

*Nečasová, Denisa: Buduj vlast – posilíš mír! Ženské hnutí v českých zemích 1945-1955 [Build the Homeland – You Will Strengthen Peace! The Women’s Movement in the Czech Lands, 1945-1955].*

Matice moravská, Brno 2011, 411 pp, Notes, Bibliography, English-language summary, ISBN 978-80-86488-82-0.

During the first half of the twentieth century, there was a vibrant and active Czech women’s movement. By 1955, it had largely disappeared. In her new book, Czech historian Denisa Nečasová traces the history of this process. She begins with the most prominent postwar Czech women’s organization, the “Rada československých žen” (the Council of Czechoslovak Women) and shows how it was repeatedly transformed in the seven years following the Communist takeover in 1948. Nečasová compares each of these successive institutions by considering a number of factors, including their mission and goals, their organizational structure, their actual activity (and how these compared to their official goals), their relationship to the Czechoslovak Communist Party (KSČ) and their work with international women’s organizations. Several themes emerge out of this comparison. The book shows how what was a “women’s movement” gradually changed into “work among women.” (p. 380) The goal of women’s emancipation was shunted aside in favor of an instrumental approach that mobilized women to serve the state. However, Nečasová also emphasizes continuities between the prewar women’s movement and its postwar manifestations, even after the beginning of the Communist regime. Although the KSČ considered feminism to be “bourgeois,” it was truly invested in women’s equality, at least in theory. Outside of KSČ leadership circles, KSČ women activists did hope to better women’s lives and opportunities. But a third theme is the persistence of gender stereotypes and prejudices, especially within KSČ cadres. Despite the ideological commitment to equality, many men and even some women simply did not believe that women belonged in positions of authority.

After an introduction that sets out her methodology and some key concepts, Nečasová begins her book with a thoughtful and critical overview of the history of the Czech women’s movement before 1945. While this overview (which takes fifty pages) might be a bit longer than necessary, it is admirable that Nečasová sets her own story into this larger framework of the history of women’s activism, both in the Czech lands and elsewhere.

The core of the work is a detailed examination of each of the four successive women’s organizations that developed after 1945 in the Czech lands, beginning with the “Rada československých žen” (RČŽ). This organization was the direct descendant of the prewar Czech feminist movement, led by prewar activist Milada Horáková. Yet, while the RČŽ inherited some of the prewar movement’s priorities

and personnel, it was also a product of its own historical moment. In addition to promoting and defending women's equality, the RČŽ urged women to participate in the building of the state, to resist fascism and work for world peace, goals that would continue to resonate during the communist era. The RČŽ concentrated its activities on realizing gender equality in the law and in assisting women in the working world, tasks that also did not clash with Communist priorities. But the organization's relationship with the KSČ was rocky. Communist women resisted Horáková's leadership and hoped to use the organization as a means of organizing politically unengaged women for their own purposes. After the Communist coup in February 1948, they forced Horáková and her supporters out. They purged and reorganized the RČŽ and renamed it the "Rada žen" (Council of Women).

After some hesitation, in January 1949 the KSČ Central Committee decided that the "Rada žen" would be transformed into a state-sponsored mass organization for women, absorbing all other women's associations. The "Rada žen" is an interesting example for thinking about continuity and change during the early years of the communist state. Its stated mission and bylaws changed very little from those of the RČŽ. But the organization's emphasis shifted markedly. Although women's equality was still one of the organization's formal goals, it became its lowest priority. Its real mission was to mobilize women to serve the socialist state. Where the RČŽ had pushed the state to change its laws or practices (including active negotiations over the writing of the new civil code and constitution), the "Rada žen" could only accept the dictates of the Central Committee. Its biggest task was to bring women into the workforce. Here, the "Rada žen" continued and even deepened RČŽ efforts to ease working women's domestic burden by establishing day care centers, preschools, laundries and cafeterias. But it also took on new tasks aimed at politically educating Czech women to be good socialist citizens, including taking part in the Communist-led peace movement and organizing celebrations of Stalin's birthday or International Women's Day.

In 1950, the Rada žen was united with its Slovak counterpart, "Živena," to form the "Československý svaz žen" (Czechoslovak Federation of Women, ČSŽ). The ČSŽ placed even less emphasis on equality than its predecessor. Its activities continued in the same vein as those of the "Rada žen," but the idea of helping women faded into mere plans to use women's labor to help the socialist state. The Communist party wanted the ČSŽ to be a mechanism for organizing "apolitical" women, particularly workers. But even though the ČSŽ technically had millions of members by 1952, it was not successful in this goal. Most of its members had been joined by fiat, by virtue of their existing membership in unions (ROH) or other groups; few even knew they were also members of the ČSŽ. The ČSŽ also suffered from a continuing Communist suspicion of women's organizations, which many still identified as bourgeois. It was perpetually starved of funds and then criticized for not being able to accomplish tasks that could only be achieved with a larger investment of resources.

As Nečasová shows, the KSČ was ambivalent about women's role in political life. Though the Party formally adhered to a socialist doctrine of gender equality, many male leaders believed that women were less capable than men and not suited to posi-

tions of power. Communist leaders were also ambivalent about the need for dedicated women's organizations, which had, after all, been abolished in the Soviet Union itself. In 1950, the KSČ disbanded the women's sections within the Party (*komise žen*). Shortly thereafter, they also decided to disband the ČSŽ. It would be replaced with an entirely different structure. Instead of a centralized mass organization, there would be only local "women's committees" (*výbory žen*) that would be attached to each local national committee (like a town council). At the national level, there would be a "Committee of Czechoslovak Women," (*Výbor československých žen*) formed of eighty members. But this national committee was mainly for symbolic purposes and to represent Czechoslovakia internationally. It had no formal relationship to the local women's committees.

While the goal of educating women to take part in local administration might have been a worthy one, the women's committees were poorly conceived and organized. Elections were badly attended; some participants were appointed without their knowledge. In many localities, women's committees existed in name only. Those that tried to create an active program often faced resistance from their local national committee, whose generally male members either tried to direct the proceedings or simply did not allow the women to conduct any significant activities. To the extent that these autonomous committees did have a suggested set of tasks, they were supposed to concern themselves with "women's" issues: the peace movement, moving women into paid employment or work brigades, or the distribution of food. They were not intended to promote equality, which the KSČ now considered achieved, to work for women's specific interests, or to challenge gender norms that disadvantaged women.

What we see from this history is that the KSČ, as Nečasová notes, never considered women to be autonomous subjects. Instead, it instrumentalized them as "workers, mothers, or political agitators." (p. 320) The last chapter of the book examines this issue in a different vein, by looking at how these categories created three faces of a "new socialist woman." Together, they form a new model of womanhood: based on paid labor, active participation in public life, a sympathy for the oppressed around the globe, and a new ideal of working motherhood where mothers accepted the state as the primary educator of their children. Nečasová's analysis of the categories of worker, mother, and citizen is analytically rich and compelling. But she considers them only as "lifeless constructs" and not as narratives that might also create meaning. Perhaps another Czech historian can take inspiration from the work of specialists on Soviet history like Jochen Hellbeck or Anna Krylova and consider how such models of the socialist person might help to shape subjectivities.

Based on extensive original research, this book brings forth a wealth of new detail on these four women's organizations. But at times this detail becomes overwhelming and repetitive, making the book most suited to those with a healthy interest in Czech women's organizations. But for those who can wade through this detail, the book is an excellent case study of how the Czechoslovak communist regime attempted to transform the country during the first years of its existence. It shows how the regime co-opted, used, debated about, fought over, and ultimately transformed a set of civic organizations and brought them into the state umbrella.