



TENT CAMP OF STRIKING MINERS, LUDLOW

BEFORE I BECAME a professional historian, I had grown up in the dankness and dirt of New York tenements, had been knocked unconscious by a policeman while holding a banner in a demonstration, worked for three years in a shipyard, and dropped bombs for the U.S. Air Force. Those experiences, and more, made me lose all desire for "objectivity," whether in living my life, or writing history.

This statement is troubling to some people. It needs explanation (after which it may still be troubling, but for clearer reasons).

I mean by it that by the time I began to study history formally (I became a freshman at New York University at the age of 27, with a wife, our two-year old daughter, and another child on the way) I knew I was not doing it because it was "interesting" or because it meant a solid, respectable career.

I had been touched in some way by the struggle of working people (my mother and father, among others) to survive, by the glamour and ugliness of war, by the reading I had done trying to understand fascism, communism, capitalism, socialism. I could not possibly study history as a neutral. For me, history could only be a way of understanding and helping to change what was wrong in the world.

That did not mean looking only for historical facts to reinforce the beliefs I already held. It did not mean ignoring data that would change or complicate my understanding of society. It meant asking questions that were important for social change, questions relating to equality, liberty, peace, justice—but being open to whatever answers were suggested by looking at history.

I decided early that I would be biased in the sense of holding fast to certain fundamental values—the equal right of all human beings, whatever race, nationality, sex, religion, to life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. The study of history was only worth devoting a life to if it aimed at those ideals. I would always be biased (leaning toward) those ends, stubborn in holding to them.

But I would be flexible, I hoped, in arriving at the *means* to achieve those ends. Scrupulous honesty in reporting on the past would be needed, because any decision on means had to be tentative, had to be open to change based on what one could learn from history. The values, ends, ideals I held, need not be discarded, whatever history disclosed. So there would be no incentive to distort the past, fearing that an honest recounting would hurt the desired ends.

The chief problem in historical honesty is not outright lying. It is omis-

sion or de-emphasis of important data. The definition of "important," of course, depends on one's values.

An example: I was still in college, studying history, when I heard a song by the folk-singer Woody Guthrie, called "The Ludlow Massacre," a dark, intense ballad, accompanied by slow, haunting chords on his guitar. It told of women and children burned to death in a strike of miners against Rockefeller-owned coal mines in southern Colorado in 1914.

My curiosity was aroused. In none of my classes in American history, in none of the textbooks I had read, was there any mention of the Ludlow Massacre or of the Colorado coal strike.

The labor movement interested me, perhaps because I had spent three years working in a shipyard, and helped to organize the younger shipyard workers, excluded from the tightly-controlled craft unions of the American Federation of Labor, into an independent union of our own. There was little in the college curriculum on labor history, so I undertook an independent course of study for myself.

That led me to a book, *American Labor Struggles*, written not by an historian but an English teacher named Samuel Yellen. It had fascinating accounts of some ten labor conflicts in American history, most of which were

unmentioned in my courses and my textbooks. One of the chapters was on the Colorado Coal Strike of 1913-1914.

I became fascinated by the sheer drama of that event. It began with the shooting of a young labor organizer on the streets of Trinidad, Colorado, on a crowded Saturday night, by two detectives in the pay of Rockefeller's Colorado Fuel & Iron Corporation. The miners, mostly immigrants speaking a dozen different languages, were living in a kind of serfdom in the mining towns where Rockefeller collected their rent, sold them their necessities, hired the police, and watched them carefully for any sign of unionization.

The killing of organizer Gerry Lippiatt sent a wave of anger through the mine towns. At a mass meeting in Trinidad, miners listened to a rousing speech by an 80-year-old woman named Mary Jones—"Mother Jones"—an organizer for the United Mine Workers: "The question that arises today in the nation is an industrial oligarchy....What would the coal in these mines and in these hills be worth unless you put your strength and muscle in to bring them....You have collected more wealth, created more wealth than they in a thousand years of the Roman Republic, and yet you have not any...."

The miners voted to strike. Evicted from their huts by the coal companies, they packed their belongings onto carts, onto their backs, and walked through a mountain blizzard to tent colonies set up by the United Mine Workers. There they lived for the next seven months, enduring hunger and sickness, picketing the mines to prevent strikebreakers from entering, and defending themselves against armed assaults. The Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, hired by the Rockefellers to break the morale of the strikers, used rifles, shotguns, and a machine gun mounted on an armored car which roved the countryside and fired into the tents where the miners lived.

They would not give up the strike, however, and the Governor called in the National Guard. A letter from the vice-president of Colorado Fuel & Iron to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. in New York explained:

"You will be interested to know that we have been able to secure the cooperation of all the bankers of the city, who have had three or four inter-



ARMED COMPANY GUARDS ATTACK

views with our little cowboy governor, agreeing to back the State and lend it all funds necessary to maintain the militia and afford ample protection so our miners could return to work... Another mighty power has been rounded up on behalf of the operators by the getting together of fourteen of the editors of the most important newspapers in the state."

The National Guard was innocently welcomed to town by miners and their families, waving American flags, thinking that men in the uniform of the United States would protect them. But the Guard went to work for the operators. They beat miners, jailed them, escorted strikebreakers into the mines.

There was violence by the strikers. One strikebreaker was murdered, another brutally beaten, four mine guards killed while escorting a scab. And Baldwin-Felts detective George Belcher, the killer of Lippiatt, who had been freed by a coroners jury composed of Trinidad businessmen, was killed with a single rifle shot by an unseen gunman as he left a Trinidad drug store and stopped to light a cigar.

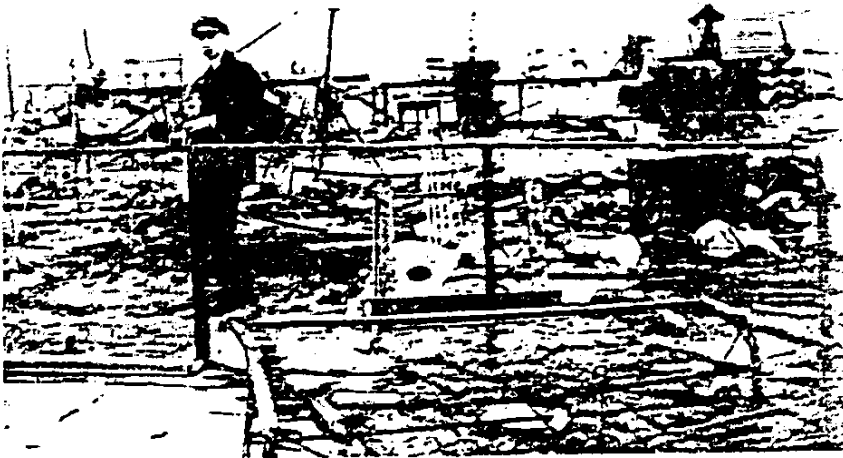
Still, the miners held out through the hard winter. But when spring came, someone had decided on more drastic action. Two National Guard companies stationed themselves in the hills above the largest tent colony, housing a thousand men, women, and children, near a tiny depot called Ludlow. On the morning of April 20, 1914, they began firing machine guns into the tents.

while the men crawled away to draw fire, and shot back, and the women and children crouched in pits dug into the tent floors. At dusk, the soldiers came down from the hills with torches, and set fire to the tents. The occupants fled.

The next morning, a telephone lineman, going through the charred ruins of the Ludlow colony, lifted an iron cot which covered a pit dug in the floor, and found the mangled, burned bodies of two women and eleven children. This became known as the "Ludlow Massacre."

I wondered why this extraordinary event, so full of drama, so peopled by remarkable personalities, went unmentioned in the history books. Why was this strike, which cast a dark shadow on the Rockefeller interests, and on corporate America generally, considered less important than the building by John D. Rockefeller of the Standard Oil Company, which was looked upon generally as an important and positive event in the development of American industry?

I knew that there was no secret meeting of industrialists and historians to agree to emphasize the admirable achievements of the great corporations, and ignore the bloody costs of industrialization in America. But I concluded that a certain unspoken understanding lay beneath the writing of textbooks and the teaching of history: that it would be considered bold, radical, perhaps even "Communist" to emphasize class struggle in the United States, a country where the dominant



RUINS OF TENT CAMP AFTER ATTACK

ideology emphasized the oneness of the nation "We the people, in order to... etc. etc." and the glories of the American system.

Very recently, a news commentator on a small radio station in Madison, Wisconsin, brought to my attention a textbook used in high schools all over the nation, published in 1986, entitled *Legacy of Freedom*, written by two high school teachers and one university professor of history, and published by a division of Doubleday and Company, one of the giant U.S. publishers. In a foreword, "To the Student," we find:

"*Legacy of Freedom* will aid you in understanding the economic growth and development of our country. The book presents the developments and benefits of our country's free enterprise economic system. You will read about the various ways that American business, industry, and agriculture have used scientific and technological advances to further the American free market system. This system allows businesses to generate profits while providing consumers with a variety of quality products from which to choose in the marketplace, thus enabling our people to enjoy a high standard of living."

In this overview, one gets the impression of a peaceful development, due to "our country's free enterprise economic system." Where is the long, complex history of labor conflict? Where is the human cost of this industrial development, in the thousands of deaths each year in industrial accidents, the hundreds of thousands of injuries, the short lives of workers (textile mill girls in New England dying in their 20s, after starting work at 12 and 13)?

The Colorado Coal strike does not fit neatly into the pleasant picture created by most high school textbooks of the development of the American economy. Wouldn't a detailed account of that event raise questions in the minds of young people as it raised in mine—questions that would be threatening to the dominant powers in this country, that would clash with the dominant ideology, that might get the questioners—whether teachers or principals, or school boards—into trouble, make them conspicuous as pointed questions almost always point out the questioner to the rest of society?

For one thing, wouldn't the event undermine faith in the neutrality of government, the cherished belief (which I possessed through my childhood), that whatever conflicts there were in American society, it was the role of government to mediate them as a neutral referee, trying its best to dispense, in the words of the Pledge of Allegiance, "liberty and justice for all?"

Wouldn't the Colorado strike suggest that governors, that perhaps all political leaders, were subject to the power of wealth, and would do the bidding of corporations rather than protect the lives of poor, powerless workers?

A close look at the Colorado coal strike would discover that not only the state government of Colorado, but the national government in Washington—under the presidency of a presumed liberal, Woodrow Wilson—was also on the side of the corporations. While miners were being beaten, jailed, killed, by Rockefeller's detectives, or by his National Guard, the federal government did not act to protect the constitutional

rights of its people. But when, after the Massacre, the miners armed themselves and went on a rampage of violence against the mine properties and mine guards, Wilson called out the federal troops to end the turmoil in southern Colorado.

And then, there was an odd coincidence. On the same day that the bodies were discovered in the pit at Ludlow, Woodrow Wilson, responding to the jailing of a few American sailors in Mexico, ordered the bombardment of the Mexican port of Vera Cruz, landing ten boatloads of marines, occupying the city, killing over a hundred Mexicans. That same textbook, *Legacy of Freedom*, in that foreword "To the Student," says: "...*Legacy of Freedom* will aid you in understanding our country's involvement in foreign affairs, including our role in international conflicts and in peaceful and cooperative efforts of many kinds in many places."

Is that not a benign, misleading, papering-over of the history of American foreign policy?

A close study of the Ludlow Massacre would tell students something about our great press, the comfort we feel when picking up, not a scandal sheet or a sensational tabloid, but the sober, dependable *New York Times*. When the U.S. navy bombarded Vera Cruz, the *Times* wrote in an editorial: "...we may trust the just mind, the sound judgment, and the peaceful temper of President Wilson. There is not the slightest occasion for popular excitement over the Mexican affair; there is no reason why anybody should get nervous either about the stock market or about his business."

There is no *objective* way to deal with the Ludlow Massacre. There is the subjective (biased, opinionated) decision to omit it from history, based on a value-system which doesn't consider it important enough. That value system may include a fundamental belief, in the beneficence of the American industrial system (as represented by the passage quoted above from the textbook *Legacy of Freedom*). Or it may just involve a complacency about class struggle and the intrusion of government on the side of corporations. In any case, it is a certain set of values which dictates the ignoring of that event.

It is also a subjective (biased, opinionated) decision to tell the story of the Ludlow Massacre in some detail (as



WOMEN MARCH TO SUPPORT STRIKE



FUNERAL MARCH, TRINIDAD

I do, in a chapter in my book *The Politics of History*, or in several pages in *A People's History of the United States*. My decision was based on my belief that it is important for people to know the extent of class conflict in our history, to know something about how hard working people had to struggle to change their conditions, and to understand the role of the government and the mainstream press in the class struggles of our past. The claim of historians to "objectivity" has been examined very closely by Peter Novick, in his remarkable book, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*.

Historians, for instance, have not been "objective" with regard to war.

In April 1917, just after the U.S. entered the European war, a group of eminent historians met in Washington to discuss "what History men can do for their country now." They set up the National Board for Historical Service in order to "aid in supplying the public with trustworthy information of historical or similar character."

One result was a huge outpouring of pamphlets written by historians with the purpose of instilling patriotism in the public. Thirty-three million copies of pamphlets written by historians were distributed. Most of them, according to a recent study of the role of historians in World War I propaganda by George T. Blakey, "reduced war issues to black and white, infused idealism and righteousness into America's role, and established German guilt with finality."

During World War II, the historian Samuel Eliot Morison criticized those historians who had expressed disillusionment with the first World War, saying they "rendered the generation of youth which came to maturity around 1940 spiritually unprepared for the war

they had to fight....Historians...are the ones who should have pointed out that war does accomplish something, that war is better than servitude." Yet, in the same essay ("Faith of a Historian"), Morison declared his commitment to not instructing the present but to "simply explain the event exactly as it happened."

A number of historians, in the cold-war atmosphere of the 1950s, selected their facts to conform to the government's position. Two of them wrote a two-volume history of U.S. entry into World War II, in order, as they put it, to show "the tortured emergence of the United States of America as leader of the forces of light in a world struggle which even today has scarcely abated...."

An honest declaration of their bias would have been refreshing. But, although they had access to official documents unavailable to others, they said in their preface: "No one, in the State Department or elsewhere, has made the slightest effort to influence our views." Perhaps not. But one of them, William Langer, was director of research for the CIA at one time, and the other, S. E. Gleason, was deputy executive-secretary of the National Security Council.

Langer was also at one time a president of the American Historical Association. Another president of the AHA, Samuel Flagg Bemis, in his presidential address to that group in 1961, was very clear about what he wanted historians to do: "Too much... self-criticism is weakening to a people.... A great people's culture begins to decay when it commences to examine itself....we have been losing sight of our national purpose...our military preparedness held back by insidious strikes for less work and more pay.... Massive self-indulgence and

massive responsibility do not go together....How can our lazy dalliance and crooning softness compare with the stern discipline and tyrannical compulsion of subject peoples that strengthen the aggressive sinews of our malignant antagonist."

Daniel Boorstin, trying to please the House Committee on Un-American Activities, testified before it in 1953. He agreed with it that Communists should not be permitted to teach in American universities—presumably because they would be biased. As for Boorstin, he told the Committee that he expressed his own opposition to communism in two ways. First, by participation in religious activities at the University of Chicago. And: "The second form of my opposition has been an attempt to discover and explain to students, in my teaching and in my writing, the unique virtues of American democracy."

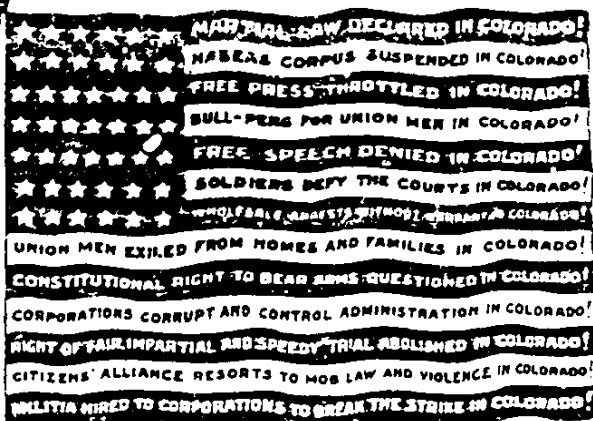
After studying the "objectivity" of American historians, and noting how many slanted their work towards support for the United States, Peter Novick wondered if that kind of "hubris," the arrogance of national power, played a part in the ugly American intervention in Vietnam, and the cold war itself. He put it this way: "If ill-considered American global interventionism had landed us in this bloodiest manifestation of the cold war, was it not at least worth considering whether the same hubris had been responsible for the larger conflict of which it was a part? Manifestly by the 1960s, the United States was overseeing an empire. Could scholars comfortably argue that it had acquired, as had been said of the British Empire, 'in a fit of absence of mind'?"

In the 1960s, there was a series of tumultuous social movements, against racial segregation, against the Vietnam



John D. Rockefeller

IS COLORADO IN AMERICA?



war, for equality among the sexes. This caused a reappraisal of the kind of history that supported war and the status quo, either directly, or by avoiding criticism in the name of "objectivity."

More and more books began to appear (or old books were brought to light) on the struggles of black people, on the attempts of women throughout history to declare their equality with men, on movements against war, on the strikes and protests of working people against their conditions—books which, while sticking close to confirmed information, openly took sides, for equality, against war, for the working classes.

A group of radical historians, sometimes called "revisionists," became prominent in the profession. One of them, Jesse Lemisch, delivered a kind of manifesto for himself and others, challenging the orthodox historians: "We exist, and people like us have existed throughout history, and we will simply not allow you the luxury of continuing to call yourselves politically neutral while you exclude all of this from your history. You cannot lecture us on civility while you legitimize barbarity. You cannot call apologetics 'excellence' without expecting the most rigorous and aggressive of scholarly replies. We were at the Democratic Convention, and at the steps of the Pentagon.... And we are in the libraries, writing history, trying to cure it of your partisan and self-congratulatory fictions, trying to come a little closer to finding out how things actually were."

This unapologetic activism of the 1960s (making history in the street, as

well as writing it in the study) was startling to many professional historians. And in the 1970s and 1980s, it was accused by some scholars, and some organs of public opinion, of hurting the proper historical education of young people by its insistence on "relevance." As part of the attack, a demand grew for more emphasis on facts, on dates, on the sheer accumulation of historical information.

In May 1976, the *New York Times* published a series of articles lamenting the ignorance of American students about their own history. The *Times* was pained. Four leading historians whom it consulted were also pained. It seemed students did not know that James Polk was president during the Mexican War, that James Madison was president during the war of 1812, that the Homestead Act was passed earlier than Civil Service reform, or that the Constitution authorizes Congress to regulate interstate commerce but says nothing about the cabinet.

We might wonder if the *Times*, or its historian-consultants, learned anything from the history of this century. It has been a century of atrocities: the death camps of Hitler, the slave camps of Stalin, the devastation of Southeast Asia by the United States. All of these were done by powerful leaders and obedient populations in countries that had achieved high levels of literacy and education. It seems that high scores on tests was not the most crucial facts about these leaders, these citizens.

In the case of the United States, the killing of a million Vietnamese and the

sacrifice of 55,000 Americans were carried out by highly-educated men around the White House who undoubtedly would have made impressive grades in the *New York Times* exam. It was a Phi Beta Kappa, McGeorge Bundy, who was one of the chief planners of the bombing of civilians in Southeast Asia. It was a Harvard professor, Henry Kissinger, who was a strategist of the secret bombing of peasant villages in Cambodia.

Going back a bit in history, it was our most educated president, Woodrow Wilson, a historian himself, a Ph.D. and former president of Princeton, who bombarded the Mexican coast, killing hundreds of innocent people, because the Mexican government refused to salute the American flag. It was Harvard-educated John Kennedy, author of two books on history, who presided over the American invasion of Cuba and the lies that accompanied it.

What did Kennedy or Wilson learn from all that history they absorbed in the best universities in America? What did the American people learn, in their high school history texts, to put up with these leaders?

Surely, how "smart" a person is on history tests like the one devised by the *Times*, how "educated" someone is, tells you nothing about whether that person is decent or indecent, violent or peaceful, whether that person will resist evil or become a consultant to war-makers, will become a Pastor Niemöller (a German who resisted the Nazis) or an Albert Speer (who worked for them), a Lieutenant Calley (who killed children at My Lai), or a Flight Officer Thompson (who tried to save them).

One of the two top scorers on the *Times* test was described as follows: "Just short of 20 years old, he lists outdoor activities and the Augustana War Games Club as constituting his favorite leisure-time pursuits, explaining the latter as a group that meets on Fridays to simulate historical battles on a playing board."

Every one does need to learn history, the kind that does not put its main emphasis on knowing presidents and statutes and Supreme Court decisions, but inspires a new generation to resist the madness of governments trying to carve the world and our minds into their spheres of influence. Z