



# Milada Horáková

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## A MOUNTAIN THAT REFUSED TO MOVE

To many Czechs, Milada Horáková is a national heroine. On 27th June 1950, Horáková became the first woman to be hanged for political reasons in the former Czechoslovakia. The images of her Stalinist show trials remain firmly etched in the Czech consciousness. Her implacable calmness and relentless defence of her position in the face of trumped up charges of treason continue to provide Czechs with a rare counter-image to those "dissidents" that were ultimately broken by a system, which demanded false confessions, scripted responses and utter capitulation.

### BIRTH PANGS

Horáková was born Milada Králová on Christmas Day 1901 in the Czech city of Prague. Her mother was a music teacher and her father was a pencil factory owner. At the age of twelve, both her older sister and younger brother died of scarlet fever complicated with meningitis. By the end of the WWI, she had become politically active and joined a group of radical socialists.

In 1926, Horáková graduated from Charles University with a degree in law and philosophy. Horáková soon entered the world of politics and spent several years working within the Prague City Council as the director of the welfare department. During this time she focused on social issues such as housing and employment and also campaigned for the rights of women as well as becoming involved in projects involving young people. She soon became a member of the Women's National Council, an association dedicated to promoting women's rights, and also joined the National Socialist party (no relation to the Nazi party). In 1927, she married Bohuslav Horák an agricultural engineer whom she had met at university. He would later work alongside her on several political projects.

### THE FIRST RESISTANCE

When the Czech lands were made part of the German protectorate, Horáková became involved in the anti-Nazi resistance, using the Women's National Council as a front for her activities. She also belonged to two underground organisations known as "Political Centre" and "We will be Faithful." She and her husband Bohuslav were ultimately ar-

rested by the Gestapo in 1940. The judge trying her case wanted her to be executed but this was later reduced to a prison sentence. Horáková spent her sentence in numerous prisons including the notorious concentration camp at Terezín. Her husband was also sent to prison.

During her imprisonment, Horáková spent much time in solitary confinement. In one of her letters she wrote that she was kept in a small room without any natural light and heating for several days. One of her colleagues from those times also remarked after her release that there were what looked like cigarette burns on her arms.

### "LIBERATORS" - May 1945

Following the end of WWII, and the Soviet liberation in 1945, Horáková was released from prison. She returned home and soon re-entered the political field, having become something of a celebrity. After being persuaded by the then Czechoslovak president Edvard Beneš, she again became a dominant figure in the Czechoslovak National Socialist party and became a member of parliament. During this period, she helped found the Union of Political Prisoners and Survivors and Victims of Nazism organisations. What is less known about Horáková is her involvement in the controversial post-war programme instigated by President Beneš to remove millions of Sudeten Germans from the Czech lands, which she strongly supported. During this time, she was also elected as head of the Women's National Council and worked tirelessly to prevent its communist members from taking control of the organisation.

As the communists continued to exert more influence over Czech society, the situation in Czechoslovakia began to grow ever more tense. In 1946, the now Communist-controlled secret police accused Horáková of spreading false reports stating that the Communist-controlled People's Courts had falsely convicted hundreds of people following the war. In February 1948, the communists seized power in Czechoslovakia, and an era of Stalinist intolerance and authoritarianism ensued. Horáková gave up her seat in parliament on the 10th March in protest and thus stripped herself of her political immunity. Horáková continued to be politically active, despite the increased infiltration of communists into all public groupings. Friends began to plead with her to join the many others who had by now fled into exile, but Horáková refused, partly believing that the communists would never execute a woman or arrest an anti-Nazi freedom fighter. She was, however, soon proven wrong.

Former members of the National Socialist party, including Horáková continued to meet in secret and effectively began to organise a de-facto new resistance. At a secret meeting it was even discussed that attempts be made to form an anticommunist government but such efforts proved futile. The Czechoslovak communist government meanwhile, began to see Horáková as one of their greatest enemies.

### AN ENEMY OF THE STATE

On 27th September 1949, Milada Horáková, a hero of the anti-Nazi resistance was arrested by the communist regime along with several other members of her group. Specifically, the charge related against Horáková was that she was the leader of a group that was attempting to overthrow the government. All members of the group were harshly interrogated and subjected to various forms of torture whilst the secret police began to build up a case of treason. Her husband, however, managed to evade arrest and escaped to the West in December 1949.

Seemingly wanting to cement their hold on power, the communist government made an active decision to execute all those it deemed to be conspirators. Along with Horáková, twelve of her colleagues were to be tried by the state. By choosing not to flee Czechoslovakia, she



had essentially given herself the death sentence, one that would leave her daughter Jana without a mother. Whilst in prison awaiting trial she wrote several letters, including one to Jana in which she stated "My task here was to do you good.... By seeing to it that life becomes better, and that all children can live well and therefore we have to be apart for a long time. It is now already the second time fate has torn us apart." she also added "When you realise that something is just and true, then be so resolute that you will be able to die for it."

During this time, Horáková was again exposed to repeated acts of torture designed to break her will before a televised show trial. These included being forced to stand waist deep in water for up to twenty-four hours and also being placed in tiny cubicles measuring less than one square metre with no light, heat or food for several days. Following such brutal methods, Horáková confessed to all the charges levelled against her, though she continued to reject the legality of the communist regime and refused any knowledge of her husband's whereabouts. Horáková also shared a cell with a woman who had been ordered by the secret police to spy on her. She would bring back messages about Horáková, report on her condition and what she had said.

### SHOW TRIAL

On May 31st 1950 the trials of Horáková and twelve other male co-defendants began. They were the first grandiose show trials in Czech history. Defendants

were expected to read from a script and confess unwaveringly to all charges. It is difficult to establish what was really said during the trials as they were subject to heavy censorship at the time.

But the trials were clearly extremely one-sided affairs, with prosecutors making wild proclamations about associations with "Imperialists" who sought to undermine the sanctity of the nation and reverse the communist revolution, whilst defendants made solemn, mechanical confessions. Horáková, evidently sensing she had nothing to lose, chose to conduct herself in a manner that was both calm and showed no signs of weakness. The Stalinist show trials were designed primarily for public consumption, and Horáková's staunch dismissal of the official lies about her continually tested and undermined the court. Several times, she contradicted the allegations and arguments of her prosecutors, even though each act of defiance was undoubtedly sealing her fate.

It is only today, that concerted attempts are being made to reconstruct the trial. Numerous contradictory sources prove how difficult a task this remains, particularly in light of communist censorship and embellishments. The trial was recorded in several ways: on film, on radio, by a stenographer and then in another highly doctored record known as the "grey book". By comparing these sources one can easily witness the communist attempts at re-writing history. For example in one excerpt the "grey book" reads:

**PROSECUTOR:** *Mrs Horáková come here please. (She comes) Did you hear the prosecution? Did you understand the meaning of the charges?*

**HORÁKOVÁ:** *Yes*

However, the official transcript reads very differently:

**PROSECUTOR:** *Do you feel guilty of the activities that you are being prosecuted for?*

**HORÁKOVÁ:** *Yes I feel guilty of the activities that I have already said according to modern criminal law. Well I did these things but now you say that these things are wrong.*

“Right now after 50 years” says Petr Blažek of the Czech Institute of Contemporary History “This is still a great issue...Only now are we finding out exactly what was said.”

Horáková was ultimately found guilty and sentenced to death. Several global figures learnt of her case and openly petitioned for her life. These included Winston Churchill, Albert Einstein and Eleanor Roosevelt. They sent letters to Czechoslovak Communist president Klement Gottwald arguing that those who worked against the Nazis should be held as heroes, not enemies of the state. The verdict also caused consternation back home. In an exceptionally rare letter, the head of an elementary school in Prague wrote “I believe that the judge worked properly and followed the law, but please make



a symbolic gesture of humanity and lend grace to a woman. God and millions of people will be grateful for this one life.” Several days later the man was fired from his job and was unable to find another. Ultimately, such pleas fell on deaf ears; the fate of Horáková and her co-accused had been sealed.

### Dying on her feet

On the evening of the 26th June 1950, the convicted political prisoners were told that the next day they would be executed. Milada Horáková had recently been informed that her sister was expecting a baby and mentions this in her last letter to her family. “I have in my heart my sister Věra and the little baby that will change my life into her life.” Horáková was finally hanged on the 27th June 1950. She was the last one of the group to be hanged, and in all likelihood before she died, saw the coffins of her fallen compatriots being taken away following their deaths.

The alleged last words of Milada Horáková were “I’m falling I’m falling. I have lost this fight but I’m leaving with my honour. I love this country and I love my people...I’m leaving without any hatred.”

Around the same time, hundreds of other men died under similar circumstances. But Horáková’s case is unique in that she was the only woman to be executed by the communists, making her not only a martyr for justice but also an inspiration to those of her gender. Following her death, the communists carefully crafted an official truth with regards to Horáková. School children were taught about her “espionage” and “betrayal” and the image of a traitor was firmly cemented in the official history books. The bodies of political prisoners were not returned to their families and today it remains unclear where, if anywhere Horáková was buried. It is widely assumed her body was cremated after her execution. A symbolic grave in Vyšehrad, Prague, however, does provide a place for those paying their respects.

### An enduring legacy

As an anti-fascist and women’s rights campaigner, Horáková’s execution by the communist regime firmly underscored the brutality and inhumanity of the post-war communist “liberators” of Czechoslovakia. The early Fifties are frequently referred to as the darkest days of the Cze-

choslovak communist regime. But Horáková’s death was not futile. To those that saw beyond the propaganda, her death served as a painful reminder that far from being liberated, Czechoslovakia was being thrust into a new totality; one which did not even spare those that had fought against the Nazi occupation. Though her fate was sealed from the outset, Horáková demonstrated that a fight to the end for one’s principles was the only way that this regime could be prevented from stripping a person of their dignity. It was this fact, that helped to convince a new generation of dissidents and activists that the official party line was little more than a falsehood designed to silence all forms of free thought and opposition, and that resistance to it was an imperative.

It was not until the pre-invasion thaw in 1968 that the verdict in her trial was officially quashed. But Horáková did not start to be publicly recognised until after the Velvet Revolution in 1989. In 1991, then president Václav Havel posthumously awarded Horáková the Order of T.G. Masaryk First Class. Her life and death are marked by a public holiday in the Czech Republic, which commemorates all the victims of the communist regime. A street in Prague is also named in her honour. Surprisingly, Milada Horáková remains little known outside the Czech Republic and Slovakia. But what arguably remains far more important is that Czechs themselves are finally re-labelling many of their officially proclaimed traitors as heroes. Milada Horáková was once described as a mountain that refused to move, and though she has been dead for more than half a century, the full impact of her life and death is only now being properly assessed.

Currently, efforts are underway by Czech filmmaker Martin Vadas to film a full reconstruction of the trial. Unfortunately, he has run into the same problems as those who have attempted to punish those responsible for Horáková’s death – namely a lack of resources, and a lack of official interest. In this sense, Horáková’s death still represents an open wound for Czech society. ■

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