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A Tale of Two Trials

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Abstract

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By: Hannah Fuller

This honors thesis seeks to broaden the understanding of show trials by asserting a comparison between a Communist Czechoslovak show trial and a Jim Crow rape case in Mississippi. By juxtaposing my analysis of Communist and Jim Crow justice systems and comparing the experiences and legacies of the defendants, this thesis expands the current understanding of show trials beyond the confines of Communist systems. Viewed as antithetical to the American justice system, show trials have been isolated to totalitarian regimes. While trials of African American defendants in the Jim Crow South have been viewed as unjust and prejudiced, their construction into public spectacles to maintain power and political dynamics has not been sufficiently studied. This thesis analyzes the show trial and execution of Milada Horáková, Czech feminist leader and politician, in 1950 to establish the identifying qualities of a show trial. In 1945 in Mississippi, an African American man, Willie McGee, was charged with raping a white woman, Willette Hawkins. In the Jim Crow South, a rape accusation from a white woman was a death sentence. McGee made national headlines, sparking protests and petitions for his life, during the trials leading up to his execution in 1951. Although their trials were fueled by different issues, race and class, McGee and Horáková were both victims of show trials. With Horáková's show trial as a point of comparison, I intend to redefine McGee's case as a show trial. Through a comparison of Communist and Jim Crow show trials, this thesis will confront the American resistance to the parallels between Communist and Jim Crow justice systems and their shared goal of political oppression.

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Introduction

During the second Red Scare of 1947-57, the United States and Soviet Union appeared to be at odds—ideologically, culturally, and politically. During the heat of second Red Scare, Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson wrote in 1950, “This Communist movement is a belated counter-revolution to the American Revolution, designed to undo the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and our Bill of Rights, and overturn our system of free, representative self-government.”¹ The fervor of the second Red Scare—personified by Joseph McCarthy—revealed Americans’ fear of the Soviet threat. How could America’s values of justice, freedom, and equal opportunity be reconciled with Communists who led with “deception, coercion, coup d’état, terrorism and assassination?”² The Soviets also drove the ideological divide between the East and West, believing that American racism was the result of capitalism and “America’s aspirations to world supremacy encounter an obstacle in the U.S.S.R.”³ The notion of American and Communist governments possessing any similarities was inconceivable to most Americans during the Cold War.

In the decades since the second Red Scare, the resistance to comparing the Soviet Union and America has persisted but also been combatted by scholars who attempted to complicate Americans’ self-perception with comparative studies.⁴ This thesis seeks to build on the historiography to challenge the accepted polarity of Soviet and American justice systems. Historians have recognized that many convictions of African Americans in the Jim Crow South

¹ Robert H. Jackson, "Justice Jackson on Communism in America: In Curbing Communist Conspiracy, He Holds, a Democracy must Protect Freedom of Belief. Communism in America," *The New York Times*, May 21, 1950, 6.

² *Ibid*, 6.

³ Robert Vincent Daniels, *A Documentary History of Communism and the World: From Revolution to Collapse* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994,) 108.

⁴ Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Steven Sabol, *Touch of Civilization: Comparing American and Russian Internal Colonization* (Boulder, Colorado: University Press of Colorado, 2016).; Ronald Radosh, "A Tale of Two Trials: Soviet Propaganda at Home and Abroad," *World Affairs* 175, no. 1 (2012): 80-87.

were gross miscarriages of justice; however, scholars have not sufficiently studied these cases as show trials.⁵ As the phrase was originally used by reporters covering the Stalinist trials, show trials were often considered to be exclusive to totalitarian regimes.⁶ They were subsets of spectacular justice that functioned to control discourse and oppress potential dissidents. Show trials “were not only integral parts of Stalinism, they were also its most cruel, deadly form of expression, and as such they became the focal point of the struggle over de-Stalinization.”⁷

Although show trials were central to the Communist terror apparatus, they were not exclusive to the Communist regime. The Cold War context, in part, hindered the recognition of show trials taking place in the Jim Crow South. American anti-communism made acknowledgement of similarities with communism difficult for many Americans to admit. By juxtaposing analyses of Jim Crow and Communist Czechoslovak justice systems and comparing the experiences and legacies of two show trial defendants, this thesis intends to prove that local Jim Crow courts utilized the same judicial weapons of oppression as Communists. In comparison to the Communist show trial of Milada Horáková, local Southern show trials, specifically that of Willie McGee, were perhaps more effective, as the discourse surrounding them was significantly diminished in the decades after the trials. Additionally, analyzing McGee and Horáková’s trials together sheds light on the oppression of women on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Milada Horáková was a leading Czech feminist, lawyer, activist, and politician, but she was most well-known for being the victim of a Communist show trial and judicial murder. Born on Christmas day, 1901 in Prague, Horáková was part of the first wave of professional women in

⁵ Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); James E. Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994).

⁶ Minou Arjomand, *Staged: Show Trials, Political Theater, and the Aesthetics of Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 4.

⁷ George Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 160.; Minou Arjomand, *Staged: Show Trials, Political Theater, and the Aesthetics of Judgment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 4

the Bohemian Lands. In 1926, she acquired a law degree from Charles University, which empowered her to improve Czech women's political standing through legal advocacy and politics. Utilizing her law degree, Horáková worked tirelessly to advance women's rights and further their social welfare.⁸ During World War II, she was part of the anti-Nazi resistance, and was imprisoned in solitary confinement in Terezín at the end of the war. From 1946 until the Communist coup in February 1948, Horáková served as a member of Parliament, representing the National Socialist Party. By the time she was in Parliament, Horáková symbolized Czech feminism, which was also closely tied to Czech national pride. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the advancement of women's rights was intertwined with and often overshadowed by the Czech nationalist movement.⁹ Becoming greatly involved in the political sphere through the women's movement, Horáková worked closely with the first Czech presidents, Tomas G. Masaryk (1918-1935) and Edvard Beneš (1935-1938, 1945-1948) and had broad public recognition. Through her work in Parliament, Nazi resistance, and women's organizations, Horáková "would represent the true character of those who opposed Communism."¹⁰ Executing a woman alone would have been unusual. Arresting and executing Horáková—a woman and one of the most influential people in Czechoslovak politics—intensified the impact and messaging of the show trial. Her gender and her significance in Czechoslovak politics made her a target for Communist leaders.

Horáková has been studied by both Czech and American scholars. After the fall of communism, the injustice of Horáková's show trial and execution became a subject of scholarly

⁸ Dana Musilová and Jitka Kohoutková, "Horáková, Milada (1901–1950)," In *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms*, edited by Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, and Anna Loufti, (Central European University Press, 2006).

⁹ David, Katherine, "Czech Feminists and Nationalism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy: 'The First in Austria,'" *Journal of Women's History* 3, no. 2 (1991): 26-45.

¹⁰ Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1950* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 219.

and public interest in Czechoslovakia. Historian Karel Kaplan wrote a monograph about the construction of her show trial, and more recently, helped produce a 10-part Czech documentary, *Proces H*, about her show trial.¹¹ Additionally, Zora Dvořáková and Jiří Doležal published Horáková's full biography.¹² American historians have also studied her oftentimes in connection with European feminism.¹³ Notably, Eastern European historian Melissa Feinberg highlighted Horáková's contributions to the Czech women's movement in her monograph, *Elusive Equality*, on Czech democracy and feminism and studied her show trial in more depth in *Curtain of Lies*.¹⁴

While she has been studied for her contributions to the Czech women's movement, this thesis seeks to analyze the last period of her life—her show trial and execution.¹⁵ When the Communists took over the Czechoslovak government in 1948, Horáková resented the values and conduct of the regime. Shortly after the coup, she resigned from Parliament in protest. Despite knowing she was in danger, Horáková refused to leave Czechoslovakia and was arrested on September 27, 1949 for espionage and treason.¹⁶ She was interrogated, tortured, and imprisoned for months. Forced to memorize and recite a script with her confession and details of her alleged crimes, she was the lead defendant in a 1950 Communist show trial. The show trial conveyed to the newly Communist nation through newspaper articles and media broadcasts that deviation from the regime was criminal and potentially fatal.¹⁷ The Communist show trials sought to

¹¹ Karel Kaplan, *Největší politický proces : "M. Horáková a spol"* (Brno: Nakl. Doplněk, 1995); "Proces H," Czech Television, 2009.

¹² Zora Dvořáková, *O Miladě Horákové a Milada Horáková o sobě* (Praha: Vydal Klub Milady Horákové v nakladatelství Eva Milan Nevole, 2001).

¹³ Dana Musilová and Jitka Kohoutková, "Horáková, Milada (1901–1950)," In *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms*, edited by Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, and Anna Loufti, (Central European University Press, 2006), 178-184.; Wilma A Iggers, *Women of Prague: Ethnic Diversity and Social Change from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), 305-312.

¹⁴ Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1950* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).; Melissa Feinberg, *The Battle over Truth in Stalinist Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

¹⁵ Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality*.

¹⁶ Dana Musilová and Jitka Kohoutková, "Horáková, Milada (1901–1950)," 180.

¹⁷ Jana Kopelentova Rehak, *Czech Political Prisoners: Recovering Face* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

communicate to an internal audience—people within Czechoslovakia—about how citizens should think and act under communism. Additionally, the show trial enabled the Communists to glorify the ideal Communist woman by rejecting Horáková and her vision of feminism. She was part of the mainstream Czech women's movement, which was comprised of mostly middle class, politically active White women and was closely tied with the Czech nationalist movement.¹⁸ The Communists appointed a female prosecutor to demonstrate that women loyal to the party would receive opportunity, while the bourgeois feminists would face condemnation.¹⁹ Her show trial became international news, eliciting responses from human rights advocates across Western Europe and the United States. While the Communists utilized the show trial to terrorize Czechoslovak citizens, Westerners publicized the trial to exemplify the ills of communism during the second Red Scare. The show trial resulted in the execution of Horáková by hanging in June 1950.

A year later in Laurel, Mississippi, Willie McGee, an African American man, was executed for raping a White woman named Willette Hawkins. He was initially arrested in 1945 for the rape and endured three trials before his execution. The alleged rape occurred in the early morning of November 2, 1945. Later that day, McGee was in Hattiesburg, Mississippi instead of his job at a wholesale grocery store. Although he was initially pulled over for unauthorized use of his employer's vehicle, in a Kafkaesque turn of events, McGee quickly became a suspect for the rape of Willette Hawkins.²⁰ McGee testified that from the moment he was arrested, the

¹⁸ Sharon L. Wolchik, and Alfred G. Meyer, *Women, State, and Party in Eastern Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁹ Emily Thompson, "Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist," *Hungarian Review* V, no. 06 (2014): 54–64.

²⁰ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee: a tragedy of race and secrets in the Jim Crow South* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), 30.

authorities handled him brutally. The police officers threatened him with a lynch mob, and he was coerced into signing a confession.²¹

Scholars have recognized that McGee and other African Americans charged with rape under Jim Crow often faced reactions from grossly prejudiced juries or violent mobs. Patricia Boyett explained that “In Mississippi, fear of federal intervention curbed mob lynching, but it failed to restrain racial violence.”²² As the civil rights movement gained momentum, the methods of racial oppression shifted from mob violence to legal lynching. Unlike Horáková’s show trial, McGee show trial was directed at an external audience comprised on people living outside Jones County, Mississippi. Maintaining White supremacy through legal lynching rather than mob violence was part of the effort prevent outside intervention from the national press and federal government.

During his first trial, McGee was assigned two court appointed lawyers who had only three days to prepare a defense.²³ The court records claimed that McGee might have had a valid defense against Hawkins’s rape accusation, but she was not cross-examined due to the “counsel’s inability to prepare.”²⁴ The record shows that Hawkins did not cry out when she heard someone enter her bedroom, when she realized the intruder was not her husband, nor when she touched the person and felt “abushy negro head.”²⁵ The White, all-male jury “went out at 5:55 p.m. and came back two and a half minutes later. The verdict: guilty as charged. McGee was sentenced to

²¹ “Negro Congresses Attack and Charge is Filed,” in *The Three Trials and Aftermath of the Willie McGee Case as reported in the Laurel Leader-Call Laurel, Mississippi*, ed. Raymond Horne (2011), 3-4.

²² Patricia Michelle Boyett, *Right to Revolt: The Crusade for Racial Justice in Mississippi’s Central Piney Woods* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

²³ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

²⁴ *Ibid.*; “Negro Indicted in Rape Case By Brand Jury At Special Circuit Court Session Monday,” in *The Three Trials and Aftermath of the Willie McGee Case as reported in the Laurel Leader-Call Laurel, Mississippi*, ed. Raymond Horne (2011), 5.

²⁵ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

die by electrocution on January 7, 1946.”²⁶ Recognizing the bias of his trial, the Mississippi supreme court granted McGee two appeals, but the verdict remained the same.

Like Horáková, McGee began to attract national and international media attention.²⁷ Massive waves of letters, postcards, and telegrams flooded Governor Fielding Wright’s mailbox, pleading him to offer McGee a full pardon. Printed pamphlets and public appeals for McGee’s wife to garnered support for McGee. After the prejudice of his first trial attracted significant attention, the Civil Rights Congress with future Congresswoman Bella Abzug stepped in to defend McGee in 1948.²⁸ McGee’s partnership with the Civil Rights Congress, which was thought to be a Communist front organization, sparked controversy about potential Communist intervention in McGee’s trials. Despite the CRC and Abzug’s massive campaigns highlighting the injustice of McGee’s trial, the second Red Scare context and the organization’s perceived Communist connection hindered the federal government from getting involved and stoked Southerners already strong fear of outsiders.²⁹ The media advocacy for McGee was matched with significant support for Hawkins. In contrast to some of the national or northern media outlets, “many southern newspapers reflected the racist orthodoxy of the era, adding to the volatile environment that encouraged a violent response to threats to the status quo.”³⁰ Despite the outside support for McGee, the jury decided he was guilty, and he was executed in 1951 by an electric chair.

The story of Willie McGee was chronicled most thoroughly by journalist Alex Heard in *The Eyes of Willie McGee: A Tragedy of Race, Sex, and Secrets in the Jim Crow South*. Drawing

²⁶ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 54.

²⁷ Leandra Zarnow, “Braving Jim Crow to Save Willie McGee: Bella Abzug, the Legal Left, and Civil Rights Innovation, 1948-1951.” *Law & Social Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2008): 1003–41.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 1018-1021.

²⁹ Charles H. Martin, "The Civil Rights Congress and Southern Black Defendants," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1987): 25-52.

³⁰ Renee C. Romano, *Racial Reckoning*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 34.

from archival sources and interviews, Heard described the historic context of McCarthyism as he explained the details of the case, including discrepancies and rumors, and provided one of the fullest studies of McGee's trial.³¹ Several historians of the South have highlighted McGee's case in a chapter or section of their monographs to exemplify broader patterns of discrimination, legal lynching, and Jim Crow police brutality. Patricia Michelle Boyett detailed the trial and execution of McGee to further her argument that Forrest and Jones counties in Mississippi were sites of extreme, racially charged activities, rather than zones of moderation.³² Although McGee received attention from scholars, no one has examined his trial as a show trial.

Historians and American citizens in general balked at close comparisons of America to Communist countries. Especially during the second Red Scare, the danger of Soviet infiltration frightened Americans who viewed their judicial system as incompatible with communism.³³ By analyzing McGee's trial alongside Horáková's show trial, this thesis reveals that White southerners and Communists established parallel goals and methods of oppressing dissent. By analyzing the roles of the women in both trials, this thesis also seeks to demonstrate how women were also objectified or possessed in the show trials within the American and Soviet contexts.

The American justice system was—and is—capable of employing the same tactics of controlling discourse as the Soviet Union. In McGee's case, the Mississippi state court recognized the injustice of his trial and granted appeals, but “authoritarian enclaves” created conditions for show trials to take place in local Mississippi courts. “Authoritarian enclaves” like the Jim Crow South existed within America's liberal democracy to sustain White supremacy and

³¹ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*.

³² Patricia Michelle Boyett, *Right to Revolt: The Crusade for Racial Justice in Mississippi's Central Piney Woods* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

³³ Toby C. Rider, “The Cold War, Propaganda, and the State–Private Network,” In *Cold War Games: Propaganda, the Olympics, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 9–28.

conservative Democrats' political careers.³⁴ Partially inspired by five years spent in Prague after the Velvet Revolution, Robert Mickey pioneered the concept of authoritarian enclaves and charted how they were gradually “democratized.”³⁵ He explained that as White southerners felt increased pressures to democratize beginning in the 1940s, enclaves in the deep South resisted and maintained elements of Jim Crow into the 1970s.³⁶ The “enclave rulers” maintained political control and worked to prevent intervention from outsiders or African Americans within the enclave. The persistence of authoritarian enclaves in the deep South created the conditions for local elites and officials to establish tenets of totalitarian systems like show trials within a liberal democracy.

A reframing of some local Southern trials as show trials highlighted the Kafkaesque nature of the justice system for African Americans in the Jim Crow South. Robert Burns, Northwestern University School of Law professor, stated that

“the death penalty, today as in the past symbolizes the ultimate power of the state, and of the government of society, over the individual citizen...The punishment is carried out in such a way as to give a spectacle not of measure, but of imbalance and excess; in this liturgy of punishment there must be an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority.”³⁷

McGee and Horáková's show trials demonstrated that spectacular justice and judicial murder functioned to preserve the dominant power's authority by managing public discourse.

Czechoslovak Communists and White supremacists utilized show trials and executions to establish or reinforce codes of conduct that maintained their supremacy. In the South, McGee was a Black man living under Jim Crow, while Horáková represented bourgeois feminists under

³⁴ Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015).

³⁵ Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie*, xvii.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁷ Robert P. Burns, *Kafka's Law: "The Trial" and American Criminal Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 71.

communism. Although their trials were catalyzed by different issues, race and class, McGee and Horáková endured conceptually comparable show trials.

Chapter 1

Targeting

Show trial defendants were targeted based on how they could be manipulated for propaganda purposes through the trial. George Hodos explained that

The show trial is a propaganda arm of political terror. Its aim is to personalize an abstract enemy, to place it in the dock in flesh and blood and, with the aid of a perverted system of justice, to transform abstract political-ideological differences into easily intelligible common crimes. It both incites the masses against the evil embodied by the defendants and frightens them away from supporting any potential opposition.³⁸

Show trials were not motivated by the court's duty to facilitate justice but by the dominant

power's aim to establish or enforce social codes—such as Jim Crow gender relations or

Communist political conformity. As show trials were employed to control public discourse and

influence public opinion, the defendants were intended to represent threats beyond themselves.

The defendants were targeted based on the threat they represented and how fear of that threat

could be manipulated by the show trial.³⁹ Horáková and McGee experienced torture, coercion,

media frenzies, and death not simply as punishment for their alleged crimes. Their suffering

communicated a larger message to the audience about the consequences of breaking the

established social codes. The political effectiveness of the show trial depended in part on who

was on the stand. The strategic targeting of the defendant was essential to staging a show trial.⁴⁰

Show trials did not merely punish an individual for committing a crime but used the

individual as an example to intimidate the public. McGee and Horáková became examples of

what was not tolerated by the regimes. Show trials manipulated the defendant's public perception

to condemn certain aspects of his or her identity, such as race or gender. Therefore, show trial

³⁸ George H. Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954* (New York: Praeger, 1987), xiii.

³⁹ Minou Arjomand, *Staged: Show Trials, Political Theater, and the Aesthetics of Judgment*, 5.

⁴⁰ Anna Lukina, "The Semenchuk Case of 1936: Storytelling and Propaganda above the Law in the Soviet Criminal Trial," *Review of Central and East European Law* 41, no. 2 (2016): 63-116.

defendants needed to be representative of a broader demographic or ideology in conflict with the dominant power. An idea or a person's character rather than the specific individual was on trial.

The show trials in East and Central Europe began well before Milada Horáková's show trial, but Horáková's show trial was one of the early Communist show trials in Czechoslovakia.⁴¹ Hodos explained that "in the Eastern Europe of the 1940s, the scenario was created before the victims were selected."⁴² While she was a good candidate for show trials in the eyes of Communists, she did not behave like the ideal defendant. She turned herself into a martyr, finding a way to retain her voice despite being forced to memorize a script.⁴³ On one hand, Horáková had clear and well-known political values, which the Communists thought would make her a symbolic of the ills of the bourgeoisie and feminism. However, she was a politician—a savvy one—and knew how to keep herself from becoming a puppet for the Communists. This indicates a key difference in how Soviets and Americans targeted their show trial defendants: Americans identified a poor, disenfranchised African American in the Jim Crow South, while the Soviets targeted elite figures.

The cases of McGee and Horáková demonstrated how each show trial sharpened a system of targeting potential threats to the power structures. Although they were part of different groups, Horáková and McGee were both representative of threats to the dominant power—making them suitable show trial defendants. McGee was a threat to White womanhood, while Horáková was a class enemy. She was a highly educated, politically active woman. As part of the first generation of women to obtain professional degrees in Czechoslovakia, she became a

⁴¹ George H. Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954*; Joel Carmichael, *Stalin's Masterpiece: The Show Trials and Purges of the Thirties--the Consolidation of the Bolshevik Dictatorship* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976).

⁴² George Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954*, xiii.

⁴³ Paul R. Gregory, *Politics, Murder, and Love in Stalin's Kremlin: The Story of Nikolai Bukharin and Anna Larina* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2013), 41-42.

leader in National Women's Council and the National Socialist Party. During World War II, she was active in the resistance to the Nazis, forming a women's resistance group.⁴⁴ Czechoslovaks knew of her as a "democrat and humanist" and associated her values of gender equality, anti-fascism, Czech nationalism, and democracy.⁴⁵ By putting her on the stand, the Soviets condemned Horáková's beliefs which extended beyond her to those who shared them.

While the Jim Crow South was divided by race, the Communists were concerned with class differences. By vilifying a politically connected, bourgeois woman, the Communists acted as if that they were on the side of the proletariat.⁴⁶ The public already recognized Horáková as a bourgeois woman, but the show trial depicted her as using political contacts to overthrow the system that was said to help the working man. The show trial attempted to redefine Horáková as a class enemy in the eyes of the Czechoslovaks. Disclosing her alleged plans also enforced the idea of the bourgeoisie having secret connections and networks, which made her a traitor to the working class. The show trial records stated, "Defendant Dr. Milada Horakova was the face of the protest organization and her job was to maintain connection to foreign countries."⁴⁷ Show trials of elite members of society helped the Communist government demonstrate their opposition to the bourgeoisie and the dangers of them.

⁴⁴ Laura Owens, "Milada Horáková: A Mountain That Refused to Move," *New Presence: The Prague Journal of Central European Affairs* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 10–13.

⁴⁵ Dana Musilová and Jitka Kohoutková, "Horáková, Milada (1901–1950)," In *Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms*, edited by Francisca de Haan, Krassimira Daskalova, and Anna Loufti, (Central European University Press, 2006).; Martina Klicperová-Baker, "Psychology of the Ultimate Cases of Character Assassination," In Sergei A. Samoilenko, Martijn Icks, Jennifer Keohane, and Eric Shiraev, *Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination and Reputation Management* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 331.

⁴⁶ Kevin McDermott, "A 'Polyphony of Voices'? Czech Popular Opinion and the Slánský Affair," *Slavic Review*, vol. 67, no. 4, (2008): 844-45.

⁴⁷ MH-1241a304-MH-1242305, Karton 1, State Central Archive, Czech National Archives.

She represented the *bourgeois* women's movement specifically, which the Communists sought to eliminate.⁴⁸ It was uncommon for women to receive death sentences—Horáková was the “only woman prisoner executed since the founding of Czechoslovakia (except during the Nazi occupation).”⁴⁹ By targeting a woman and assigning a female prosecutor, the Communists sought to make a statement about women in communism.⁵⁰ Although women were promised equality under communism, “[t]he line between the powerful and the powerless was drawn politically: if a woman supported the dominant discourse and actions, she might succeed in gaining a good position (although not as easily as a man), while those opposing the regime were marginalized or persecuted.”⁵¹ While the Communists did not want to appear against all women, they degraded the Czech women's movement.

Despite strategically targeting her, Horáková's was one of the early Czechoslovak show trials, and the regime was still learning who to target and how to run the show for the specific region's audience. Horáková's show trial was not as effective as the authorities would have hoped. The trial was intended to silence people who thought like Horáková; however, she complicated this message by continuing to be as vocal as she could be.⁵² Although she was targeted for being a prominent bourgeois feminist, her political reputation hindered the success of her trial. Despite she was being tried for espionage and treason, Horáková had proven her commitment to the Czech people and Czech nationalism through years of public service.

⁴⁸ Libora Oates-Indruchová, “Unraveling a Tradition, or Spinning a Myth? Gender Critique in Czech Society and Culture,” *Slavic Review* 75, no. 4 (2016): 924-25.

⁴⁹ Marie Homerova, “When One Civilization Is Replaced by Another: The Case of Czechoslovakia,” *Comparative Civilizations Review*, no. 58 (Spring 2008): 72.

⁵⁰ Emily Thompson, “Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist,” *Hungarian Review* V, no. 06 (2014): 62.

⁵¹ Blanka Knotkova-Capkova, "On Feminisms in Czech Political Contexts," *Alternatif Politika* (February 2016): 70.

⁵² Jan Velinger, “Czech Radio Uncovers Long-Lost Audio from Milada Horáková's Trial,” Radio Prague International, *Czech Radio*, November 21, 2005.

Horáková's political career and reputation made the claim that she was working for the downfall of her country seem questionable.⁵³

While Horáková was targeted for being a powerful, bourgeois woman, Willie McGee exemplified the American strategy of targeting everyday people on a racial basis. He was poor, uneducated, and seemingly unexceptional until the trial. McGee was a suitable defendant because the intention of Jim Crow show trials was to convince White Southerners that any Black men could and probably would rape a White woman.⁵⁴ The post-World War II context also informed the nature of the targeting. Wartime demands for soldiers and industrial labor shifted racial dynamics in the South by enabling African American men to serve and women to seek employment. While White men—the dominant power—anticipated “the postwar world would look much like the prewar world,” African Americans sought integration and equal treatment more strongly than ever.⁵⁵ Despite the federal government's order to integrate war industries, White Southerners turned to seemingly civil structures like the courts to preserve the prewar power dynamics.⁵⁶ In response to African American veterans and citizens with better living conditions, “white racists mounted a postwar campaign of terror.”⁵⁷ McGee worked as a truck driver for a grocery delivery store. As an employed African American man with mobility,

⁵³ Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1950*.

⁵⁴ Michele Faith Wallace, “The Good Lynching and ‘The Birth of a Nation’: Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow,” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 1 (2003): 85–104.

⁵⁵ Gail Williams O'Brien, *The Color of the Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999). 1; William J. Collins, “Race, Roosevelt, and wartime production: fair employment in World War II labor markets,” *American Economic Review* 91, no. 1 (2001): 272-286.

⁵⁶ William J. Collins, “Race, Roosevelt, and wartime production: fair employment in World War II labor markets,” *American Economic Review* 91, no. 1 (2001): 272-286.

⁵⁷ Gail Williams O'Brien, *The Color of the Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South*, 1.

McGee exemplified the changing material circumstances of postwar African Americans that worried Southern Whites.⁵⁸

Horáková and McGee's cases were both representative of broader patterns of the defendants in show trials. While they were both compelling as individual historical subjects, they were also significant and worthy of comparison because their cases did not stand alone. Just as Horáková's show trial was modeled on the Moscow Trials, which were show trials orchestrated by Stalin in the 1930s against Trotsyites, historians have frequently compared or connected McGee's case to other rape trials beginning in the 1930s.⁵⁹ From 1930 to 1972, "455 people were executed for rape, and 405 of those were African American," according to the US Department of Justice.⁶⁰ Due to the comparable charges, setting, and political context, McGee was specifically linked with the Scottsboro Boys and Martinsville Seven.⁶¹ Nine African American boys accused of raping two White women in 1931 became known as the Scottsboro Boys during their highly publicized trials. In Virginia, seven African American men, the Martinsville Seven, were executed the same year as McGee for allegedly raping a White woman. However, Jeremiah Reeves was lesser studied but may be a better comparison. Reeves, also a grocery delivery person, was accused of raping a White woman in 1952, drawing support from the Montgomery

⁵⁸ Erik S. McDuffie, "Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968," *Canadian Committee on Labour History* 57, (Spring 2006): 227-230.

⁵⁹ Gerald Horne, "Prison Looms," in *Black Revolutionary: William Patterson and the Globalization of the African American Freedom* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 108-124.

⁶⁰ Chelsea Hale and Meghan Matt, "The Intersection of Race and Rape Viewed through the Prism of a Modern-Day Emmett Till," *American Bar Association*, July 16, 2019.

⁶¹ Leandra Zarnow, "Braving Jim Crow to Save Willie McGee: Bella Abzug, the Legal Left, and Civil Rights Innovation, 1948-1951," 1010.; Charles H. Martin, "The Civil Rights Congress and Southern Black Defendants," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1987): 25-52.; Tommy Curry, "He's a Rapist, Even When He's Not: Richard Wright's Account of Black Male Vulnerability in the Raping of Willie McGee," in *The Politics of Richard Wright: Perspectives on Resistance*, ed. by Gordon, Jane Anna, and Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 140.

NAACP and Rosa Parks. Meeting the same fate as McGee, he was executed in 1958 at twenty-two.⁶²

When Willette Hawkins reported the rape, she claimed that the rapist was African American based on his hair texture.⁶³ She did not describe other identifying characteristics, only that the intruder had “abushy negro hair.”⁶⁴ McGee was targeted because he was an African American man—his individual identity did not influence the targeting. In fact, the day after the police picked him up, *Laurel Leader-Call* published an article reporting his arrest and spelled his name wrong.⁶⁵ MaGee and McGhee were common misspellings that appeared in print until his execution. Black and White presses both continued to spell his name incorrectly, showing that the details of McGee’s identity were not as significant compared to what he symbolized.⁶⁶ McGee lacked name recognition even within his hometown, but Americans did not misspell Horáková’s name—despite the potentially foreign sound and spelling. McGee’s name did not matter because he was intended to appear replaceable. In a majority African American state, the defendant could have been any Black man—a neighbor, waiter, or someone standing across the street. He was supposed to show that an entire race was dangerous and inferior.

The ties between civil rights issues and communism created a new stigma for African Americans. During the Cold War, American racism in the South sullied the perception of

⁶² “The Jeremiah Reeves Case,” Rosa Parks digital exhibition, *Library of Congress*.

⁶³ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

⁶⁴ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

⁶⁵ “Another Negro Is Jailed In Assault Case Investigation,” in *The Three Trials and Aftermath of the Willie McGee Case as reported in the Laurel Leader-Call Laurel, Mississippi*, ed. Raymond Horne (2011), 2.

⁶⁶ “Often-Convicted Willie McChee is Saved again,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, March 24, 1951.; John N. Popham, “M’Gee Wins Stay on Execution Eve: Justice Burton Grants Order Postponing Negro’s Doom, Probably until October many Legal Moves Governor Silent,” *New York Times*, Jul 27, 1950.; “McGhee Cheats Chair, Slapped by Mobster,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 5, 1950.

American democracy abroad.⁶⁷ Although other nations' outrage at American racism prioritized civil rights on the national stage, within the Jim Crow South, "segregationists argued that efforts to abandon racial segregation were communist-inspired and would undermine the fabric of American society."⁶⁸ During the second Red Scare, "The focus of American foreign policy was to promote democracy and to 'contain' communism, but the international focus on U.S. racial problems meant that the image of American democracy was tarnished."⁶⁹ Although President Truman integrated the army and worked to make civil rights part of the national agenda, the federal government failed to intervene in McGee's case. While his case evidenced the persistence of racial problems in the deep South, aiding McGee would require supporting the work of the CRC, potential Communists, which the federal government avoided.⁷⁰

Just as the template for Horáková's show trial was set by the Moscow Trials of the 1930s, the template for McGee's trial was also set up in the 1930s, by the infamous Scottsboro Boys case. The Scottsboro Boys were arrested for allegedly raping two White women and sparked uproar in the media. James Goodman explained that "They needed a new form of oppression to combat the union of workers across the color line. So they turned to the courtroom, the 'heartless and hypocritical pretense of a legal procedure,' which in swiftness, brutality, and the denial of rights was 'no different from the most cold-blooded 'illegal' lynching."⁷¹ While mob violence had carried out racial punishment in previous decades, a shift in power emerged in the early twentieth century. The South became more integrated into the national economy, and the northern public opinion carried greater weight. As the acceptability of racism diminished

⁶⁷ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 28.

⁶⁹ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 12.

⁷⁰ Charles H. Martin, "The Civil Rights Congress and Southern Black Defendants," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 71, no. 1 (1987): 46- 52.

⁷¹ James E. Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 26.

throughout America, Southern communities shifted to more civil methods of maintaining the segregation. Historians have studied the shift of mob violence and lynching to legal lynching through court ordered executions.⁷² This process may have appeared as progress to outsiders but upon closer inspection, racism had endured and polluted the justice system. Heard stated, “‘Legal lynching’ cases are even harder to quantify than lynching, but the best measure is probably state-by-state executions for rape—an offense for which black men were disproportionately condemned.”⁷³ Show trials became the mode of facilitating legal lynching, which was intended to conflate oppression with justice.

From the moment he was arrested, McGee experienced the division between the mobs and law men but also saw that they both wanted him dead. He testified that the policeman who arrested and drove him from Hattiesburg to Laurel threatened him. McGee explained that the police officer said “‘If you know what’s good for you, there’s two roads leading out of here, one leads to Jackson and one to Laurel, and the White people in Laurel would be mighty glad to get their hands on you, if you know what’s good for you you better tell me you done it so I can take you on to Jackson’ and I said, ‘I didn’t do it.’”⁷⁴ McGee recognized that “‘Means they was gonna lynch me, hang me on a bridge.’”⁷⁵ The police utilized the potential lynch mob as leverage to funnel McGee through the local court system. Although Americans were supposed to be considered innocent until proven guilty, the police had already decided McGee was guilty and wanted to see him executed. McGee’s fear of being hung from a bridge was legitimate and harkened back to the hanging a African American man named Howard Wash. In 1942, a local

⁷² Seth Kotch, “The General Sense of Justice: Lynching and the Death Penalty, 1880–195,” In *Lethal State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019) 23-56; Kiyohiko Murayama, “Lynching as an American Tragedy in Theodore Dreiser,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2017): 163–79.

⁷³ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 69.

⁷⁴ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36411, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

jury convicted Wash of murdering his White employer. Although he was convicted, he was not sentenced to death, and “[t]hat same night, one hundred armed men hung Wash from a local bridge.”⁷⁶ Wash’s murder was proof of Laurel Whites’ capacity for violence, but McGee’s case exemplified how local Southerners evolved to use legal lynching in an effort to block outside involvement in racial relations.

Choosing an ordinary person—without status or education—was useful for carrying out legal lynching. The defendant often had little to no resources to combat the Jim Crow justice system. Unlike Horáková, McGee did not have the political and educational background to outmaneuver the staging of the show trial. In some ways, one could argue that the American targeting strategy was more effective than the Soviet’s approach. In theory, when the target became attached to a criminal act through the show trial, the public would become suspicious of other people who embodied the same values or demographics as the defendant.

⁷⁶ Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 53-54.

Evidence

Collecting and presenting evidence was a necessary step of staging a compelling show trial. Although show trials were not centered around facts and truth, the concept and communication of evidence were important for ensuring the receptivity of the show trial. In both show trials and regular trials “the legitimacy of a trial relies, to an extent, on how spectators perceive the trial.”⁷⁷ Due to the unbalanced power dynamics of show trials, evidence was presented to help construct the façade of a fair trial. While evidence most likely would not have impacted the verdict, it could alter how much the public was convinced by the show trial. Having real evidence of illegal activity was not necessary because the dominant power could manufacture evidence.

The Soviets wrote a script and fabricated evidence to convict Horáková and shape the opinion of the audience—not necessarily the judge. Therefore, the evidence they fabricated was used to prove to the Czechoslovak citizens that Horáková was guilty and those who acted like her would face a similar fate. As McGee was being tried under a Jim Crow justice system, “[t]he combination of anti-Communist fervor and antiblack racism created an insurmountable public perception that McGee was not only a rapist but an anti-American symbol.”⁷⁸ The depiction of both McGee and Horáková was based on what they symbolized. The dominant powers capitalized on public prejudices and fabricated evidence to create a scripted trial with a predetermined verdict. Although the scripting did not always influence the public in the desired way, as more trials took place, the dominant powers grew more adept with more practice.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Minou Arjomand, *Staged: Show Trials, Political Theater, and the Aesthetics of Judgment*, 4.

⁷⁸ Tommy Curry, “He’s a Rapist, Even When He’s Not: Richard Wright’s Account of Black Male Vulnerability in the Raping of Willie McGee,” 140.

⁷⁹ Kevin McDermott, “A ‘Polyphony of Voices’? Czech Popular Opinion and the Slánský Affair,” 840-865.

Horáková was arrested alongside twelve other people accused of conspiring against the regime. The defendants needed to submit to the regime and deliver the script for the evidence to be successfully conveyed to the public. As Horáková's crime involved espionage and secret political connections, the script discussed letters to other conspirators and concocted detailed networks of communication. The two show trial advisors were sent from Moscow to plan and execute the show trial.⁸⁰ They orchestrated the trial script to have the defendants confirm each other's guilt. In addition to admitting their own guilt, they spoke of how they were all connected to each other or specifically Horáková, working in coordination for the same goals. Horáková's conviction was particularly intertwined with defendants Josef Nestával and Antonie Kleinerova who both received life imprisonment.⁸¹ The script interlaced their charges to turn defendants into witnesses of other defendants' crimes. For example, Horáková testified that, "I gave Ripka's letter to read to Dr. Nestaval and the other member of the committee, Kleinerova read it before me."⁸² By intertwining the stories, a vast conspiracy network seemed plausible. Antonie Kleinerová was forced to testify that "I knew that Dr. Horakova was in protest groups."⁸³ The orchestrators of the show trial created public knowledge by scripting details of the crimes and establishing multiple statements of confirmations from the various defendants.

The StB and the Soviet advisors from Moscow tortured and interrogated Horáková for months. Horáková and the other defendants were sleep deprived, starved, beaten, and their families were threatened. The physical and psychological interrogation methods were tailored to

⁸⁰ Emily Thompson, "Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist," *Hungarian Review* V, no. 06 (2014): 61.

⁸¹ Fond A 2/2, Secretariat of the Ministry of the Interior. Security Services Archives.

⁸² MH-996050, Karton 1, State Central Archive, Czech National Archives.

⁸³ MH-4-059_585-MH-4-060_586, Karton 2, State Central Archive, Czech National Archives.

each prisoner “to destroy the will and psychological bearings” and force a confession.⁸⁴

Horáková was scripted to confess, “I feel guilty of my action, which I already confessed in administrative proceedings and already according to the valid law found facts substantiating the crime of treason and espionage, then, I worked against democratic people of the republic system.”⁸⁵ Horáková was pressured to confessed in words that were not written for her. Forced confessions were the essential to show trial scripts because “[t]he public art of confession was the physical sign of the party’s power to shape the world in which it operated and to create the truth it desired.”⁸⁶ When the defendant confirmed that the charges were correct, even if they were lying or unconvincing, the accusations became the reality—part of the official record—and were met with in this case, fatal consequences.

When the show trial took place, she breached from the script, refusing to show remorse or accept that her actions were criminal.⁸⁷ The Communists cut most of the recordings of her deviations, but she was able to turn herself into a martyr through her demeanor and minor departures from the script. Additionally, Western media reporting and her reputation as a democratic leader facilitated her martyrdom. For example, she was supposedly testified that “the only way of accomplishing this wish [overturning the Communist regime] was fighting a third world war of western world powers against her own state and her own population.”⁸⁸ However, among the parts of her trial cut from broadcasts, she said “as a woman and a mother, I personally

⁸⁴ Marie Homerova, “When One Civilization Is Replaced by Another: The Case of Czechoslovakia,” *Comparative Civilizations Review*, no. 58 (Spring 2008): 68.; Maria Dowling, “Friends, Nazis and Communists: The Double Persecution of Antonie Kleinerova,” *Quaker Studies* 8, no. 2 (2003): 231.

⁸⁵ MH-988042-43, Karton 2, State Central Archive, Czech National Archives.

⁸⁶ Melissa Feinberg, *Curtains of Lies*, 22.

⁸⁷ Emily Thompson, “Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist,” *Hungarian Review* V, no. 06 (2014): 61.

⁸⁸ MH-1242305, Karton 1, State Central Archive, Czech National Archives.

never wanted war.”⁸⁹ Whether or not she was part of a conspiracy to overthrow the Communist party did not matter because her confession was designed to devise a new reality not reveal the truth. However, the evidence did not convince all observers that Horáková was guilty or that the trial was legitimate. The US State Department representative in Prague explained in a telegram to the Secretary of State that the trial was a “mixture fact, half-truth and fancy.”⁹⁰ The show trial was not dependent on whether or not Horáková actually committed treason. Fabricating evidence of Horáková’s crimes was necessary to preserve the façade of a legitimate trial and convince the public that she was a threat. When the half-truths of her charges were presented by the prosecution as evidence of her guilt, the show trial went through the motions of a fair trial, even if some public did not believe she was guilty.

Like in Horáková’s show trial, evidence was fabricated in McGee’s trial. Exculpatory evidence was not successful in changing the verdict because McGee faced a justice system that was not receptive to his defense. Like the Communists, the Jim Crow police tortured and threatened McGee into submission. Just as torture was part of the Communist terror apparatus, police brutality of African Americans was a tool for maintaining segregation. Silvan Niedermeier explained that “African Americans’ significantly higher likelihood of being killed by southern police officers indicates that police violence constituted a form of oppression that was tightly connected to the system of racial segregation.”⁹¹ In McGee’s case, the police threatened mob violence to coerce McGee into confessing to a justice system that sought the same ends as the Klan. While the police did not turn him over to the mob, McGee also described how the police

⁸⁹ Emily Thompson, “Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist,” *Hungarian Review* V, no. 06 (2014): 62.

⁹⁰ “Records of the Department of State Relating to Internal Affairs: Czechoslovakia 1945-49.” Manuscript, May 31, 1950. Archives Unbound.

⁹¹ Silvan Niedermeier, “Forced Confessions: Police Torture and the African American Struggle for Civil Rights in the 1930s and 1940s South,” in *Crime and Punishment in the Jim Crow South* edited by Amy Louise Wood and Natalie J. Ring (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

inflicted violence on him. McGee testified that when he was initially arrested and tried to explain himself, the officers hit him. He said, "... by the time I got 'Willie' out, he hit me, Mr. Hugh Herring [police officer] hit me in the face there on the street."⁹² McGee struggled to communicate with the officers because "How a man gonna say anything and everything he open his mouth somebody hit him in the mouth."⁹³ However, "southern law enforcement officers took increasing measures to protect black defendants from lynch mobs" to further the goals of Citizens Councils and keep outsiders away.⁹⁴ Like the Communists avoided appearing like to the Nazis, the Citizens Councils were averse to comparisons to the Klan and vigilante violence. While they prevented the unregulated violence of mobs, police officers did not stop inflicting violence themselves.⁹⁵

Through brutality and coercion, McGee signed a confession written by the officers, much like Horáková's confession scripted by the Communist advisors. In his last trial, McGee stated "It wasn't voluntary" when asked about the nature of his confession.⁹⁶ McGee testified that "Mr. Easterling, and Mr. Montgomery, and Mr. Royals, and Mr. Landrum and Mr. Herring, [the police officers] and they put two Negroes on me and they strapped me and choked me, and carried me and put me in the hot box."⁹⁷ McGee was not merely coerced—although that was corrupt enough—but physically tortured into signing a scripted confession. He explained that the policemen employed physical force to pressure him into signing a confession that he had not

⁹² *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36411, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Silvan Niedermeier, "Forced Confessions: Police Torture and the African American Struggle for Civil Rights in the 1930s and 1940s South," in *Crime and Punishment in the Jim Crow South* edited by Amy Louise Wood and Natalie J. Ring (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 64.

⁹⁵ Geoff Ward, "Living histories of white supremacist policing: Towards transformative justice," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 15, no. 1 (2018): 167-184.

⁹⁶ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36411, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

read or written. When he finally testified that the confession was coerced, it became invalid in a court of law but not necessarily in the eyes of the public.⁹⁸ Police brutality in pursuit of a forced confession facilitated legal lynching. Historians noted that “[Gunnar] Myrdal observed that the use of force to gain confessions from Black suspects was a ‘routine device’ in many southern police stations.”⁹⁹ A voluntary admission to the crime established clear evidence and would speed up the execution process. In fact, the police “often resorted to physical coercion against those defendants to secure their fast conviction in court and appease the local White community’s desire for swift and harsh justice.”¹⁰⁰ While forced confessions were not uncommon throughout the history of Jim Crow trials, they were also often rejected or challenged. Rejecting forced confessions was a tactic of civil rights activists to thwart legal lynching.¹⁰¹ Despite the legal protections against forced confessions, the people responsible with enforcing the law—the police—often ignored African Americans’ rights and tried to create evidence in the style of Communist show trials.¹⁰² The officers’ attempt to forge a confession revealed an effort to compose script for the trial. In both McGee and Horáková’s cases, scripted confessions, torture, and inadequate defense facilitated their judicial murders.

Evidence of McGee’s sanity also became relevant due to his inability to speak on the stand and paralyzing anxiety.¹⁰³ McGee’s sanity was called into question following the first trial. Rather than seeking consultation from a physician or psychologist, the Court allowed the jury to

⁹⁸ Silvan Niedermeier, "Forced Confessions: Police Torture and the African American Struggle for Civil Rights in the 1930s and 1940s South," 61

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 67.; Silvan Niedermeier and Paul Cohen, “The NAACP Campaign against ‘Forced Confessions,’” In *The Color of the Third Degree: Racism, Police Torture, and Civil Rights in the American South, 1930–1955* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 59–88.

¹⁰² Silvan Niedermeier and Paul Cohen, “The NAACP Campaign against ‘Forced Confessions,’” 59–88.

¹⁰³ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 44–45.

determine McGee's sanity.¹⁰⁴ McGee was deemed sane by the jury rather than a medical professional.¹⁰⁵ McGee's defense protested that "Counsel for appellant also contends that appellant's sanity could not be established by non-expert witnesses."¹⁰⁶ McGee's mother was the only witness and explained that she had never seen him so upset.¹⁰⁷ However, the jury's ruling stood. They declared, "We, the Jury find the Defendant Sane."¹⁰⁸ Insanity was and continues to be a consistently unsuccessful defense tactic for African Americans, in part due to being stereotyped as violent or criminal.¹⁰⁹ Empowering a jury rather than a medical professional to determine McGee's sanity allowed stereotypes instead of science to guide the ruling.

In addition to the forced confession and a prejudiced public perception, McGee was also hindered by an inadequate defense. In his first trial, he was represented by two court appointed lawyers who lacked the time and resources to thorough prepare a defense. In the records explained that "In other words, the names of all attorneys of the bar were placed in a hat and two names were drawn, and there two were appointed by order of the Court."¹¹⁰ He did not testify in his first trial and the defense only managed to find one witness.¹¹¹ Conversely, the prosecution had over twenty witnesses ready to testify, the accusation and testimony of Willette Hawkins, enforced then notion of rape as the "negro crime".¹¹² In both McGee and Horáková's show trials,

¹⁰⁴ "Willie McGee Declared Sane After Sanity Hearing And On Trial For Life For Rape," in *The Three Trials and Aftermath of the Willie McGee Case as reported in the Laurel Leader-Call Laurel, Mississippi*, ed. Raymond Horne (2011), 10.

¹⁰⁵ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee* 45.

¹⁰⁸ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

¹⁰⁹ Melissa Thompson, "Race, Gender, and the Social Construction of Mental Illness in the Criminal Justice System." *Sociological Perspectives* 53, no. 1 (2010): 100-102.

¹¹⁰ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence In the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 108.

the dominant powers assigned them to a category that had already been defined as the enemy: alleged Black rapists and the bourgeoisie. Estelle Freedman discussed how sexual assault and rape became known as “The Negro Crime[s]” after Reconstruction.¹¹³ The 1915 film, *Birth of a Nation*, aided in linking rape to African American men and fueling the fervor of White supremacists.¹¹⁴ McGee needed to prove that the intercourse was consensual or that they never had any form of sexual relations. McGee’s lawyers had the potential to challenge Hawkins’s claims, which were contestable.¹¹⁵ In her testimony, she explained that she was “not hysterical” or “overcome by fright.” She did not cry out or fight back, claiming that she did not want to wake her children.¹¹⁶ And when the Court asked the jury if they believed that Willie McGee “violently, forcibly and against her own will unlawfully and feloniously did ravish and carnally know” Willette Hawkins, they found him guilty.¹¹⁷

McGee’s fate was sealed by the White, all male jury. One of the facets of a show trial was that the verdict was decided before the trial began. McGee appealed on the basis of jury selection. During the 1946 trial, multiple jury selectors took the stand and discussed the history of jury selection in Jones County, Mississippi. The court records showed that “... approximately 90 qualified electors who are Negroes.... [out of] 12,000 qualified electors.”¹¹⁸ Therefore, African American men represented 0.75% of the potential jurors in Jones County.

¹¹³ Ibid, 108.; Kiyohiko Murayama, “Lynching as an American Tragedy in Theodore Dreiser,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2017): 163–79.

¹¹⁴ Michele Faith Wallace, “The Good Lynching and ‘The Birth of a Nation’: Discourses and Aesthetics of Jim Crow,” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 1 (2003): 85–104.

¹¹⁵ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

¹¹⁸ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

Following Reconstruction, in the late 1890s, African American men were prevented from registering to vote and achieving full citizenship with literacy tests, poll taxes, and the threat of violence.¹¹⁹ The disenfranchisement of African American men was both legal and illegal, as Supreme Court cases, like *Williams v. Mississippi* in 1897 and *Patton v. Mississippi* in 1947, set legal precedent and the threat of vigilante violence loomed over African Americans considering registering to vote.¹²⁰ The disenfranchisement of African Americans done through “trickery and intimidation” worked alongside the legal precedent that licensed voter suppression and solely White juries.¹²¹ Southern Whites worried that “re-enfranchisement of blacks would threaten local elites’ domination of municipal and county-level offices. As in authoritarian regimes everywhere, suffrage would have to be ‘conquered, not granted.’”¹²² McGee’s trial transcript explained that jurors were selected based on “a list of qualified electors of good intelligence, sound judgement and good character.”¹²³ However, the cultural and social context created a stereotype of African American people that did not allow for the qualities of a good juror.

Although Laurel and Prague were on different continents and under supposedly opposing governments, Laurel was an authoritarian enclave, and its justice system functioned similarly to those in Prague.¹²⁴ Both Soviet and Jim Crow courts sought to appear civil and fair to outsiders and the local public. White Southerners and Communists knew that evidence even if it was fabricated was essential to preventing outsider intervention and convincing the public that the

¹¹⁹ Richard M. Valelly, *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1

¹²⁰ Robert Goldman, *Reconstruction and Black Suffrage* (University of Kansas Press, 2001), 140-141.

¹²¹ Richard M. Valelly, *The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 124.

¹²² Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 10.

¹²³ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36411, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

¹²⁴ Robert Mickey, *Paths Out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America's Deep South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 10.

defendant was a threat. In the Jim Crow south, a White, male jury secured the decision before a word was argued by either side, but the presentation of evidence like a confession made the trial appear to be fair. Both regimes employed torture and coercion to secure confessions, which was central to a scripted trial. Jim Crow show trials facilitated legal lynching because they created the façade of evidence backed death sentences rather than rabid mob lynching. The Communists fabricated evidence of the defendants' crimes to for parallel objectives of maintaining legitimacy and convincing their audiences.

Chapter 2

Spectacle

Although spectacle was not the sole qualifier of a show trial, it was essential to the construction of show trials. The presentation of evidence, depiction of defendants, and media coverage worked in concert to further the aims of the dominant power. The theatricality of the trial proceedings and media reports of the trials and executions combine to transform judicial practice into public spectacle. Jonathan Markovitz explained that, “The spectacle itself is not merely a set of widely disseminated images, but a social relationship in which imagery forms the basis for social interaction, meaning-making and identity formation.”¹²⁵ Show trials were intended to function as propaganda; therefore, they involved messaging to the public through visual, audio, and textual projections. Analysis of the spectacle elements in McGee and Horáková’s show trials disclose some of the propaganda strategies and the intentions of the powers creating the spectacle.

Besides the term show trial, Horáková and McGee have both been described as *cause célèbres*. Although historians have not sufficiently analyzed trials of African Americans as show trials, they have studied the spectacle of legal lynching and racial violence.¹²⁶ Both trials spurred a flood of media attention. The trials combined with the media coverage of the trial proceedings make the alleged threat of the defendants a reality or “a set of self-evident facts.”¹²⁷ However, intention and bias of the media varied depending on the writers and their audiences.¹²⁸ Markovitz stated that “[r]acial spectacles are not merely imagery of contemporary life, nor simply a part of a conversation. Instead, they matter materially because they work to shape popular

¹²⁵ Jonathan Markovitz, *Racial Spectacles: Explorations in Media, Race, and Justice* (Florence: Routledge, 2011), 4.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 15.

¹²⁸ Jonathan Markovitz, *Racial Spectacles: Explorations in Media, Race, and Justice*, 5.

understandings of the social world that they can affect how people lead their daily lives.”¹²⁹

While some media outlets supported the goals of the dominant power, other outlets contested the charges or legitimacy of the trials. Although some media treated the trials like other news stories, other media outlets utilized the symbolic quality of the show trials to convey specific messages. For the show trial audiences, whether the description of the events related to the trial reflected reality was not the takeaway from observing the show trial. Recognizing and deciding how to respond to the “trial’s lessons about the Cold War world and their place within it” was paramount.¹³⁰

Although Horáková was one of the first victims of show trials in Czechoslovakia, other Soviet bloc countries had staged show trials in similar ways and often influenced each other.¹³¹ Based on his first-hand experience and other primary sources, Hodos explained that the Rajk trials in Hungary “served as a model for all the satellite countries. Representatives of the security services of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany came to Budapest to study its organization and procedure.”¹³² Show trials needed to be tested, evaluated, and reshaped to improve upon past attempts. Across the Soviet bloc, show trials “had one central theme: the socialist camp was under siege, menaced by hidden and dangerous enemies who plotted to destroy it from the inside.”¹³³ Hodos recognized that show trials highlighted a particular person as an enemy to discourage others from speaking or acting on similar viewpoints. The Communist regime sent StB, secret police, agents to conduct show trials among other forms of persecution to

¹²⁹ Jonathan Markovitz, *Racial Spectacles: Explorations in Media, Race, and Justice* (Florence: Routledge, 2011), 3.

¹³⁰ Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 3.

¹³¹ Joel Carmichael, *Stalin’s Masterpiece: The Show Trials and Purges of the Thirties--the Consolidation of the Bolshevik Dictatorship* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976).; Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954*, 159-160.

¹³² George H. Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954*, 25.

¹³³ Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 5.

“combat these perceived enemies.”¹³⁴ Although the show trial of Rudolf Slánský was perhaps more well-known, the show trials immediately after the Communist coup in 1948 “helped assure the reduction of the Czechs and Slovaks to subject status for almost half a century more.”¹³⁵ The early show trials in Czechoslovakia targeted civilian “members of the anti-Communist opposition,” and later show trials carried on the trend of exposing internal, government agents as national traitors and class enemies in later years.¹³⁶ The theatricality of the trial expanded the charges from a single person to what that person represented. The media was an essential component of the show trial apparatus because it facilitated the communication of the dominant powers’ objectives to the public, even if it opened the show trial up to contestation in the process.

From the Soviet perspective, communist newspapers covered the show trial in great detail during the weeks leading up to it. The communist newspapers revealed the bias against the defendants by publishing their scripted confessions, interrogations, and trial testimonies. *Nova Svoboda* published reports of Horáková’s charges, claiming that she “expressly confessed” to them.¹³⁷ The security services’ interrogations of the defendants, which helped compose the script of the trial, were also published.¹³⁸ As they were conducted privately before the trial began, the interrogations aided in depicting the communists as transparent in contrast to the defendants being charged with espionage. *Nova Svoboda* also published thorough articles about each defendants’ testimony. With titles like “Fair Judgement to a Gang for High Treason” and “Defendants Charged with Destruction of Czechoslovakia,” the tone of the writers assumed the

¹³⁴ Marie Homerova, “When One Civilization Is Replaced by Another: The Case of Czechoslovakia,” *Comparative Civilizations Review*, no. 58 (Spring 2008): 64.

¹³⁵ *Ibid*, 65

¹³⁶ Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 4.

¹³⁷ “Vedení Reakčního Podzemí před Statním Soudem v Praze,” *Nova Svoboda*, 4, June 1, 1950.

¹³⁸ *Nova Svoboda*

guilt of each defendant and did not question the legitimacy of the charges.¹³⁹ Horáková's trial was broadcast in Czechoslovakia as Communist propaganda via television and radio.¹⁴⁰ Because Horáková breached from the script, the broadcast footage was highly edited.¹⁴¹ *Lidová Demokracie* also published articles with each of the defendants' testimonies and a photo of Horáková on the stand.¹⁴² It detailed her alleged involvement with Petr Zenkl, who represented the Czechoslovak exiled political movement and headed the exile Council of Free Czechoslovakia. Petr Zenkl had decades of experience in Czechoslovak politics and was a public, bourgeois figure. Horáková's alleged association with Zenkl evidenced the claim that she utilized her political connections to free Czechoslovakia from communism. The Communists' propaganda campaign surrounding Horáková's show trial "was intended to show the impossibility of further political opposition to the Communist regime."¹⁴³

Horáková received significant media coverage from the American press. The Western media expressed outrage and grief about Horáková.¹⁴⁴ However, the media attention also helped circulate the symbolism of her trial, allowing writers and readers to interpret her experience as an example of a broader trend. The meaning associated with Horáková and McGee's show trials varied, which contributed to their historical significance to multiple communities. Although spectacles gave "insight into the dominant ideology," they also triggered resistance and contesting viewpoints.¹⁴⁵ American presses wrote about Horáková's show trial to call attention to

¹³⁹ "Spravedlivý rozsudek nad bandou velezradcu," *Nova Svoboda*, 10 May 1950, 4.; "Obžalovaní zločinci počítali se zničením čechoslovenska," *Nova Svoboda*, May 3, 1950, 4.

¹⁴⁰ Czech National Film Archive

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² "Druhý den procesu se členy vedení záškodnického spiknutí," *Lidova Demokracie*, June 2, 1950, 3.

¹⁴³ Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 22.

¹⁴⁴ Roosevelt, Eleanor. "A Memorial Meeting." *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*; Boston, Mass. October 24, 1950.

¹⁴⁵ Jonathan Markovitz, *Racial Spectacles: Explorations in Media, Race, and Justice* (Florence: Routledge, 2011), 5.

human rights violations and the dangers of a communist takeover.¹⁴⁶ Coverage of her trial aligned with the tone and content of much of the second Red Scare media's anticommunism and redbaiting.¹⁴⁷ After describing how she survived Nazi imprisonment, a *Daily Boston Globe* reporter stated, "Despite her plea, and her obvious innocence of any crime, the Soviet puppet court found her 'guilty,'" and by executing her, "The Communists did what the Nazis never dared do."¹⁴⁸ Interestingly, the Communists also referenced the Nazis by comparing Horáková to a Nazi.¹⁴⁹ She embodied the American fear that democracy was under attack worldwide, enforcing the notion that communism needed to be contained if not eliminated.

The National Council of Women of the United States and the International Council of Women at Zurich advocated for Horáková despite believing "that any effort would probably be hopeless."¹⁵⁰ While her name carried more weight than McGee's, many Americans were receptive to the symbolism of her show trial. Some Americans felt personally alarmed by the persecution of Horáková because her values of democracy and equal rights aligned with their own. Helen Evans, president of the United States National Council of Women, expressed her sorrow that Horáková had become "a martyr at the hands of another government in her own country, for the cause of freedom."¹⁵¹ The staging of show trials moved the trial beyond the individuals on the stand to what they represented.

Newspapers circulated reports of her show trial and execution, feeding the anti-Communist perspective and facilitating her martyrdom. Newspaper articles delineated how

¹⁴⁶ Free Europe Committee, *Unconquered [the Story of Milada Horakova]* (New York: National Committee for a Free Europe, Inc., 1951).

¹⁴⁷ Jennifer Frost, "Hollywood gossip as public sphere: Hedda Hopper, reader-respondents, and the red scare, 1947-1965," *Cinema Journal* (2011): 84-103.

¹⁴⁸ Herbert Philbrick, "She Dared Fight Nazis and Reds to the Death," *Daily Boston Globe*, June 27, 1956, 16.

¹⁴⁹ Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 15.

¹⁵⁰ "Soviet Military Budget: Use of Official Ruble Conversion Rate Said to Distort Estimate Milada Horakova's Execution Watering Provisions for Horses," *New York Times*, July 5, 1950.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Horáková looked, often describing her as “gray” or “quiet” to create the image of an unthreatening woman being needlessly tortured by the communists.¹⁵² Some presses also reported on her “defiance” during the show trial, citing her loyalty to Edvard Benes and Tomas G. Masaryk.¹⁵³ In a final statement Horáková clung to her beliefs, stating “I would be lying if I said I had entirely changed my opinions.”¹⁵⁴ The American press called attention to the illegitimacy of the charges and show trial. *The New York Times* rejected that accusation that Horáková was conspiring with Americans, explaining that the Americans named in the show trial were not “in any way whatever’ involved in espionage or subversive work in Czechoslovakia.”¹⁵⁵

These kinds of descriptions took the spectacle from communist propaganda to American Red Scare propaganda. Feinberg explained that “actors on both sides of the Iron Curtain placed truth at the center of politics, making the Cold War a moral contest that pitted right against wrong. In this context, truth was an absolute that could be possessed by only one side. The ideas of one’s adversaries could only be lies; anything they said was slander or propaganda, cleverly designed to fool the ignorant or the desperate.”¹⁵⁶ The Communist show trial scripts depicted the West as “socialism’s irreconcilable enemy, bent on its destruction,” and the ideological cavern between the Soviet Union and the West was widened by the American media’s treatment of Horáková’s trial.¹⁵⁷ The media’s rejection of Horáková’s charges and treatment revealed the

¹⁵² “People Commemorate Czech Milada Horakova Executed by Communists,” *Czech News Agency (CKT)*, June 26, 2015.; “June 28, 1950,” *Palm Beach Post*, June 28, 1950, 4.

¹⁵³ “Defiance at Prague Political Trial: Defendant Proud of Her Crimes,” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 2, 1950.

¹⁵⁴ “Woman Ex-M.P. to Die: ‘I Still Follow Benes,’” *The Manchester Guardian*, June 9, 1950.; “4 To Die For Anti-Red Czech Plot,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 9, 1950.

¹⁵⁵ “Czech Woman Ties West to Spy Guilt: Main Defendant of 13 Accused Avers Diplomats Directed Moves to Upset Regime Staff Colonel Gets Death,” *New York Times*, 1950, 1.

¹⁵⁶ Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, x.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 11.

American distrust of the Soviet system and the desire to prevent Communist influence in their own courts.

The media became a mode of advocacy for Horáková. A comic book titled *Unconquered* was published by the Free Europe Committee to rally support for Horáková with a visual and narrative medium.¹⁵⁸ Some high-profile political figures spoke out against the show trial, spurring even more media coverage. Eleanor Roosevelt and Albert Einstein were among the most famous advocates for amnesty. Following Horáková's execution, Roosevelt attended a memorial for Horáková at a New York City high school. Roosevelt spoke to the 350 attendees about the victims of the show trial and eulogized Horáková.¹⁵⁹ Additionally, Roosevelt wrote an article, proclaiming, "A spirit like that of Dr. Horakova, however, will live on and inspire other people to fight for the things in which they believe."¹⁶⁰ Unlike the USSR—which sought to silence people like Horáková—Roosevelt hoped that the memory of Horáková would motivate others to act. While Roosevelt's comments were in admiration of Horáková, they also capitalized on the political opportunity of responding to her trial. The article concluded with a message asking Americans to stop fearing threats to American freedom because "they build an atmosphere of suspicion."¹⁶¹ Roosevelt confirmed the threat of communism but encouraged Americans to trust their government to suppress McCarthyism.

As previously discussed, evidence took on a new form in the context of show trials. Evidence did not impact the verdict, but it could help or hinder the show trial engagement with a public in a particular way. Hodos stated, "We confine ourselves here to the main political

¹⁵⁸ Free Europe Committee. *Unconquered [the Story of Milada Horakova]*. New York: National Committee for a Free Europe, Inc., 1951.

¹⁵⁹ "Mrs. Roosevelt Asks Refugees' Criticisms," *New York Times*, October 1950, 5.

¹⁶⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt, "A Memorial Meeting," *Daily Boston Globe*, October 24, 1950, 23.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 23.

scenario of the show trial. It would be superfluous to go into details of the fabricated charges of conspiracy, espionage, and murder.”¹⁶² The delivery of evidence was part of the spectacle of the show trials. The testimonies in Horáková’s trial were highly altered before they were presented to the public via radio, television, and newspapers. Marie Homerova explained that, “The propagandists also re-wrote the actual dialogue between the judges and the indicted during the trial. Thus, the confessions of Milada Horakova and other ‘class enemies’ presented to the public, written up the way the Communists needed in order to manipulate the Czechoslovak public.”¹⁶³ Furthermore, in the American South, Markovitz noted that racial spectacles “can influence the kinds of evidence that jurors deem credible in criminal trials or that the electorate will find relevant in political debates.”¹⁶⁴ Spectacle can help cultivate a political and social climate that influenced authority figures to continue to enforce the Jim Crow system.

The purpose of Horáková’s trial was not only to pacify political dissidents but to manage ideas about feminism within communism. Much of Horáková’s political career was spent within feminist organizations or with the goal of addressing women’s issues in society. Putting her on the stand was a challenge to her widely known commitment to gender equality. The Czechoslovak communists did not want or could not afford to eliminate women as political agents. Communism claimed to remove hierarchies including race and gender; therefore, demoting women as citizens would be blatantly hypocritical.¹⁶⁵ However, scholars have studied how Communists’ theory of gender equality often contradicted the realities women faced under

¹⁶² George H. Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954*, 62.

¹⁶³ Marie Homerova, “When One Civilization Is Replaced by Another: The Case of Czechoslovakia,” *Comparative Civilizations Review*, no. 58 (Spring 2008): 71.

¹⁶⁴ Jonathan Markovitz, *Racial Spectacles: Explorations in Media, Race, and Justice* (Florence: Routledge, 2011), 3.

¹⁶⁵ Emily Thompson, “Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist,” *Hungarian Review V*, no. 06 (2014): 54–64.

communism.¹⁶⁶ A show trial could enable Communists to convey expectations for women without appearing to entirely demote them.

A female lawyer, Ludmila Brožová-Polednová, was appointed as the lead prosecutor in the show trial. Despite being fresh out of law school with little legal experience, Brožová-Polednová was the face of the prosecution.¹⁶⁷ What she lacked in experience, Brožová-Polednová made up for in loyalty to the Party. By putting a woman at the center of the show trial, the Czechoslovak communists proved that they were not opposed to gender equality.¹⁶⁸ However, by elevating Brožová-Polednová and renouncing Horáková, they also created a dichotomy between the ideal, Communist woman and the type of bourgeois woman that would not be tolerated by the Party. Although it promised gender equality, communism continued to maintain a patriarchal society. Rather than deferring to her father or husband, the Communist woman would submit to the Party.¹⁶⁹ Eva Fodor explained that “it was important to reduce the control husbands exercised over their wives’ bodies and extend the surveillance of the state through the institutions of the labor force to women.”¹⁷⁰ Brožová-Polednová’s fanaticism was evident when she demanded “suffocate the bitch,” calling for Horáková death.¹⁷¹ Brožová-Polednová became a living spectacle, embodying the perfect Communist woman through her condemnation of Horáková and communist pride. Her prosecution demonstrated that Communist

¹⁶⁶ Hana Havelková and Libora Oates-Indruchová, "Expropriated voice: transformations of gender culture under state socialism; Czech society, 1948–89," In *The politics of gender culture under state socialism* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 15-40.

¹⁶⁷ Emily Thompson, “Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist,” *Hungarian Review* V, no. 06 (2014): 62.

¹⁶⁸ Emily Thompson, “Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist,” *Hungarian Review* V, no. 06 (2014): 62.

¹⁶⁹ Fodor, Éva. "Smiling Women and Fighting Men: The Gender of the Communist Subject in State Socialist Hungary." *Gender and Society* 16, no. 2 (2002): 240-63.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 245.

¹⁷¹ Stephen Brown, “‘Show Trial’ legalist who sent Czech dissident Milada Horakova to the gallows in 1950 gets eight years,” *History News Network*, George Washington University, December 3, 2007.

women could receive opportunity, and “the only prerequisites were her loyalty and willingness to wield the hatchet.”¹⁷² The question of women in a Communist society was answered through spectacle, with a physical display of what a good and bad woman was in the eyes of the government.¹⁷³

While spectacle established gender roles in Czechoslovakia, in the Jim Crow South, spectacle aided in enforcing racial stereotypes and segregation. As lynching became intolerable outside of the South, racial spectacles adapted to the courtroom. Like Horáková, McGee’s trial attracted a significant amount of media attention throughout the United States and Europe. McGee became national news, written about by conservatives, liberals, racists, and Communists to rally support for their ideology. The uproar surrounding his trial appeared to be rooted in responses to what he symbolized rather than who he was. The media coverage ranged widely in bias. For Jim Crow southerners, McGee was an example of the inherent criminality and inferiority of African American men. Conservative, southern newspapers “reflected the racist orthodoxy of the era, adding to the volatile environment that encouraged a violent response to threats to the status quo.”¹⁷⁴ Conversely, liberals and African Americans viewed him as an example of the corruption of Jim Crow. Furthermore, Communists reported on McGee’s trial to show how racial divisions and injustice emerged in capitalist systems.¹⁷⁵

The physical proceedings of the trials contributed to the overall spectacle, which was extended by the media coverage. *The Laurel Leader-Call* published that his trial “attracted wide attention because of the use of the National Guard troops to escort the defendant from the strong

¹⁷² Emily Thompson, “Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist,” *Hungarian Review* V, no. 06 (2014): 63.

¹⁷³ Jan Matonoha, “Dispositives of Silence: Gender, Feminism and Czech literature between 1948 and 1989,” In *The Politics of Gender Culture under State Socialism*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 174-199.

¹⁷⁴ Renee Romano, *Right to Revolt*, 34.

¹⁷⁵ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 117, 250-251

Hinds county jail to Laurel.”¹⁷⁶ The military was said to be for McGee’s “protection,” but the visible presence of guns and men in uniform became part of the spectacle of the trial.¹⁷⁷

Additionally, the trauma of the trial and his imprisonment was evident in McGee’s demeanor during the trials (see fig. 1). Wide-eyed and rigidly staring at the floor, McGee appeared to be paralyzed by fear in his seat. While the Civil Rights Congress and other advocates published photos of McGee looking strong and capable, the images from the trial exposed the overwhelming terror of his show trial.¹⁷⁸ White supremacist writers capitalized on the image of him in the midst of trauma because it bolstered the conception of African Americans as being savages. The *Laurel Leader-Call* reported that “he was trembling, wild-eyed, unsteady on his feet and jabbered continually and inaudibly throughout the day.”¹⁷⁹ Both McGee and Horáková entered their trials after experiencing psychological and physical torture, which was evident in McGee’s manner. Horáková’s attitude in court resembled more like the CRC’s images of McGee, proud and dignified. Horáková’s physical torture was concealed by a black peacoat, and unlike McGee, she was not handcuffed. Western media outlets noted that she appeared small and quiet, but she also held herself with perfect posture and neatly pulled back hair (see fig. 2).

Like in Horáková’s case, some celebrities became invested in McGee’s trial and wrote to petition for his life. Most notable, future Congresswoman, Bella Abzug, worked with the CRC to advocate for and defend McGee in court.¹⁸⁰ Additionally, William Faulkner was misquoted by representatives of the Civil Rights Congress. In response, he commented that “I do not want Willie McGee to be executed, because it will make him a martyr and create a long-lasting stink

¹⁷⁶ “No Negro On Jury, M’Gee Gets Re-Trial,” in *The Three Trials and Aftermath of the Willie McGee Case as reported in the Laurel Leader-Call Laurel, Mississippi*, ed. Raymond Horne (2011), 50.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 50.; Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 44.

¹⁷⁸ Harry Raymond, *Save Willie McGee* (New York: New Century Publishers, 1951).

¹⁷⁹ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 44.

¹⁸⁰ Leandra Zarnow, “Braving Jim Crow to Save Willie McGee: Bella Abzug, the Legal Left, and Civil Rights Innovation, 1948-1951.” *Law & Social Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2008): 1003–41.

in my native state. If the crime of which he is accused was not one of force and violence, and I do not think it was proved that, then the penalty in this state or in any other similar case should not be death.”¹⁸¹ Albert Einstein also published an article in response to McGee’s trial in the *New York Times* days before his execution. He wrote, “In the face of the evidence any unprejudiced human being must find it difficult to believe that this man really committed the rape of which he has been accused. Moreover, the punishment must appear unnaturally harsh to anyone with any sense of justice.”¹⁸² While Eleanor Roosevelt was made aware of the trial, she did not actively support him as she did for Horáková.¹⁸³ Most likely, she would not offer her support unless the case was clearly corrupt. When asked why she did not intervene, Roosevelt said “In the case of Willie McGee, while I regret there should be this discrimination in the law, I have to add that he was a bad character and so was the White woman, so there was very little that one could feel personally about.”¹⁸⁴ While Roosevelt did not feel invested in the trial, thousands of other citizens across the world did.

McGee’s trial sparked a surge of letters, postcards, and telegrams on his behalf to Mississippi’s Governor Fielding Wright. Show trials were intended to elicit a response from the public, and in Horáková’s case, the advocacy for her in the West was matched with Czechoslovak citizens who wrote to Communist officials demanding her execution.¹⁸⁵ Companies mass printed cards with the request for McGee’s pardon and a line for each employee to sign. Copious amounts of letters from individuals and large companies arrived from across the United States and in Europe.¹⁸⁶ One mass printed letter said “I protest the sentencing of Willie

¹⁸¹ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 289-90.

¹⁸² "Display Ad 77 -- no Title," *New York Times*, May 4, 1951.

¹⁸³ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*.

¹⁸⁴ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 1.

¹⁸⁵ Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 23.

¹⁸⁶ Fielding Wright correspondence, Willie McGee Case Correspondence, 1950-51-Series 942/Box 1836

McGee, and in the interest of justice and democracy demand a stay of execution and pardon” with a place for each person to sign his or her name.¹⁸⁷ Some of the writers pointed out how McGee’s execution was in violation of the values on which America had claimed to structure its justice system. A common message being “The American tradition of “Equal justice under the law” will be best upheld by your intervention. Willie McGee must not die.”¹⁸⁸ Some postcards simply said, “FREE WILLIE MCGEE.”¹⁸⁹ Many of the letters and telegrams relied on the language of the American government like “democracy” and “justice.” Similar to the comic book in support of Horáková, Harry Raymond published a short book entitled *Save Willie McGee*, describing the events of the trial as another form of advocacy.¹⁹⁰

African American newspapers throughout the country covered McGee’s trials, and offered a perspective that acknowledged the injustices of the Jim Crow justice system. The tone of many African American articles conveyed their cynicism toward the Southern courts and some even called the case a “legal-lynching.”¹⁹¹ The writers explained the case by calling attention to the lack of sufficient evidence, the Jim Crow context, and the appeals of government officials who thought the verdict was the questionable.¹⁹² One article after McGee’s first stay of execution asked readers for continued support of McGee who was “still at the mercy of the vindictive lynch-hungry officials of the State of Mississippi who have been prevented

¹⁸⁷ Fielding Wright correspondence, Willie McGee Case Correspondence, 1950-51-Series 942/Box 1836

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Harry Raymond, *Save Willie McGee* (New York: New Century Publishers, 1951).

¹⁹¹ "Governor Of Mississippi Evades Truth In McGee Case--Civil Rights Congress," *Arkansas State Press*, December 2, 1949: 1.; "3rd Appeal for Willie McGee," *The Chicago*, December 2, 1950.; "Willie McGee Slated to Die Tonight," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 26, 1950.; "Willie McGee Saved again," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 24, 1951.

¹⁹² "Death Sentence For Willie McGee, Miss. Negro, Upheld By U. S. Supreme Court," *Arkansas State Press*, June 2, 1950: 2.; Louis Lautier, "Petition Hints Strongly at Alleged Innocence of McGee," *Atlanta Daily World*, November 29, 1950.

temporarily from taking his life.”¹⁹³ After his execution, the *Chicago Defender* noted that despite living in “this world’s greatest democracy,” White men had never faced execution for the same crime as McGee.¹⁹⁴ In spurring more support for McGee, many articles gave voice to the current protesters and their objections to the ruling.¹⁹⁵ The African American presses also gave more attention than other White presses to the impacts of the trial on McGee’s wife, who was part of the CRC’s publicity campaigns.¹⁹⁶ Some of the articles referenced the potential affair between McGee and Hawkins, claiming that Hawkins “refused to release McGee from a relationship of several years.”¹⁹⁷ Although the idea of an interracial relationship was inconceivable to most White southerners, some African American sources confirmed that the African American community in Laurel generally believed it to be more than plausible.¹⁹⁸

The Civil Rights Congress, McGee’s defense, fueled the media circus through media campaigns, and unintentionally, by attaching the controversy of the organization itself to McGee’s trial.¹⁹⁹ The CRC’s presence in southern courtrooms created a linkage to the Red Scare, adding another layer of political tension. Heard explained that “The CRC had problems of its own, including politically motivated legal attacks against its leadership, which grew out of HUAC’s 1947 report labeling the group a Communist front.”²⁰⁰ The CRC was dubbed as a communist front organization, and by partnering with them, McGee was tainted by his perceived

¹⁹³ "Continue Appeal for Willie McGee," *Atlanta Daily World (1932-2003)*, August 4, 1950.

¹⁹⁴ "Mississippi Whites Roar Approval as Willie McGee Dies in the Chair," *The Chicago Defender*, May 19, 1951.

¹⁹⁵ "People's Call Grows; 'Save Willie McGee'," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 11, 1950.; "Jo Baker Pays to Bury Willie McGee," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 19, 1951.

¹⁹⁶ "Appeal for Wife of Willie McGee," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 21, 1950.; "Bars Wife of Willie McGee from Miss. Jail," *Atlanta Daily World*, August 12, 1950.;

¹⁹⁷ "Wife of Willie McGee in Final Plea Here." *Pittsburgh Courier*, Mar 17, 1951.

¹⁹⁸ *New York Age*, March 24, 1951: 4.; Iola Williams oral history, oral history conducted by Patricia Buzard, The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage of The University of Southern Mississippi, 2006.; "Willie McGee." *Atlanta Daily World*, May 6, 1951.

¹⁹⁹ Gerald Horne, "Prison Looms," in *Black Revolutionary: William Patterson and the Globalization of the African American Freedom Struggle* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 108-124.

²⁰⁰ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 182.

connection to communism.²⁰¹ Southerners feared that Communists in the CRC viewed the case as an opportunity to infiltrate the American—specifically Jim Crow—system.²⁰² Southerners were already averse to outsiders, but communist outsiders were an even greater cause for concern.

In 1950, the *New York Times* reported on the CRC's attempts to organize support for McGee in Mississippi and through the media. The *New York Times* published "The Civil Rights Congress will participate in a motorcade next week to Jackson, Miss., which has been arranged in an effort to bring about a stay of the execution of Willie McGee, a Negro, who has been convicted on a charge of raping a white woman in 1945."²⁰³ The CRC also printed pamphlets with McGee's story, encouraging the stay of his execution. The executive secretary of the CRC, William Patterson, explained the defense of McGee as "an appeal 'to world humanity to save the life of the innocent Mississippi Negro as you once saved the innocent Scottsboro boys.'"²⁰⁴ While national and northern newspapers tended to view McGee's trial as being racially motivated, southern and local newspapers often held different views.

Mississippi papers revealed the perspective of Jim Crow southerners. *The Jackson Daily News* heavily covered the trials, typically expressing belief in McGee's guilt and outrage at the unwanted outsider intervention his trials sparked. The start of the Korean War in 1950 amplified the perceived threat of communist intervention in McGee's case and Southern life more broadly. *The Jackson Daily News* published, "The men who are getting killed every day over in Korea, fighting against Communism but yet the Communist here in the United State are putting their

²⁰¹ "Willie McGee: The Symbol," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 9, 1951.

²⁰² Leandra Zarnow, "Braving Jim Crow to Save Willie McGee: Bella Abzug, the Legal Left, and Civil Rights Innovation, 1948-1951." *Law & Social Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2008): 1003–41.

²⁰³ "Group Joins in Fight for Execution Stay," *New York Times*, July 20, 1950.

²⁰⁴ "'Willie McGee Can Be Saved,' Defense Counsel Asserts," *Jackson Daily News*, June 13, 1950.

pressure on our courts and Justices' here to get what they want."²⁰⁵ Additionally, White southerners were concerned that Chinese communists were becoming invested in saving McGee. The *Jackson Daily News* printed that "Chinese communists even sought intervention in the McGee case which only adds to Burton's [judge who ordered stay of execution] shame, or should."²⁰⁶ Segregationists felt that "There has already been quite too much Communist money used in Mississippi to save Willie McGee's neck, and quite too much making a joke of justice in his behalf."²⁰⁷ Adjacent to fear of communists was the aversion outsiders more broadly. A frustrated writer vented that "We of the South are not allowed to run our own affairs, or our courts, without meddling from sources who encourage mob violence."²⁰⁸ By focusing on the threat of communism rather than issues of race, the *Jackson Daily News* helped maintain the ruse that McGee's trial was legitimate rather than an example of legal lynching.

While the *Jackson Daily News* featured many impassioned articles, the *Laurel Leader-Call* consistently reported on the trials with a more neutral tone. The cool tone aided in depicting the justice system as legitimate. Although the language was not heated, the *Laurel Leader-Call* more subtly implied McGee's guilt. For instance, rather than describing Willette Hawkins as the prosecution or the alleged victim, she was described as "the ravished woman."²⁰⁹ The article reporting his stay of execution in 1949 began, "This is the story of an execution that failed."²¹⁰ Additionally, the appeals and retrials were not considered as evidence of the inadequacy of the defense but as proof of the thoroughness of Southern courts. It printed, "In spite of its weakness, in spite of its delays, the courts in our country still function. This was proved in the case of

²⁰⁵ Allen Davis, "Gross Injustice From Washington," *Jackson Daily News*, July 28, 1950.

²⁰⁶ Presley J. Snow, "Victory for Communists," *Jackson Daily News* July 30, 1950, McGee.

²⁰⁷ "Communists Still Busy," *Jackson Daily News*, July 11, 1950.

²⁰⁸ Presley J. Snow, "Victory for Communists," *Jackson Daily News*, July 30, 1950.

²⁰⁹ "McGee Lawyer Seeks Write Coram Nobis," *Laurel Leader-Call*, July 21, 1950.

²¹⁰ "Willie McGee To Die and Chair Set Up," in *The Three Trials and Aftermath of the Willie McGee Case as reported in the Laurel Leader-Call Laurel, Mississippi*, ed. Raymond Horne (2011), 102

Willie McGee, whose lawyers tried every delaying tactic, every propaganda move but the courts slowly ground out the ultimate justice of which we, as a people, are proud.”²¹¹ The bulk of the articles lacked intense emotion, which helped diffuse claims that McGee was the victim of a prejudiced or broken system.

The fear of Communist intervention exemplified how Americans were convinced that their justice system lacked any similarity to the Soviet’s system.²¹² They viewed potentially Socialist and Communist liberals from the north as threats to southern and American society more broadly. The *Jackson Daily News* explained that “These invaders are just as much enemies of the United States government as are soldiers fighting under the Communist banner in Korea—fighting with Russian arms and ammunition.”²¹³ Jim Crow Southerners’ worry that the Communists would corrupt their justice system revealed their blindness to the parallels between McGee’s trial and the Communist show trials being discussed in American media at the same time.

Spectacle amplified the messaging of the show trials by heightening the symbolism and increasing the publics exposed to the messaging. The audience of McGee and Horáková’s show trials was diversified through the media coverage. The dominant powers conducting the show trials were able to reach more people, and other groups posited conflicting messages about the significance of the trials. The staging of the defendants, witnesses, and prosecutors of the trials demonstrated the power dynamics that should be practiced in broader society. The dominant

²¹¹ “A Clean Slate,” in *The Three Trials and Aftermath of the Willie McGee Case as reported in the Laurel Leader-Call Laurel, Mississippi*, ed. Raymond Horne (2011), 315.

²¹² Toby C. Rider, “The Cold War, Propaganda, and the State–Private Network,” In *Cold War Games: Propaganda, the Olympics, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 9–28.

²¹³ “Communists Coming Here,” *Jackson Daily News*, July 19, 1950, SF 1950

power established or enforced rules for behavior through the trial proceedings, while proving the criminality of the defendants to maintain the façade of legitimacy.

The Social Psychology of Guilt

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and America “used the concept of ‘truth’ (or ‘lies’)” to make their ideology and worldview appear supreme or correct. The dominant power’s targeting of specific individuals with symbolic potential contributed to the growing suspicion of certain groups. One of the dominant power’s objectives was to generate public suspicion of targeted groups through show trials. Suspicion turned citizens into agents of the police state that supported the dominant power. Under Stalin’s regime, “millions of people actively participated in creating and sustaining this political culture of terror, just as millions were victimized by it.”²¹⁴ Compelling show trials spawned contempt for the defendant and roused suspicion of people like him or her. Although all criminal justice systems rely to some degree on the complaints and reports of citizens, “repressive societies actually tend to require greater participation, as they regulate more behavior than do less repressive systems.”²¹⁵ Effective show trials also silenced people who sympathized with the defendants; therefore, the people who ignored the messaging became objects of suspicion. By highlighting the defendant’s “fabricated character flaws,” in an effective show trial, the dominant power “attempt—or at least mutilate—the very character (not just the reputation) of vast social strata.”²¹⁶ In Horáková’s case, feminists and the bourgeoisie became suspicious because they were identified as enemies of the Party. In McGee’s case, he was used to solidify suspicion of African American men and assert sexual restrictions for White women.

The impact of spectacle trials could be measured by the response of the audience of the show trials. After the show trials set the standards of behavior, citizens were tasked with acting

²¹⁴ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 16.

²¹⁵ Patrick Bergemann, "Denunciation and Social," *American Sociological Review* 82, no. 2 (2017): 385.

²¹⁶ Martina Klicperová-Baker, "Psychology of the Ultimate Cases of Character Assassination," 322.

accordingly and calling attention to dissidents. Suspicion fostered the development of a public police force armed with weapons of denunciations. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately explained that "...denunciations may be defined as spontaneous communications from individual citizens to the state (or to another authority such as the church) containing accusations of wrongdoing by other citizens or officials and implicitly or explicitly calling for punishment."²¹⁷ Denunciations were key to the terror structures in both Nazi and Soviet societies, emboldening citizens to assert the doctrine of the state without officially being part of the government or police force.²¹⁸ Considering both the Soviet and Southern fear of foreign or outside spies and intervention, denunciations were tools that equipped everyday people to work as informants for the dominant power. After targeting resulted in suspicion, suspicion manifested itself in denunciations.

Show trials cultivated the perceived duty to denounce dissidents. Fitzpatrick and Gellately, stated,

The notion that denunciation is part of a specifically totalitarian kind of intimidating universal surveillance is shared by many writers on totalitarianism, without being fully developed by any of them. Hannah Arendt alluded to the similarities of Nazi and Soviet denunciations and their importance to the secret police in both regimes, observing that there developed 'a system of ubiquitous spying where everybody may be a police agent' and where 'each individual feels himself under constant surveillance.'²¹⁹

The ability and perceived responsibility to denounce was not purely fear based but was also embroiled in class and status differences. For people who felt powerless—like poor, uneducated Whites in the South—denunciations were an opportunity to grasp power and assert control. Fitzpatrick elaborated that "Public accusations and public justice are used to protect the 'interests of the community' but they are also a way to those lacking power and status to achieve some

²¹⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789-1989* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 1.

²¹⁸ *Ibid*, 5.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 9-10.

agency. Denunciations are ‘weapons of the weak’ because they arm poor, marginalized people with a tool to challenge people with more power.”²²⁰ In Communist countries, denunciations proved loyalty, aiding individuals in protecting themselves from the regime. Additionally, in what was supposed to be a classless society, denunciations provided individuals with power and increased status within the Party. Tolerating the messaging of show trials was not enough; the audience had an active role to play.

Denunciations were an important device for social control in the Soviet bloc and many other societies. Following the Communist coup in 1948, the Communists conducted show trials as part of a broader effort to “consolidate and extend its [the Party] monopoly of power.”²²¹ Targeting Horáková enforced the idea that the bourgeoisie and Czech feminists were distrustful and potentially dangerous to society. Hodos explained, “In Prague, the purges did not involve only a handful of collaborators, but the entire upper echelon of party leaders, the terror continued so that every loose end might be buried in anticipation of the inevitable day of reckoning.”²²² Horáková’s show trial instilled a suspicion of the elite, which contributed to the later show trials of government figures. Most famously, the show trial of Rudolf Slánský followed in 1953, convicting a well-known Communist official for espionage.²²³ Additionally, significant portions of the records related to Horáková’s show trial were not discovered until after the fall of communism. The information presented to citizens was highly censored, and citizens faced intense retaliation for questioning or attempting to research people or subjects labeled as deviant. When show trials were successful, discourse was not only pacified but directed. Citizens felt “a strong impetus to denounce others, if only to protect oneself against the charge of having failed

²²⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789-1989*, 117-118.

²²¹ Kevin McDermott, “A ‘Polyphony of Voices’? Czech Popular Opinion and the Slánský Affair,” 844.

²²² Hodos, *Show Trials: Stalinist Purges in Eastern Europe, 1948-1954*, 74.

²²³ Karel Kaplan, *Report on the Murder of the General Secretary* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990).

to denounce them.”²²⁴ Some historians of the Soviet Union have claimed that after reading private texts it appeared to be “practically impossible for the individual to think or feel outside the terms defined by the public discourse of Soviet politics.”²²⁵ Denunciations were a facet of Stalin’s terror apparatus, functioning to keep citizens from stepping out of line. Show trials resembled stage productions more than judicial proceedings, but when the public embraced their role, the world created in the script became the governing doctrine.

The juxtaposition of Horáková and Brožová-Polednová also outlined the social expectations for women under communism. The ideals of Czech feminism were undercut by the standards for women in the newly communist country. Although communism promised gender equality, women’s ability to act on their rights was contingent on their loyalty to the party.²²⁶ The Party and the growing denunciation culture dissuaded women, perhaps Horáková’s former colleagues, from questioning “persistent inequalities and shortcomings.”²²⁷ Women who did point out inequalities “were arrested, interrogated, and in some cases deported.”²²⁸ The show trial was intended to set the standards for women and encourage women to police each other.²²⁹

McGee’s show trial also communicated to women, specifically White women. The show trial enforced the perceived impossibility of a White woman *choosing* to have sex with a Black man.²³⁰ If a White woman and Black man were engaged in a sexual relationship, it was assumed to have been rape or assault. Although McGee was the victim of his show trial, it revolved

²²⁴ Wendy Z. Goldman, *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 30.

²²⁵ Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Picador, 2007), xxxiv.

²²⁶ Emily Thompson, “Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist,” *Hungarian Review* V, no. 06 (2014): 63.

²²⁷ *Ibid*, 63.

²²⁸ *Ibid*, 63.

²²⁹ Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1950* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

²³⁰ Leandra Zarnow, “Braving Jim Crow to Save Willie McGee: Bella Abzug, the Legal Left, and Civil Rights Innovation, 1948-1951.” *Law & Social Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2008): 1003–41.

around Willette Hawkins. As Hawkins's only description of her attacker was his hair texture, McGee along with any other man with his hair texture matched the flimsy depiction.²³¹ The prosecution was less concerned with indicting specifically McGee than protecting White womanhood. Estelle Freedman explained that “[i]n a political script replayed throughout the South, Democrats stirred up fears of black lust, promising to protect the purity of white womanhood and guarantee future racial purity.”²³² One of the ways White Southern Democrats sustained their power postwar and combated the growing Black vote and women's movement was capitalizing on “rape fears.”²³³ By communicating that White women and Black men could not have consensual sex, White men and women were tasked with denouncing African American males who appeared threatening.

The defamation of Black men and supposed protection of White women reduced the humanity and political agency of both demographics. In 1951, a group of White women gathered in Jackson to protest McGee's death sentence, explaining that “no more innocent men shall die in the name of protecting Southern white womanhood.”²³⁴ White males observing the protests told the women that they “ought to beat the hell out of you,” and the women were eventually put in jail when they failed to follow police instructions to disperse.²³⁵ The supposed protection of White womanhood practically took away their political and social agency by rendering them incapable of extricating themselves from the Jim Crow system.

²³¹ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36116, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

²³² Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence In the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 91.

²³³ *Ibid*, 91.

²³⁴ John Herbers, “Police Haul Demonstrators Into City Jail,” *Jackson Daily News*, May 6, 1951.; John N. Herbers, *Deep South Dispatch: Memoir of a Civil Rights Journalist* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 40-44.

²³⁵ John N. Herbers, *Deep South Dispatch: Memoir of a Civil Rights Journalist* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 40-44.

McGee was targeted to embody the entire demographic of African American men. The profiling of McGee was the result of decades of prior suspicion established in the Jim Crow South through various forms of prejudice. The Scottsboro Boys served as a prime example of criminal cases being viewed by White supremacists as “an ideal opportunity for mass education and mobilization.”²³⁶ By targeting a seemingly average African American men, the show trial conveyed to southerners that *all* African American men were dangerous. McGee matched Hawkins’s description of her attacker’s the kinky hair texture, as would most other African American men. In cases when the show trial was effective, citizens adopted suspicion of African American men and felt compelled to make accusations based on stereotypes. The suspicion generated towards African American men resulted in rape being dubbed a “negro crime.”²³⁷ Enforcing the inconceivability of consensual interracial relations hurt women by limiting their ability to protest African Americans’ persecution or the death penalty. It also restricted their agency in cases of interracial sex, like McGee’s. Co-founder of the American Civil Liberties Union, Roger Baldwin, explained that “whatever evidence, no Negro can be acquitted when a white woman, even of the lowest character accuses him” because the prejudice was deeply engrained in the culture.²³⁸ Southerners had been conditioned to expect it; therefore, when a White woman called rape, her accusation was rarely doubted by her community.

Additionally, denunciation and stereotype-based suspicion enforced an etiquette system that dictated the everyday interactions of people in the Jim Crow South. The acceptable behaviors and “definition of good manners depended on one’s race.”²³⁹ The social order was

²³⁶ James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro*, 27.

²³⁷ Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence In the Era of Suffrage and Segregation*, 108.

²³⁸ *Ibid*, 286.

²³⁹ Jennifer Ritterhouse, “Etiquette of Race Relations in the Jim Crow South,” In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, edited by Thomas C. Holt, Laurie B. Green, and Charles Reagan Wilson, Volume 24: University of North Carolina Press, 2013, 58.

buttressed by small, day-to-day actions and customs that enforced the supremacy of White males and inferiority of African Americans and White women. Overarching legal and voluntarily segregation was justified by daily customs.²⁴⁰ Micro level practices like “calling blacks of all ages by their first names” or referring to adult males as boys maintained White control without physical violence but were backed by the threat of brutal retaliation for breaking the social rules.²⁴¹

The effectiveness of show trials can be judged by the dominant powers’ success in directing the discourse and action of their publics. The show trial script was not complete without the audience, which “also had a part to play.”²⁴² In totalitarian systems, citizens who “merely complied were also drawn to action” because if they avoided active participation they “would immediately have drawn undesired attention and been subjected to persecution.” In Communist Czechoslovakia, the audience was expected to demonstrate their loyalty to the Party and approval of the show trials by denouncing and calling for the execution of the defendants.²⁴³ Citizens could shield themselves from suspicion through denunciation. The citizen police forces supported the legal structures that established the social guidelines. In the American context, citizen denunciation fueled McCarthyism as well as the systematic marginalization of African Americans and women. The racial and sexual etiquette system in the Jim Crow South was directed by but also justified the structural oppression of African Americans and women. The show trial medium resulted in a culture guided by suspicion and denunciation, which were essential to both the Soviet and Jim Crow models of terror and social control.

²⁴⁰ Leon F. Litwack, “Jim Crow Blues,” *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 2 (2004): 8.
Jennifer Ritterhouse, “Etiquette of Race Relations in the Jim Crow South.”

²⁴² Melissa Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*, 22.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 22-23.

Chapter 3

Outcomes

Show trials were sometimes called “monster trials” due to their overwhelming terror.²⁴⁴ It was a fitting nickname because like the imaginary monsters that hide under kids’ beds, show trials were menacing, illogical, and inescapable. But unlike the monsters that frighten little kids, show trials were all-consuming, potentially fatal nightmares backed by the power and relentlessness of the state. The verdicts were determined before the trials even began. McGee and Horáková were guilty. They both received death sentences. With McGee’s jury taking a mere two and a half minutes to deliberate, neither verdict was ever in doubt, which was a key component of show trials.²⁴⁵ Despite their pending executions, McGee and Horáková fought. Horáková was equipped with her political and legal training. McGee armed himself with the defense of the Civil Rights Congress. Despite the direness of their situations, both defendants asserted agency where they could.

Horáková knew that she was not going to survive her trial, but she was willing to die for her beliefs.²⁴⁶ The night before her execution, Horáková wrote to her daughter, “Decide to fight. Have courage and clear goals and you will win over life.”²⁴⁷ While the Communists sought to depict her as criminal, she tried to find ways to use her situation to further her own political goals. She was defiant up to the moment she died. With the noose around her neck, she said, I am falling out, falling down...I lost this fight, I am leaving with pride, I love this country, I love

²⁴⁴ Martina Klicperová-Baker, "Psychology of the Ultimate Cases of Character Assassination," 321.

²⁴⁵ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 54.

²⁴⁶ Wilma A Iggers, *Women of Prague: Ethnic Diversity and Social Change from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), 305-312.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 305.

its people—develop prosperity for them. I am leaving without hatred toward you and wish you...”²⁴⁸ Before she finished speaking, they killed her.

Knowing that she was “not coming back anymore,” Horáková remained steadfast in her political beliefs, turning herself into a martyr for democracy.²⁴⁹ Much of the evidence of her deviance during the trial was not recovered until after the fall of communism. Despite the Communists’ efforts to mask her dissent, Horáková’s reputation as a feminist, advocate of democracy, and anti-fascist ensured her martyrdom during the show trial. After the fall of communism, Horáková’s efforts to stand by her values transformed her from martyr to a national icon. Although she admitted to the crimes, she did not show remorse and stood by her actions.²⁵⁰ She even deviated from the script at certain moments. The court records show that she testified, “I maintain my beliefs because I relied on the opinions and information of people I consider authorities, above all the two presidents of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Dr Edvard Beneš, who have had an effect on me my whole life.”²⁵¹ She did not deny being anti-fascist and pro-democracy. Her loyalty was to Czechoslovakia and the Czechoslovak people not the Party.

Nonetheless, she was forced to confess to the crimes assigned to her by the Communists and was killed in June 1950. Even her death was tainted by the corruption and malice of the trial. The lead prosecutor, Ludmila Brožová-Polednová argued for her death with conviction and theatricality. Voicing her judgement with venom, Brožová-Polednová declared, “suffocate the

²⁴⁸ Jana Kopelentova Rehak, *Czech Political Prisoners: Recovering Face* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 78.

²⁴⁹ Wilma A Iggers, *Women of Prague: Ethnic Diversity and Social Change from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, 305-312.

²⁵⁰ Jana Kopelentova Rehak, *Czech Political Prisoners: Recovering Face*, 78-79.

²⁵¹ Emily Thompson, “Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist,” 54–64.

bitch.”²⁵² Despite its theatricality, her statement was not an exaggeration but intentional and serious. Brožová-Polednová commanded the executioner, “don’t break her neck in the noose.”²⁵³ Horáková was not just to die but to suffer a painful death. In Horáková’s case, a quick death was considered too merciful. Upon Brožová-Polednová’s command, Horáková was pulled down by the executioner against the noose until her breath ceased. She was strangled not hanged.²⁵⁴ Although much of the show trial process was directed at the public, the brutality of Horáková’s execution demonstrated that the private hatred of the Communists and their desire to see her suffer. The fanaticism of her sentence and execution revealed the vindictiveness and commitment of the Communists to annihilate dissidents. Death was not simply an end to life under communism but an experience of suffering.

While Horáková relied on her political background, McGee had to find a different strategy to fight his charges. Although they both faced a pre-determined verdict, McGee lacked the education and experience to combat the Jim Crow justice system. In Mississippi, a White man had never been sentenced to death for rape, reserving the verdict exclusively for Black men.²⁵⁵ However, he attempted to work within the system by partnering with the CRC. Knowing that the courts in Mississippi served to maintain the status quo, he outsourced his defense to people who still were able to work within the system: White people. Despite the trauma of the trial, he did not accept the initial death sentence and appealed two more times before his eventual execution.

²⁵² Stephen Brown, “‘Show Trial’ legalist who sent Czech dissident Milada Horakova to the gallows in 1950 gets eight years,” *History News Network*, George Washington University, December 3, 2007.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ Leandra Zarnow, “Braving Jim Crow to Save Willie McGee: Bella Abzug, the Legal Left, and Civil Rights Innovation, 1948-1951.” *Law & Social Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2008): 1022.

The corruption of the trial was evident to the state Supreme Court who stayed his execution. McGee endured three trials from 1946 to 1951. He appealed on the grounds of venue changes and jury selection. A change of venue was necessary because the African Americans confirmed that “this case was so intense that for a colored person to take any publicly known action favorable in any way to the defense, might subject him to some form of retaliation.”²⁵⁶ Although mob violence was restrained throughout his trials, the atmosphere of his legal lynching required the presence of military troops. As he was sentenced by two White juries, his third trial featured the county’s first African American juror.²⁵⁷ Mostly White men still sat on the jury, the threat of mob violence kept local Black people relatively quiet, and history was on the side of the White men who time and time again had executed *only* Black men for allegedly raping White women. Despite the attempts of his lawyers to prove his innocence and wide acknowledgement that his verdict was based on prejudice not evidence, McGee’s fate was unaltered after his death sentence from the White, all male jury in his first trial.

African Americans had been lynched for generations, and that form of racial spectacle—public execution—became the “template for later racial spectacles.”²⁵⁸ Although McGee’s execution took place behind the closed doors of the courthouse, over five hundred Whites, mostly men, waited outside, and African Americans hid in their homes. As McGee was smuggled into the courthouse by military guards to prevent an actual lynching, the atmosphere of the crowd outside was described as “festive” with young boys clambering up trees for a better view and men lounging in lawn chairs.²⁵⁹ The few people allowed inside the courthouse where

²⁵⁶ *Willie McGee v. The State of Mississippi*, No. 36411, Mississippi Supreme Court case files. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ Jonathan Markovitz, *Racial Spectacles: Explorations in Media, Race, and Justice* (Florence: Routledge, 2011), 6.

²⁵⁹ John N. Herbers, *Deep South Dispatch: Memoir of a Civil Rights Journalist*, 43

mostly White men, including a few reporters, Hawkins's husband, and military guards. McGee was killed by the state's traveling electric chair, the only one in the country, which was hauled from county to county depending on where it was needed.²⁶⁰ This night, it was called to the same courtroom where McGee was tried.

The media responses to his execution ranged along the political spectrum with some revealing sorrow, neutral reporting, or a sense of victory.²⁶¹ However, radio coverage recorded the surrounding crowd's palpable sense of triumph. The execution was broadcasted over two radio networks, WFOR and WAML. Radio reporters hung microphones over the fence surrounding the courthouse with the electric chair. Families turned out and stood around the fence surrounding the courthouse in Laurel to listen to the execution. As the generator fueling the electric chair revved up, the radio reporter narrated— these few seconds of mechanical roaring were killing Willie McGee. Onlookers' shouts and cheers could be heard over the radio broadcast. When the body was taken from the courthouse to the waiting hearse, the guards held back the excited, cheering crowd.²⁶² Without a detectable emotional reaction to the execution, the reporter stated that "I believe that our purpose has been fulfilled. I don't think there's going to be much else to see. Certainly, WFOR and WAML had intended no sensationalism in this. It was simply that it was a news story and we wanted to cover it as best we could."²⁶³

²⁶⁰ Alex Heard, *The Eyes of Willie McGee*, 319

²⁶¹ "Mississippi Whites Roar Approval as Willie McGee Dies in the Chair," *The Chicago Defender*, May 19, 1951.; "Willie McGee Electrocuted in 1945 Rape Case: Is Executed in Mississippi After Futile Appeals to Justices Black, Vinson," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 8, 1951.; John N. Popham, "McGee Dies in Mississippi Chair; Final Plea to Justice Vinson Vain: Willie M'Gee Goes to Electric Chair Series of Court Moves," *New York Times*, May 8, 1951.; "Memorial Day Set for Willie McGee," *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 22, 1952.; "Willie McGee Executed for Rape in 1945," *The Washington Post*, May 9, 1951.

²⁶² John N. Herbers, *Deep South Dispatch: Memoir of a Civil Rights Journalist*, 43-44.

²⁶³ "My Grandfather's Execution," Radio Diaries, All Things Considered, National Public Broadcasting, May 7, 2010.

Their purpose had indeed been fulfilled. While the broadcast recorded history, it also contributed to the overarching narrative of White male dominance and judicial murder in the South.²⁶⁴ With African Americans cowering in their homes, the execution was another example recorded in history of African American community being subject to the violent whims of the White Jim Crow justice system. Show trials led to official verdicts and sentences, which created a court record of McGee's guilt. The media element of the show trial's spectacle worked in the same vein to create a cultural record of Black men being viewed as savage criminals. Although the reporter claimed not to be sensationalizing the execution, the recording fueled the spectacle and messaging of the show trial. Just like show trials involved the presentation of evidence of the defendants' crimes, denying sensationalism was a strategy of maintaining the rouse sincerity and legitimacy.

Despite the worldwide campaigns to save both Horáková and McGee, they were victims of judicial murder. The court room became a stage with theatrical presentations of power dynamics—Horáková pitted against a female prosecutor and McGee facing an all-White jury. McGee and Horáková's executions were the closing scene of their show trials. Public execution had “a kind of twisted logic behind them. Lynching were (like colonial executions) meant to teach a lesson.”²⁶⁵ While mob violence and lynching achieved similar goals, government sanctioned, civic violence extinguished the culpability of the executioners and provided official license to a public to prejudice a particular demographic. Although the show trials were theatrical and could seem almost unbelievable, the consequences were fatal and demonstrated what happened to people who challenged the prescribed way of life. McGee and Horáková's

²⁶⁴ Kiyohiko Murayama, “Lynching as an American Tragedy in Theodore Dreiser,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2017): 163–79.

²⁶⁵ Lawrence M. Friedman, *The Big Trial: Law as Public Spectacle*, 23.

verdicts were fixed from the onset, but the participation of their communities revealed the dangers of empowering citizens with suspicion and denunciation. The script imagined by their show trials became reality when whites waiting outside the courthouse and Ludmila Brožová-Polednová embraced the corruption and took pleasure in demanding judicial murder.

Legacies

Although McGee and Horáková's trials should be considered in tandem, they and their trials have left different legacies in America and Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic. The aftermath and post-Cold War responses to their show trials exposed how effectively the dominant powers controlled public discourse. Although significant study and consideration of her show trial did not occur until after 1989, Horáková has become a cultural icon. She both exemplified the devastating excesses of the Communist occupation and embodied the mythology of Czech democracy. Her show trial and execution revealed how Czech democracy, gender equality, and Czech national pride were simultaneously extinguished by communism. Feinberg stated that, "[w]ith her death, the feminist hope for liberation via democracy was definitively silenced."²⁶⁶ The Communist period in Czechoslovakia was widely studied and memorialized in the country, and the particulars of Horáková's experience have also been honored. Although her show trial did aid in suppressing dissent until Prague Spring in 1968, it did not have the desired long-lasting affect nor did it succeed in warping her public memory. Conversely, McGee trial left a starkly different and less triumphant legacy. Although he became a *cause célèbre* during the late 1940s and early 1950s, McGee quickly faded from the general public's awareness and concern. With similar trials following shortly after his, McGee's place in public memory was initially replaced by the Martinsville Seven, an even greater miscarriage of justice.²⁶⁷ McGee's individuality was diluted or forgotten, and he became an example of a recurring phenomenon: Black men being accused of raping White women, and singularly being killed by the state for this alleged crime.

²⁶⁶ Melissa Feinberg, *Elusive Equality: Gender, Citizenship, and the Limits of Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1918-1950*, 219.

²⁶⁷ Eric W. Rise, "Race, rape, and radicalism: The case of the Martinsville seven, 1949-1951," *The Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 3 (1992): 461-490.

Post-communist Czechs admired Horáková for her tenacity throughout her show trial and enduring commitment to Czechoslovakia. In her article on Horáková, Laura Owens, stated that,

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.²⁶⁸

The Communists thought that through torture and coercion, they could mold Horáková into a symbol, but she resisted even in the most ominous circumstances. Discovered after 1989, letters written on the eve of her execution have given insight into how she viewed her show trial. She wrote, “when you come to consider something right, then be so definite that you can fight and die for it.”²⁶⁹ Her letters constitute a physical emblem of her character, beliefs, and response to her show trial. They have become part of the historical record of the communist period and her personal legacy. After the fall of communism, Czechs sought to highlight her as representative of Czech culture and character as they rebuilt Czech democracy.

The physical landscape of Czech Republic demonstrated the country’s admiration and appreciation for her. After 1989, the writings of many oppressed Czechs were discovered and published, including Horáková’s letters. In the spirit of Horáková, an oral history project launched to document the experiences of women under communism.²⁷⁰ Additionally, Václav Havel’s writings characterized how even obedient citizens abided by censorship laws out of habit and aversion to the consequences of failing to follow the rules rather than passion for

²⁶⁸ Laura Owens, “Milada Horáková: A Mountain That Refused to Move,” *New Presence: The Prague Journal of Central European Affairs* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 13.

²⁶⁹ Wilma A Iggers, *Women of Prague: Ethnic Diversity and Social Change from the Eighteenth Century to the Present* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1995), 306.

²⁷⁰ Marci Shore, “The End of Communism as a Generational History: Some Thoughts on Czechoslovakia and Poland,” *Contemporary European History* 18, no. 3 (2009): 303–29.

communism.²⁷¹ Owens noted that “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.”²⁷² She was awarded the Order of T. G. Masaryk, First Class, by President Václav Havel in 1991.²⁷³ Although the general public outside of Czech Republic was not usually aware of her, Czechs placed her alongside some of the nation’s most revered historical figures.²⁷⁴ Horáková has a symbolic grave at Vyšhrad cemetery, which was reserved for the nations’ celebrities, heroes, and patron saints. The location of her urn and actual grave remains unknown.

In addition to preserving her memory, Czechs have worked to see that Horáková received posthumous justice. Although most of the people directly involved in her show trial were dead, Ludmila Brožová-Polednová was still alive when the state began to respond to the injustice of the Communist show trials. Brožová-Polednová, age eighty-six, was the only prosecutor to face consequences for Horáková’s execution. She was charged with complicity in murder and faced up to fifteen years in prison, meaning that she would not be released until after her one hundredth birthday.²⁷⁵ In 2007, she was tried and found guilty for the murder of Horáková. Still—over fifty years later--Brožová-Polednová remained the ever loyal Communist and stood by her actions against Horáková.²⁷⁶ In 2008, Brožová-Polednová was sentenced to six years in prison but later released because of poor health and old age. Brožová-Polednová’s “defense lawyer, for his part,

²⁷¹ Václav Havel, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (Abington, Oxon: Routledge, 2010).

²⁷² Laura Owens, “Milada Horáková: A Mountain That Refused to Move,” 13.

²⁷³ “27 June 1950 Execution of Milada Horáková,” Government Information Centre. June 27, 2010.

²⁷⁴ Laura Owens, “Milada Horáková: A Mountain That Refused to Move,” *New Presence: The Prague Journal of Central European Affairs* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 13.

²⁷⁵ Veronika Lehovcová Suchá, “Ex-prosecutor on Trial for Helping to Stage One in 1950,” *Aktulálné*, October 19, 2007.

²⁷⁶ Dominik Jun, “Eighty-Seven Year-Old Woman Faces Jail For Role in Milada Horáková Execution, Radio Prague International, *Czech Radio*, October 9, 2008.

asked for the acquittal of his client who he said did not feel guilty of the alleged crime, pointing out that prosecution did not bring any solid evidence against her and arguing she was only in her first year at law faculty when the trial took place in 1950.”²⁷⁷ Like Horáková in her show trial, Brožová-Polednová did not express remorse and claimed that she was only a small, insignificant piece of a larger machine.

Czech Radio quoted historian Tomáš Bursík’s reflection on the trial:

The court verdict should be viewed more in symbolic terms. But I do think it is groundbreaking in the sense that what was happening here in the 1950s not just by the secret police and their apparatus, but also in the corruption of the judicial process, has been recognized. The crimes of the regime were not just committed by members of the security apparatus, but there were all kinds of other people – lawyers, judges, and they too bear the responsibility for prosecuting numerous innocent people during the 1950s.²⁷⁸ The public memory of Horáková is dynamic, preserving her individual experience and expanding beyond her show trial to her role as a feminist, politician, and mother. However, she also became representative of the evils of show trials in Czechoslovakia. The trial of her prosecutor evidenced a decisive return to liberal norms and an attempt to reconcile the memory of judicial murders under communism.

Unlike Horáková, McGee faded from public interest after his execution. While most Czechs are educated about if not celebrate Horáková, the public memory of McGee has been diluted as similar trials continued to persist. While some have written about and studied McGee, his memory failed to spark a moment of reconciliation as in the trial of Brožová-Polednová. The targeting was effective because his individual identity and experience were overridden by his demographics. While McGee was one example of a broader trend in history, the persistence of the pattern after him signified his relevance to modern society and history. The socially

²⁷⁷ Veronika Lehovcová Suchá, “Ex-prosecutor on Trial for Helping to Stage One in 1950,” *Aktuálně*, October 19, 2007.

²⁷⁸ Dominik Jun, “Eighty-Seven Year-Old Woman Faces Jail For Role in Milada Horáková Execution,” *Radio Prague International, Czech Radio*, October 9, 2008.

constructed category “mapped upon black makes make them mythological creatures, not historical person whose complexity is worthy of study.”²⁷⁹ While the image of Horáková as a bourgeois class enemy was shattered post-communism, the symbolism attached to McGee endured after his execution. His verdict and execution helped solidify the public suspicion of African American men and signaled to legal elites that legal lynching remained a viable method for sustaining power.²⁸⁰

As his individual identity has not been adequately preserved, McGee’s legacy lies in the silence that followed him. McGee’s verdict intensified the fire of the southern Whites on Black men. W.E.B. Du Bois explained that “‘The charge of rape against colored Americans was invented by the white South after Reconstruction to excuse mob violence.’ Since then it had become ‘recognized the method of re-enslaving blacks.’”²⁸¹ Whites supremacists worried that the “political authority of black men would lead to sexual access to white women,” which could result in interracial marriage.²⁸² The stereotyping of Black men helped White supremacists remain in political office with the power to strengthen Jim Crow legislation and appoint racist policemen, furthering the cycle of racial oppression. Additionally, it created a distinction between Black men—animalistic and malicious—and White men—gentlemanly and benevolent.²⁸³ Although America was a liberal democracy, McGee exemplified that the Jim Crow South was an authoritarian enclave where elements of Communist terror could flourish.

²⁷⁹ Tommy Curry, “He’s a Rapist, Even When He’s Not: Richard Wright’s Account of Black Male Vulnerability in the Raping of Willie McGee,” 140.

²⁸⁰ Kiyohiko Murayama, “Lynching as an American Tragedy in Theodore Dreiser,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2017): 163–79.

²⁸¹ Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence In the Era of Suffrage and Segregation*, 106.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 109.; Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, “Capital punishment as legal lynching?,” *From lynch mobs to the killing state: Race and the death penalty in America* (2006): 21-54.

²⁸³ Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence In the Era of Suffrage and Segregation*, 112.

Not only could legal lynching continue, but actual mob violence resurfaced.²⁸⁴ The fury of White supremacists erupted when Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old African American boy from Chicago, allegedly whistled at a White woman in Mississippi. Despite being a child, he paralleled the threatening dynamic between Black men and White women. Although he did not break the law, he deviated from the social etiquette system that pervaded all levels of Jim Crow society.²⁸⁵ Without even touching a woman, Till faced the wrath of Whites supremacists and was brutally murdered. In more recent years, the Central Park Five endured a trial similar to McGee, highly publicized and insufficiently evidenced. Like Till, they were young boys accused of raping a White woman jogging in Central Park. In 1989, nearly forty years after McGee's death, the same pattern persisted.²⁸⁶ Future president, Donald Trump, took out an \$85,000 advertisement for the death penalty during their trial. Unconcerned with due process and the establishment of guilt, Trump declared that "I want to hate [them]. They should be forced to suffer I am not looking to psychoanalyze them or understand them, I am looking to punish them."²⁸⁷ Despite this or in ignorance of this, Donald Trump was elected to President of the United States. While Horáková's prosecutor was tried and President Havel honored Horáková with the Order of T. G. Masaryk, future president Donald Trump attempted to rally a media lynch mob against the Central Park Five. The Czechs actively reconciled with and worked to amend the trauma of show trials after the fall of communism. Conversely, after the end of Jim Crow, Americans did not recognize the trials of African American men like McGee as show trials, and they continued to occur.

²⁸⁴Kiyohiko Murayama, "Lynching as an American Tragedy in Theodore Dreiser," 163–79.

²⁸⁵Jennifer Ritterhouse, "Etiquette of Race Relations in the Jim Crow South."

²⁸⁶Greg Stratton, "Transforming the Central Park Jogger into the Central Park Five: Shifting Narratives of Innocence and Changing Media Discourse in the Attack on the Central Park Jogger, 1989–2014," *Crime, Media, Culture* 11, no. 3 (December 1, 2015): 281–97.

²⁸⁷Jeremi N. Duru, "The Central Park Five, the Scottsboro Boys, and the myth of the bestial black man," *Cardozo Law Review*. 25 (2003): 1315.

Although McGee was the victim of the trial, it revolved around Willette Hawkins. Rape cases like McGee's questioned and debated who was allowed to have sex with a White woman. Emmett Till was a fourteen year old boy—he did not even lay a finger on the woman—but as an outsider, he deviated from the social codes that governed race and gender relations.²⁸⁸ If Hawkins and McGee had been engaged in an affair, Hawkins would have asserted sexual agency that was not afforded to her at the time.²⁸⁹ The “centuries-old prohibition against interracial sex and marriage ‘lay at the heart of Jim Crow.’”²⁹⁰ The rabid responses to rape accusations stemmed from White males’ insecurity that perhaps White women would choose to be with Black men. While there was an argument that McGee and Hawkins were engaged in a consensual affair, Hawkins eliminated the legal backing of the claim. In 1955, she filed a million-dollar defamation suit against the *Daily Worker*.²⁹¹ She claimed that her reputation was ruined after the *Daily Worker* spread rumors of her having an affair with McGee and then suddenly calling rape. Hawkins “contended the statements were false and malicious and that she suffered irreparable damage to her reputation because of them.”²⁹² The *Daily Worker* settled for \$5,000, legally admitting to spreading false rumors about Hawkins.²⁹³ Whether or not McGee raped Willette Hawkins, he was the victim of a show trial aimed at proliferating the notion that rape was an exclusively Black crime.

²⁸⁸ Allen, Quaylan, and Henry Santos Metcalf. ““Up to No Good”: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Fear of Black Men in US Society.” In *Historicizing Fear: Ignorance, Vilification, and Othering*, edited by Boyce Travis D. and Chunnu Winsome M., 21. Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2019. Accessed February 27, 2020. doi:10.2307/j.ctvwh8d12.4.

²⁸⁹ Leandra Zarnow, “Braving Jim Crow to Save Willie McGee: Bella Abzug, the Legal Left, and Civil Rights Innovation, 1948-1951.” *Law & Social Inquiry* 33, no. 4 (2008): 1009.

²⁹⁰ Jennifer Ritterhouse, “Segregation and Desegregation,” In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 13: Gender*, edited by Bercaw Nancy and Ownby Ted (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 245.

²⁹¹ “Daily Worker Suit Settled for \$5,000,” *New York Times*, May 6, 1955.

²⁹² Ibid.

²⁹³ Ibid.

The racial and gender dynamics of the Jim Crow South have seeped into American culture. Although McGee has largely disappeared from recognition, the broad strokes of his story composed the historical and cultural narrative of Black men in America. Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* served as a prime example of how McGee's experience rests in the pages of an American classic. The trial of Tom Robinson was eerily similar to McGee's trial, and his death sentence "was a catharsis—a performance that resolved the racial tension raised by Mayella Ewell's accusation."²⁹⁴ McGee was part of a long trend in American history, which has now become a theme in classic American literature and film. Generations of readers were distraught about Tom Robinson's death and trial perhaps because of its familiarity.²⁹⁵ Readers were touched by and remember Tom Robinson's story within a novel, yet the historical embodiment of the character has been mostly forgotten. While the Czechs actively memorialized, studied, and sought legal justice for Horáková, Americans largely allowed McGee to be remembered as the symbol of depravity.

McGee's place in the national consciousness diminished after the end of Jim Crow. However, the memory of McGee still haunts his hometown of Laurel. McGee's granddaughter, Bridgette McGee-Robinson, did an investigative NPR radio diary about McGee's trial and execution.²⁹⁶ Her research began in 1998 for a family reunion and culminated in an NPR radio diaries special in 2010. She wanted to know what happened to her grandfather and why no one talked about him. McGee-Robinson went to Laurel and spoke to the people or descendants of people alive during the trials. Her investigation unveiled the immediate legacy of McGee's trial

²⁹⁴ Lisa Lindquist Dorr, "Black-on-White Rape and Retribution in Twentieth-Century Virginia: "Men, Even Negroes, Must Have Some Protection"," *The Journal of Southern History* 66, no. 4 (2000): 712.

²⁹⁵ Joseph Crespino, *Atticus Finch: The Biography* (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 153-54.; Harper Lee, *To Kill A Mockingbird* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988).

²⁹⁶ "My Grandfather's Execution," Radio Diaries, All Things Considered, *National Public Broadcasting*, May 7, 2010.

in the people closest to the action. She found that the African American community had thought McGee and Hawkins were having an affair, which McGee-Robinson's aunt Della McGee Johnson, Willie McGee's daughter, confirmed to be the family's belief as well. The NPR special quoted Harvey Warren, who was a young, African American boy during the period of the trials. His parents took him to see McGee's body, hoping to convey, "don't mess with white girls. You see what happened to Willie McGee."²⁹⁷ Warren and his parents received the message the Jim Crow southerners were attempting to send with McGee's trial. The symbolism and messaging created by his show trial worked. After the execution, the talk of McGee subsided, and people stopped questioning the verdict and its implications. Although Horáková's show trial did manage discourse until Prague Spring, she now has a national holiday, and McGee lacks any physical markers in his hometown.

Although Horáková's show trial became an archetype for Communist show trials in her homeland, the American show trial of Willie McGee was arguably more successful. Horáková's show trial did not have its intended effect on the Czech population. The Communists wanted to eliminate discourse surrounding Horáková and her ideas, but after putting her on the stand, she became central to conversations about communist Czechoslovakia, Czech national pride, and feminism. Rather than constricting discourse, the communists started a conversation that has continued into the present. Although Horáková is dead, her memory has endured partially because of her show trial. Conversely, McGee's trial *did* control the discourse—people stopped talking about what happened to him. As McGee-Robinson found, even the people who witnessed

²⁹⁷“My Grandfather's Execution,” Radio Diaries, All Things Considered, *National Public Broadcasting*, May 7, 2010.; Iola Williams, oral history conducted by Patricia Buzard, The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage of The University of Southern Mississippi, 2006.

the trial in Laurel were silent after the execution.²⁹⁸ The dominant power—White men—were largely successful in dictating the discourse within Laurel. The profiling of African American men as rapists has resulted in African American men, like the Martinsville Seven and Central Park Five, continuing to be jailed or executed without fair trials.

Although their show trials confronted different issues, race and class, Horáková and McGee were both part of the broader web of Cold War competition. Within the Cold War context, Americans across the country feared outsiders, but this aversion was more complicated in the Jim Crow South. White Southerners shared the nation's worry about Communists but also feared the intervention of outsiders from other regions within America. This aversion to American outsiders in part drove the transition from lynching to legal lynching. However, the Cold War hysteria helped White supremacists camouflage their legal lynching by presenting as anticommunists with the relatable fear of Communists rather than racists. Like the Jim Crow Southerners, the Communists also fed of the tension of the Cold War and used tactics like show trials to seal citizens off from other ways of thinking and suppress potential dissent. Although the regimes were of different ideologies, they both prioritized managing the role of women in their respective societies. Studying Soviet and Jim Crow show trials together illuminated how people in Mississippi and Czechoslovakia were both subjected to the same method of oppression. By examining the stories of McGee and Horáková alongside one another, the mutual use of show trials bridged the Cold War division between the Soviet Union and America.

²⁹⁸ "My Grandfather's Execution," Radio Diaries, All Things Considered, *National Public Broadcasting*, May 7, 2010.

Conclusion

During the Cold War, America and the Soviet Union were locked in bitter conflict. From the American perspective, the Soviet Union's government was not merely different but threatening to American democracy. In a 1948 address to Congress, President Truman stated that "The peoples of the world are faced with the choice of freedom or enslavement."²⁹⁹ Stalin echoed the awareness of their supposedly opposing ideologies stating, "It would be ridiculous to deny the difference in the ideologies and social systems of the countries that constitute the Anglo-Soviet-American coalition."³⁰⁰ Historians have shown that as the divide between the two nations created a competition for the best ideology, they began to feed off each and in some cases became more similar in the process.³⁰¹ For instance, Kate Brown examined Americans and Soviets as "two communities, united in fear, mimicry, and the furious production of plutonium," in her study nuclear plants in both nations.³⁰²

By taking the polarity of the nations for granted, they came to resemble each other in various ways without fully realizing it. In the case of the American justice system, the assumption of civil rights and rule of law was undercut by enclaves of corruption and lawlessness, such as the Jim Crow South.³⁰³ Examining Horáková and McGee's trials in tandem discloses the ways the Jim Crow South functioned like Communist Czechoslovakia in ways that would have been very disturbing for most Americans to acknowledge. Within America's liberal democracy, authoritarian enclaves allowed forces of terror and corruption similar to those of the

²⁹⁹ Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 82.

³⁰⁰ Joseph Stalin, *On the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1944), 87-88, 90-91.

³⁰¹ John Krige, "The Social, Environmental, and Personal Costs of Cold War Competition," Edited by Kate Brown, Scott Kaufman, Yanek Mieczkowski, and Audra J. Wolfe. *Reviews in American History* 42, no. 3 (2014): 505-12.

³⁰² Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

³⁰³ Ronald Radosh, "A Tale of Two Trials: Soviet Propaganda at Home and Abroad," *World Affairs* 175, no. 1 (2012): 80-87.

Communists to warp the justice system. In the Jim Crow South, conformity and compliance to the rules of the White patriarchy were enforced through show trials just as Communist dictatorship and suppression of bourgeois feminism was as well.

Although it has not been sufficiently studied as such, the show trial of McGee functioned like a Communist show trial, driven by the paranoia of Communist and outsider invention and by Jim Crow racism. Show trials have been a tactic of oppression for generations, but they were often thought of as primarily Communist because they were an important facet of Stalin's terror.³⁰⁴ As her show trial took place, Americans viewed Horáková as an example of the type of injustice inherent in communism, which also enforced the idea that America lacked a history of show trials. Rather than viewing Communist show trials as a point of contrast with the American justice system, this thesis utilized show trials as a new way of thinking about injustice within authoritarian enclaves in the United States. In juxtaposing an analysis of her trial with McGee's trials, Horáková's show trial can act as a lens for understanding the realities of spectacular justice and judicial murder in the Jim Crow South.

Show trials were propaganda intended to silence dissent. Multiple factors and mechanisms worked in concert for show trials to have their desired impacts on the public. Show trials capitalized on the power of symbolism using strategic targeting and spectacle. Although they were targeted for different reasons, both McGee and Horáková seemed to personify the threats to Jim Crow and communism. Horáková appeared to be a suitable defendant because she symbolized the women's movement and the bourgeoisie, which the Communists sought to eradicate. However, they underestimated Horáková's commitment to her beliefs and the public's

³⁰⁴ Joel Carmichael, *Stalin's Masterpiece: The Show Trials and Purges of the Thirties--the Consolidation of the Bolshevik Dictatorship* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976).

receptivity to her. In McGee's case, the targeting was strategic but less specific. Hawkins claimed that a Black man had raped her, but her insubstantial description of her attacker did not point to McGee or any person specifically. He fit the profile of who the police were looking for: a poor, uneducated Black man.

After they had been targeted, their verdicts were sealed. McGee and Horáková were slated to die, and the show trials worked not to achieve truth but to create or enforce social codes. Horáková was branded a class enemy and McGee embodied the idea that rape was only committed by African American men. The concept of class enemies and African American rapists paralleled each other in that publics became fearful of a socially constructed idea rather than the individuals on trial. Although prosecuting the defendant was a component of the show trial script, the evidence presented was fabricated and coerced and did not change the verdict. In newly Communist Czechoslovakia, Horáková's alleged crimes were fabricated to maintain the ruse of a fair trial, but the threat she symbolized pressured citizens to denounce others like her to avoid becoming a target.³⁰⁵ By the time McGee was on trial, the threat of rape and Black lust were well-worn tools of White supremacists for maintaining the political suppression and perceived savageness of African American men. After African American veterans returned from World War II and their material conditions began to improve, McGee's show trial enforced the myth of rape being a Black crime and restated the racial codes that governed prewar Mississippi.³⁰⁶

With a new regime in Czechoslovakia and changing gender roles in postwar America, women were central to the messaging of both show trials. The physical image of Milada

³⁰⁵ Libora Oates-Indruchová, "Unraveling a Tradition, or Spinning a Myth? Gender Critique in Czech Society and Culture," *Slavic Review* 75, no. 4 (2016): 924-25.; Emily Thompson, "Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist," 54–64.

³⁰⁶ Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence In the Era of Suffrage and Segregation*, 108.

Horáková—a Czechoslovak feminist democrat—facing Ludmila Brožová-Polednová—a viciously loyal Communist—communicated a message about Communist women. The staging of one woman in power and another on the stand told women what to aspire to and what to condemn.³⁰⁷ McGee’s show trial enforced sexual restrictions on White women, who were encouraged to submit to the protection of White men. After WWII and women’s further involvement in the workforce, White women’s political agency was diminished as they were pressured to follow the White patriarchal script that guided rape accusations against Black men.³⁰⁸

McGee and Horáková’s judicial murders were the finales of their show trials. Executions made an example out of the victim to show that a behavior was not tolerated by the state. The death of defendants illuminated how the living members of a society were allowed to act and the consequences of failing to abide by the guidelines set by the regimes. In Horáková’s case, her execution illustrated the new regime’s intolerance for deviance from the political loyalties and gender norms. Horáková’s show trial delineated how citizens should act and her execution established the consequences for non-conformers. McGee’s execution followed the same blueprint. His trial outlined how Black men and White women should and should not interact. His execution demonstrated that African Americans who challenged the guidelines would be killed. Both show trials established that the justice system was going to enforce the dominant power’s rules despite the threat of outsider intervention or disapproval.

³⁰⁷ Emily Thompson, “Milada Horáková – The Tragic Destiny of a Czechoslovak Proto-Feminist,” 54–64.

³⁰⁸ Gail Williams O’Brien, *The Color of the Law: Race, Violence, and Justice in the Post-World War II South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).; William J. Collins, “Race, Roosevelt, and wartime production: fair employment in World War II labor markets,” *American Economic Review* 91, no. 1 (2001): 272-286.

It is important to recognize the power and damage of American show trials. Every state, county, and city in America was supposed to follow the laws of a democratic justice system because it guaranteed all citizens equal protection under the law. However, within the authoritarian enclave of the Jim Crow South, the justice system mutated into an undemocratic form that aided White segregationists in attempting to make White supremacy reality. When the jury ruled that McGee was guilty of raping Hawkins, they created public knowledge. They set the official record of what happened, and the court decision was regarded as truth because it was backed by the sanctity of the American legal system. The official ruling carried real outcomes and consequences—judicial murder. Horáková’s show trial functioned in the same vein, as the Communists fabricated evidence and forced confessions to annihilate the positive public perception of her and then kill her. During the ideological battle of the Cold War, both Communists and Jim Crow Southerners scripted and staged show trials to manufacture “the Truth” which was not the truth at all.

Fig. 1. Waller., Robert C. "Willie McGee trial." M195 Waller Photographs. University of Southern Mississippi Libraries. December 1945.



Fig. 2. “Milada Horakova, show trial.” CTK Historical. *Czech News Agency*. May 31, 1950.



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