"Yes, Ludlow Was a Massacre" by DeStefanis & Feurer, with Response by Martelle and Andrews

Posted on April 21, 2014 by Anthony DeStefanis

Anthony DeStefanis and Rosemary Feurer wrote blogs simultaneously in response to a central question raised at the Ludlow Commemoration this weekend: Was Ludlow a Massacre? We present these here separately, and invite commentary. UPDATE: We now have a response from Scott Martelle, who initiated the question.

Contributors: Anthony DeStefanis, Rosemary Feurer, Scott Martelle, Thomas G. Andrews

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Anthony DeStefanis

The 100th anniversary of the Ludlow Massacre was this past Sunday. I attended a symposium held in Pueblo, Colorado to commemorate the anniversary of the destruction of a tent colony that the United Mine Workers of America built in Ludlow, Colorado to house striking miners and their families after they had been thrown out of company housing when

they went on strike in September 1913. The Colorado National Guard, who had been called out to break the strike, killed twenty people in the colony and set it ablaze on April 20, 1914.

More than 100 people from all walks of life attended and participated in the Pueblo symposium, and there were musical performances and book and poetry readings in addition to scholarly presentations. I met a grandniece of Charlie and Cedi Costa, who were killed at Ludlow along with their two children, and she raised a question about whether or not Ludlow was a massacre. She thought that it was, and most symposium participants seemed to agree with her.


The Colorado National Guard at Ludlow, 1914

Some recent scholarship on Ludlow, however, claims that the destruction of the tent colony and the killing that came with it did not, in fact, constitute a massacre. In *Blood Passion: The Ludlow Massacre and Class War in the American West*, journalist Scott Martelle, who was at the symposium, asserts that the UMWA played a crucial role in cementing the image of a massacre in the public mind after Ludlow. According to Martelle, a trio of pro-labor explorations of Ludlow by Barron Beshoar, George McGovern and Leonard Guttridge, and Zeese Papanikolas also had a "tremendous impact on historical perception of the events in southern Colorado, in many cases affirming union publicity efforts." As Thomas G. Andrews points out in *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War*, other important figures contributed to creating the "Ludlow as massacre" narrative. Upton Sinclair wrote two novels about the 1913-14 southern Colorado coal strike that excoriated the miner operators, Woodie Guthrie penned "The Ludlow Massacre," which he released in 1946, and Howard Zinn wrote his master's thesis on Ludlow and has published several book chapters about the strike.

Martelle concludes that these left-leaning scholars and artists have succeeded in making it

"a given . . . that the deaths of the women and children in the Ludlow fire constituted a massacre." For Martelle, the deaths of fourteen women and children and six striking miners and union officials at Ludlow were not a massacre, but instead were "the result of criminally negligent acts by the Colorado National Guard, private mine guards, and strikebreakers as they torched the camp." He also makes clear that the miners gave as good as they got during the strike.

Martelle should be applauded for trying to remove the yoke of victimhood from the miners' necks, but he conflates those killed in the ten-day insurrection that followed Ludlow with those killed at Ludlow on April 20, 1914. It is important to remember that the UMWA along with Sinclair, Guthrie, Beshoar, Zinn, McGovern and Guttridge, and Papanikolas wrote and sung about a Ludlow Massacre, not a 1913-14 Southern Colorado Coal Strike Massacre.

In *Killing for Coal*, Andrews also questions how the events at Ludlow have been remembered. He explores the dueling narratives of the strike that began to emerge immediately after Ludlow and how the Rockefeller family, who owned the largest coalmining company in southern Colorado, tried to cast the events at Ludlow as a battle rather than a massacre. Still, it is clear that the American labor movement and the scholars and artists who wrote and sung about Ludlow succeeded in casting Ludlow as a massacre, making it a rare instance in which history was not written by the victors.

Andrews also identifies what he sees as a profound problem with understanding Ludlow either as a battle or as a massacre. He is right when he says that such dichotomous thinking pulls "a single day of killing from the stream of time, thus severing Ludlow from the vast and tangled web of events amid which it unfolded."

Killing for Coal is a fine book, and like Andrews, my goal in my forthcoming book, "Guarding Capital and the Empire: Soldier Strikebreakers on the Long Road to the Ludlow Massacre," is to place the events at Ludlow in a larger context that pays close attention, as Andrews does, to the development of the coal mining industry in Colorado and the strife that it produced. My larger context, however, also includes the Plains Indians Wars, the wars in Cuba and the Philippines, the development of the National Guards as strikebreaking forces in the U.S., the Colorado National Guard's history of strikebreaking before the 1913-14 coal strike, and how the mining industry's vast power shaped Colorado politics. Only by understanding this context, I would argue, can we understand why the UMWA and southern Colorado's coal miners began referring to a "Ludlow Massacre" in the first place.

For them, "massacre" conveyed how outrageous the killing and destruction at Ludlow was. These miners, their families, and their union understood that like the United States,

Colorado was a functioning democracy in 1914. Still, the military arm of that state, which had made violence a central strategy in their efforts to break strikes before, again employed violence and intimidation for months before Ludlow to break the strike. It did not matter to the Colorado National Guard that the state's coal miners died on the job at a rate that was 3.5 times the national fatality rate in the coal mining industry or that the mine operators dominated every aspect of their employees' lives. The Colorado National Guard also was not obligated to break this strike; they worked for the state of Colorado and its residents, not for southern Colorado's mine operators, and the mine operators had no formal control over the National Guard. The Colorado National Guard had to choose to break the strike and to do so in a way that made Ludlow possible. That was a choice they made, and that choice led directly to the killing at Ludlow. Seen this way, arguing about what we call the events of April 20, 1914 in Ludlow, Colorado drains them of their power and significance. We should let these coal miners and their union have the last word on what we call what happened to them. That word is massacre.

Rosemary Feurer

I just returned from an invigorating commemoration of the Ludlow Massacre of 1914, hosted jointly by Colorado State University-Pueblo and El Pueblo Museum. For me it started with a Friday afternoon provocation from Scott Martelle. Martelle reminded us of his assertion in *Blood Passion* that he does not consider "massacre" the correct word for the events of April 20, 1914: "Rather than the intentional execution of a large number of people, the deaths seem most likely to have been the result of criminally negligent acts by the Colorado National Guard, private mine guards and strikebreakers as they torched the camp." This assertion, which got the most buzz from the attendees and was the basis for a number of discussions and debates among participants, is one that I think is important to be addressed—and rejected.

For Martelle, the argument is part of a wider call, shared by historian Thomas Andrews, author of *Killing for Coal*, for viewing workers as agents rather than victims. They remind us that workers fought and that more innocent victims, guards and militia were killed in the wider strike than were strikers. They hope to decenter the massacre and replace it with a wider treatment that examines the use and causes of violence in the struggle against coal companies. The essential argument suggests that workers in the strike were fighting back with guns during April 20 and weren't defenseless throughout the entire strike, that they deployed violence too. This both spreads responsibility and agency for the violence and asks

us to explain it. Both authors allege that previous treatments have hidden this part of the story including the 10 day war that followed April 20. At the conference, Martelle ticked off the names and circumstances of some of the dead and asked us to ponder whether violence worked for either side in these cases.

The noun form of the word massacre, unlike the verb, doesn't need any intentionality. It is "an indiscriminate and brutal slaughter of people," usually with the recognition that one side holds overwhelming force against the other. Only the verb form seems to suggest the need for the "intentional execution" as Martelle alleges. The events of April 20, 1914 meet the noun definition. Moreover, labeling of an event as a massacre is always based on subjectivity and perception inherited from the past. To rescind this term from the events when it has been known as that traditionally suggests that we've learned something stunningly new in the history since the first designation of "massacre" immediately after the events of April 20, something that could force reconsideration from the inheritance. In fact, there isn't anything new on that score in any of the recent books about the specific events that would force that kind of reconsideration.

But what happened on April 20 could even fit the verb criteria. The soldiers torched the camps and that was the key factor that led to the deaths of the 13 women & children. Numerous witnesses testified that the soldiers took oil cans to extend the fire and make it complete without concern to check for anyone in the pits. It is true that Captain Philip Van Cise testified that participating soldiers claimed they had intended to destroy only the camp—that the deaths of the children and women was an accident. To use modern parlance, they were claiming it was "collateral damage." But "collateral damage" has in the past and in the present not been an obstacle to labeling something a massacre.

Eleven year old Frank Snyder crawled from his underground cavern beneath the Snyder family tent. As he did, a

bullet ripped the back of his head off.
His father later asked soldiers who were
clearing the remnants to help him carry
his dead boy's body away, but the
soldiers refused.

Yes, the union men were firing back, but their weaponry constituted only a minor deterrent to soldiers armed with machine guns from Water Tower Hill, as well as much more sophisticated weaponry than the rifles and non automatic weapons on that day. Moreover, all one has to do is read the testimony from a few of the witnesses to recognize that calling this something other than a massacre does violence to the memory of what the miners and their families endured on those 2 days. Just listen to Helen Korich, a young Croatian girl:

> The next day the shooting started. I had my white lace dress on, my Easter dress. The weather was beautiful. They started shooting their machine guns at us, and they knew people were in the basements. My dad got his gun out when they started shooting at us. I wanted to go with my dad. But he said, "No, you can't go with me. Go home, go with Mama." We were out of the tent, and my sister came after me and pulled me back by my hair. I was so mad! I thought they would kill him. The shells were going right by my ear. We knew they were going to murder all of us. They were shooting all over, and the union men were scattered. We walked down under a bridge where two union men were shooting. One got shot and fell, and I stepped on him. I was so scared I ran straight through some barbed wire and it tore my Easter dress, but I just kept running, pulling that barbed wire and lace, for what seemed like miles and miles." (from Marat Moore, *Women in the Mines*.)

Pearl Jolly, who was trying to aid the women and children, recalled that when the soldiers "kept continually shooting into the camp the women asked me to put a white dress on with red crosses" in the hope the soldiers would recognize the universal sign and it would be protection. The soldiers "could not help but see it. When I got out there they took it for to be a good target and shot at me as hard as they could." These testimonies could join any number of horrifying points of evidence from witnesses to suggest the weight of history still shows that whether or not the men fought back with guns, this was intentional execution.

Finally I would argue that decentering the massacre and concentrating on the violence afterward also decenters the role of women and children in the struggle. That's why of all the accounts on the massacre and its wider context, the one I would recommend is still

Priscilla Long's *Where the Sun Never Shines: A History of America's Bloody Coal industry.* The image of those women and children who were killed or endured this attack calls on us to recognize a different history than those presented in recent books, a history in which women and children were central to the struggle. Making the ten day war more central allows us to forget that one of the reasons men didn't take a more armored position previously was because their families were sitting ducks, exposed to the militia. They fought back, but from the beginning, they fought back with their children exposed. Soldiers and hired mercenaries fought back without any harm to their families. It made it an incredibly uneven fight. Only when the women and children were refugees in Trinidad and elsewhere—after the Massacre--did it become possible to fight back with their full fury.

Martelle and Andrews contend that use of guns and violence by the strikers was hidden in previous histories. They argue that the distortions start with Woody Guthrie's song about the events. But just listen to the verses of Woody Guthrie's classic and you know that's just not the case. The song includes the verse:

The children of Ludlow, some of whom were killed on April 20, 1914.

> Our women from Trinidad they hauled some potatoes
> Up to Walsenburg in a little cart
> They sold their potatoes and brought some guns back
> And put a gun in every hand
>
> The state soldiers jumped us in a wire fence corner
> They did not know that we had these guns
> And the redneck miners mowed down them troopers
> You should have seen those poor boys run.

Only by ignoring entire chapters in previous books can one make a claim that the union and historians have presented this as a story of "martyrology" and victimization. Barron Beshoar's *Out of the Depths* has a chapter "Call to Arms" on the 10 day war, more pages devoted to it in fact than either *Blood Passion* or *Killing for Coal*. Priscilla Long, George McGovern, Zeese Papanikosas' *Buried Unsung: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacr*e and all the standard accounts from the mine union that I have on my shelves do more than acknowledge the 10 day war. Only by counting on the ignorance of historians and the general public about these previous accounts can such claims stand. Even the much maligned Howard Zinn uses the massacre not as a lesson in "martyrology" but about the "fighting spirit" of the union.

The previous treatments consistently claimed that unionists before the massacre used restraint in the face of machine guns trained on them, searchlights as psychological warfare that they faced day and night, constant provocations intended to result in violence. The kind of weapons each side had is relevant. Workers may have had some guns during this struggle, but the other side had high power machine guns, the Death Special, the ability to deny habeas corpus and imprison anyone deemed necessary, the use of the courts in the local, state and federal government.

So I will keep calling this the Ludlow Massacre. That to me is a central part of this story and is necessary to understanding the full story. In my opinion, it doesn't detract from the agency of workers, but in fact enhances our understanding of how and why workers fought back in 1913-1914.

For anyone who wants an account of the 10 day war and the long term aftermath, join facebook page, Mother Jones Lives. I'll be sharing some information I find enlightening and stunning about these events for this, the page for the forthcoming Mother Jones Museum. In a short time, I'll be posting a "teaching Ludlow" blog as well.

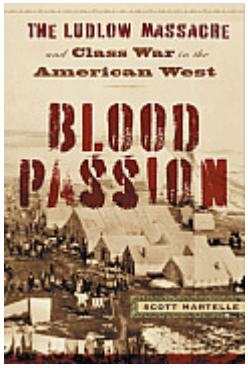
A Response by Scott Martelle

It was good seeing both Rosemary Feurer and Anthony DeStefanis on Friday at the start of the Ludlow symposium, though unfortunately I had to leave for another speaking engagement before the event got into full swing. I appreciate their work, and insights, and look forward particularly to Anthony's project on the National Guard. When I wrote *Blood Passion: The Ludlow Massacre and Class War in the American West* (Rutgers University Press, 2007), I had hoped it would be a launching point from which others could move into

potentially richer veins of research. I claim no credit for the more recent projects, but it is gratifying to see more work being done on Ludlow and the coalfield war and I hope it continues, and expands.

But my primary goals when I decided to research and write *Blood Passion* were to establish a foundational level of detail, and take a step back from the legends to look at the reality of what happened. I'm a journalist, and key to that craft is questioning how we know what we think we know. In the case of the Ludlow Massacre, we know it was a massacre because that is what it is called, and how it was marketed with brilliant success by the pro-labor forces then, and now (I, too, am pro-labor, and once spent 18 months on a picket line). We have a responsibility, though, to burrow beneath the lore to the details of the events. As I mentioned during my presentations last week around Colorado, not everyone agrees with my analysis, which is fine – that's the nature of historical inquiry. But in their blog posts, Anthony and Rosemary misconstrue what it is I have written, and what I believe.

I'm not going to do a point-by-point rebuttal, but a few things bear a response. Anthony writes: For Martelle, the deaths of fourteen women and children and six striking miners and union officials at Ludlow were not a massacre, but instead were "the result of criminally negligent acts by the Colorado National Guard, private mine guards, and strikebreakers as they torched the camp." The quote is accurate; the context is not. The deaths of the 11 children and two mothers were unintentional (arson); the others who died that day were the results of direct acts of intentional violence (gunfire). And I don't conflate the 10 days of rage that followed with the deaths at Ludlow, as Anthony states. I write quite clearly that they were separate but connected moments within the broad sweep of the eight months of violence.



Blood Passion, by Scott Martelle

Key here is that nothing in the records suggests that the National Guardsmen who torched

the Ludlow tent colony on April 20, 1914, knew that the 11 children and four women (two survived) were hiding in the pit below the wood-floored tent. As the fire raged above, all 11 of the children and two of the women suffocated, the oxygen they needed to survive being consumed instead by the fire. Were the deaths the result of a criminal act? Decidedly so. By today's standards, the National Guardsmen committed arson with a blatant disregard for life, at the least a charge of criminally negligent homicide in many states. However, we perceive of massacres as intentional killings. The National Guard's intent here wasn't to kill, but to destroy the tent colony (they had done so earlier at Forbes, though without fire). Thus my quibble with the term "massacre," which in no way marginalizes the significance of the 13 deaths. More problematic to me were the cold-blooded murders by National Guardsmen of Louis Tikas and two other union men. Unarmed, they were summarily executed while in custody, an atrocity and war crime for which no one was ever held to account. But those deaths lacked the emotional drama of the deaths of women and children, so it didn't resonate nearly as well, or as far.

As I also pointed out in my talks last week, the early acts of strike violence were instigated by the strikers, not the coal operators' thugs and mine guards, though I do argue that the coal operators' hiring of the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency gunmen created an environment, even an expectation, of violence. More broadly, the workers were victims of corrupt economic, political, and legal systems. They chose to stand together and fight on their own behalf, which I find admirable (I call them freedom fighters in my book). But I also asked a question last week with which I still wrestle: Was the violence, and the deaths of at least 75 people over those seven or eight months, worth it? The miners lost the strike. Conditions in the mines, and in the political, economic and legal systems, didn't change as a result of the walkout and violence. Democratic institutions – a state court tossing out a rigged election, and voters ousting an incompetent governor – eventually led to changes. A chastened John D. Rockefeller Jr. adopted an early model of a company union (no solution, that, but it has to be marked as progress from what existed before). So one could argue that the violence was for naught. On the other hand, I doubt those political responses, or Rockefeller's sudden interest in his workers' welfare, would have occurred without the violence. So maybe the violence did effect change, albeit indirectly.

Also, Rosemary writes that I (along with Thomas Andrews) "contend that use of guns by the strikers was hidden in previous histories." I have contended no such thing. Nor do I "contend the distortions start with Woody Guthrie's song about the events." As I wrote in my book, the distortions began almost immediately; Guthrie's song came nearly three decades later. I do believe that previous histories gave insufficient weight to the violence throughout the course of the strike; until my book, no one had even attempted an

accounting of the dead. And with the 75 victims as evidence, clearly the strike, and the violence, extended far beyond that day at Ludlow. Rosemary also writes that the miners fought with their children in mind. That is unknowable without records from the miners of what they were thinking, records I have not encountered. And while I don't have the breakdown at hand, a large proportion of the miners were single men without families.

As for Rosemary's point that decentering the massacre also decenters the role of women: I don't see it. Putting deaths within context should be our overriding interest. As I said several times during my week of talks in Colorado, I am eager to read fresh, well-researched works exploring the role of women in the strike, which was significant, from Mother Jones' exhortations and agitations; to the miners' wives who apparently held together the camps, and their families, through significant strife; to the political pressure that women's groups sought to wield in Denver. Rosemary might consider making that her next project, given her deep interest in the subject. Other voices yet to be heard, largely because the records don't seem to exist: The scabs' perspective. And I'm hoping Anthony's book-in-progress will give us a better view of the National Guardsmen's perspective.

There is a lot of interesting work still to be done on Ludlow and the events in Southern Colorado. But it needs to be rooted in verifiable fact, and not shaped by a romanticized view of how the actions played out. Our pursuit of history needs to be dispassionate, clear-eyed, and unfreighted by legend, no matter how compelling, or deeply ingrained, the legends might be.

A Reponse by Thomas Andrews

Let me cut to the heart of the matter: I consider Ludlow a massacre, and never in either *Killing for Coal* nor anywhere else have I stated otherwise.

My *Killing for Coal* and Scott Martelle's Blood Passion are, despite some convergence, very different books. Scott and I differ on several counts; most relevant to this discussion, he stands by his position that Ludlow was not a massacre. As I clarified at the outset, this is not a position I have ever held. Anthony DeStefanis's contribution acknowledges this; Rosemary Feurer's ignores it, unfairly lumping Martelle and me together.

Feurer not only makes several errors of fact—like Martelle, for instance, I trace the "Ludlow-as-massacre" narrative to the Ten Days' War itself, not Woody Guthrie. More important, she misconstrues the nature of my enterprise in *Killing for Coal*. As DeStefanis

recognizes, *Killing for Coal* begins with a discussion of the competing narratives about Ludlow that competed for adherents in the tumultuous wake of the massacre and the Ten Days' War. One of the obstacles I encountered very early in my research stemmed from the near-total polarization that had descended upon Colorado throughout the 1913-'14 miners' strike. By framing the book in this manner, I hoped to invite readers to rethink this conflict—to suspend easy associations and preconceived notions, thereby encountering the strike anew. I trusted that I could let readers determine for themselves how to make sense of Ludlow. Though I repeatedly avoid calling Ludlow either a battle or a massacre in *Killing for Coal*—a choice this forum gives me some cause to regret--Feurer's response constitutes the first time I know of in which any reader has intimated, let alone stated, that my book claims that Ludlow was not a massacre, and should not be called one.

Feurer also misunderstands my work in a second important respect: She misses the boat regarding what I think is new (or, more accurately, new-ish) in my book and what is not. She seems to suspect that I have deluded myself into believing that I discovered the Ten Days' War, a subject that has been sitting in plain sight all along. Feurer is, of course, absolutely right that virtually every book-length history of Ludlow addresses the uprising that followed, often in considerable detail. Nowhere have I suggested, though, that my book's take on the coalfield war offered a frontal corrective to the works Feurer rightly admires—the august books by Beshoar, McGovern, Papanikolas, Zinn, and Long. Rather, I'm far more concerned with popular memories, an admittedly elusive entity, as well as scholarly glosses that contain shocking errors (Richard White has the massacre occurring in 1917, Alan Dawley repeats the longstanding body count given by the UMWA in the days following the massacre that 66 strikers died, and a panoply of sources wrongly claim that Ludlow was a mining community and a Colorado Fuel & Iron company town, when in fact it was an unincorporated village several miles distant from any mine of importance).

Killing for Coal began as a dissertation, and I certainly would not have had a prayer of convincing my committee to approve it had I simply hewed to the interpretations of previous scholars. The difference between previous works and my book, then, is not that I document the Ten Days' War while others overlook it; such a tack would have been cheap and mendacious. Instead, I use the strikers' rebellion to lay out the core question of the book: Who were the strikers, what were they fighting for, and what processes and events had brought them to launch this remarkable struggle—and to prosecute it so effectively in the wake of the Ludlow massacre? Crucial to my point-of-departure is the fact that UMWA leaders signed a truce with state officials on April 25th. Despite energetic pleading from John Lawson and others, though, the strikers stuck by their guns (and, of course, to other means of struggle—this was a kind of total war, after all) and continued to fight until

Woodrow Wilson dispatched federal troops to the strike zone. While Zinn indeed cast the Ten Days' War as a lesson in what Feurer calls "the 'fighting spirit' of the union," I'm far more interested in the fighting spirit of the strikers, which is not quite the same thing. Implicit in my entire approach, after all, is a key premise: the events of the strike itself are necessary but insufficient to explain the massacre and the uprising that followed; the same goes for a top-down perspective that privileges union leaders above rank-and-file strikers.

This brings me to a third and final rebuttal of Feurer: She wrongly minimizes the importance women and children play in my analysis. I'd be the first to admit that my book would have benefited from more depth and breadth in this regard. Men (and, to a lesser extent, masculinity) do inhabit the bulk of *Killing for Coal*. But I think that Feurer unfairly overlooks numerous instances in the book where women and children play key roles. She also neglects the overarching question that the final three chapters of *Killing for Coal* collectively address: Why did women and children come to play increasingly central roles in labor conflict in the southern coalfields, and how did a string of conflicts that initially focused rather narrowly on workplace-centered issues morph in the early decades of the twentieth century into a sweeping struggle for civil rights, economic freedom, and democracy? Feurer is certainly right that Priscilla Long has done a better job on the far-ranging and vitally important roles women played in the great coalfield war. There nonetheless remains much more work to be done on women and children—before and after the 1913-'14 strike, as well as during the conflict. For all this, Feurer is simply wrong when she alleges that I treat women and children as peripheral to the massacre and the larger contexts in which it was enmeshed. I would urge readers of this forum to draw their own conclusions about *Killing for Coal* instead of accepting Feurer's mischaracterizations of my work at face value.

By way of conclusion, I want to draw the attention of LAWCHA folks to two recent accomplishments of the Ludlow Centennial Commission here in Colorado: the passage by the state legislature of a resolution commemorating the centennial of the massacre and acknowledging (tepidly, at least) the state's culpability in these tragic events; and the completion of a set of primary sources on the Colorado coalfield war for use in secondary and college history courses, authored by yours truly (please email me at Thomas.andrews@colorado.edu for a copy). And yes—I do call Ludlow a massacre in these teaching materials.

Author

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