JAN PALACH'S MEMORY

Jan Palach, the Czech student who set fire to himself in Prague's Wenceslas Square a year ago yesterday and died three days later, has become a powerful and important symbol in Czechoslovakia, especially for the younger generation. This is not easily or widely understood abroad. Suicide evokes sympathy but seldom respect. As a form of political protest it can seem defeatist, in spite of the example of the Vietnamese monks. The popular comparison with Jan Hus, the Czech martyr who was burned at the stake in 1415, is difficult to sustain; there is a world of difference between taking one's own life and accepting death at the hands of a superior power rather than compromising one's beliefs.

Yet the impact of Jan Palach's act is indisputable. Coming at the time it did, and from an apparently rational and serious young man, it seemed to express the desperation of the entire nation in the face of the Soviet occupation and to pose in the most extreme and moving way possible the moral dilemma of young people who did not know how or even whether to resist.

In the endless debates that have ensued some have seen his act as representing merely the logical reaction to the situation. After being betrayed by the west at Munich, Czechoslovakia nurtured a generation in the belief that the Soviet Union was the best protection against another betrayal to fascism. The Soviet invasion destroyed this myth and brought the nation face to face with its helplessness and isolation, and with another capitulation by its leaders. If resistance was fruitless and compromise unacceptable, death was the only pure act left.

This is why some Czechoslovak students regard Jan Palach as a kind of hero. He symbolizes for them a protest against their country's long history of non-resistance, adaptation and survival. For them he is saying that if one does not fight one dies. Yet there are also defenders of the same tradition who argue the moral virtues of non-resistance and the suicidal implications of a small nation like Czechoslovakia trying to fight its larger neighbours.

Others again stress the more positive aspect of Jan Palach's death. They regard it not as an act of despair but as a cool and rational act of protest. On his death bed he is said to have asked that others should not imitate him. He struggled for his life and died wanting others to live. He was, according to this view, making the ultimate sacrifice for the human and political values he believed in. It is in this sense that some student leaders regard him as an example and an inspiration, a continuing voice of conscience that asks them whether they are doing enough for their country.

For outsiders with a different history and fortunately different problems it is difficult to make moral or political judgments on an act of this sort. It is only possible to try to appreciate the desperation out of which it was born and the meaning which it had and still has for the country in which it took place.

When Jan Palach died Mr. Dubcek was still in nominal power. He and his colleagues had signed an agreement with Moscow in the hope that by compromise and manoeuvre they could still save their country from the full rigours of military occupation and a puppet government. Their decision is now much criticized by young people who believe they should not have compromised. History may be kinder, or possibly not, but the effect was only to delay the onset of political darkness. In that darkness Jan Palach's death illuminates the profoundest questions, even if it provides no answers.