Ludlow Massacre April 20, 1914

Early April 20, 1914, the first shots were fired at striking miners outside of their makeshift tent colony in Ludlow, Colorado. Over the next 14 hours, striking coalminers and their families were unlawfully attacked by state militia and guards from the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company, leaving their makeshift village looted and burnt to the ground. Following the massacre were ten days of guerrilla warfare resulting in between 69 to 199 casualties.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Ludlow Massacre is important to the Progressive business period because at the time it was the most violent labor conflict in US history, it shed light on labor relations, and it forced John D. Rockefeller Jr. to react to labor problems in his Colorado Fuel and Iron Company.

In September 23, 1913, the United Mine Workers of American began a 14 month strike that would lead to the Ludlow massacre. The strike was organized to attack major mining companies in Colorado, including the Rockefeller’s Colorado Fuel & Iron Company, the Rocky Mountain Fuel Company, and the Victor-American Fuel Company.[[2]](#footnote-2) The UMWA striking miners were asking for better wages, a recognized union, eight hour work days, the right to choose non company housing and stores, and the ending of the company guard system.[[3]](#footnote-3) Due to the strike miners were evicted from their company homes but the UMWA provided tent housing and named Louis Tikas campleader. Tikas’ job was to protect the miners and their families from the company guards and the hired Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency, a known strike buster gang who possessed a machine gun mounted armored car called “the death special”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

On the morning of the massacre, Tikas was negotiating with local militia about the company guardsmen, but he was overwhelmed with a feeling of uneasiness after witnessing machine gun being mounted on the surrounding hills overlooking the camp. At 10am the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company guard commanded by Lt. Karl E. Linderfelter opened fire on the camp.[[5]](#footnote-5) During the attack eighteen­­­­­­­­ miners and their families were killed and four women and eleven children­­ died of smoke inhalation from being trapped and burned alive in their tent.[[6]](#footnote-6) Tikas was also murdered during the attack and National Guardsmen placed his body near the Colorado and Southern tracks as an example.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Ludlow Massacre brought great backlash against Rockefeller and concern about industrial relations in general. *The New York Times* featured an account of the massacre that depicted the sight of the mangle bodies of innocent children found clinging together in “death holes” under the charred remains of tents.[[8]](#footnote-8) Rockefeller also received several threatening letters including one from Upton Sinclair, in which Sinclair calls Rockefeller a murderer and a false Christian. The bad press and threatening letters produced from the event provoked Rockefeller to address the direction and improvement of his company before the United States Commission on Industrial Relations and to personally speak to the miners on September 20, 1915, where he states “We are all partners in a way. Capital can’t get along without you men”.[[9]](#footnote-9) The backlash following the Ludlow Massacre prompted Rockefeller to provide better conditions for the miner including fairer pay, better working conditions, and shorter hours.

“Ludlow Massacre” by Woody Guthrie

It was early springtime when the strike was on,  
They drove us miners out of doors,  
Out from the houses that the Company owned,  
We moved into tents up at old Ludlow.

I was worried bad about my children,  
Soldiers guarding the railroad bridge,  
Every once in a while a bullet would fly,  
Kick up gravel under my feet.

We were so afraid you would kill our children,  
We dug us a cave that was seven foot deep,  
Carried our young ones and pregnant women  
Down inside the cave to sleep.

That very night your soldiers waited,  
Until all us miners were asleep,  
You snuck around our little tent town,  
Soaked our tents with your kerosene.

You struck a match and in the blaze that started,  
You pulled the triggers of your gatling guns,  
I made a run for the children but the fire wall stopped me.  
Thirteen children died from your guns.

I carried my blanket to a wire fence corner,  
Watched the fire till the blaze died down,  
I helped some people drag their belongings,  
While your bullets killed us all around.

I never will forget the look on the faces  
Of the men and women that awful day,  
When we stood around to preach their funerals,  
And lay the corpses of the dead away.

We told the Colorado Governor to call the President,  
Tell him to call off his National Guard,  
But the National Guard belonged to the Governor,  
So he didn't try so very hard.

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 they put a gun in every hand.

The state soldiers jumped us in a wire fence corners,  
They did not know we had these guns,  
And the Red-neck Miners mowed down these troopers,  
You should have seen those poor boys run.

We took some cement and walled that cave up,  
Where you killed these thirteen children inside,  
I said, "God bless the Mine Workers' Union,"  
And then I hung my head and cried.

Woody Guthrie, *Ludlow Massacre*, 1958 by Asch Recordings & Woody Guthrie Publications Inc, 7 inch records, 45 rpm. <http://www.woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Ludlow_Massacre.htm>

This song was produced and originally copyrighted in 1944 by Woody Guthrie. At the time Woody Guthrie was a well-known folk singer songwriter that specialized in songs about the Dust Bowl, the American West, and poverty. Guthrie would go on to write another song, titled “1913 Massacre,” about a mining massacre in response to 1913 attack on copper miners in Calument, Michigan. Audio recording “Ludlow Massacre” can be listen to at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XDd64suDz1A.>

1. PBS- The American Experiance, "The Rockefellers." Last modified 2000. Accessed September 25, 2012. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rockefellers/sfeature/sf\_8.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Majority Rights, "The Ludlow Massacre of 1914 - A Microcosm of Modern Multi-Culturalism." Accessed September 25, 2012. http://majorityrights.com/weblog/comments/the\_ludlow\_massacre\_of\_1914\_a\_microcosm\_of\_modern\_multi\_culturalism [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The United Mine Workers of America, "UMWA History: The Ludlow Massacre." Accessed September 25, 2012. http://www.umwa.org/?q=content/ludlow-massacre. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Majority Rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. PBS. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)