society that the Germans have," a Czech journalist told me proudly. "For three hundred years our language was kept alive by the farmers ...I'll bet you every man in this restaurant would tell you his great-grandfather was a farmer."

The Czechs and Slovaks also have a tradition for an intellectualism that embraces rich and poor--the common laborer feels no disdain for poetry. While students in West Germany are predominantly the sons and daughters of the elite or upper middle class, fifty to sixty percent of the Czechoslovakian university students are children of the working class. (This

preference, of course, works against the children of the well-educated.) Even within the universities, there is no chasm between the professors and students--as an engineering student explained, "the professors are not holy here, and they never have been." Perhaps because of this rapport, the students accord their professors a respect and common courtesy sadly missing in some West German assemblies.

Nor have relations between the students and the government followed the unyielding confrontation politics from both sides that is so lamentable in West Germany. When 1,500 students protested on 31 October 1967 against the electrical power shortages in the Strahov student dormitories, police attacked the students with billy clubs just like their counterparts in Berlin or Hamburg. But after this first demonstration of student political power, the students' demands--identification numbers for policemen, parliamentary discussion of the protest and police action, disciplinary measures for the police--were largely fulfilled by the Central Committee. When a Prague policeman was murdered some time later in a robbery, the students sent a letter of condolence.

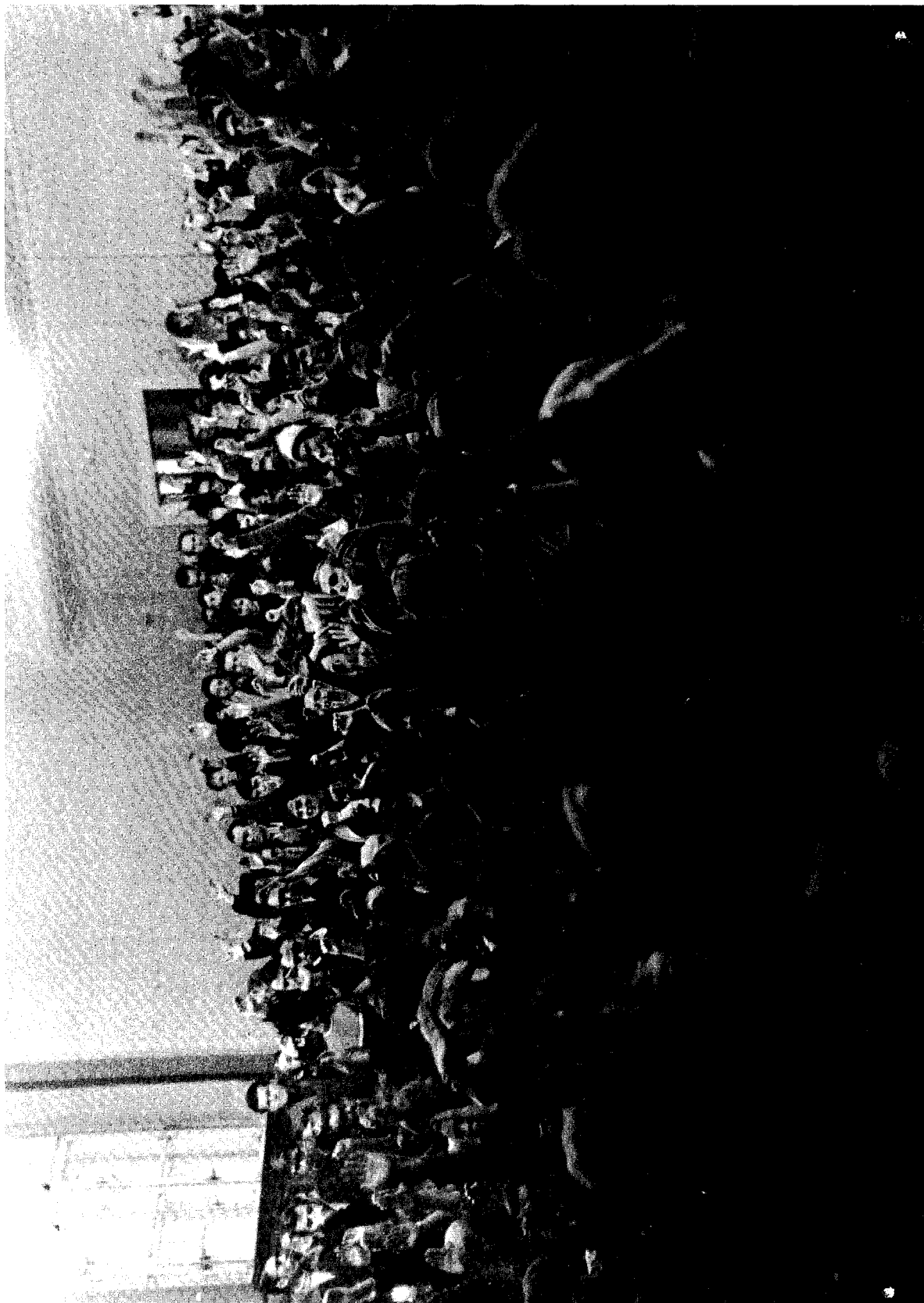
The Prague students began to establish their cooperative understanding with the factory workers after the Strahov demonstration. "Two years ago there was antipathy between workers and students," a student of languages told me as we sat in a cafe drinking Viennese coffee near the end of my stay in Prague. "They didn't understand each other. The workers were repressed by the technocrats and they associated the students with them. But now they realize that they have common goals."

Exchange of information between students and workers, and vice versa, now operates on a permanent basis. Small groups of workers and students meet weekly to discuss their individual problems; when union chapters plan a meeting, student representatives are invited, and students report to the workers (or invite them to sit in) on student government meetings.

During the three-day "occupation strike" of the universities last November, in which more than half the student population of Czechoslovakia took over their university buildings to discuss "democracy" and the lagging reforms, the railroad workers' union publicly announced their sympathy for the student demands. Factory groups brought hot soup and bread to the young people; actors and public functionaries came to talk to and with the students. Although some factory groups considered calling a general strike, student leaders asked the workers to wait, and they did.

By mid-December, the Prague students were expecting some government action on the demands they had voiced during the November strike--a six-month cut-off date for press censorship, removal of travel restrictions, the right to free assembly, no "cabinet politics" and a free flow of information between government and citizens, fulfillment of the reforms accepted by the April 1968 plenum, an explanation for the continued postponement of free elections, a foreign policy in accordance with the United Nations charter of human rights.

But late December and January was not a time ripe for student concessions, even if they were "demands for the people." These November points have now been superceded by those announced by students and union groups after the



Charles University students at the philosophy faculty during November strike

Palach immolation: free elections to all government and party bodies, immediate meetings of the Bohemian Central Committee and a full party congress, removal of censorship and a banning of the Soviet occupation newspaper "Zpravy," and full and frank explanation of the true economic situation.

German journalist Christian Schmidt-Haeuer once described the Prague students as "politically between Montesquieu and Dahrendorf's conflict theory (sociologist-politician Dahrendorf, a West German, opposes Parsons' theory of functionalism)...or even between the Western Marxist Mills, Gramsci and the Frankfurt sociologists Adorno, Haberman, Friedeburg." This nutshell name-dropping of neo-Marxist sociologists and philosophers gives only a vague orientation for the real position of Prague youth, but it demonstrates nonetheless that the younger generation is attempting to move beyond the ideological boundaries of their Marxist-Leninist schooling.

The Western student idols--Che Guevara and Herbert Marcuse--carry little weight in Prague, however. A familiar picture of Che is prominently displayed above the torn and broken leather chairs in the student council room of the Charles University philosophy faculty, but Che's concept of guerilla warfare would not be applicable to local conditions, the students say. Marcuse is mostly a name to bandy about. "Marcuse has some influence on students," a sociology student explained, "but those who follow his theories do it mostly from a shallow understanding--they only know his ideas from hearsay. You can't get his books here so we can't read him directly. Even sociology is in the kindergarten stage here. It's been offered as a major for only two years. Some students reject Marcuse empirically because of our experience with the system, and others reject him because Marcuse means a doctrine, and they mistrust every authority."

The students with whom I talked--history and engineering students, sociology and chemistry majors, a languages major who wants to study in Cuba--all call themselves "socialists," but none would say he was a "communist."

"These words have no real objective content now," said L., a slight, bearded student. "Even the students who subscribe to and use Marxist theory try to use a new vocabulary, to find words that say what is hidden behind the words."

"We've seen socialism lose its meaning and be taken out of our hands," another student said. "Socialism should be a means and not a goal. Marx said the goal should be communism, but we don't like to juggle with these terms. It doesn't have to have an ism as long as it's democratic."

Czechoslovakian students, under the independent Czech and Slovak student union organizations which last April replaced the "Consomol-parody" party youth organization of the CSM, plan to work out a political concept at a student congress in April 1969. "We can expect that the congress will oppose the Russian occupation, not as a theoretically grounded conception, but in reaction to the political situation," a Prague student leader explained. He also anticipates that the congress will try to find some local application for "the contemporary strivings of Western students--putting Che and Marcuse into Czechoslovakian possibilities," but he admitted that such ideas "have no tradition here."

The congress' chief emphasis, however, will lie on building a political concept on the generation principle. "It is not a question of generations according to birth-date, but political generations--that the present younger generation and the generation in power, the groups with the same political experiences, should come to the same goal. It will be a total rejection of the present power structure, Dubcek as well as Novotny. If this political generation refuses to bargain, then we must reform from within, through discussions and negotiations. We want to do away with the vertical structure and have a horizontal structure of communication and power. The generation standpoint is the most important--not for a primitive change of the generation in power, but to politicalize the younger generation."

Nationalism versus internationalism--a subject I have not heard discussed by the New Left of West Germany--is a problem of deep concern to the Czechoslovakian students with whom I talked. "We regard ourselves as part of the international student movement," said K., a Prague history student, "but the differences between the Czechoslovakian students and other ideological groups are so great that the only real tie between us is time... that we are all protesting against something at the same time."

Nationalism is important for Czechoslovakian students, K. continued, "and I think it plays a role in Western movements too, even when the students don't admit it." All the Eastern student movements--Polish, Hungarian, Yugoslavian--are strongly nationalistic, K. said, but with good cause. "It wouldn't be good if tomorrow we all just speak Russian."

Forging a tie between the nationalist and internationalist aspects of the student movement, however, is a problem the Prague students expect will cause conflict. "Marxism couldn't solve the problem with the worker movement, and for the next fifty years it was ignored. If the internationalist tendencies in the student movement are subdued, this can fall apart too. The only thing that makes me optimistic about our student movement," he mused, "is that it's just beginning, and the outlook and hopes are that the students will not neglect the possible internationalism."

The young historian blamed the dissolution of the international worker movement on false organization priorities. This roused a cry of protest from a graduate engineer who described himself as representing "the views of the left."

"The conclusive split," countered clean-shaven C., "was not on internationalism, but in the betrayal of the Social Democrats who began to serve bourgeois capitalism. But I agree that nationalism plays a progressive role in the current Czechoslovakian student movement. We hear that the Western students need patience to study and understand our nationalist viewpoint. They will understand it when they understand the character of Stalinism."

The CSSR reaction to Stalinism, admitted the young engineer, is once again nationalistic, "but this is only secondary. We must be patient and discreet. We must work step by step to put aside the nationalist aspects so that the revolt against Stalinism will be stronger and will conquer." The only solution for subjugating nationalism to internationalism is "in Marxist form," C. added, "and I'm optimistic about the student movement



The philosophy faculty of the Charles University, Prague,  
during the "occupation strike" last November



because it is directed most strongly toward internationalism...and in the last analysis a revolution depends on proletarian internationalism."

But how do they plan to keep the student movement going? I asked. Do the Czechoslovakian students plan to use escalation tactics and take to the streets again after their extremely well-disciplined strike of November? "The movement must advance, but we must find new forms of cooperation between workers and students," replied C. "If we accept socialism as a system of self-government where the creative activity of every individual is realized, where the goal is to do away with the 'alienation of work,' and where every person makes his contribution to the administration of society, we must admit that socialism never existed in the CSSR and that CSSR society never tried to build up socialism. We believe--a group of some fifty students--that this system must be changed through political revolution."

The bearded history student K. identified his views as those of the "middle left" and took a more moderate standpoint on escalation: "The student movement is the only one which has definite boundaries for escalation. The extreme border is disintegration, so this means that the student movement must have a moment in which these ideas become the social strengths of others. An increase in activity must not mean an escalation in actions but in the self-confidence of the students. I agree that concrete actions are important, but a student means virtually nothing...to be blunt, a student strike is a fart in comparison to a strike in an electrical plant or to the influence of several political newspapers. A student strike only has meaning insofar as it provokes the students themselves to productive thinking so that they can influence other social groups."

Warming to the subject, the young engineer rebutted the existentialist importance of the movement and defended his activist standpoint: "Students are politicalized for the analysis of society," agreed C., "but when they learn the character of society, it is their duty to pass along critical or revolutionary ideas to other social groups. If the students demonstrate so that the workers understand why, so that the workers accept the student criticism and expand this and make it concrete, we can expect that the electrical plant will go on strike too."

Brashly, C. then suggested that a three-day general strike, given the level of the CSSR economy, "would mean the fall of the political regime." How could that be, countered the moderate K., when a three week strike in France could not even depose DeGaulle? "Our power elite knows its weaknesses," C. said confidently. "The crux of the problem is that the capitalist system is built on the power of capital, whereas our bureaucratic system would fall back onto fraud, on the misuse and rape of the proletarian ideology."

Unable to convince us that even a so-called socialist regime can be toppled so easily, the young engineer then answered an earlier question about the Czechoslovakian students' views of other student movements. From the "second and third-hand information available," C. found the American student movement "most positive" because American students are "against every form of establishment, whereas in West Germany the students respect some forms of establishment."



Socialism with a human face--Charles  
University students during the strike

A sociology student, however, defended the "clearer political goals" of the French students. "American students," he said, "merely negate society, while European students are considering an ideology of the future. The European movement also negates society, but it fights against it constructively." The possibility of changing the capitalist system in the United States, he added, is bleak because "the system is so far developed that there's no way out...but in the capitalist states of Europe the development is not so advanced, there are still other perspectives for change."

Curiously, all the students with whom I talked denied any real generation conflict at the roots of their movement. But an older woman, whose son refused to study because he could make more money repairing electrical appliances, told me she believed the students' support of reform politics stems as much from disappointment with their parents as from altruistic socialism. "The generation conflict is greater here than in Western lands," she said with some bitterness. "Children who have been able to travel outside the country for the last two years, who can see what can be bought just across the border...they accuse their parents of helping the communist regime, and all the whys and wherefores of our reasons for turning to the Soviet Union twenty-five years ago make no dent on these young people. The young people can see that there's no chance for youth here...they don't even want to enter the university unless it's a family tradition or they have a special interest. Why should they? My son, who didn't graduate from high school, makes four thousand kronen a month, more than I do after a university degree and twenty years of experience at my job."

Later that evening, I asked a clean-shaven, extremely polite young chemistry student why he bothered with a university education. Laughing, he replied first, "Well, Lenin said 'learn, learn, learn.'" Then he thoughtfully added that perhaps some system of financial recognition for achievement should be introduced. "It isn't very satisfying to know the lady cleaning the streets makes as much money with her hands as you do with your head, but I don't know how to find the middle ground. And I do think we need a socialist base..."

Despite the Prague Winter, are the young people here still optimistic? I asked another student companion. "I don't like the question," he said, "but I'll say this--I want to be. Didn't Hemingway write that 'man is not created for defeat'?"

Sincerely yours,

*Barbara Bright*  
Barbara Bright

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