

Milada Horáková: Defender of Democracy Against Totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia

BY GREG ROSS



On the 23rd of August, the City of Buenos Aires observes the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Totalitarianism. The life of Czech activist Milada Horáková is emblematic of the fight against various forms of totalitarianism.

Horáková, detained by the Nazis in a concentration camp and later executed by communists in Czechoslovakia, was posthumously awarded the honor of the First Order of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk by Czech president Václav Havel in 1991.

It is the Czech government's highest recognition of citizens who have dedicated their lives to democratic and humanitarian causes. Horáková's story was recently highlighted in «Milada», a 2017 Czech-American film distributed by Netflix.



GREG ROSS is an International Intern at CADAL. He obtained his B.A. from the University of Chicago, where he studied history and wrote his thesis on the politics of early urban planning in Asunción, Paraguay. He is a recent recipient of a Fulbright grant, which he will use to study the urban development of Asunción along the Paraguay River, where he will head after his time in Buenos Aires.



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Reconquista 1056 piso 11. C1003ABV. Buenos Aires, República Argentina.

Tel: (54-11) 4313-6599 • 4312-7743. ✉ centro@cadal.org

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In 1918, Czechoslovakia elected its first president, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. Under Masaryk's leadership, the country transitioned from a territory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into an independent state and toward a blooming democracy. Czechoslovakia experienced a liberal renaissance during the 1920s and 30s: Prague was the city of Kafka y Čapek, and Brno the city of modernist architecture. Democracy had arrived, and for a span of time, the future seemed promising. But the storm clouds of World War II were gathering. Situated between Germany and Russia, the First Republic of Czechoslovakia existed in a precarious balance. The prominent Czech literary critic René Wellek asked in 1936, «How can [Czechoslovakia] preserve and develop her individuality in the midst of varying influences, especially as she lies in the very heart of Europe, at the crossroads between West and East, between South and North?»¹ The two spheres of German fascism and Czech democracy clashed in 1938, when Hitler annexed a swath of Czech territory. Under the German occupation, many Czech leaders—including president Edvard Beneš— fled to Paris or London to establish a government in exile. As the conflict spread, however, one Czech leader chose to stay.

Milada Horáková was born in 1901. After graduating from Charles University in Prague in 1926 with a Juris Doctorate degree, she worked in the social services department of the Czech government, providing housing and healthcare to women.² Her crusade to improve the wellbeing of Czech citizens continued into the 1930s, as she occupied a central role in various civil organizations. Horáková was president of the *Demokracie dětem* (Democracy for Children), *Společnost přátel Spojených národu v ČSR* (Czech Society for Friends of the United Nations), and the Women's National Council. She also


1 Wellek, René. «The Cultural Situation in Czechoslovakia.» *The Slavonic and East European Review* 14, no. 42 (1936): 638.

2 Watkins, Adam D.E. «*The Show Trial of JUDr. Milada Horáková: The Catalyst for Social Revolution in Communist Czechoslovakia, 1950.*» Connecticut State University, 2010. p. 40.

represented women's rights on the world stage, traveling to conferences abroad and maintaining contact with Eleanor Roosevelt, the first lady of the United States.³

Horáková was a leading protagonist during the liberal reforms of the First Republic as part of the well-to-do society that supported Masaryk's democratic vision. Horáková met Masaryk in 1933, who she deeply admired for his pragmatism and democratic principles. She also developed a friendship with president Beneš, who was elected in 1935 after Masaryk stepped down.⁴ Both Masaryk and Beneš headed the *Česká strana národně sociální* (CSNS), the socialist party. CSNS was the main proponent of Czech democracy, and the party proved receptive to Horáková's calls for strengthened women's rights.

The progress of the First Republic was interrupted in 1938 with the German annexation of Sudetenland, a region of Czechoslovakia home to a large ethnic German population. As the rise of Hitler sent Beneš into exile and endangered Czech sovereignty, Horáková remained in Prague to fight against fascism. With her friend and fellow activist Františka Plamínková, Horáková organized aid to the people—German in addition to Czech—displaced by the Nazi occupation.⁵ While Hitler continued to consolidate control over Czechoslovakia, Horáková directed various movements of the Czech resistance, including the authorship of its charter.

 **AFTER SPENDING TWO YEARS IN A PRAGUE PRISON, HORÁKOVÁ WAS TRANSFERRED TO THE CONCENTRATION CAMP OF TEREZÍN, WHERE SHE REMAINED UNTIL LIBERATION IN 1945.**

As a result of her leadership of the resistance, the Gestapo arrested Horáková on August 2, 1940. Her husband, Bohuslav Horák, was also detained for his activist work.⁶ Their young daughter, Jana, stayed in Prague to live with her grandparents.⁷ After spending two years in a Prague prison, Horáková was transferred to the concentration camp of Terezín, where she remained until liberation in 1945.⁸ Upon returning to Prague, she continued to fight for her ideals. Her extended time in prison did not dissuade her from re-entering the political scene. Elected to Parliament on a CSNS ticket, Horáková intended to restore Masaryk's platform and promote Czech democracy.

But the return of democracy to Czechoslovakia did not last long. Destabilized by a confluence of geopolitical factors, the nation struggled to safeguard the principles

3 Baer, Josette. *Seven Czech Women: Portraits of Courage, Humanism, and Enlightenment*. New York: Columbia U., 2015. p. 126.

4 Baer, p. 117.

5 Watkins, p. 48.


6 Thompson, Emily. «Milada Horáková - The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist.» *Hungarian Review* V, no. 6 (2014).

7 Watkins, p. 49.

8 Thompson.

of the First Republic against emerging alternatives. After the complicity of Western powers in the signing of the Munich Agreement of 1938 (which annexed Czech territory to Germany), Czechs became more suspicious of the intentions of the West. This historical episode—still recent in Czech memories following the war—and the relative absence of postwar Western aid compared to that of Russia encouraged a gradual turn toward Moscow.⁹ In addition, the democratic vision of CSNS was stained by a decree from Beneš that stripped Czech citizenship from millions of ethnic Germans and Hungarians.¹⁰ Yet Horáková continued to have faith in the long-term mission of CSNS, maintaining that a democratic world would triumph over the opposing forces of fascism and communism.

The elections of 1946, however, were the last democratic elections in Czechoslovakia until 1989. In the years after the war, the connection between Prague and Moscow strengthened with the rise of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. The party, *Komunistická strana Československa* (KSČ), won about 40% of the vote in 1946, compared to 24% for the CSNS.¹¹ Popular support for the KSČ increased with its implementation of «People's Courts,» which prosecuted various actors responsible for war crimes on the Czech people. These trials helped bolster the perception that the KSČ was crucial for the reconstruction of postwar Czechoslovakia.¹² By means of these efforts, the power of the communists consolidated, and by 1948, it was clear that they had enough support to control the government. With fear of a communist coup on the horizon, many MPs of the CSNS resigned, paving the way for the KSČ to occupy the Prague Castle—where it would remain until the Velvet Revolution of 1989.

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Horáková, then a MP, did not renounce her seat in the initial wave of CSNS resignations. An American friend of Horáková recalled a conversation they had in Prague in 1947: «I told her, 'Milada, you have to get out.' And she started to explain, much the same was as Plamínková did, that her people needed her...that she was convinced that they could resist the pressure, hold out until the elections and then win them.»¹³ One biographer affirms that Horáková «did not see that danger can also emerge from within the nation, not just from the outside.»¹⁴ When Jan Masaryk, the Foreign Minister and son of the ex-president, died under suspicious circumstances in March of 1948,

9 Watkins, p. 59.

10 Thompson.

11 Iggers, Wilma A. *Women of Prague: Ethnic Diversity and Social Change from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*. Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995. p. 295.

12 Watkins, p. 16.

13 Baer, p. 118.

14 Baer, p. 119.

Horáková finally resigned her seat in protest.¹⁵ As she did during the Nazi occupation, she then began to form resistance networks against the communist regime, reaffirming her conviction in a democracy that again had been silenced in Czechoslovakia.

The communist regime detained Horáková on September 27, 1949. She was executed on June 27, 1950, after a show trial conducted for political ends.¹⁶ Among the 200 dissidents executed under the Czech communist show trials, Horáková was the only woman.¹⁷

When totalitarianism arrived in her country, Horáková chose to confront it with a firm and uncompromising stance. She maintained this position until her death. Subject to torture throughout her time in prison, she refused to concede information to her captors. Sometimes, she assumed responsibility for the activity of others in the resistance in order to protect them.¹⁸ The night before she was hanged, Horáková wrote three letters: to her mother-in-law, husband, and daughter. They remained unpublished until the return of democracy four decades later.¹⁹ Leaders from Albert Einstein to Eleanor Roosevelt to Winston Churchill wrote to the Czech communist leader Klement Gottwald, asking in vain that he refrain from executing Horáková.²⁰



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What defines a generation, according to the Hungarian sociologist Karl Mannheim, is its orientation toward a common goal, or «a common location in the historical process.»²¹ At times, in the grand sweep of history, these common goals become clear. The members of the generation of the 1968 Prague Spring, for example, or those of the 1989 Velvet Revolution, shared a common goal articulated by their dramatic uprisings and collective movements. If political change is announced by sudden uprisings, then one cannot forget the accumulation of the historical moments that preceded such change. Certainly, the generations of 1968 and 1989 owe much to their predecessors. The path to liberty that crystallizes

15 Watkins, p. 67.

16 Baer, p. 126.

17 Watkins, p. 36.

18 Watkins, p. 50.

19 The letters can be read at <http://chnm.gmu.edu/wwh/p/230.html>, thanks to «Women in World History» at George Mason University.

20 Watkins, p. 77.

21 Mannheim, Karl. «The Problem of Generations» in Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972. As cited in Shore, Marci. «(The End Of) Communism as a Generational History: Some Thoughts on Czechoslovakia and Poland.» *Contemporary European History* 18, no. 3 (2009): 304.

in certain moments in history does not surface in isolation; rather, its first bricks were laid by persons in periods before. Horáková was one of the protagonists that paved this path, and although she did not live to see the restoration of the democracy she defended, she set in motion the change that would come in the generations to follow.