

KINO LORBER
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presents

BURNING BUSH

A Film by Agnieszka Holland

2013 / Czech Republic / in Czech with English subtitles / Color

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

The three-part drama, directed by the Polish director Agnieszka Holland, is HBO Europe's most ambitious, big-budget project to date. The film returns to a pivotal time in modern Czech history, ignored in Czech cinema until now. It begins with a reconstruction of the shocking act of a Czech university student, who in protest of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, set himself on fire in Prague's Wenceslas Square on January 16, 1969, and died four days later. Through the story of the brave defense attorney Dagmar Burešová, who defended Palach's legacy in a doomed lawsuit, the film examines the transformations taking place in Czechoslovak society after the invasion of the armies of the Warsaw Pact in August of 1968 and the installation of a hardline Communist government. It depicts the beginnings of Czech and Slovak resistance against the occupation, which reached its apex with the mass protests during Palach's funeral. It also shows the nation's gradual resignation under the pressure of fear and harsher persecution.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Part I

On the 16th of January 1969 on Wenceslas Square in Prague, a young student sets himself on fire in front of dozens of passers-by. Police Major Jireš (Ivan Trojan) investigates the circumstances of Palach's actions. His instructions are to stop any other "human torches." The news of Palach's self-burning quickly spreads among his colleagues – students at the Charles University's Faculty of Arts. One of them is Ondřej Trávníček (Vojtěch Kotek), who is a radical student protester. The heavily burnt young student is taken to the hospital where he is cared for by Dr. Ziková (Taťjana Medvecká). Jan's brother finds out about what Jan did and the morning after his mother learns of her son's shocking act while on a train to Prague to meet with him.

Both of Palach's closest relatives visit the heavily burnt young man at his hospital bed. In the meantime, defense attorney Dagmar Burešová (Tatiana Pauhofová), her boss Dr. Charouz (Adrian Jastraban) and her colleagues at the law firm enter the story. Detective Jireš tries at all costs to find out if Palach was part of an organized group and if someone is soon to follow in his footsteps. He uses somewhat hard-nosed methods to convince Palach's friend, the student Hana Čížková (Emma Smetana), to discourage possible followers of Palach in an appearance on television.

On Sunday, January 19, Palach dies. His funeral becomes a massive protest. The newspapers print a scandalous statement by parliament member Vilém Nový. Palach's mother and brother decide to sue the Communist MP for defamation of character. They ask Dr. Burešová to represent them. At first she refuses their request because they have no chance of success.

Part II

Part two begins with a depiction of Jan Zajíc's self-burning at the end of February 1969. Attorney Burešová takes on the case of Palach's mother and brother against Dr. Nový and,
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with the help of her young legal clerk Pavel (Patrik Děrgel), begins searching for evidence of the fallacy of Nový's claims. The search for witnesses, however, is accompanied by numerous complications. Nový avoids receiving his summons and the beginning of the trial is repeatedly postponed. With a colleague's help, attorney Burešová gets her hands on a document that illuminates Nový's past. The document indicates that Nový was once arrested during the Stalinist purges and probably collaborated with the KGB to avoid the death penalty.

In the meantime, the unscrupulous secret police (StB) officer Major Dočekal (Igor Bareš) exerts pressure on Palach's family and others involved in the Nový affair. Palach's mother is terrorized by anonymous phone calls and the StB begins an operation to remove Palach's grave from the Olšany graveyard. Dr. Burešová happens to visit Nový at his villa while he is having a boisterous party with Soviet officials. Major Dočekal meets with Burešová's boss, Dr. Charouz. He uses Charouz's daughter Vladka (Jenovéfa Boková), who was arrested in an anti-regime protest in August 1969, to blackmail Charouz and eventually gets him to collaborate. Major Jireš, who is increasingly disturbed by the brutal methods of the StB, emigrates along with his family.

Part III

Eight months after Palach's death, the trial of Vilém Nový, represented by the arrogant, self-assured attorney Sýkora (David Novotný), finally begins. Palach's mother, during an important private conversation with Nový, is shocked by how pontifical he is. Dr. Burešová's husband, pediatrician Radim Bureš (Jan Budař), faces escalating problems at work due to the StB's pressure. After several incidents of bullying he is fired from the hospital and ends up a general practitioner in a remote town.

The uncompromising attorney, with the help of her clerk, continues her search for evidence and witnesses. Many of the witnesses, however, are afraid of consequences in the increasingly rigid regime. An important document goes missing in the Dr. Burešová's office. It is stolen by her boss Charouz in order to complicate the trial. It is revealed that a crew from the Czechoslovak radio was present at the party meeting and recorded Nový's speech. The recording is a key piece of evidence. Despite the evidence of untruthfulness and maliciousness of the MP's claims, the manipulated judge (Ivana Uhlířová) pronounces a judgment in which she absolves the defendant of all charges. The StB's blackmail leads to the removal of Palach's grave, which was said to attract unwanted attention. Aided by the StB, Palach's remains are cremated.

The epilogue from January 1989 opens with fliers informing about the planned anti-government protest on the occasion of the anniversary of Palach's death.

Cast and Crew

Dagmar Burešová, attorney – Tatiana Pauhofová
Libuše Palachová, Jan's mother – Jaroslava Pokorná
Jiří Palach, Jan's brother – Petr Stach
Radim Bureš, Dagmar's husband – Jan Budař
Police Major Jireš – Ivan Trojan
Police Lieutenant Boček – Denny Ratajský
Police Commander-in-Chief Horyna – Alois Švehlík
STB (secret police) Major Dočekal – Igor Bareš
Ondřej Trávníček, student leader – Vojtěch Kotek
Vladimír Charouz, head of the law firm – Adrian Jastraban
Pavel Janda, Dagmar's articulated clerk – Patrik Děrgel
Ilona Palachová, Jiří's wife – Marie Maroušková
Hana Čížková, a fellow student and Palach's friend – Emma Smetana
Vilém Nový, member of parliament – Martin Huba (known for *Kawasaki's Rose*)

Vladka Charouzová, member of the Student Union – Jenováfa Boková
JUDr. Sládeček, Dagmar's colleague – Stanislav Zindulka
JUDr. Knapp, Dagmar's colleague – Ondřej Malý
MUDr. Ziková, Jan's doctor – Tatjana Medvecká
Judge Orlová – Ivana Uhlířová
JUDr. Sýkora, Nový's attorney – David Novotný
Luděk Pachman, chess champion – Jiří Bábek
Comrade Hazura, witness in the Nový trial – Pavel Cisovský
Jiříčka, train conductor – Miroslav Krobot (known for *Man from London*)
Zuzanka Burešová, Dagmar's daughter – Michaela Procházková
Lucinka Burešová, Dagmar's daughter – Tereza Korejsová
Jan Palach – Lukáš Černocho

scriptwriter Štěpán Hulík
director Agnieszka Holland
executive producers HBO Europe Antony Root, Tereza Polachová
producers nutprodukce Tomáš Hrubý, Pavla Kubečková

director of photography Martin Štrba
editor Pavel Hrdlička
sound Petr Čechák
costume designer Katarína Hollá
production designer Milan Býček
make-up artist Zdeněk Klika
music composer Antoni Komasa-Lazarkiewicz

About the Film

Burning Bush, screenplay by debuting Štěpán Hulík (1984), explores the aftermath of Palach's sacrifice and the beginning of the so-called "normalization" period in occupied Czechoslovakia. The story's heroine is defense attorney Dagmar Burešová (Tatiana Pauhofová), a historic figure who represents Palach's mother, Libuše (Jaroslava Pokorná), and brother, Jiří (Petr Stach), in a seemingly hopeless case. The lawsuit challenges the scandalous defamation by MP Vilém Nový (Martin Huba, *Kawasaki's Rose*) who belittled Palach's act at a Communist party meeting in a false proclamation about so-called "cold fire" and an ugly conspiracy which supposedly fooled the young student.

The film also recounts the self-burning of Jan Zajíc in February 1969 which, in the impending paralysis of the society, created much less stir than Palach's. We see the student protesters who attempted to preserve the remaining ideals of the Prague Spring and publicly defended it against systematic repression of the post-invasion Communist government. The film also examines the collaborationist practices of the secret police officers who attempted to erase Palach's legacy from the nation's consciousness and began cruelly punishing any signs of disagreement with the officially approved return to Soviet style rule.

Burning Bush is unique in many ways. The film's rendering of the late sixties created difficulties from a technical point of view. The opening sequence of Palach setting himself on fire at the top of Wenceslas Square in Prague was shot in a tram depot, and finished with special effects at the UPP studio. To recreate the period disposition of the square and other locations throughout the film, *Burning Bush* contains 108 special effect shots completed using 2D technology (with 3D elements) at the UPP studios (visual postproduction). The story features original locations, including Palach's own childhood home in Všetaty, as well as authentic clothing, television and medical equipment and other elements of the 1960s. The film incorporates archival footage, including the shots of mass processions during Palach's funeral. The original death mask, which is shown being made in key scenes in Part I, was loaned to the production by its creator – the Czech sculptor Olbram Zoubek.

The riveting performances from the supporting cast of *Burning Bush* are played by top Czech and Slovak actors, including Ivan Trojan in the role of policeman Jireš, and Miroslav Krobot (known for the lead performances in *Man from London*, and *Alois Nebel*) as a train conductor. At its core, the story is about individual bravery and, conversely, the breaking of personal character and the resulting moral depravity. The story recognizes individuals who sacrificed their quality of life and sometimes life itself to follow their conscience or pursue seemingly unattainable ideals. This true story, which also recalls the massive protests in January 1989 during "Palach's Week," continues to be relevant today, and makes a valuable, much-needed contribution to understanding the past half-century of Czech history. It is a timeless testimony to the immorality of dictatorship and the fragility of freedom.

Historical Background: Reality versus Fiction

While the central characters of the mother and brother of Jan Palach, JUDr. Burešová and her family, and Vilém Nový resemble closely their historical counterparts; other characters in the series are solely stock characters (for instance students Čížková and Trávníček or the detectives and police officers). After lengthy deliberations, the writer and director decided to simplify the unfolding of the trial in which Jan Palach's mother, along with five other well-known individuals (Vladimír Škutina, Pavel Kohout, Lubomír Holeček, Emil Zátopek and Luděk Pachman), sued Vilém Nový. The creators decided to emphasize the efforts of Libuše Palachová to defend her son's honor, and the five other petitioners, whom Vilém Nový accused of their part in Palach's death in February of 1969 during his scandalous speech, did not fit into the series.

Some of the events connected with Palach's protest have to this day not been clarified by detectives or historians. For instance, the group of followers whom Jan mentioned in his last letters most likely never existed. Since we may never learn the entire truth about this matter, the creators of *Burning Bush* leave the question open. In several cases, it was necessary, for the purpose of drama, to connect a certain event or action with a different individual than it was connected with in reality.

The most important instance of this is the last statement of Jan Palach directed at the other members of the (alleged) protest group. In the film, the student Čížková is forced to publicly read this statement. In reality, however, Palach's last message was relayed to the public by the student leader Lubomír Holeček, who built on several actual statements of the dying Palach.

However, Holeček spun the statements in such a way as to calm the situation and discourage other self-burnings. Also unclear is the role the secret police and the Soviets had in the disinformation concerning so called "cold fire." In the film, the circumstances regarding their involvement are therefore merely hinted at.

Further information and audio and visual documents about the life and protest of Jan Palach are accessible in English, Czech, French, German and Polish on the Charles University website portal www.janpalach.cz.

THE CAST AND CREW

Agnieszka Holland (director)
(1948)

The world-renowned Polish director and screenwriter was born into an intellectual family in Warsaw. Her mother, a journalist, was a member of the Polish underground.

Agnieszka Holland graduated from FAMU, the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague in 1971, from there she joined the group of promising young Polish directors associated with acclaimed Polish director Andrzej Wajda, who were known as “the filmmakers of moral unrest”.

She won the International Critic’s Prize at the Cannes Film Festival for her solo directorial debut, *Provincial Actors (Aktorzy prowincjonalni)* 1980). Next came the films *Fever (Gorączka)*, 1980) and *The Lonely Woman (Kobieta samotna)*, 1981), the latter premiering shortly before the declaration of the state of emergency in Poland. After this forced turn in the political situation, the film was immediately taken out of distribution because of its social critique.

Just before the state of emergency, Holland emigrated to France, but her films continued to have Polish themes and earn critical acclaim. She directed *Angry Harvest (Bittere Ernte)*, 1985), the story of a Polish farmer hiding a Jewish woman who had escaped from a Nazi forced transportation train, which received an Oscar nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. In the drama *To Kill a Priest* (1988), Holland was inspired by the real case of a murdered Catholic priest Jerzy Popieluszko, who was executed by the Polish secret police in 1981.

She received a Best Adapted Screenplay Oscar nomination for *Europa, Europa (Hitlerjunge Salomon)*, 1990). This period drama is a startling chronicle of a Jewish boy who lived through both Stalinist re-education and was part of the Hitler Youth movement.

In America she made *The Secret Garden* (1993) and *Total Eclipse* (1995), a historically accurate account of the passionate and violent relationship between two 19th century French poets, starring a young Leonardo DiCaprio. Her next films included *Washington Square* (1997), an adaptation of a novel by Henry James, the mystical story *The Third Miracle* (1999) and the psychological film *Julie Walking Home* (2001).

In the biographical film, *Copying Beethoven* (2006), Holland worked with actor Ed Harris for the third time. She has also directed episodes for many notable TV series including *JAG*, *Cold Case*, *The Wire* and *Treme*.

In 2009, along with her daughter Kasia Adamik, she made the co-production film *The True Story About Janosik (Prawdziwa historia)*, which tells the legendary story of the Slovak outlaw. Her newest feature film, *In Darkness (V ciemności)*, 2011), depicts the fate of a group of Jews who spent the war hidden in the sewage system of the occupied city of Lvov. This film – inspired by true events – was also nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.
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Burning Bush has earned her the Best Film and Best Director awards from the Czech Film Academy, along with 18 other nominations for the film which were all received in the major categories.

Holland's works reflect her Jewish and Catholic roots, dealing with issues of faith and mysticism. The key focus of her work, however, is the question of how human beings can morally stand the test of a critical situation.

Štěpán Hulík (scriptwriter)
(1984)

A native of Uherské Hradiště, Czech Republic, Štěpán was a student of Film Studies at Charles University's Faculty of Arts in Prague (same school as Jan Palach) before graduating from screenwriting and dramaturgy at FAMU. Active in the past on productions of film festivals the Summer Film School in Uherské Hradiště and the River Film Festival in Písek, he won the country's most prestigious literary award Magnesia Litera for Discovery of the Year for his book, *Cinematography of Forgetting* (*Kinematografie zapomnění*, 2012), a captivating historical account of film production at Barrandov Studios in Prague in the years 1968-1973 the period that marked the end of the Czechoslovak New Wave in cinema and is known politically as the beginning of the period of 'normalization' in the country. Remarkably, *Burning Bush* is Hulík's debut as a narrative feature scriptwriter.

PRODUCERS

HBO Europe s. r. o. in the Czech Republic

HBO's original Czech production was launched in 2004 with the thus-far unknown genre of stand-up comedy to the Czech audience and launched the careers of a number of professional entertainers. Documentaries were another step in original TV production, chosen from a screen-writing competition. Czech HBO stepped into the sphere of live-action film in 2009 with several feature film debuts. Thus far, the most extensive live-action project have been two seasons of forty-five episode series *Terapie* (2011) and *Terapie II* (2013) which employs some of the best filmmakers and actors in the country.

nutprodukce

nutprodukce is a Prague-based production agency, which was created out of the desire of young producers (Tomáš Hrubý – EFP 'Producer of the Move' in Cannes May 2014 – and Pavla Kubečková) to find together new approaches to film and television. Since its founding in 2011, nutprodukce received Czech and international awards for student films *Graffitiger* (short), the documentary *The Fortress*, and other projects. The miniseries *Burning Bush* was created and produced for HBO Europe s.r.o. in the Czech Republic by nutprodukce. They approached director Agnieszka Holland because of her unique ability to capture historical stories in an original, honest and unsentimental way, for her world renown and, last but not least, her personal involvement in the story.

PRINCIPAL CAST

Tatiana Pauhofová (Dagmar Burešová, attorney)
(1983)

Among the most important contemporary Slovak actors on stage, in TV and film, Tatiana Pauhofová is often cast in Czech productions. She was born and still lives in Bratislava, where she studied acting at the Academy of Arts. She worked with director Agnieszka Holland in the big-screen movie *The True Story About Janosik* (2009).

Jaroslava Pokorná (Libuše Palachová, Jan's mother)
(1946)

An awarded theater actor, Jaroslava Pokorná has also devoted herself to studies on devised theatre and pedagogy at Prague's Theater Academy of Performing Arts (DAMU) where she studied acting in late 1960s. Along with theater she's had a rewarding TV and film career as a character actor. She was given her only leading film role by director Agnieszka Holland in her student work *God's Sin* (1969).

Petr Stach (Jiří Palach, Jan's brother)
(1974)

Petr Stach graduated from the department of alternative theater at DAMU in Prague. Miloš Forman chose him as one of the interpreters of the lead role of Uli in a new production of a musical *A Well Paid Walk* staged at the National Theater in Prague. He made his film debut in Václav Marhoul's war drama *Tobruk*. Since then he's appeared in several TV series and major Czech film productions.

Ivan Trojan (police major Jireš)
(1964)

Ivan Trojan is one of the most accomplished theater and film actors of his generation in the country. Active in the most progressive Prague theater companies since 1988, he's a principal actor of the Dejvice Theater working with director (and actor) Miroslav Krobot, work for which he's received the most prestigious acting awards many times over. He made his film debut in David Ondříček's *Loners* and has been a staple of Czech cinema ever since with multiple Czech Film Academy Awards in his possession.

Martin Huba (MP Vilém Nový)
(1943)

Along with his long and accomplished acting careers, making him one of the most frequently cast Slovak character actors, Martin Huba is a respected theatre and opera director based in Bratislava. Since 1989, he has mostly been cast by Czech film directors and appeared in three films by Jan Hřebejk including in the Best Foreign Language Oscar nominated film *Divided We Fall* (2000), and *Kawasaki's Rose* (2009). He has also worked with Jiří Menzel on his adaptation of *I Served the King of England* (2006) and his latest *Don Juans* (2013).

Miroslav Krobot (Jiříčka, the train conductor)
(1951)

As a director, actor and educator, Miroslav Krobot has played an important role in the development of contemporary Czech theater. He founded Dejvice Theater, a small forms theater company with a remarkable reputation based in Prague, where he's been the artistic director for sixteen years. In 2001, Petr Zelenka cast him in his theater play *Tales of Common Madness*, a role which Krobot reprised four years later in a film adaptation. Since then he's a frequent presence on cinema screens and in 2007 he was cast as the lead in the drama *Man from London* by the Hungarian director Béla Tarr. In 2014 he will be making his feature film directing debut with *Nowhere in Moravia* presented as work in progress at the Cannes film market in May 2014.

INTERVIEWS WITH THE FILMMAKERS

Agnieszka Holland (director)

You were a student in Prague and actively participated in the student movement during the time of Palach's protest. What did you live through back then?

It was my first experience as an adult and perhaps my most important experience with politics. I lived through the Prague Spring, the resistance spirit during the invasion and directly after it, Jan Palach's protest and then that of Jan Zajíc. The reasons for their two sacrifices were similar, but their reception by the public was extremely different. Palach was regarded as a national hero. A month later, when another Jan set himself on fire - that is Jan Zajíc - people didn't even want to hear about him.

During that month, I had the chance to see an incredible transformation. People understood they were not capable of that extreme a sacrifice. So they resigned. I always thought the anatomy of so-called normalization would make a good topic. Another important question which always interested me has to do with the psychological reasons for heroism. How is it possible that an individual goes against the grain and sacrifices him or herself? I myself was cheeky, brave and curious at that time. That's what pointed me in the direction of political activism with other students and in the end it landed me in jail.

What does Palach's act mean to you personally? What do you perceive to be his legacy?

It expresses the resistance to evil. The rejection of failure. A believe in the power of the individual even at the price of one's own life. Humanity needs acts like this, even if it doesn't immediately understand them.

What was going through your head when you first read the screenplay to Burning Bush?

The material seemed really captivating and true to me. I was certain that someone who had lived through the time had written it. And I was shocked when I found out that, in fact, a very young man had written it.

Why did you decide to film it?

I couldn't miss such an opportunity. To film something that encapsulates my own experience and at the same time is an important and exciting story for many people, perhaps even the entire nation and maybe even beyond it.

What is the basic message of Burning Bush?

It shows us that the fates of individuals and nations are complicated and put us face to face with impossible choices. My goal, however, isn't to tell or even force any kind of ideals onto people. The most important thing is to provide the audience with a strong and believable experience.

Štěpán Hulík (scriptwriter)

What was your motivation for writing a screenplay about the time after Palach's protest?

I was fascinated by Palach's act. I can't say that I agree with it in all respects, but Jan's determination to involve himself in what was happening around him and the courage to put at stake the most valuable things he has touched, and continues to touch, me greatly. We live in a time when most of us are again succumbing to the feeling that the things around us can't be changed, that everything that's happening is decided differently and elsewhere. It seems to us that there's no point in getting ourselves involved. It's similar to the times after the August 1968 invasion, and then during normalization. Palach showed us in the most extreme way that we're wrong to think that way. He showed us that there's always something we can do. It seems to me that this forty-year-old story is suddenly very current.

What sources did you use for your research? Did you speak with people who remember the time and those directly involved in the story?

I searched through archives, read newspapers of the time and had several long phone conversations with Dr. Burešová. But the best insight into the era of normalization came to me through interviews with people who remember that time. I had conducted these interviews as research for my book about Czechoslovak film during normalization. Dozens of people spent several months talking to me about their experiences from that time and brought me closer to it through small details, observations and personal recollections, through their dilemmas, doubts and joys during that era. Suddenly I felt like I was „there.“

Why did you decide to focus the story on attorney Dagmar Burešová, what does she symbolize to you?

It wasn't possible to tell Palach's story as a biography. With Palach, everything important happened in those few minutes on Wenceslas Square, when Jan carried out his protest. It was necessary to find a way to capture what his act really meant and also how the rest of us, to whom Jan's act was directed, were able to cope with it. It seems to me that the story of the subsequent court case enables all this. I also had the sense that Dr. Burešová represents a kind of symbolic heir to Jan Palach. Just as Jan cared about what was happening around him, so did she.

World-renowned director Agnieszka Holland directed your debut script. What was your discussion over the script like?

Agnieszka never – not even during filming, I think – interacts from a position of power, never tells anyone exactly what they need to do. Rather, she suggests, asks, inspires. That's how the screenplay came to be as well. I really appreciated how she was able to respect me and give me confidence as a fledgling screenwriter. I'll carry it with me as a model for how the collaboration between a screenwriter and a director should work.

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Why did you choose the title Burning Bush?

It's clear to me that in the atheistic Czech Republic, few will know the Biblical story of Moses, to whom God appeared in the desert in the form of a bush that „burned without burning down.“ This is, of course, more than symbolic of Palach's story. But even without knowing the story, the title is, in short, perfectly evocative, immediately inspiring a certain feeling in the viewer. At least I hope...

Antony Root - Executive Vice President, Original Programming and Production of HBO Europe, and Executive Producer

What was the major factor that prompted you to decide to produce Burning Bush?

First and foremost, *Burning Bush* is a profoundly resonant story for the Czech people. It also has an exceptional script from Štěpán Hulík and gave us the chance to work with one of the pre-eminent filmmakers from the region, Agnieszka Holland, on a project for which she has a great personal passion. We feel extremely lucky that we have had the opportunity to work on this material, with these talents and with such an exceptional cast and crew.

The topic of Jan Palach is strongly connected to Czech history. How does it appeal to you as someone who comes from outside the Czech historical context?

As a schoolboy in 1969, I well remember the news reports of Palach's act and the shock and respect it invoked. While the specific narrative is intensely local, its story values are universal: it depicts heroic self-sacrifice, political struggle, moral conflict, the battle of Good v. Evil and the choice we all face at some time in our lives between doing the right thing and not. *Burning Bush* truly has the qualities of great drama down the ages. The fact that it is based on a true story makes it doubly appealing.

Tereza Polachová – Executive Producer, HBO Europe s. r. o.

Filmmakers have been surprisingly reluctant to approach the subject of Jan Palach. Was it difficult to sell the idea for filming this story to commercial television?

The original productions of HBO are focused around series and miniseries. It wasn't entirely easy to advocate for the theme of Jan Palach for commercial TV. We all felt, however, that we were dealing with a unique screenplay and an uncommonly important subject matter. That is why HBO decided to produce this material. From the first reading to the final take, we were able to accomplish this in record time.

How did you go about looking for a director and how did you end up choosing Agnieszka Holland?

Agnieszka Holland was a clear choice for both HBO and the producers. The producers, the
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screenwriter and I all knew and admired her work. She's a world renowned director, who, in addition, has experience working for American HBO. Thanks to her studies at FAMU in the 1960s, she also has a personal relationship with the Czech Republic. She herself experienced Prague during the time the film brings to life.

Why did you choose the rather untraditional format of a three part series to tell the story of Burning Bush?

The three-part miniseries is a fairly common format among HBO's productions. The original format of *Burning Bush* was a traditional feature film. It was, however, so powerful, so rich in plot-lines and so full of important information that it seemed a waste to us not to give the story its due space. That is why instead of one film we made three feature films, the total running time of which is three and half hours. I hope that viewers will appreciate not only its content but also its timeless message.

Tomáš Hrubý – producer for nutprodukce

Can you describe your collaboration thus far with screenwriter Štěpán Hulík, the genesis of the idea and the development of the script for Burning Bush?

We read Štěpán's script during a time when he himself felt it was un-filmable and was doubting whether he should even be a screenwriter. We found it to be by far the best screenplay we've read, not only of those written by our colleagues from film school, and it wasn't at all clear to us why it hadn't been filmed yet.

Whose idea was it to approach director Agnieszka Holland and what were the main reasons for your decisions to do so?

It was the result of a long search we conducted with Pavla Kubečková and Štěpán Hulík. It took a while before we understood that a film that's in Czech doesn't necessarily have to be directed by a Czech director (among which we could not find one suitable to the project) but that we could start looking abroad as well. We liked everything about Agnieszka. Pavla and I love her work for TV (especially for the series *The Wire*) and Štěpán is a big fan of her movies from the eighties and nineties. And her personal connection to the story gave us the courage to believe that a director of her status would take on a project like this.

What was it like working with HBO Europe? What do you most appreciate about you collaboration and, on the contrary, what would you have done differently?

HBO Europe shared our enthusiasm for the script, for Agnieszka Holland and for the historically important subject matter which *Burning Bush* explores. This enthusiasm helped us overcome all sorts of difficulties and complications. HBO Europe invested unprecedented resources and, at the same time, approached the artistic process with respect and understanding. Thanks to this generosity, we were able to realize this film without artistic compromise. That is a unique gift on the European market.

**BURNING BUSH and JAN PALACH
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

(available in a great graphic form at <http://www.janpalach.cz/en/default/index> in four language mutations)

Primary Historical Figures and Facts

JUDr. Dagmar Burešová
(*October 19, 1929, Prague)

Dagmar Burešová graduated from the Law Faculty of Charles University in Prague. From 1952, she worked as an attorney, specializing in civil and labor law. She took various positions in professional organizations (from 1963 she was a member of the committee of the Prague Bar Association and from 1968, for two years, a member of the committee of the Czechoslovak Bar Association). She lectured on labor law at the Law Faculty of Charles University in Prague. She published widely in specialized journals, especially in the Bulletin of the Czechoslovak Bar.

The talented lawyer was never a member of any political party. She often represented those persecuted by the regime. At the end of the 1960s and beginning of the 1970s, she represented the brother and mother of Jan Palach in a dispute with Vilém Nový. After 1968, she represented, in labor-law disputes, those who criticised the regime (for example Karel Kyncl, Milan Kundera and Ivan Medek.) The secret police spied on the fearless lawyer for a number of years in an operation with the code name „Dáma“ (“Lady”). In December 1989, she was named Minister of Justice in the Czech government. In June 1990 she was elected deputy to the Czech National Council, which she was the speaker of for two years. She then ran a law firm in Prague. In 1996 she unsuccessfully ran for the Christian Democratic Party in senate elections.

From 1998, she was a member of the Board of Trustees of the Czech-German Future Fund. She also took part in the renewal of the scout movement. Between 1990 and 1992, she was the chairman of the Czech scout organization *Junák* and was subsequently elected honorary chairman. In 2002, Czech president Václav Havel awarded JUDr. Dagmar Burešová a Class IV Order of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. In 2007, on the occasion of the Lawyer of the Year awards annually hosted by the Czech Bar Association, she was inducted into the Judicial Hall of Fame.

Vilém Nový
(* May 16, 1904, Jihlava - † March 1, 1987, Prague)

The communist journalist and politician lived through extreme falls and ascensions. Between the two world wars, he was a communist party functionary in Moravia. In the years 1939–1945 he was exiled in London. After returning to Czechoslovakia in 1946, he became the head secretary of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party in Ostrava. He gradually
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made his way to being a member of the party leadership. In November 1945 he was co-opted into the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. In the years 1946–1949 he served as a deputy in the National Assembly. From 1948, he was also the editor-in-chief of the communist newspaper *Rudé právo*. In November 1949, his political career was cut short by his arrest by the secret police. He was imprisoned until 1954.

During the custody, he was set against his fellow prisoners (one of them the former minister of agriculture Josef Smrkovsky) as a confidant with the code name “Nechleba.” After his political rehabilitation, he became a rector of the College of Political Science attached to the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party where he served from 1963 to 1968. In the years 1964–1968 he was again a deputy in the National Assembly and in the years 1969–1976 in the Czechoslovak Federal Assembly. In 1966, he returned to the wider party leadership when, at the 13th congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, he was elected a member of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party.

After the August occupation in 1968, Vilém Nový was one of the main critics of the reform movement and supporter of collaboration with the Soviets. According to recently released Russian documents, Vilém Nový was one of the informers to the Soviet Embassy in Prague. After the self-immolation of Jan Palach in January 1969, Nový became infamous for his false thesis about so-called “cold fire.” In 1964, the recently-rehabilitated Vilém Nový received the Order of the Republic, in 1973 the Order of the February Victory, and in 1974 the Order of Klement Gottwald. The daughter of Vilém Nový is the former news announcer, Kamila Moučková, who, after the August occupation, parted ideological ways with her father and later signed the Charter 77.

Jan Palach

(* August 11, 1948, Všetaty u Mělníka - † January 19, 1969, Prague)

Jan Palach grew up in Všetaty u Mělníka, a town fifty miles outside of Prague, where he was born on the 11th of August, 1948, a few months after the Communist take-over. His father ran a confectionary store in Všetaty and his mother Libuše was a housewife. The Palachs were involved in their community: they were members of the *Sokol* and volunteered at an amateur theater. The father was a member of the National Socialist Party and the mother was a member of a protestant church. They tried to raise their sons – Jan as well as the first-born Jiří (* 1941) – in the tradition of the First Republic.

At the beginning of the 1950s, the Palachs, along with most business-owners, had to close their shop and later even the production facility. The father then worked as a manual worker in Brandýs nad Labem and the mother found a job as a vendor in a kiosk in the Všetaty train station. Despite these experiences, in 1957, Libuše Palachová joined the communist party in order to insure that her sons could go to college. Josef Palach died of a heart-attack in 1962. Because her eldest son Jiří was already of age, Libuše was left alone with her son Jan.

In elementary school, Jan Palach spent his time playing chess and reading books. He loved history and adventure novels. He liked sports, attended the *Sokol* and ran. In September 1963 he began attending the grammar school in Mělník. According to the school’s teachers,
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Palach was an average student, but had an affinity for history, geography and social studies. After graduating in June 1966, the young man wished to study his beloved history at Charles University's Faculty of Arts in Prague. He was not accepted, however, because of the large number of applicants, so he registered to study at the Prague School of Economics. He spent two years there, taking active part in student life. In the summer of 1967, he took part in a work trip to Kazakhstan and a year later he was the organizer of student work visits around Leningrad. In the spring of 1968, he helped found an independent Academic Student Council.

As a student of the Prague School of Economics, he also lived through the Prague Spring, which marked a turning point in his life. He was interested in politics before the Prague Spring as well (for instance, he would hand out type-written texts to his colleagues, among them a letter by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, texts by Ludvík Vaculík or transcriptions of speeches given at writers conferences) but in 1968 his interest in public affairs escalated. In the spring of 1968 he took part in a number of political discussions and meetings.

Palach spent most of the fateful summer of 1968 on a trip within the Soviet Union from which he only returned on the 17th of August 1968. Good news waited for him at home: his request to transfer to the Faculty of Arts was accepted. Back in Všetaty he also found out about the August occupation of Czechoslovakia. He immediately made his way back to Prague where he spent several days. When he returned to Všetaty, he and his friends wrote anti-occupation slogans in the streets.

In the autumn of 1968 Jan Palach saw the West for the first and last time. He traveled to France for two weeks, where he helped pick grapes. After his trip to France, Palach began attending the Faculty of Arts in Prague. According to some of his friends, he took part in several protests in the autumn of 1968. In November 1968, he also actively participated in a lock-out strike which ended unsuccessfully. It is then that a decisive break in his character occurred.

Various sources show that Palach had been thinking for some time about an act that would wake the public from its compliance. He considered various forms of protest, as is evident from his letter calling for the occupation of the headquarters of the Czechoslovak Radio and broadcasting of an invitation to a general strike. He sent his suggestion to the student leader Lubomír Holeček at the Student Union in the beginning of January 1969. In connection with the unsuccessful occupation strike that he took part in, Palach suggested that a small group of students take initiative and convince the rest of the public to protest.

In his letter, Palach formulates ideas which he later used in the famous letters signed „Torch No. 1“. Among his requests, for instance, was the abolition of censorship. Jan Palach evidently didn't get a reply to his letter. This may be one of the reasons he decided on a different form of protest, one that was much more shocking than the forced take-over of the radio and at the same time required little preparation. As the police detectives later found out, Palach only needed a few hours to prepare his protest.

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The student Jan Palach set himself on fire under the ramp of the National Museum on Wenceslas Square in Prague on the 16th of January 1969 shortly before 2:30pm. He explained the motives of his protest in four almost identical letters addressed to his colleague at the School of Economics Ladislav Žižka, the student leader at the Faculty of Arts Lubomír Holeček and the Union of Czechoslovak Writers. The fourth letter he put in a suitcase and took with him to the scene. In the letters, he said he was part of a group that decided to self-immolate in order to wake the public from its lethargy.

He made two requests having to do with free speech: the abolition of censorship and the banning of *Zprávy*, a journal of the occupying armies, which was published since the end of September 1968. He requested that the people begin a strike with no time-limit to support these requests. If the requests were not met by the 21st of January 1969, “the next torch” would be incinerated. Palach drafted another letter at the dorms, in which he explained his act and which included a few more requests, among them the resignation of pro-Soviet politicians.

The young man was taken from the scene to Legerova Street Hospital, where he spent the last three days of his life in the burns unit. He was in critical condition, with second and third degree burns on almost 85% of his body, a rarely survived injury. Despite this, under the influence of pain-killers, Palach asked about the response to his protest. On Sunday, the 19th of January 1969, Palach’s doctor called his friend Eva Bednáriková and asked her to immediately come to the hospital as his patient Palach wanted to speak with her.

According to Bednáriková, the dying Palach asked her to bring Lubomír Holeček to the hospital so he could speak with him. When she returned to the hospital with Holeček, the dying student allegedly asked them to spread the word to the rest of the student group that they shouldn’t burn themselves.

It will remain a mystery as to whether this was really Palach’s wish. The five day time-limit on the requests he made in his letters was running out and the fear of another self-immolation may have led Holeček to an interpretation that was meant to save the next “human torches.” Because of his critical condition, Palach was only capable of short statements, not a cohesive speech like the one Lubomír Holeček passionately relayed at the subsequent remembrance ceremony.

After Bednáriková’s and Holeček’s visit, Palach’s condition worsened and shortly after, on the 19th of January 1969 at 3:30pm, the doctors declared him dead. The next evening, his body was transferred to the Institute of Forensic Medicine where the sculptor Olbram Zoubek was able to make Palach’s death mask. Here, the court-ordered autopsy also took place, according to which the immediate cause of death was “developing pneumonia as a result of severe burns.”

Palach’s act of protest attracted much attention in Czechoslovakia and abroad (among those who made statements of respect concerning Palach’s act were UN Secretary General U Thant, the Italian Prime-Minister Mariano Rumor, the Indian Prime-Minister Indira Gandhi and

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Pope Paul VI). There was a great many articles, news, reports and commentaries concerning Jan Palach's protest. The Czechoslovak public was shocked and shaken. Only a portion of the public, however, decided to join in supporting Palach's requests. In the last quarter of January 1969, in Prague's center, several spontaneous protests took place, broken-up by the police in the evening hours. One of the largest protests was a hunger-strike started on the 18th of January 1969 by a group of students under the ramp of the National Museum. They stayed in tents, in the freezing winter, for four days until the police forced them to end their protest.

On the 20th of January 1969, a day after the death of Jan Palach, a mourning procession of thousands walked through the streets of Prague. The procession was organized by the Union of College Students of Bohemia and Moravia. It began on Wenceslas Square and ended in front of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. Several speakers made statements from the balcony. Similar remembrance ceremonies took place in other cities in Czechoslovakia. The statue of Saint Wenceslas became one of the main sites of protest, surrounded by fliers, portraits of Palach and candles. Students and others stood watch over the statue holding the state flag. Palach's death mask, donated to the students by the sculptor Olbram Zoubek, was displayed at the fountain under the National Museum.

Jan Palach's funeral, which took place on Sunday the 25th of January 1969, was organized by the Union of College Students of Bohemia and Moravia. At first, they considered the Vyšehrad cemetery, where many famous Czechs are buried, for Palach's resting place but the government agencies didn't allow it. In the end, they chose the Olšany graveyard. The coffin with Palach's remains was displayed from the 24th of January 1969 in the Karolinum, where tens of thousands of people came to pay homage to him. The same day a funeral procession took place in Všetaty in which most of the townsfolk took part.

At the ceremony in the Karolinum, on the 25th of January 1969, the rector of Charles University Oldřich Starý, the dean of the Faculty of Arts Jaroslav Kladiva and students Zdeněk Touš and Michael Dymáček gave memorial speeches. The Minister of Education Vilibald Bezdíček who, along with the Minister of Sports Emanuel Bosák, was the only Czech governmental official at the funeral, also made a speech. No one else from the state and party representatives attended the funeral. After the ceremony, the coffin was transferred to the hearse, behind which a procession formed and walked through Ovocný Trh, Celetná street and the Old-Town Square, stopping in front of the Faculty of Arts on the square which had already been spontaneously renamed, since the 20th of January 1969, in honor of Jan Palach. The last goodbye took place at the Olšany graveyard, now only attended by his family, invited guests, and journalists. Preaching over Palach's grave was evangelical pastor Jakub S. Trojan, who emphasized the meaning of Jan Palach's sacrifice.

For several months, police detectives examined the circumstances of Jan's actions in great detail, mainly looking for possible collaborators in his self-immolation. The police cross-examined many witnesses, asked for several expert opinions, and wrote many reports to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In June 1969, police investigators Captain Jiří Ryant and Major Miroslav Novák dropped the charges against an unknown party due to lack of concrete evidence about the group which Jan Palach mentioned in his last letter.

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According to them, the letter simply had the purpose of giving more impact to Palach's shocking act of protest. Equally interested in the investigation was the secret police (StB), which, however, did not influence the process or results of the investigation.

A renewed interest in the case by the secret police didn't come until the first anniversary of Palach's act. The members of the StB focused not only on the re-evaluation of the previous investigation but also on finding material for political propaganda. They contacted some of the witnesses and secretly taped their statements. They also took interest in the circumstances of the publishing and distribution of an LP record „*Kde končí svět*“ (“Where the World Ends”) on which, along with several older poems, they found recordings of the speeches at Palach's funeral.

Every year, members of the secret police attempted to suppress any remembrance of Palach's protest. In the October of 1973, they forced Palach's mother and brother to agree to the exhumation of Jan's remains and the removal of his grave from the Olšany graveyard. The urn with the cremated remains of Jan's body was kept at the cemetery in Všetaty. Despite the fact that the secret police was literally obsessed with the possible existence of a group of “human torches”, it never got hold of any credible evidence. On the anniversaries of Palach's act, police units held annual states of emergency. They also paid close attention to the situation in Všetaty. Their fears of wide-spread protests didn't come true, however, until twenty years later during “Palach's Week.”

On the 15th of January 1989, the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Palach's death, opposition organizations (like *České děti*, *Charta 77*, *Mírový klub Johna Lennona*, *Nezávislé mírové sdružení* and *Společenství přátel USA*) organized a procession to the statue of St. Wenceslas in downtown Prague. The organized remembrance, however, was forbidden and the members of the opposition organizations were detained. Supporters still came to Wenceslas Square, however, and the protests continued for several days. They were usually forcibly dispersed with water cannons and emergency police units. At the end of „Palach's Week,“ on the 21st of January 1989, the government agencies, with the help of the security forces, also banned the memorial service at Palach's grave in Všetaty.

In conjunction with their calls for action broadcast by Western radio stations, Václav Havel and Dana Němcová were accused of provocation and of hindering the power of public officials. Havel was sentenced to nine months in prison without parole. Opposition activists arrested on Wenceslas Square were sentenced along with him. In their campaign to set the prisoners free, the opposition movement was able to break a certain barrier between themselves and mainstream society. The support they won inspired Václav Havel to write, after he was released from prison, a petition called “*Několik věť*” (“A few sentences”). Consequently, the anti-regime protests in the January of 1989, during which the police arrested over 1400 protesters, marked the beginning of the fall of communism. The communist leadership found itself under international pressure. While peaceful protests were being broken up in Czechoslovakia, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in Vienna was reaching its peak. The Czechoslovak delegation was repeatedly criticized for not keeping its international human rights commitments.

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Only after the November of 1989 was it possible to openly commemorate Palach's legacy. Already on the 20th December 1989 the square in front of the main building of the Faculty of Arts in Prague was named after Palach for the second time (the square was first spontaneously renamed from Krasnoarmějců Square to Jan Palach Square already in the January of 1969). A plaque made by Olbram Zoubek and comprising Palach's death mask was placed on the Faculty of Arts. A symbolic return took place on the 25th of October 1990, when Palach's ashes were ceremoniously transported from Všetaty to the Olšany graveyard. That same year, Jiří Lederer published a book on Palach's act. On the 28th of October 1991, President Václav Havel awarded Jan Palach and Jan Zajíc a Class I Order of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, in memoriam, for their part in the promotion of democracy and human rights. In 2000, a monument was erected in front of the National Museum remembering Palach's and Zajíc's acts of protest.

A Reenactment of the Protest

With the help of archival footage and testimonies of those who were there, it is possible to reenact the shocking protest of the Czech student Jan Palach. On the 15th of January 1969, Jan Palach attended his uncle's funeral and the next day took the train from Všetaty to Prague. He arrived at the Spořilov dorms on the 16th of January 1969 around 8am. In his room, he wrote an outline and then four almost identical letters which he signed Torch no.1. Palach left the dormitories around 11am.

It is not entirely clear what he did in the coming hours. It is assumed he must have thrown away the three letters into the mailbox on his way downtown. Before that, it appears that he bought stamps and a post-card showing Malostranské square, on which he wrote the address of his friend Hubert Bystřičan and a short greeting, and sent the post-card along with the letters. What is clear is that between 11am and 12:30pm he bought two plastic containers and had gasoline pumped into them in Opletalova street. With the full containers and his briefcase, he made his way straight to Wenceslas Square under the National Museum. He had deliberately chosen a place in Prague's center, where there were always plenty of people passing by. He came to the fountain in front of the museum several minutes before 2:30pm.

A number of bystanders witnessed the shocking protest; their testimonies were preserved in the police files and allow an exact reconstruction of the event. The surroundings in Wenceslas Square looked very different in January 1969 than they do today. The main building of the National Museum was an integral part of the square, not separated from it by a highway, the way it is today.

A number of tram lines made their way through Wenceslas Square and one of them stopped right next to the statue of St. Wenceslas. Jan Palach took his coat off at the railing of the fountain in front of the museum and took a bottle with the words Ether written on it out of his briefcase. He opened it with a knife and put it to his nose. Then he poured the gasoline on himself and lit it. He jumped over the railing and ran through the parked cars towards the statue of St. Wenceslas.

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Then he was nearly hit by a passing tram. This may be why he turned and ran towards the corner building to the left near to which he fell into the street where random passers-by put the fire out with their coats.

At Palach's suggestion, they opened the letter inside the briefcase which was left by the fountain and read it. A few minutes later, an ambulance of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which only happened to be passing by, stopped on the square.

The severely burned young man, still conscious, was taken first to the hospital on Karlovo square. He was not accepted there, however, and the ambulance was sent to Legerova street, where the Plastic Surgery Clinic of the University Hospital Na Vinohradech was housed at the time, and included a burns unit. He was admitted there at 2:45 pm. As he was being taken to the hospital room, he repeated to the nurses that he was not trying to commit suicide, but that he set himself on fire as a protest, the way Buddhist monks did in Vietnam.

A crowd gathered at the site of Palach's protest. Soon, the firemen and police investigators arrived. The police questioned the first witnesses and took photographs of the scene. At the fountain, they found seven shards from the bottle of ether and a melted plastic container. They also found two papers in A4 format, on which someone, probably one of the witnesses of Palach's protest, wrote in ink „A 20 year old student burned himself here.“ The police officers also confiscated Palach's personal belongings, among them the letter in which he explained his actions. Based on this letter, the detectives later launched a criminal investigation for aiding suicide. Only two hours after Palach's protest, the Czechoslovak Press Agency put out a short statement about the self-immolation of the student of the Faculty of Arts, in which Jan Palach was only mentioned with his initials.

Only a few hours after Palach's protest, the Legerova clinic was swarming with journalists demanding information about Palach's condition. The head of the burns clinic Jarmila Doležalová thus decided to close the clinic and only allowed Jan's mother and brother Jiří to visit. She didn't even allow the investigators into his room, though they wanted to find out more about potential followers of Palach. She only took from them a tape recorder on which she was to record any possible confessions by Palach (the recorder seemed not to have been used for reasons that remain unclear.)

According to the hospital staff, Jan Palach was vehement the entire time about the fact that a group of followers did exist. He refused to answer the question of who these followers may be. On the 17th of January 1969, the psychiatrist MUDr. Zdenka Kmuničková recorded a short conversation with the Palach on a cassette player (a different one than the one given to the hospital by the police technician). In this conversation, Palach repeated his requests from the letter and emphasized that he meant to wake the public with his protest. That same day, Palach's mother and brother paid a visit. They were both shaken and subsequently hospitalized in the psychiatry ward.

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For Palach's Honor: The Trial According to Historical Fact

In the January of 1969, the self-immolation of Jan Palach provoked varied reactions. Most of society was, above all, shaken by this act which, to them, evoked a foreign cultural context. In their dealings with government officials, student representatives tried to accomplish Palach's requests though, at the same time, they did not call for a general strike. A number of cities held memorial services which took the form of quiet protests against the impending era of normalization. In Prague's center, several rallies took to the street, chanting anti-Soviet slogans. Most of them were forcefully broken up by police forces.

The government attempted first and foremost to calm the situation and keep the shocked citizens under control. While politicians generally expressed sorrow over Jan's act of protest, they also rejected the form of protest he had chosen. On several meetings with the college student representatives they characterized Palach's requests as impossible to grant. On the 19th of January 1969, the police declared a state of alert for all security forces, the most extensive one since the August occupation. On the 20th of January 1969, the Office of the Press and Information sent out instructions to news editorial staffs, not to publish anything except official statements. Sixteen foreign journalists were expelled from the country. That same day, the presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia met in Bratislava under the direction of Gustav Husák. The decision made at this meeting was now unapologetically threatening. On the other hand, after an agreement with the college students, the Czech government allowed first the organization of a memorial procession through Prague and then a public memorial service for Jan Palach.

Palach's protest was officially denounced only by party conservatives, especially the dogmatic ones from the local cell of the Communist Party in Libeň, who spoke of an alleged misuse of Jan Palach. This unsupported thesis was also spread by MP and Central Committee of the Communist Party member Vilém Nový, who, at the end of January 1969, gave an interview to the French press agency AFP, in which he first officially revealed his thesis about „cold fire.“ Palach had supposedly been convinced by someone that he would set himself on fire with a chemical that creates flames that do not burn (in reality, such a chemical does not exist.)

The protest did not go as planned, however, and Palach self-immolated instead. The responsibility, according to Nový, goes to „right wing“ writers and journalists. The letter which the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev and the President of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union Alexei Nikolayevich Kosygin sent to Alexander Dubček and Oldřich Černík on the 23rd of January 1969 is clear testimony to where the theory about „a student who was taken advantage of“ comes from. The Soviet officials wrote in their letter about the troubling situation in Czechoslovakia and characterized Jan Palach as a victim of disturbers of the peace.

Vilém Nový repeated the above interpretation about „cold fire“ on the 20th of February 1969 at a public meeting of MPs and voters, which took place in the hotel Merkur in Česká Lípa. This time, Nový added the names of the perpetrators who allegedly convinced Jan Palach to carry out the act of protest: the writers Vladimír Škutina and Pavel Kohout, the student leader

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Lubomír Holeček, the athlete Emil Zátopek and the chess player Luděk Pachman (in whose case the accusation was obviously revenge for Pachman's attempt to convince the members of Palach's alleged group not to continue self-immolating.)

When outraged cries and whistles erupted in the room, the party conservative defended himself with the alleged results of an investigation: „Comrades, what do you want to hear? You wanted to hear about Palach, and I'm telling you what I know. I went to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and spoke to the Minister Grösser and asked him why they still haven't released an official statement about Palach's death. All they said, was that the information, that is the statements I have just relayed to you, don't come from them, but they didn't say either way whether I'm right or wrong about the matter.“

Nový's statement led the aforementioned five individuals whom he falsely accused to file a civil law suit for protection of personal rights in March 1969. Libuše Palachová did the same, and chose JUDr. Dagmar Burešová as her lawyer. The independently filed lawsuits were joined into one case on the 20th of May 1969. The result of this trial was a testimony to the „restoration of order,” as the journalist Milan Šimečka ironically named the gradual reestablishment of the communist regime.

At first, Vilém Nový attempted to delay the trial by refusing to pick up his summons for several weeks. According to his statement from May 1969, the lawsuits were merely intimidation ploys which were meant to „scandalize and remove functionaries loyal to the Communist Party, socialism and to our commitment to the Soviet Union.“ He also made clear that the petitioners were basing their claims solely on the statements of journalists who, he said, grossly distorted his statements. Nový also mentioned the fact that he made the statements as an MP, and therefore, according to him, he should be granted immunity. The petitioners' lawyers countered, however, that according to the opinion of the Supreme Court a trial concerning the defamation of character is solely a matter for the courts, and no other governmental agency can rule in such a dispute.

In the summer of 1969, the political climate grew much stricter in conjunction with the first anniversary of the August occupation. Protests in the streets of Prague, Brno and Bratislava were suppressed. Shortly after, the secret police intercepted the authors of the petition „Deset bodů“ („Ten Points“) in which the August occupation and the resulting political compromises were condemned.

The main target of the police concerning the petition was Luděk Pachman who was arrested along with Jan Tesař and Rudolf Battěk. A trial never came to pass, however, and the three were released after ten months in police custody. It was because of this custody that Pachman arrived at the hearing with Vilém Nový from prison, with handcuffs. Despite the fact that he was a political prisoner, Pachman, unlike another petitioner, did not withdraw from the trial of Vilém Nový. In the end, of the five who were falsely accused by Nový, the only one to withdraw his lawsuit was the athlete Emil Zátopek in an attempt at „self-critique“. At this time, Nový was attempting to move the trial from the jurisdiction of the Prague 7 District Court to the District Court in Česká Lípa.

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The petitioners were able to stop these attempts by raising the issue of unfair prejudice (Nový was an MP for the Česká Lípa District). Witnesses present at the February 1969 public meeting in Česká Lípa were successively questioned. From their responses, the petitioners found out that the meeting was recorded on an audio tape. At the end of July 1970, an employee of the agricultural section of the Czechoslovak Radio, Vladimír Hončík, appeared in court and testified to the fact that he and some colleagues happened to record the meeting.

Despite the fact that the petitioners presented clear evidence about the slanderous statements of Vilém Nový, they did not win the case. On the contrary, on the 30th of July 1970, the judge JUDr. Jarmila Ortová read a verdict in which she clearly demonstrated that the justice system had become a mere tool of the establishment. The judge dismissed the action with the reasoning that Vilém Nový not only had the right to critique the act of Jan Palach, but that it was his responsibility to do so. She pronounced the petitioners, now responsible for paying Nový's legal expenses, enemies of socialism.

The Monopoly of Power

After the Second World War, Czechoslovakia, along with Hungary, Poland and other European countries, became part of the Soviet Union's sphere of interest. The political system officially took on the form of a parliamentary democracy, but in reality political competition was limited down to several acceptable parties which collaborated on governmental duties. All of these parties agreed on the nationalization of property, though they differed in the extent to which they wanted it. The World War also fundamentally changed the national identity. Already in 1944, Subcarpathian Rus was attached (under the name Transcarpathia) to Soviet territory. Another change had to do with the post war „transfer“ of a great majority of the German population from Czechoslovak territory.

In 1946, the communists gained a dominant position in the government. At this time, the party representatives spoke of a specifically Czechoslovak road to the building of a socialist state. According to the Czechoslovak communists, their socialism should not blindly follow the Soviet model but, rather, draw on local traditions. In reality, even in the first years after the war the government was misusing the police forces and judiciary against political opponents who were in many cases persecuted.

When, in February 1948, the communists completely seized power, they unleashed purges in the government administration, the army and in universities. Tens of thousands of people left the country. Thousands of others were sentenced to many years in prison, with forced labor. Between the years 1948 and 1960, 242 people were sentenced to death in political trials and executed, among them former communist officials (former general secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Rudolf Slánský was one of them). In 1950, the battle against religion saw the elimination of all monastic orders. Hundreds of newspaper and magazine publications were banned.

The works of many dissident authors were eliminated from libraries. Forced collectivization utterly changed the social structure of rural environments. Private enterprise was gradually
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and almost entirely eliminated in Czechoslovakia (among the affected business owners was Palach's family, who was not allowed to run their confectionery shop and workshop).

The Road to the Prague Spring

The relative relaxation of the political climate in Czechoslovakia came only gradually, starting in the mid-1950s. The transformation was foreshadowed by the deaths of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin and Klement Gottwald in the spring of 1953. It was in this year that the most massive anti-regime protests took place, erupting after the announcement of the currency reform. An important break was the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, at which the highest representative of the USSR Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev condemned Stalin's politics of dictatorship. One of the pieces of evidence for the temporary relaxation of the regime was, for instance, the student rag day, in which, on the 20th of May 1956, one hundred thousand people took part in Prague alone. The slogans criticized politicians, organizations and censorship.

After the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution in the autumn of 1956, the period of detente ended in Czechoslovakia as well. Already in the following year, a new wave of purges took place all over Czechoslovakia. The number of political trials also rose. The next wave of detente only occurred in the mid-1960's. In the May amnesties of the years 1960, 1962, 1963 and 1965, most political prisoners were let out of prisons (typically, however, they became second class citizens who could not find work and lived under the constant scrutiny of the secret police).

There was a significant revival in the arts, however, represented most visibly by the films of the Czech New Wave. Academic institutions wrote the first reform plans which were intended to amend the worsening economic situation. The government under the Secretary General of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the President of Czechoslovak Socialist Republic Antonín Novotný, who made his way to the top of the political pyramid during periods of mass political protests, had the habit of alternating between relaxing and tightening its political grip. This was one of the reasons that intra-party opposition began to build against him, which in January of 1969 resulted in his resignation from the leadership of the Communist Party.

The cause of Novotný's fall was many-sided – the economic crisis, Slovak secessionism and disputes with certain groups of the population, like university students, all played a role. Alexander Dubček was subsequently elected to the party leadership. His name is now associated with the short eight-month period, when democratic reforms took an unexpected turn: at the end of March 1968, censorship was completely abolished and the media became open to questions entirely taboo in the recent past. It was also under the influence of these news reports that Antonín Novotný had to resign from his presidency, and was replaced by Ludvík Svoboda who was regarded by much of the population as a supporter of the reforms (which, however, in the August of 1968 turned out to be an illusion.)

In the April of 1968, the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party adopted
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the Action Program in which the communist party laid out its reform plans. These changes provoked spontaneous excitement among the public and a number of activities which overstepped the boundaries of the party's idea of the country's direction. Even the most vehement communist reformers disapproved of the creation of KAN, the Club of Engaged Non-Party Members, and K 231, the Association of Former Political Prisoners, and on the efforts to reestablish the Social Democratic Party.

The communists were positively horrified by the manifesto „2000 slov“ („2000 Words“) in June 1968, penned by the writer Ludvík Vaculík. Paradoxically, the public invested its hopes in politicians who were generally not able to jump over their own shadow. On the one hand, they vehemently spoke of the abolition of censorship, but on the other hand, already in May 1968 they discussed, under pressure from Moscow, other satellite countries as well as Czech conservatives, how to keep an awakened society within bounds.

The August Occupation

At this time, Czechoslovak politicians had repeatedly taken part in meetings with Soviet representatives, who bid them to stop the reforms. The leadership of „brother“ communist parties, especially that of Poland and East Germany, also put pressure on the Czechoslovak communists. Alexander Dubček promised to take action, but did not take any real steps to do so. Diplomacy was therefore replaced with military action: on the night of the 21st of August 1968, Czechoslovakia was occupied by five armies of the Warsaw Pact. Several of the head representatives of the CSSR, including the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party Alexander Dubček, were abducted and taken into Russia. The invasion provoked a national resistance, however, thanks to which the occupiers were not able to build a puppet government.

The last push of the Prague Spring was the 14th extraordinary congress of the Communist Party held in the Vysočany district of Prague during which - though this was short lived - all those who opposed the reform movement were expelled from their positions of power. The occupiers were saved from the uncomfortable position they found themselves in by President Ludvík Svoboda. Along with several select politicians, he left for Moscow to convince the abducted representatives of the Czechoslovak Communist Party to sign a capitulation agreement with the Soviets.

On the 26th of August 1968 in the capital of the Soviet Union, the Czechoslovak delegation signed the „Moscow Protocol“. In this secret document, they agreed, among other things, to cancel the outcomes of the extraordinary Vysočany congress. They agreed to purge the leadership of the media and to restore censorship as well as, among other things, prevent the discussion of the occupation in the UN Security Council. When the politicians returned to Czechoslovakia, the public didn't trust them, much because the delegation wouldn't speak openly about the results of their meetings in Moscow. It was only Alexander Dubček who won over a portion of the population, when he assured the citizens, in an emotional speech, that the reforms would not cease entirely, though they may slow down. It became apparent in the coming weeks, however, that the political reality was taking an entirely different turn.

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On the 6th of September 1968, František Kriegel, the only abducted Czechoslovak politician who refused to sign the Moscow Protocol, was expelled from his position of head of the National Front. Not long after, the director of the Czechoslovak Television Jiří Pelikán and the director of the Czechoslovak Radio Zdeněk Hejzlar also lost their jobs. In the autumn of 1968, Zdeněk Mlynář, one of the main authors of the Action Program and secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, willingly resigned.

The Beginnings of „normalization“

On the 18th of October 1968, the National Assembly approved the agreement on the „temporary stay“ of the Soviet armies, which legalized the presence of 75 thousand Soviet soldiers in Czechoslovakia. Only four MPs were against it (František Kriegel, František Vodsoň, Gertruda Sekaninová-Čákrťová and Božena Fuková), ten abstained and several others did not even take part in the meeting. The Czechoslovak government made another concession on the 8th of November 1968, when it temporarily halted the publication of the critical magazines *Reportér* and *Politika*.

The ascent of communist conservatives was completed at the Prague meeting of the Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party on the 14th to 17th of November 1968. They were not only able to secure several important positions but simultaneously pass the resolution which outlined the next steps in “normalization.” The most vehement protests against these changes came from the university students who, from the 18th to 21st of November 1968 organized the lock-out strike to support the „Student Ten Commandments“ in which they listed several requests for the Communist Party. They were not able to get support for any of their requests and so by the end of 1968 a feeling of hopelessness started to spread, not only among students.

At this time, the Slovak politician Gustáv Husák was slowly gaining an important position in the Communist Party. In December 1968, he proposed that Josef Smrkovský, the proposed candidate for the head of the new Federal Assembly (until then the head of the National Assembly), be replaced with a Slovak. According to his manipulative argument, this would uphold the federative principal.

Though the public protested in favor of Josef Smrkovský, who was one of the most popular figures of the Prague Spring (Jan Palach wrote about the protest in Smrkovský's support in 1969, in his letter in which he proposed the occupation of the Czechoslovak Radio and the broadcasting of a call for a general strike), he rejected the public's support and Peter Colotka was elected in his place.

The communist conservatives were thus able to claim another victory, which was furthered in April 1969 with the election of Gustáv Husák as the first secretary of Central Committee of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. August 1969 marked a definitive end to the Prague Spring when protests in the streets were suppressed not only by the security forces and people's militia but also by the army. Mass purges within the Communist Party followed and the reinforcement of an authoritative model of government according to the Soviet model continued for another twenty years.