

THE LIMITS OF CITIZENSHIP IN THE PEOPLE'S DEMOCRACY

Under the new concept of law we are called traitors, but we still know that if we had freedom of action again we would act no differently than we have acted all our lives, truly serving the noble ideals of liberty, democracy, social progress and humanity. That loyalty is now considered treason. In this most trying moment, we take strength from the realization that we were not alone in our actions, that our cause will not die with our going.

Milada Horáková, courtroom speech, June 1950

AFTER HER ARREST in 1942, Františka Plamínková met Milada Horáková once more, in the women's camp for political prisoners in Terezín. During the days they spent there together, she urged Horáková to continue their struggle for women's rights, making her promise that she would take the lead in reconstituting the WNC after the war's end. Horáková assured her friend and mentor that she would never relinquish their common goal of creating a democratic society for both men and women. A few days later, on June 30, 1942, Františka Plamínková was shot in the Prague suburb of Kobylisy. Milada Horáková, however, escaped her teacher's fate. Initially arrested in 1940, Horáková endured two years in Prague prisons before being transferred to the concentration camp at Terezín. She was kept there for a further two years, often in punishing solitary confinement. Throughout her imprisonment, she steadfastly refused to divulge information about

the Czech resistance and just as tenaciously held on to the hope of a better future for herself and for her country. Finally, in October 1944, she was put on trial before the People's Court in Dresden, where the Nazi prosecutor recommended a death sentence. An accomplished lawyer, Horáková presented her own defense before the German judges. While she was found guilty, her efforts persuaded the court to deny the prosecution's call for her execution. She was sentenced instead to eight years in the prison of Aichach outside of Munich, where she was held until liberated by American forces on May 20, 1945.¹

Shortly thereafter, Horáková was back in Prague and intent on returning to her former public activities. True to her promise to Plamínková, one of her first priorities was rebuilding the Czech women's movement. She founded a new organization to be its guiding force: the Council of Czechoslovak Women (CCW, or Rada Československých Žen), which she hoped would continue the legacy of the WNC. Elected the group's first president, Horáková tried to implement a program based on the goals and methods of the interwar feminist movement. But, as Horáková herself realized, a simple return to the prewar First Republic was impossible under postwar circumstances. The experience of Munich, occupation, and liberation had fundamentally changed Czechoslovak politics, creating a new set of basic assumptions about the nature of the state, the relationship of the state to the individual, and the country's place in Europe. Like 1918, 1945 was a revolutionary moment, one that would set the terms for a new era in the region's history.

The People's Democracy

Soon after he fled post-Munich Czechoslovakia for the University of Chicago, former Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš began to ponder what would make democracy work, both in his country and in Europe as a whole. In his 1939 book *Democracy Today and Tomorrow*, he suggested that future democratic politicians would need to think about citizenship differently. Social and economic equality would take on greater importance, and individual freedoms might even have to be limited in order to pursue these new standards of social justice.² During the war years, Beneš after he

had left Chicago to head the Czechoslovak exile government in London, Beneš transformed his ideas into a program for a completely new Czechoslovak Republic, one that married democracy with socialism. If he returned to power, Beneš declared, he would enact a social revolution by nationalizing major industries and breaking up large estates in the countryside. He would create national unity by expelling German and Hungarian traitors, and pursue alliances with the Soviet Union as well as with the West.³

In many respects, Beneš's plans for a new postwar Czechoslovakia dovetailed with the hopes of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (Komunistická Strana Československa, or KSČ). After they formally split off from the Czechoslovak Social Democratic party in 1921, the Czechoslovak Communists had, unlike other Communist parties in Central and Eastern Europe, legally participated in parliamentary politics. In their electoral debut in 1925, the Communists had achieved the second strongest showing nationally. In later elections their popularity dipped somewhat, but the KSČ retained a significant share of the electorate throughout the interwar years, gaining around 10 percent of the total vote in both the 1929 and 1935 elections. However, the party never participated in a governing coalition and was always relegated to the ranks of the opposition.⁴

The KSČ's influence grew dramatically during the war years, as the party began to assert a leading position both at home and abroad. Its increased strength was the result of many factors, including the disorganization of other Czech parties after Munich and during the war, the KSČ's uncompromising resistance to Nazism at home, its bold vision for a new future that had no ties to the First Republic, and its association with the Soviet Union. Its Soviet ties served the party in several respects. A Soviet alliance appealed to the many Czechs who had lost faith in the West after Munich. It also certainly bought the Czechoslovak Communists a much more substantial role in creating a postwar government than they would have had otherwise, because the Soviets, as the military power in most of Czechoslovakia at the end of the war, could demand a Communist presence in any new regime. And, in fact, plans for a postwar Czechoslovak government were laid in Moscow during the spring of 1945, just as the Red Army began to enter the Czech lands.⁵

In Moscow, the Soviets hosted a meeting between the KSČ and representatives from the Czech exile government in London. Beneš invited

representatives from four Czech parties to join the negotiations, where they were met by a Slovak delegation. Three of these parties were socialist: the Communists, Social Democrats, and Czech National Socialists. The centrist People's Party, formerly Catholic but now of a nondenominational Christian orientation, was also present. One of the first decisions made in Moscow was to effectively eliminate the right wing of the former political spectrum by banning all rightist parties, including the previously dominant Agrarian Party, for collaborating with the Nazi regime. The remaining four parties then agreed to work together as the National Front and jointly formed a provisional government. They accepted a common political program, later called the Košice program after the Slovak town in which their government formally took power in April 1945. The KSČ was the primary author of this document, but, after some negotiation, it was accepted by all of the parties in the National Front.

The Košice program indicated a fundamental shift in Czech politics, including a new set of assumptions about the meaning of citizenship. It created the blueprint for what would be called the "people's democracy," proclaiming, "the people are the single instrument of state power," and urging citizens to take charge of their own communities by forming "National Committees" to serve as their local government. These National Committees were encouraged to root out Germans and collaborators and take their property for the state. Citizenship would now be limited to those who could prove their national and patriotic credentials; Germans, Hungarians, and collaborators would find that their personal rights and property were no longer legally guaranteed.⁶ However, in the new people's democracy, those who could claim citizenship would find that their list of rights had expanded considerably. The Košice program declared that Czechoslovak citizens were entitled to a long list of social rights, including the right to employment, vacation, medical care, and old age insurance.⁷

The Košice program provided the basis for what was later called the "national revolution." This "revolution" was really a set of presidential decrees promulgated by the Beneš administration between May and October of 1945. The Beneš decrees set out to nationalize the new republic by establishing special courts to try wartime collaborators and authorizing the expulsion of millions of German and Hungarian-speaking Czechoslovak citizens and the redistribution of their property to Czech and Slovak fam-

ilies.⁸ The decrees also took a firm step toward “socializing democracy,” most significantly by nationalizing major industrial enterprises. Although the standards varied by industry, all businesses over a certain size were subject to nationalization, effectively making the state the new authority in the realm of big business.⁹ These revolutionary measures had the broad support of both the population and the parties of the National Front, as all agreed that a radical break had to be made between the present and pre-Munich Czechoslovakia.¹⁰

Although they technically formed a united coalition, the parties of the National Front soon began to viciously compete with each other for a greater share of political power. Each began a concerted drive to gain new members: by 1946 an unprecedented 40 percent of the population had joined a party. While all of the National Front parties made tremendous gains in their membership, it was the Communists who were able to present themselves as the true driving force of the revolution and to assert themselves as the party of the moment. With its engaging message and amazing organizational machine, the KSČ increased its membership from about fifty thousand individuals at the end of the war to over a million one year later.¹¹ As the party’s leader, Klement Gottwald, declared in a speech shortly before the first parliamentary elections in May 1946, the Communists were the party of acts and deeds, not empty words and promises. The KSČ presented potential voters with a clear and confident plan of action, a blueprint for economic prosperity and national security.¹² Its vision was definitely directed toward a socialist future, but Communist leaders insisted on their commitment to democracy as a significant part of their Czech national heritage. In fact, the Communists styled themselves as the true defenders of democratic Czech national values. They even claimed to be the real inheritors of Masaryk’s legacy, declaring that Masaryk would have recognized the value of scientific socialism.¹³

Through this platform, the Communists managed to set the terms of postwar Czech political discourse. The other parties were forced to operate on their terms and scrambled to find a way to answer the Communist challenge. Since none of them could produce a coherent plan that substantially differed from the Communist program, they were quickly reduced to attacking the idea of Communism, or fighting over who was the real descendent of Masaryk.¹⁴ By the time of the first postwar elections in

May 1946, politics had devolved into increasingly bitter partisan warfare. The KSČ tried to tag the National Socialists as reactionaries who wanted to renege on the revolution and claimed that they harbored dubious elements from the banned Agrarian Party. The National Socialists and the People’s Party darkly intoned about the dangers of the “totalitarian” Communists. The National Socialists derided the Social Democrats for merely being Communists in poor disguise, and the Social Democrats responded by calling the National Socialists “a party without action, without a program, and without character.”¹⁵ Unable to stay above the fray, the People’s Party also attacked the National Socialists—even though they were its most likely allies against the KSČ—and mocked them for claiming to be both socialist and for private property.

In the midst of all this vitriol, the KSČ gained the advantage by moving beyond attacking its competitors and focusing the public on its positive message of social change. While the National Socialists and the People’s Party both complained about the Communist Party’s relentless campaigning—the National Socialist newspaper even ran a cartoon of a man covered in KSČ election stickers, telling his surprised wife in a caption that he had only stopped for a moment on the Charles Bridge when rabid Communist campaign workers confused his still form for a statue—it was they who had not been able to adequately adapt to new political circumstances.¹⁶ The KSČ won a decisive victory, gaining 38 percent of the vote and the prime minister’s chair for Klement Gottwald. Its closest rival, the National Socialist Party, won only 18.3 percent of the votes, trailed by the People’s Party (15.6 percent), the Slovak Democrats (14.1 percent) and the Social Democrats (12.1 percent). With just over half the votes going to explicitly Marxist parties, it seemed that Czechoslovakia had indeed started down the road to a socialist future.¹⁷

The Postwar Women’s Movement

The government that took charge of the liberated Czechoslovakia promised its citizens a new beginning. The bright future that all the parties of the National Front hoped to offer, and which the Communists articulated especially well, rested on a new kind of equality: instead of a liberal state

dedicated to protecting the freedom of people to do as they pleased, the trend after 1945 was toward a more interventionist state that would actively engineer the social and economic equality of its citizens. While the leaders of the "people's democracy" continued to concern themselves with a citizen's individual freedom, they placed a striking new emphasis on his or her material condition. This not only affected their thinking about the rights of citizenship, which were expanded to include the rights to sustenance, health, and relaxation, but also changed the way they conceived of a citizen's responsibilities. Postwar social rights did not come free; they were awarded to nationally reliable citizens on the basis of their work, not their humanity. It was only by actively contributing to the community that a citizen earned the benefits of belonging to that collective. The way that the new government approached the issue of women's citizenship was no exception to this attitude. The Košice program, like the Washington Declaration of 1918, proclaimed that women could expect equality in the political, economic, and cultural realms. But unlike the authors of the Washington Declaration, the framers of the Košice program pledged to "carry this out consistently." Perhaps more significantly, they specified that women would have the same rights to employment as men and be paid the same wages for the same work. Like men, women would earn rights through their labor.¹⁸

As in 1918, the politicians of 1945 loudly declared that women's equality was a fundamental part of the people's democracy. In a manner reminiscent of the earlier debates over women's suffrage, the National Front parties all claimed to champion women's rights. They proudly displayed their egalitarian credentials and tried to show women how they would work to realize their equality. As the parties openly admitted in their appeals to female voters, women were a majority of the electorate and the party that could command their support would be the victor.¹⁹ Among the socialist parties, this spawned a contest to prove which party was the true friend of women's rights.

In their attempts to win women over to their camp, the Communists and Social Democrats emphasized their concern for the practical realities of women's lives. The Social Democrats mentioned prewar concerns like changing the civil code, but their basic answer to the "woman question" was to enable women to become independent and productive workers.

Capitalism had forced women into an oppressive economic dependence on their husbands that made any legal changes in their status meaningless. "Scientific socialism" would give them the economic wherewithal to actually utilize their legal rights. Both Marxist parties claimed that they would work to make women's lives easier materially, by providing them with washing machines, central heating, and day care facilities. The Communists also stressed that they were the only party with a real plan capable of accomplishing this, inviting women of all classes to come and "build a happy home with us." "Away with the old times!" the KSČ suggested to women, Communism will give you a prosperous new world." Under a picture of a smiling young woman worker and an older female peasant, the party newspaper, *Rudé Právo* (Red Right), seductively added, "our plan has bowls full of goodies for all good and upstanding people," if only they were willing to work with the Communist Party to achieve this bright future.²⁰

The National Socialists and their leader, Petr Zenkl, also tried to sell themselves as the party most devoted to women's rights. In this area at least, the National Socialists could present a concrete program of demands, including giving women adequate access to training and education, providing childcare for working women, and looking after the rights of housewives in a worker's democracy. While the Communists and Social Democrats emphasized relieving women of domestic chores so that they could be workers like men, the National Socialists talked about legally recognizing housework as valuable work. They held up the record of their female representatives in the provisional National Assembly, which had been formed in the fall of 1946, a group that included Milada Horáková and long-standing party leader Fraňa Zemínová. The party noted that these women had been instrumental in recognizing housewives as workers in certain government programs.²¹ Although the National Socialists emphasized their commitment to socialism and the Košice program, they tried to carve out a moderate position that emphasized women's ability to choose either a traditional or modern path, so that "able women could fully and actively take part in the building of the new republic," but marriage, motherhood, and the family would remain viable institutions.²²

The People's Party also made attempts to attract women, and even placed women on its candidate lists for the first time. Its overtures to them used markedly different language from the prewar Federation of Catholic

Women and Girls. Female party leaders claimed that they would fight to see that women got their "just share" in public life. They declared that the People's Party was dedicated to "a democratic state as Masaryk understood it," emphasizing that a vote for the People's Party was a vote in support of freedom of expression, freedom of enterprise, and the free choice of profession and education. Yet, it was also in its appeals to women that the party most forcefully emphasized its Christian orientation—which was otherwise fairly muted in its election campaign—claiming that it would fight for Christian values in the schools and in family life. While women from the party did not return to prewar Catholic demands for a decidedly gendered household, they still assumed that women were particularly concerned with family and morality. In this way, they mimicked the National Socialists by attempting to capitalize on women's fears about how the socialist emphasis on wage work might affect family life and the job description of the housewife. Unlike the National Socialists, though, they also played up the atheism of the socialist camp, reminding women that only the People's Party had a firm moral standpoint dedicated to traditional values.²³

With all the parties of the National Front doing anything they could to present themselves as favorable to women's rights, the immediate postwar era seemed like a real opportunity for women activists to push their own agenda and perhaps win some of the battles they had been fighting since 1918. However, the intense politicization and partisanship that began to develop after the spring of 1945 also affected the ability of women to work together for these goals. Shortly after the liberation of the country, female leaders from each of the parties in the National Front created their own coalition, which they called the National Women's Front (NWF). While it remained a partisan organization, the group later included representatives from the Council of Czechoslovak Women, the successor to the Women's National Council. But although the parties in the NWF had pledged to work in the interests of national unity and not personal political advantage, they found this difficult to achieve. Instead, partisan factions competed with each other and used the NWF as a forum for their own ends, which created more conflict than cooperation. For example, after the first NWF rally, held in Prague's Lucerna hall in September 1945, the Com-

munist representative Julie Prokopová complained bitterly that some speakers had brought up subjects that had not been approved by the group. Prokopová particularly rebuked Fraňa Zemínová for paying tribute to her fallen National Socialist comrade Františka Plamínková without including any reference to women from other parties who had been killed by the Nazis. Prokopová was also upset that the Soviet flag was not among the decorations and that Soviet hymns were not sung. To resolve the dispute, the group agreed to work jointly on all speeches to be given at public gatherings in the future.²⁴

The members of the NWF managed to work together on some issues. In one of their first projects, they attempted, albeit unsuccessfully, to convince the government to rehire the married women fired from the civil service in 1938. Beneš overturned the resolution that had authorized the layoffs, but refused to require the reinstatement of those who had been affected. The women could return to their old jobs, but only if their former offices wanted them back.²⁵ The NWF also worked toward greater parity for women in politics, organizing formal meetings with leaders from all parties to encourage them to place more women high on their candidate lists during the 1946 elections.²⁶ However, such moments of cooperation were relatively rare by mid-1946. After the KSČ triumphed in the elections, relations between the members of the NWF deteriorated, severely hampering the effectiveness of the organization.

Communist women hoped to use the NWF to bring more women into the workforce, which would have been a great boon to the new Gottwald government's economic program, known as the Two-Year Plan. However, they found their efforts at least partially blocked by the National Socialists and the People's Party. Female Communist leaders claimed in internal party documents that Zemínová attempted to stymie their plan to create women's work brigades in the countryside and that People's Party leader Marie Trojanová tried to prevent the NWF from encouraging married women's employment outside the home altogether. Both these women, they charged, were trying to use the NWF and its magazine, the very widely printed *Československá Žena* (Czechoslovak Woman), to spread "reactionary" ideas. On the other side, the National Socialists and People's Party members saw the Communists pushing a Two-Year Plan that was

more a priority for their party than for the country as a whole. For the People's Party, plans to move women into the labor force in record numbers were especially problematic, because they pointed toward a new relationship between work and rights that they did not support.²⁷

The conflicts within the NWF were especially evident during the group's 1946 congress, held in Prague on October 26–28. The speeches given by NWF leaders were vetted, in a rather contentious series of meetings, by the entire group. Although they eventually agreed upon the texts to be presented, the way the topics were distributed and discussed still captured the ideological differences between the parties. Speaking on the subject of the Two-Year Plan, Communist leader Anežka Hodinová stressed the need to increase industrial production, creating "rows of new tractors and machines, locomotives and railway cars, millions of meters of material and millions of pairs of shoes." The key to achieving this happy industrial future, where there would be no more lines for necessities like bread and potatoes, was the labor of women as well as men. Women, she said, had to be made to realize that their work was not only the basis of their own independence, but the foundation of the new republic. In her opinion, getting women to work was the NWF's biggest and most important task.²⁸

The National Socialist leader Fraňa Zemínová took a very different tack in her speech, which covered the topic of the new constitution (then in the process of being written) and women in public life. She spoke of women gaining their freedom through law, rather than work. Harkening back to the language of the prewar era, she demanded that any new constitution address the long-standing concerns of women left over from the First Republic: legal equality within marriage and the family. In her notoriously spirited manner, Zemínová challenged Czech politicians to keep their promises to women once and for all, noting that even after the 1946 elections, only twenty-four out of three hundred representatives in the National Assembly were women, and there was not a single female minister. "We are half the nation," she declared, "why aren't there more of us in positions of responsibility?" Even women politically allied with the KSČ could accept this demand. Zemínová's call for women to unite in defense of national freedom as something more fundamental than the individual freedom granted to them by the constitution was more controversial.

Considering her deep suspicion of the Communists, she undoubtedly meant this as a plea against excessive Soviet influence in Czechoslovakia, even if her words could be read in multiple ways.²⁹

In the last part of her speech, Zemínová remarked that the people's democracy was founded on the basis of partisan contestation and that women could not expect the National Women's Front to be like a party. However, while she and the other leaders of the NWF wanted to advance women's interests generally, they soon began to see that goal as inextricably tied to their own party's future. Zemínová herself clearly did not trust Communist women, even within the NWF. In March 1947, Zemínová wrote to a district-level leader in the National Socialist women's organization to complain that, against her explicit instructions, the Communists had "lured" National Socialist women in several towns into joining NWF celebrations in honor of International Women's Day, which she charged was a Marxist holiday that should not be endorsed by the NWF. According to Zemínová, the Communist women were "double crossers" who were only interested in using the NWF for their own partisan agitation. She warned the district leader to "keep the NWF at arm's length" and charged her with working to keep the Communists from organizing Czech women in a federation that was really under their umbrella, as she claimed they had done with unions and were trying to do with farmers.³⁰

In 1947, Zemínová began to lead her National Socialist women's organization in an active struggle against the Communists. She launched a major campaign to bring women into the party and convince their male colleagues to take them seriously. As she explained to the party's male leaders, all of the other parties were strenuously engaged in competing for women's allegiance. While the National Socialists had a history of having the strongest women's movement, they were in danger of losing that advantage due to neglect. Even many of the wives of party members were voting Communist or Catholic, she charged. There was no excuse for not winning them over to the National Socialist camp. To begin, she announced a plan to register one hundred thousand new women and found one thousand new local organizations.³¹ She also worked tirelessly to focus local leaders on the fight against the Communists and bring up party morale. In a letter to one of her district officials, she declared that the National So-

cialists were holding the line in their fight against Communist agitation, confiding that the Communists were beginning to worry about losing support in the next elections. Although she admitted that events in neighboring Poland and Hungary were troublesome, she held fast to the conviction that the Communists would not be able to stifle opposition in Czechoslovakia as they had done in those places, at least as long as Beneš was president. Zemínová urged her correspondent to throw herself into party work because the "biggest battle for democracy and the independence of the state lies in front of us."³² As she wrote in another letter to the head of the party's women's group in the town of Horní Litvínov, the Czech nation did not take kindly to terror and would not easily submit to Communist domination. It was in resistance to such terror they had "broken up Austria, fought Hitler to the death, and believe me, we will also disperse this red cloud over our borders."³³

Although Zemínová exuded confidence, the Communist Party's Central Women's Commission, led by Julie Prokopová and Anežka Hodiňová, was ready for a fight. Their plan for 1947 was essentially the same as Zemínová's: to aggressively recruit more women. They hoped to make their members the backbone of every event or organization concerned with Czech women, and envisioned Communist women fanning out into every local community, where they would "help shape the opinion of Czechoslovak women in a positive relationship to the government and Gottwald."³⁴ Like the National Socialists, Communist women launched a major membership drive in 1947, but their effort seemed to be better supported by their men. Writing for the magazine directed at female party functionaries in May 1947, KSC leader Rudolf Slanský declared that the membership campaign would explicitly focus on women and young people. At that moment, he said, 30.5 percent of KSC members were women, which was already the highest percentage of any Czechoslovak party, reflecting what he called the party's leading role in fighting for women's equality. But, said Slanský, the party's goal was to have half of its members be women. To achieve this, the Communist Party needed to show Czechoslovak women that it could transform the promises of the Košice program from words on paper into reality.³⁵

Apparently, the KSC did quite well in convincing women that it was committed to their interests: about 40 percent of those who joined the party

in 1947 were women, and this number swelled to 50 percent in the cities of Prague, Kladno, and Brno. This was a marked improvement over previous efforts. In all, the Communists added 46,148 women to their membership rolls over the course of the year, giving them the impressive total of 446,148 female members. To put this number into perspective, in the fall of 1947 there were just under 600,000 people registered with the National Socialist party as a whole.³⁶ Despite their success, the Communists were, as Zemínová implied, increasingly nervous about their position. The leaders of the Central Women's Commission constantly referred to enemies who wanted to sabotage the Two-Year Plan: "The reaction is concentrating" they claimed, "looking for ways to strengthen the reactionary front and disempower us" by blaming the KSC for problems with food distribution and low living standards. They vowed to put all their energy into fighting this conspiracy.³⁷

In this poisonous atmosphere, building a truly nonpartisan women's organization like the old WNC was an incredibly difficult task. Former WNC leaders attempted to do so, however, through the CCW, which was modeled on its predecessor and dedicated to realizing women's equality "not only theoretically, but practically."³⁸ Like the WNC, the CCW was a federation of independent women's groups with a central core of officers and "expert" working groups dedicated to following the interests of the entire membership. In the intensely politicized atmosphere after the Second World War, however, an organization that purported to represent the interests of all Czechoslovak women could not exist without partisan involvement. The four parties of the National Women's Front conceded the need for a "professional" group dedicated to women's interests and distinct from their own "political" organization, but they still demanded representation on the CCW presidium.³⁹ From the beginning, the CCW struggled to maintain a place between the NWF and the individual parties. Its leaders continually emphasized their role not simply as feminists or advocates but as experts in women's affairs, a special group of skilled workers who could perform a distinct service for Czechoslovak women. The CCW created working groups to tackle a number of different issues, including old priorities, like revising citizenship regulations and family and marriage law, and new concerns, like ensuring that women were not disadvantaged in new national insurance schemes and arranging shop hours to benefit work-

ing women. The CCW also worked diligently to give women a voice in the writing of the new Czechoslovak Constitution, which began in earnest after the 1946 elections.⁴⁰

But although a matter like the constitution was certainly one in which women had an interest regardless of party, partisan infighting made work within the CCW increasingly torturous. CCW president Milada Horáková had followed in Plamínková's footsteps by becoming a National Socialist representative to the National Assembly in 1946. Her political activities did have their benefit for the organization; she was appointed to the Assembly's constitutional commission and managed to arrange a meeting between its members and CCW representatives, which was impossible during the debates over the old constitution.⁴¹ However, her link to the National Socialists also caused difficulties. Leaders of the Communist Party's Central Women's Commission in 1946 discussed their problems with the CCW. They recognized that the CCW could do good work and represented a truly "progressive" viewpoint, but were afraid that it was too identified with Horáková, a National Socialist. They called her "aggressive" and "ambitious" and were wary of supporting the CCW if it remained under her leadership. They planned to try and undermine her control of the group by placing their own comrades closely around her, so that they could influence the work of the CCW and perhaps even gain popularity with women alongside Horáková.⁴²

Making things more difficult was the fact that many of the Communists were not foreigners to the Czech women's movement, but some of its veteran practitioners. Numerous members of the Czech intellectual elite joined the KSČ right after the war, and women were no exception. Indeed, frustration with the slow pace of progress for women's rights in the First Republic may have motivated many feminists to consider aligning themselves with the Communists, who not only had a long history of supporting gender equality but, as a former opposition party, also could not be blamed for the wrongs of previous governments. According to Vilma Součková, many of those left after the liquidation of the WNC came to realize that "a global socialist view" was the best way to achieve equality even before the end of the war, and quite a number of old WNC functionaries became Communists.⁴³ As tensions grew sharper between

the Communists and National Socialists, work in the CCW grew harder to accomplish, and friendships began to fray under the strain. Horáková was particularly hurt by the antipathy she now felt from her old WNC colleague, the judge Zdenka Patschová, who tried to get her to join the KSČ and threatened her when she refused, saying "if we win, we must arrest you, and if you are brought into my court, I must sentence you to death for all you have done to undermine the regime."⁴⁴ But Milada Horáková was not one to go back on her convictions, and she was convinced that the Communists were bent on attacking democratic government. According to one story, when a colleague complained that the Communists seemed to be gaining the upper hand, Horáková replied that they were not going to gain the upper hand on her, adding, "a lot of people will still find me a hard nut to crack."⁴⁵

This viciousness brewing inside the Czech women's movement shows how much politics had changed in Czechoslovakia since 1945. As in the interwar years, many politically active Czech women shared many of the same goals. They wanted to see the promises of the Košice program fulfilled, giving women and men equal access to social security, education, and economic opportunity. But, in the postwar era, consensus on such issues quickly ran aground on ideological differences. Each party began to see itself as the home of the righteous, and its opponents as the representatives of evil. As politics became polarized along the lines of good and evil, the possibility for dialogue disappeared, and the chance for building a workable consensus faded.

February 1948 and Its Aftermath

From mid-1947 on, conflicts between the parties of the National Front escalated to a fever pitch, influenced at least in part by the poisonous atmosphere of the early Cold War. The steadily growing animosity between the United States and the Soviet Union made the idea of acting as a bridge between East and West untenable. Now, it seemed, everyone would have to choose sides. Inside the Czech lands, the idea of a unique Czechoslovak road to socialism began to fall apart. As the KSČ moved to solidify its

power within the police force and the unions, the façade of the National Front quickly disintegrated into open battle between those who supported the Communists and those who did not.⁴⁶

Things came to a head at a government meeting on February 13, 1948, when the National Socialists tried to make a stand on what was a relatively minor issue involving personnel transfers within the police force. Their decision to hold firm stemmed from a wider fear that the Communist Minister of the Interior, Václav Nosek, was using his position to turn the police into a KSČ institution. So the National Socialist ministers in the government announced that they would refuse to participate in government meetings until the transfers were reversed. When their demands were not met, they resigned, and took the Cabinet members from the Slovak Democratic and People's parties with them. The resigning ministers obviously hoped that their action would bring down the government and necessitate early elections, which they hoped to win. However, their plan was compromised by the fact that they had neglected to consult the Social Democrats in advance. By themselves, the National Socialists, Slovak Democrats, and People's Party did not form a majority of the government. Unless the Social Democrats joined them, there was nothing that could legally force Gottwald's government to fall. And he decided to make sure it would remain standing.⁴⁷

Although the National Socialists had been the ones to resign, it was the KSČ that took the initiative. Communist leaders immediately decried the resignations as a reactionary attempt to break the National Front, divide the country, and destroy the revolution. Calling the resigning ministers traitors, Gottwald created what he called the Central Action Committee to root them and their supporters out of the National Front, leaving behind a new coalition of Communist fellow-travelers. At the same time, the KSČ mobilized its membership, about one and a half million strong, bringing them out into the streets to protest against this "attack" on the people's democracy. The other parties were paralyzed by this show of force, reduced to looking on in horror as hundreds of thousands of workers in Prague participated in a one-hour general strike in support of Gottwald's government. In the end, enough members of the National Assembly, whether out of conviction, fear, or opportunism, agreed to support the government for it to retain its majority.⁴⁸

The matter now rested with President Beneš. If he accepted the resignations of the opposition ministers, Gottwald would be free to replace them with his own supporters. If not, the opposition would remain in the government. Under immense pressure, he yielded, and a Communist-dominated government was installed on February 25, 1948. This was ostensibly a legal transfer of power, made possible through the ill-advised actions of the opposition parties. However, Communist-sponsored violence and intimidation were crucial in determining the final shape of events. Much of this work was carried out by the so-called Action Committees. These ad-hoc groups of KSČ supporters formed throughout the country, fanning out from the Central Action Committee into every nook and cranny. In government ministries, public offices, within the other political parties, inside factories, businesses, and mass organizations like unions and clubs, Action Committees took root on every level and in virtually every public body. Their goal was to foil the "reactionary conspiracy" against the people's democracy, which generally involved identifying people who did not agree with the government's position and kicking them out of their positions. It was the Action Committees that performed the job of wrecking the opposition, purging anyone who refused to publicly support the government and driving them out of public life.⁴⁹

The women's movement could not remain outside this process. The Council of Czechoslovak Women was invited to send delegates to the initial meeting of the Central Action Committee of the National Front, held on February 23, 1948. The CCW's governing committee agreed to send representatives, armed with a resolution declaring that the CCW "stood on the progressive front, but insisted on free elections." But the committee also decided, by a vote of twenty to thirteen, that the CCW would not formally join the Action Committee. The next day, Milada Horáková received a phone call from one of the Council's secretaries, telling her that CCW vice president Julie Prokopová, a high-ranking member of the KSČ, had demanded that Horáková agree to the organization's participation in the Action Committee. If she would not do this, Prokopová said, Horáková should surrender the Council's official stamp and some of its stationery so that Prokopová could join on behalf of herself and the thirteen members of the executive committee who had voted for inclusion. Horáková angrily replied that she was still the president of the CCW and would

not allow the vote of its committee to be undermined in a blatantly undemocratic violation of its bylaws. "I am," she said, "a person who is used to closely adhering to laws, regulations, and rules." Instead of permitting Prokopová to have her way, she agreed to call a special emergency meeting of the governing committee the next day so that the entire group could revisit the issue. The meeting was called, but not before Prokopová had already acted on her own, writing (without the proper stationery or stamp) to ask that the Council of Czechoslovak Women be included as a member of the Central Action Committee, with Prokopová as its official representative.⁵⁰

Speaking to the assembled committee members the next morning, Prokopová defended herself by saying, "the things that are developing around us are of the type that the true women's movement represented by the CCW cannot remain outside of them." If she had not taken charge, she contended, the CCW would not have been on the list of groups that had agreed to participate in the Action Committee, which had already been given to Gottwald. After she finished justifying her actions, the meeting was interrupted by women who had been delegates at the recently held Congress of Factory Councils. Since these women-unionists represented the largest organization within the CCW federation, they demanded that the CCW follow the lead of the unions and join the Action Committee. The women proclaimed: "women unionists will always be on guard against any threat to the Republic and its path to socialism and will not allow other forces within the CCW to devalue the progressive women's movement with their passivity." One of the women added, "if Ms. Plamínková was among us she would not stand by negatively but would be inclined toward working women, toward the strength of progress." Hearing Plamínková's name used as justification for joining the Action Committee angered her old friend (and former leader of teacher's unions) Antonie Maxová, who heatedly defended socialism but decried the events of the previous few days. She concluded by saying, "I remembered Senator Plamínková today as well, and she would certainly be on the side of progress, but not for a minute would she move off the path of democracy."⁵¹

After Maxová's outburst, the unionists were asked to leave, and the members of the committee discussed what the proper reaction of the

women's movement should be. Quite a few of those present seemed unsure and perhaps afraid, asking for clarification on what precisely the Action Committee was and what joining it would mean. There were a few very vocal KSC supporters (including Prokopová, Netušilová, and Augusta Müllerová) who presented the Action Committee as a new National Front "with the task of perfecting the reconstruction program." They presented the decision to join a vote in favor of "socializing democracy," arguing that not participating in the Action Committee would mean rejecting the Košice program and all that it stood for. They also reasoned that many other mass organizations, including the unions and the cooperatives, had already joined. This kind of talk seemed persuasive to women like Irene Malinská, who said she felt that the decision represented an enormous responsibility, but that it was clear that "the CCW cannot go against the people." But some of those present resisted the way the Communists characterized the Action Committee. Božena Kubičková insisted that the debate was not about "socializing democracy," because all the parties were in favor of further socialization, national insurance, and maintaining Czechoslovakia's Soviet alliance. "The difference is," she said, "that we want to take the democratic road and we reject methods in which someone autocratically does something that has not been voted on, even if they did it with the best intention." Her argument was not enough to win over the majority of the members, however, and the committee agreed to join the Action Committee by a vote of thirty to seven, with five abstentions.⁵²

After the vote had been taken, Milada Horáková rose to speak. She had been mostly silent during the debate, she said, because she did not want her views to overly color the proceedings. But now she had to vent her own feelings. She was against joining the Action Committee because, in her opinion, it was not "the constitutional and democratic path." No one, she said, really knew what the Action Committees were, but it was certain that they were taking on enormous power and acting without real legal authority or oversight. They were, without mincing words, the shock troops of a revolution, and she vehemently opposed this kind of attack on the parliamentary system. She also strongly objected to those who contended that the CCW was not "progressive" or "radical" enough. The point of the CCW, she said, was not to be radical, but to create a coalition between

Czech women from both sides of the political spectrum that could span different opinions. To move away from that was to exclude some people from participation, and she rejected that path.⁵³

As she finished speaking, Horáková acknowledged that her own opinions put her on the wrong side of the vote, but declared that this was no reason she could not stay in her post as president. "Maybe you think that I don't feel strong enough," she said, but "I will stay in charge until a plenary meeting removes me or until revolutionary circumstances force me to go." In fact, as soon as Horáková finished speaking, Julie Prokopová proposed that she be immediately removed as the head of the organization. However, Horáková's point that only a plenary meeting had the power to elect a new president carried some weight with those present. The committee did not vote to replace her out of hand, but instead agreed to call a new plenary meeting as soon as possible. This turned out to be just a temporary reprieve, as bylaws and regulations were soon cast aside in the name of political expediency.⁵⁴ The very next day, Horáková found herself suddenly locked out of the CCW offices. A self-proclaimed Action Committee of Czechoslovak Women declared it was taking over both the CCW and the National Women's Front in order to purge them of enemy elements that threatened to harm the people's democracy. Those who had voted with Horáková against joining the Action Committee were removed from the CCW. A similar process occurred in the central office of the NWF, where Fraňa Zemínová, the Catholic leader Marie Trojanová, and others were stripped of their posts. The leaders of the Action Committee urged women all over the country to form their own committees and take over local branches of the CCW and NWF. These local Action Committees would then purge unreliable elements out of the lower levels of both organizations and "help in the cleansing of the nation."⁵⁵

At a meeting of the KSC Central Women's Commission on February 26, Julie Prokopová defended all that had happened, saying that she and those who assisted her had acted in a completely correct manner. "The CCW," she said, "had feigned a progressive orientation against fascism on the outside, but in reality it was governed by reactionary elements that hindered every positive effort." Horáková and the National Socialists were responsible for this untenable situation, and they had to go. Now the Com-

mission members had to decide what they would do next. As Prokopová noted, they had an opportunity to put themselves in a strong position to "direct the education and mood of women." They decided right away to use the situation to liquidate the Czechoslovak Association of University Women, because of its "reactionary orientation," and promote a complete shakedown in the Housewives' Union, which they considered a nest of National Socialists. The NWF would also no longer be needed and could be disbanded. The Council of Czechoslovak Women they would keep, after cleansing its branches of women like Horáková. In fact, they later planned to expand the CCW and make it into a mass organization for Czechoslovak women. This was done and, its name changed to the Federation of Czechoslovak Women, the CCW lived on during the Communist regime as the official public outlet for women in Czechoslovakia.⁵⁶

The Trial of Milada Horáková

For Milada Horáková, being removed from her place at the head of the Council of Czechoslovak Women was only the beginning. Amongst themselves, female Communist leaders spoke of the need to publicize an attack on Horáková as a "warning sign" to others who might consider opposing them. They publicized her expulsion from the CCW and denounced her as a reactionary element in the Czech women's movement.⁵⁷ Within a few days, Horáková had been removed from her other positions in public life and even found herself ceremonially thrown out of some associations she had never joined. She lost her job with the Social Office of the City of Prague, and soon her husband, Bohuslav Horák, was fired as well. A few weeks later, she completed the cycle by resigning her seat in the National Assembly as a form of public protest against the events of February. She turned in her resignation on March 10, 1948, just after the mysterious suicide of the foreign minister, Jan Masaryk, son of Tomáš Masaryk.⁵⁸ Although she had given up her place in the National Assembly, Milada Horáková did not retreat into private life, nor did she leave the country, as a number of her colleagues did. As she wrote to some of them, she felt strongly that her place was at home, where she could work toward ending

the Communist domination of politics. She knew that such work was dangerous, but she chose it anyway, remarking to one of her friends abroad, "one who has been imprisoned in German concentration camps like me . . . no longer fears what a man can do to another man. In any case, my own countrymen cannot be worse than the Germans."⁵⁹

Horáková's activities during the months after February 1948 are difficult to determine. She certainly had strong ties to a number of leaders within the National Socialist party, including party chief Petr Zenkl and former government minister Herbert Ripka. She visited both men a number of times before they fled abroad, and then secretly corresponded with them. Evidence indicates that after they left the country, Horáková became a member of a group known as the "political six," a secret association of National Socialist loyalists who met to discuss what was going on in the country and report on events to their colleagues in exile. Horáková's biographer, Zora Dvořáková, called her a "master at gaining and gathering information" that she would then send abroad. For well over a year Horáková's reports to Zenkl gave the exiles a vivid portrait of the place they had left behind. They might not have always liked what they heard. Horáková quite emphatically told Zenkl that people were suspicious about hearing that the banned Agrarian and National Democratic parties had been reconstituted abroad. They did not, she wrote "want to substitute a leftist dictatorship with a rightist one." Instead, they wanted to be sure that most elements of the Košice program, including the nationalization of major industries and state-sponsored rights to employment, vacation, and a pension would be maintained.⁶⁰

Besides corresponding with those across the border, Horáková was interested in creating a positive alternative political program to have ready for the time when an opposition party could openly function again. She firmly believed that any useful opposition needed to be clear about what it was for as well as what it fought against. Therefore, she devoted her energy toward working out the ideological basis and policy framework for an alternative regime, and not toward an armed revolt against the KSČ. Her efforts consisted mainly of organizing or attending meetings with people from different partisan backgrounds to construct a workable program. Besides meeting with other National Socialists, Horáková was in

contact with a number of people from other opposition parties and tried to create a common organization between them, although this idea did not go anywhere. Despite her network of contacts, however, she was not by any means the center of opposition activity, but merely a member of one group among many.⁶¹

Horáková's clandestine activities suffered setbacks almost immediately, as some of those involved were detained by the State Security Services (Státní bezpečnost or StB). Drawing on their investigation of these individuals, the police decided to question Horáková as well. She was taken into custody at her office in late September 1949. Her husband, Bohuslav Horák, barely escaped from the agents that also showed up at their home, running in his house slippers out through the garden. After finding out that his wife had been arrested, he managed to slip across the border to Germany, where he stayed for over five years before finally getting permission to emigrate to the United States.⁶²

Horáková was arrested just as a Cold War-inspired paranoia started to sweep over Eastern Europe. The search for traitors and class enemies intensified, heavily encouraged by Stalin, who hoped to create satellite Communist parties that would be too cowed by fear to take an independent line from the Soviet Union. In their quest to create more reliable political partners, Soviet advisers to East European Communist regimes introduced the phenomenon of the show trial, where political opponents were publicly tried for treason in heavily publicized and intricately staged events. Such trials had already begun in Hungary, and the Soviets hoped to bring them to Czechoslovakia, as well. Soviet advisers were sent to Prague to assist the StB in organizing trials there. When Milada Horáková was taken into custody, her captors did not know exactly what purpose she would serve. But as they began to investigate her and her associates, they began to envision a trial of a vast conspiracy to bring down the Communist regime, led by none other than Milada Horáková. The trial that they eventually created was the first of its kind in Czechoslovakia, and it provided the basis for many future show trials.

It is not entirely clear why the security agents responsible for designing the trial eventually settled on Horáková as their ringleader. Both Dvořáková and the historian Karel Kaplan suggest that, in the end, she

was simply the one in custody that best fit their requirements. The trial planners had decided that they wanted a scenario that warned of a global conspiracy to overthrow the People's Democratic regime and they had proof that Horáková, a publicly known figure, had not only corresponded with prominent exiles like Zenkl and Ripka but had tried to acquire information about the true state of the economy to send to them.⁶³ In addition, as the former head of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs committee and the CCW, it was easy to show that she had extensive contacts with influential people in Western governments.

Horáková did not prove to be a very cooperative subject, especially at the beginning. In her first set of recorded interrogations, conducted after she had been in prison for about six weeks, she readily admitted that she had a critical view of what had happened in February 1948 but steadfastly denied being involved in any illegal activity and claimed that the meetings she had attended all rejected the idea of forming illegal cells to actively oppose the KSČ. Even after several more months of relentless interrogations, she still refused to agree with her captors' version of events. One of the StB agents who questioned her remembered her later as an "absolute and ardent anti-Communist fighter," an impression that is borne out by some of her interrogation records.⁶⁴ When asked in a confrontational questioning session conducted in late January of 1950 if she had plotted to overthrow the people's democracy and return Czechoslovakia to the "subjection of Western imperialists," she firmly replied that she could never bear to see her country subjected to any form of imperialism. By this point in her captivity, she was willing to admit on the record that she wanted to oust the current regime, but insisted on adding that this was because she considered it "a sure form of dictatorship, not as democracy or the government of the people, but the government of one party." She declared that the goal of any punishable offenses she may have committed was only to establish a regime that was truly based on the "will of the people, expressed in free elections."⁶⁵

But by her last set of recorded interrogations, taken in late April and May 1950, Horáková was more willing to adopt the role her interrogators prepared for her. Although no sure record of her treatment in prison exists, others incarcerated with her variously remembered being interrogated in-

cessantly at all hours of the day, woken at odd times to see if they remembered the testimony that had been prepared for them, threatened with the arrest of spouses or family members, beaten, or forced to walk incessantly up and down the halls all day long.⁶⁶ Whatever physical or psychological pressures Horáková endured, she was finally convinced to sign some statements that fit the character the trial planners had decided she would play. For example, when asked what side she would take in a war between West and East, she agreed that she would take the side of the West, in order to use the situation to bring down the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia. When the questioner then demanded to know if this meant she wanted to create a fifth column in the country, she replied, "yes, it could be called that, or the actions of our subversive group would have to lead to this result."⁶⁷ Even though Horáková stressed in later portions of the interrogation that her activities were focused on passive resistance and not armed conflict, the mere suggestion of war in the newly nuclear standoff between the United States and Soviet Union was precisely what the trial organizers planned to use to convince the population that dangerous elements were in their midst. Milada Horáková was ready for her trial.

Just a few weeks later, the Justice Ministry published its indictment in the case they called "Milada Horáková and Associates." Twelve others were indicted along with her: six from her National Socialist party, along with two Social Democrats, two People's Party members, and two former Communists. Interestingly, three of the National Socialists on the dock were women; the others were Fraňa Zemínová and National Assemblywoman Antonie Kleinerová, who had known Horáková from their shared time in German prisons.⁶⁸ The indictment accused Horáková of organizing the others to work under the direction of exiled National Socialist leaders Petr Zenkl and Herbert Ripka. The group's goal was "to work for the return of capitalism and pre-Munich relations" via foreign intervention. According to the indictment, the exiles abroad ordered the conspirators to commit espionage; support terrorist acts, including attempts on the lives of KSČ leaders; and create "passive resistance" in industry to sabotage the economy. Their ultimate aim was to form a fifth column of reactionaries who would fight against the people's democracies of Eastern Europe and their Soviet allies in a war to bring all of Europe under imperialist domination.

With this kind of heated rhetoric, the indictment painted a picture of a vast international conspiracy that was plotting to plunge Czechoslovakia into a devastating nuclear war.⁶⁹

The trial began the day after the indictment was published, on May 31, 1950. Like the indictment, the trial was carefully planned and scripted beforehand to create the sense of imminent danger facing the country. All the participants, including the defendants, learned their parts in advance and generally said their lines as directed. Kleinerová recalled later that the only deviation she allowed herself was to begin answers before the prosecutors had finished asking the questions, as an oblique form of protest.⁷⁰ Some historians have asserted that several of the accused, including Horáková, deviated more substantially from the script, but at the time, few would have been able to tell. Live radio transmission of the trial was halted after the first day (the trial was still broadcast, but not live), and the transcripts that were published daily in the papers were corrected to reflect the prepared text.⁷¹ What people heard from the trial was what the regime wanted them to hear: those elements in society that claimed to support democracy and the legacy of the First Republic were really only in favor of war, annihilation, and the triumph of the bourgeoisie over the masses.

According to the published transcripts, Horáková freely admitted to working toward the overthrow of the current government and the establishment of a new one based on "bourgeois principles." She claimed that she knew the information she sent abroad would be used to destabilize Czechoslovakia and assumed it would help lead to "armed conflict" in the world. Even more alarmingly, she was asked if she realized that the atomic bomb might figure in to such a conflict, and replied that she had "reckoned even with that." The most quoted bit of her testimony, however, was the last question asked by the prosecutor. He inquired whether she had considered that Prague might be hit if war broke out. According to the printed text, she replied, "If there is a war, we have to expect that all targets might be hit." To which the prosecutor added, "Even Prague? Isn't your sixteen-year-old daughter in Prague?" And Horáková ended her testimony simply by answering, "Yes."⁷²

This testimony was used to make Horáková seem like a cold and calculating monster who was willing to sacrifice even her own daughter in her

fight for Western imperialism. In articles published during and just after the trial, Horáková was constantly described in such a way as to make her seem as unfeeling and unfeminine as possible. She was referred to as "proud," "cold-blooded," and "uncontrollably ambitious and conceited," primarily concerned with her own personal advancement.⁷³ One book openly portrayed her as a perverted specimen of womanhood, titling its chapter about her deeds "Mother," as an ironic comment on her failure to embody ideal feminine values. The authors noted that she had seen some of the destroyed cities of Europe during the Second World War, had met women who had lost children to bombs, and was a mother herself. Yet, they wrote, "she helped those who wanted to drop bombs on the cities where tens of thousands of Czechoslovak children live, where even her own daughter lives."⁷⁴ Contemporary commentators thus presented Horáková, who had let her maternal instincts be swallowed by her hatred for the people's democracy, as a woman who had betrayed her gender—and therefore could not expect any leniency on behalf of her sex.

Implicit in the drive to present Horáková as a ruthless warmonger was a comparison with the new regime's recent relentless association of women and peace. Shortly after Horáková's expulsion from the Council of Czechoslovak Women, the group had begun to concentrate its activities around a government-sponsored campaign for peace, which was an attempt to simplify the growing animosity of the Cold War into a fight between those who wanted war (Western imperialists) and those who believed in peace (the Soviet Union and its allies). This project had culminated in the weeks before the trial, when seventy thousand women gathered in the Old Town Square in Prague to declare themselves ready to "fight for peace and the happiness of our children."⁷⁵ Millions around the country signed petitions declaring themselves "women-mothers for peace" who were against atomic weapons. Next to this, Horáková and her companions in the courtroom did indeed seem "inhuman," as one of Horáková's former colleagues from the CCW wrote, wondering what kind of woman would want "war to destroy the blooming land and growing towns, to betray defenseless children, who would want their death?" Obviously, said Julie Prokopová, the current president of the CCW, Milada Horáková was motivated only by hate.⁷⁶

On the last day of the trial, the defendants were given the chance to address the court and explain their actions. By several accounts, Horáková took this opportunity to deviate from the script and defend herself. She claimed that she had not been a traitor, but had always held onto her convictions and remained true to the legacies of Masaryk and Beneš.⁷⁷ By this point, however, her words, which were expunged from official transcripts of the trial, could have little effect. Even if the judges had believed her, they had departed from a system in which the truth carried legal weight. This trial was more political theater than legal forum, and the play had to be played out to its conclusion. As a spectacle, the trial had already been tremendously successful in evoking an emotional response from a frightened public worried about the possibility of nuclear war. As the week of testimony wore on, thousands of resolutions had poured into the prosecutor's office from factories, schools, clubs, and associations all over the country, condemning the accused and demanding they receive the strictest sentences possible.⁷⁸ The whole nation seemed to be screaming for the blood of the conspirators in an outpouring of hysteria that surprised trial officials. The prosecutors even referred to it in their closing statements, demanding that the judges listen to the wishes of the working class and punish the traitors severely. It only took three hours after the trial had been concluded for the judges to reach their verdict. All of the accused were found guilty of treason and four of them, including Milada Horáková, were sentenced to death. The others received prison terms ranging from fifteen years to life. International figures from Einstein to Churchill protested Horáková's sentence, but to no avail. Within a few weeks, all appeals for clemency had been denied and the executions were set for June 28, 1950.⁷⁹

Milada Horáková had beaten the Nazis in court, but in Dresden she had been tried as an individual and able to use the law and the rules of evidence in her own defense. In her own country, she was tried as the symbol of the former regime, the representative of an ideology that had become an enemy, in a court where laws had given way to theater. As she realized at the very end, in this kind of situation, there was nothing she could do. In the days before her death, she wrote a series of letters to her family detailing her thoughts and trying to come to terms with her fate. In the first letter, she likened her situation to that of an industrial worker

who looks away from his machine for a second and turns back to find himself being crushed to death. The same thing, she wrote, can happen to political actors who fail to notice what is really going on around them; their inattention also often ended in death.⁸⁰ In the last letter, written in the final hours before her execution, she urged her loved ones not to despair at her passing, declaring that she felt calm and clear in her conscience. She ended the letter as the dawn was beginning to break, knowing that with it would come her death, saying "I am going with my head held high—one has to know even how to lose. It is not a disgrace. Even an enemy won't lose respect if he is true and honest. In battle one falls, and what is life but a battle?"⁸¹ With that, she bid her loved ones farewell, put down her pen, and was led to the courtyard of the Pankrác prison to be hanged.

The Communist regime intended Horáková's death to be a symbol. In the minds of those who planned the trial, she would represent the true character of those who opposed Communism: a traitorous demon who was so attached to the values of Western imperialism that she hardly blinked at the thought of destroying her own daughter in a nuclear conflagration. This caricature, however, clouded the true symbolism of her execution. When it tried and killed Milada Horáková, the Communist government of Czechoslovakia was silencing her vision of Czech democracy and the feminism that was so closely intertwined with it. With her death, the feminist hope for liberation via democracy was definitively silenced.

AFTER 1945, the Czechoslovak Communists came to power promising a new form of democracy, one that would finally fix the inequities that had persisted during the First Republic. Their people's democracy would combine the basic legal equality of all individuals with a universal standard of living that would guarantee all Czechs a new level of material prosperity. It would not, they claimed, move completely away from the legacy of Masaryk's ideology, but would add to it the power of scientific socialism. After living through the indignities of Munich and German occupation, many Czechs gravitated towards the KSČ, and with good reason. Not only did the Communists have fresh ideas and a positive vision of the future, they seemed to be getting results. This was particularly true in the case of gender equality. During the First Republic, equality between the sexes was

accepted as a general principle, but rarely enacted into specific policies, especially in the realm of the family. The Communists actively set out to change that.

Indeed, even in the first months after February of 1948, those feminists who had supported the KSČ could consider themselves to have been on the right side of the struggle. Politically, the Communists were far better than the other parties at bringing women into public office; fully half of the women elected to the National Assembly in 1946 represented the KSČ. And the party supported them in their efforts to legislate equality for women. With speed and ease, the KSČ managed to achieve most of what the interwar Czech feminists had struggled in vain to win. In the realm of women's employment, the Košice program had explicitly promised that women would receive the equal pay for equal work, and as early as 1945 the KSČ sponsored legislation to make that a reality. By 1947, the Gottwald government had passed a new citizenship law that allowed women the ability to control their own national allegiance, ending for once and for all the problem of statelessness for married women.⁸² Much more importantly, the Constitution of May 1948 was a clear improvement over the old Constitution of 1920. Following the suggestions of advisers from the CCW, the writers of the new constitution removed the ambiguities that had dogged Article 106, especially when it came to women's place within the family. The 1948 document used much more specific language and declared that "men and women will have the same position in the family and in society and they will have the same access to education, to all professions, offices, and ranks."⁸³ This statement of principle provided the legal basis for a new set of family and marriage laws, finished a year later, which finally gave men and women equal rights and responsibilities in the family and as parents to their children.⁸⁴ In 1955 the Soviet Union re-legalized abortion, and Czechoslovakia soon followed with a law that allowed abortions during the first trimester with the approval of a local commission.⁸⁵

Going by such measures, or by state support for working families in the form of day-care centers, cafeterias, and laundries, the Communist regime certainly was a substantial improvement over the First Republic. But, as Milada Horáková knew only too well, the kind of equality offered by the people's democracy meant little, since it was conditioned on ac-

cepting a society where individuals did not have the freedom to pursue their own paths in life, and where they could be persecuted and tried in courts that made a mockery of the very legal system that supposedly guaranteed their equality. As Horáková saw it, democracy rested on the twin pillars of equality and freedom, guaranteed by the rule of law. Without those elements held in some sort of balance, it would collapse. This ruin, she saw, was the reality of the people's democracy, which would quickly evolve into a hierarchically organized party dictatorship. As such, the Communist state could engineer some things that would benefit its citizens, as women who had safe, legal abortions, or wives who no longer had to worry that their husband might die and deprive them of custody over their own children could attest. But, as in any dictatorship, these benefits came at the pleasure of those in charge; they were not something citizens could easily demand by virtue of their constitutional rights, even if they technically had them. This was something even female Communist Party functionaries soon discovered to their chagrin, when the Central Committee of the Party decided, in 1954, to disband its Women's Commission, leaving party women without their own power center or a way to formally protect their own interests. By then, though, they had no means of expressing their opposition, and had, in fact, seen all too vividly what public opposition could bring. They had discovered that Horáková was right, but it was too late.

AFTER A DECADE OR SO had passed, the "thaw" of the Khrushchev era finally began to be felt in Czechoslovakia, leading the Czechs to rethink the Stalinist excesses of the early 1950s. By 1963, all of those who had been imprisoned as a result of the Horáková trial had been quietly released. After the liberalization of the Czechoslovak regime during the Prague Spring of 1968, the verdict of the case was formally overturned, and the "conspiracy" was denounced as an "artificial construction."⁸⁶ But this rehabilitation was cut short by the Soviet invasion of August 1968 and the hard-line regime that followed it. Milada Horáková's last letters to her family languished somewhere in a file in the Ministry of the Interior. Although her family knew of their existence, they were never allowed to see them. It was only after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989 that they were finally found, delivered, and eventually published. Time now fully

revised its judgment and Horáková was no longer a traitor, or even a patriot who had been mistaken about the proper path for her country, but a courageous martyr who had given her life fighting against an oppressive regime. She was given a memorial in the Slavín cemetery, where many of the Czech nation's honored figures are buried, and a boulevard in Prague now bears her name. Although Horáková has been resurrected, she has been remembered almost exclusively as a "victim of anti-democratic iniquity."⁸⁷ Few recall her as a feminist leader who spent a lifetime working for women's rights. That story, along with the rest of the history of the egalitarian Czech feminist movement, remains a largely overlooked aspect of the history of Czechoslovakia.

CONCLUSION

As long as people are people, democracy in the full sense of the word will always be no more than an ideal; one may approach it as one would a horizon, in ways that may be better or worse, but it can never be fully attained. In this sense, you too are merely approaching democracy.

Václav Havel, Speech to the United States Congress, February 21, 1990

IN HIS BOOK about the European twentieth century, the historian Mark Mazower challenges the contemporary assumption that democracy was somehow destined to succeed in Europe. Europeans, he reminds us, did not "naturally" take to democracy and, in fact, often fought against it with surprising zeal. It was only during the years after the First World War that democracy gained more than a toehold on the European continent, and this initial experiment did not turn out well. After only twenty years, European democracy looked utterly defeated on all fronts.¹ Revived on the Western half of the continent after the end of the Second World War, stable democracies are only just beginning to form in contemporary Eastern Europe.

The Czech experiment with democracy during the first half of the twentieth century was one of Europe's more successful efforts during the interwar years, and yet it, too, failed on multiple occasions, sliding into "authoritarian democracy" in 1938 and the Communist people's democracy in 1948. While many factors led to these events, including a global