

# Czech student kills himself in protest against war and corruption

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The death by self-immolation of a 19-year-old student in Prague in protest against conditions in the Czech Republic has shaken that country. On March 6, at 7:30 in the morning, Zdenek Adamec, a straight-A student, poured gasoline on himself and set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square in front of horrified commuters and other onlookers. A policeman attempted to put out the flames, but Adamec died after attempts to resuscitate him failed.

Adamec, who lived with his parents in Humpolec, 60 miles from Prague, committed his desperate act only a short distance from the spot where philosophy student Jan Palach set himself ablaze in January 1969 to protest the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops.

Various factors contributed to Adamec's suicide. Police had been investigating the youth in connection with his hosting a web site for a group of "darkers"—computer hackers who used computer and electrical engineering skills to cut the electrical power to whole neighborhoods. Adamec asserted that he had simply done a favor for a friend. According to his father, the police had been threatening him with two years in prison to extract information: "They had constantly exerted pressure on him so that he gave the information, but he was of a timid and vulnerable nature. It is awful that the police behaved so selfishly."

The youth was apparently a loner, religious, somewhat eccentric, most content working at his computer. His mother said, "He thought they would put him in prison and he would have no books, no school, no Internet and no life."

In a note Adamec left behind, he described himself as "another victim of the democratic system, where it is not people who decide, but power and money." He criticized the conditions in Czech schools, asserting, "Drugs, violence, money and power—these are the

watchwords of our civilization."

Adamec posted another letter on the Internet a few hours before he made the trip to Prague and committed suicide. Confused as parts of it may be, Adamec's note reflects the response of the most sensitive and intelligent young people to the situation produced since the downfall of Stalinism in 1989. The student directly identified himself with Palach, who termed himself "Torch number one," by heading his note, "Action Torch 2003."

He wrote: "We didn't get any better even after the Velvet Revolution [in November 1989].... The so-called Democracy we gained is not a Democracy. It's about the rule of officials, money and treading on people." He went on. "The whole world is corrupted by money and is spoilt, depraved.

"It's not too late for salvation, but if we continue like this we will soon suffocate in the filthy air or in war. You may have read it in newspapers or have seen in on TV. Every weekend there is shooting, even at schools. And who is the cause of all this?"

Adamec condemned war, and the US war plans in Iraq in particular: "And wars? Never-ending nuclear wars tests, we are all the time inventing new measures to kill each other. People should unite, not fight against each other.... Why do you think that Americans attack Iraq and look for another Osama? It's just a population manipulated by the media and by the government. Iraq has the oil and Americans want it too, that's the reason. Korea has nuclear weapons—it doesn't excite them as much."

Adamec returned a number of times to the degraded state of American society and its influence in the world. "Civilization leads to self-destruction. Have you ever seen the dumping grounds in the USA? Never-ending mountains of rubbish. And we all do the same every

day—we come home and go immediately to the TV.”

He spoke about international violence and violence in everyday life: “And look at relationships among people? Look around you. Never-ending violence, almost every week a murder, in all the bigger cities there are homeless people. Mostly it’s not their fault. Addicts wandering on the streets, bribes and corruption everywhere, and what encourages it? The way we let our children grow up. We put them before the TV and that’s it. It’s easy. Already 10-year-old children look at violent movies.... And if you by chance have some problem, everyone turns his back. People like to see others suffer. It’s easy to hurt someone but very difficult to help. It takes a lot of work, but we should try.”

Jaroslava Moserova, who treated Jan Palach as a doctor in 1969 and is now a senator, told the press, “The situation in this country is not the same as it was then. But I have to say there is a great deal of despair arising among young people.”

Some commentators noted the coincidence of Adamec’s self-immolation with the inauguration of right-wing Vaclav Klaus as president. Joseph Broz, a freelance writer, suggested that the election of Klaus February 28 might have influenced Adamec. “This tragedy is a direct impact of the symbol in the Castle [referring to the seat of the presidency].”

Klaus is a reactionary mediocrity elected by the Czech parliament in its third attempt. Former dissident Vaclav Havel stepped down February 2 after 13 years in office. Klaus served as finance minister after the collapse of Stalinism and is closely identified with the introduction of free-market policies. He became prime minister after Czechoslovakia split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993.

In last year’s parliamentary election, Klaus’s Civic Democratic Party received only 24.5 percent of the vote, its worst showing ever. The unreconstructed Communist Party obtained 18.5 percent of the vote, in an election marked by a high protest vote and a low overall turnout (58 percent of eligible voters).

While a small layer has enriched itself, economic conditions for wide layers of the Czech population are worsening. The unemployment rate in one of the most prosperous former Stalinist-ruled countries is 10 percent and rising, and in industrial areas in northern Moravia and northern Bohemia it is 25 to 30 percent.

The real income of working class families has dropped by 13 percent since 1989, and by 1997 the value of basic social benefits as a share of GDP had fallen by 44 percent. The purchasing power of retirees on pensions is 10 percent lower than before the “Velvet Revolution.” Social tensions are increasing, with racism against the Roma encouraged by right-wing, nationalist elements. The future for young people is bleak.

Nor is the despondency felt by Adamec unique to the Czech Republic. In his condemnation of corruption, the power of money in all aspects of life and the cynicism of politicians and the media, in his disgust with American dominance, he no doubt reflects the feelings of large numbers of youth all over the world.

That he felt this despair and saw no way out except through suicide is not primarily his fault. It is largely a measure of the prevailing ideological filthiness in eastern and central Europe, where the rule of the “free market” has been economically and morally disastrous for the vast majority. Nonetheless, Adamec’s tragic act is one that must not be emulated by others.

Without minimizing the depth of the Czech youth’s feelings or drawing fatuous lessons from his death, it is a reality that the global wave of protest and revulsion against the US war in Iraq opens up a different prospect for young people. Trotsky once noted that “peoples never resort to suicide.” He continued: “When their burdens are intolerable, they seek a way out through revolution.”



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