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Louie Tikas

LOUIS TIKAS: 1914 PASSION- BEARER OF THE COLORADO COAL FIELDS

One of the authentic heroes of the American West was Ilias Anastasios Spantidakis, a young Greek immigrant from Crete, known in America as Louis Tikas, who, on Bright Monday, 1914, gave his life to save a colony of striking miners' families from destruction in Ludlow, Colorado. By the 1970's, Tikas' memory had been reduced to a name on a casualty list until a young Greek-American writer, Zeese Papanikolas, whose grandfather, George Zeese, had arrived in the Colorado coal fields one year after Tikas, unearthed the traces of his remarkable story. Though the United Mine Workers had honored the victims of the Ludlow Massacre, little was known of Tikas himself and Papanikolas understood that any living memories of him would soon vanish forever. Over the following decade he ransacked office records and archives, patiently gathering end-of-life memories in a race against time to save Tikas' story. His phenomenal account was published in 1982 as *Buried Unsung: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, Lincoln). Although George Zeese and Louis Tikas never met, they would have shared the Pascha of 1907, following the Good Friday procession with lighted candles and passing under the flowered funeral bier into Denver's Greek Orthodox church to anticipate Christ's Resurrection. As Zeese Papanikolas says, "George... would survive the road gang and the mining town, live to found a family and enter the long struggle with old age. Louis Tikas would die a martyr, cut off from both his past and his posterity."¹

Opposite: l to r. UMW organizer John Lawson with Louis Tikas.

Photos of Louis Tikas and the Ludlow tent city on pages 34,37,38,41 and 48-51 are courtesy of the Denver Public Library, Western History/Genealogy Digital Collection.

On Bright Monday of 1914, Louis Tikas, a young Greek Orthodox immigrant and union organizer, was murdered by the Colorado National Guard in what came to be known as the Ludlow Massacre – the deadliest incident in the deadliest strike in the history of the United States. Organized by the United Mine Workers of America, the strike targeted the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I) which ran the Ludlow mine and was itself majority-owned and directed by the Rockefellers, father and son. The April 20th massacre resulted in the violent deaths of nineteen people when the National Guard attacked Ludlow’s tent colony of 1,200 striking coal miners and their families.

The mine conditions that led up to the strike were desperate: the average gross wages for a Colorado coal miner averaged \$3.50 per day, which did not include payment for “dead work” such as shoring up deteriorating mine shafts or laying track, nor did it pay for rent on crowded company-owned housing, mining tools, powder, blacksmithing supplies for work animals and monthly retainers to the company doctor, which trickled most of the miner’s pay back into the company. Colorado Fuel and Iron Company miners took home \$1.68 a day, paid in company scrip rather than dollars, which was redeemable only at company stores.ⁱⁱ Company stores set their own prices for consumer goods, gouging the miners and their families for food and clothing with prices double and sometimes triple that of town shops. In some places, clean water was thirty-eight cents a barrel, and typhoid from bad water was endemic.ⁱⁱⁱ Though Colorado had instituted safe mining practices, they were unenforced and the death rate due to accidents was almost three times higher than eastern coal fields. Coal miners everywhere spent most of their workday on their knees or on their back in darkness, and in nonunion mines the workday was 10, 12, even 14 hours. Paid by the ton, miners were still cheated on the company scales, which were weighed by company weightmen.¹ Those who protested unsafe conditions or circumvented the company store often found themselves transferred to dangerous or waterlogged mine shafts. A birth, serious illness, or death in the family meant that a salary advance would incur a debt almost impossible to work off. Enforced poverty, company corruption, needless deaths, and desperation drove the strike.

1 According to Papanikolas, Nick Saris and James Ganos, two Trinidad, Colorado miners who had worked for CF&I for five or six years, “had watched coal weighed in the same cars they had used when they’d first gone to work drop from 5,500 to 6,000 pounds to 3,000 or 3,500 pounds on the company’s scales.” (Pg. 75.)

Opposite: Striking coal miners at the UMW tent camp in Ludlow, Colorado, 1914.





According to the United Mine Workers census, by January 1914, 22,000 Colorado men, women, and children were on its relief rolls. The union's demands included: recognition of the union as bargaining agent; an increase in tonnage rates (equivalent to a 10% wage increase); enforcement of the eight-hour work-day law; payment for "dead work" such as laying track, shoring up the mine shafts with timber, and handling impurities; weight-checkmen elected by the workers (to keep company weightmen honest); the right to use any store and to choose their own boarding houses and doctors; strict enforcement of Colorado's laws (such as mine safety rules and the abolition of scrip for payment); and an end to the company guard system.^{iv}

In his early 20's Louis Tikas had emigrated to Denver and become part-owner of a Greek coffee-shop, not unlike the one his father owned in Loutra, Crete. Lured to the mines as a minor strike-breaker, once he understood the conditions, Tikas led his own first strike on November 17, 1912 in Frederick, Colorado, calling a walkout that included immigrant Italians, Slavs and sixty-four fellow Greeks.

Within months, Tikas began collecting affidavits on mining conditions for the Colorado legislature's strike investigation in Boulder and Weld counties. By April 1913, he was sent as the union representative to the Pike View mine in El Paso with money to relieve the families of eighteen Greek strikers, and was effective enough to be assaulted by Baldwin-Felts mine detectives a few weeks later. On September 23, as Ludlow's 1,200 striking miners were evicted with their families from company homes, the 27 year-old Tikas arrived to help them set up a tent colony to live in through the brutal Colorado winter. For a time the shipment of tents was held up by company bribes to railway officials, and families huddled for weeks under wagons or patched-up shanties made out of wooden crates, barrel staves, and corrugated iron. The privies were pits, loosely covered with a few boards, and a gunnysack for a door.^v In the below-freezing record-breaking winter temperatures of 1913-14, women and children would spend days huddled together in bed for warmth in the canvas tents.

Three weeks after the start of the strike, Tikas took a day off from organizing to finish some legal work he'd begun months earlier: in a Denver courtroom he stood and was sworn in as a U.S. citizen. Neither his union work nor his naturalized citizenship gave him immediate status among the Greek strikers, nor did he expect it, although his accomplished English made him

Opposite: View of the Ludlow tent city, 1913.

a natural spokesman. As an interpreter between the Greeks and the union leaders, he could also, if needed, parley with the mine bosses. It was his quiet readiness to help out wherever needed that most impressed the strikers, and Tikas' eventual unofficial leadership was not by force of arms, but through his strength of personality and the solid arguments that reached even the most impassioned of his countrymen.

In Loutra, Louis was remembered for his boyhood ability to tame wild animals, teaching rabbits to play with dogs, and birds with cats. Wild birds would sit on his shoulder when he called.^{vi} His influence over his hot-blooded young Greek compatriots wasn't so different, and in both Crete and among the strikers, Louis was remembered as "a courteous man" and "a gentleman". The United Mine Workers Journal called Tikas "conservative" and "cool-headed" and praised his ability to preserve order "even under the most provoking circumstances".^{vii} John Lawson, a UMW organizer, said, "He was one of the quietest men I have ever known and a man you could have absolute confidence in."^{viii} Mary Thomas, a miner's wife, would recall decades later: "He was always dressed very smart ...but he was well educated. And he was always a gentleman."^{ix} She was wrong about the education, but right about the dress. Photos of the time show that Tikas took pride in his appearance, and he sometimes displays the old-country cloth leggings wound from the ankle to the knee over his knee-length baggy Cretan pants.

Philip Van Cise, a Denver lawyer and Captain of the National Guard from 1910 to 1914 would call Tikas "the single greatest force for peace in the strike." Even his bitter enemy, Lt. Karl Linderfelt of the state militia who would order his murder, admitted that, "he knew more in five minutes than Lawson or anyone else... about handling the foreigners in the tent colony."^x

Many small glimpses gathered painstakingly decades after Tikas' death by his biographer shed light on why he was so respected. On October 22, a week after Tikas' naturalization, the Dawson, New Mexico Stag Canyon #2 mine blew up when mine bosses illegally used dynamite to dislodge deep coal veins, igniting the tunnels filled with coal dust. Over 286 men were trapped, of whom only 23 survived; most were burnt beyond recognition. Tikas was among the miners who rushed from their strike camps in the surrounding region to rescue the survivors and recover the dead. A few weeks later, "Big Jim" Bicuvaris, union organizer and miner, was attacked from behind by

Opposite: Wives and children of striking miners at Ludlow tent colony, 1913.



mine detectives and hid in a rooming house until Tikas could get him to a Denver hospital. At Christmas, the union put up a Christmas tree and Tikas distributed the gifts: apples, nuts, and shoes for the kids. Boys were given writing slates, girls received dolls; the first Christmas presents many of these children had ever seen. Everywhere he is remembered for taking special care of the strikers' wives and children.^{xi}

As the months went by and incident followed incident, the strike heated up. Strikebreakers were brought in by mine bosses; ignorant new immigrants desperate for work who had no understanding of what they'd signed up for, or unemployed miners from other regions who had been told there was no strike, only to find out when they arrived that they'd been lied to. According to Papanikolas, the new immigrants were "as afraid of violence as they were driven by their hunger." Most had no understanding of the battlefield they'd entered.

On October 15, Ludlow mine bosses rolled out what came to be known as the "Death Special" – a car shipped in from Denver, whose sides had been replaced with 3/8-inch steel plates and equipped with rifle-carrying mine guards and a machine gun which, mounted on a passing train, had previously riddled a striker's tent colony filled with women and children in West Virginia. The union organizer who took a photograph of it was beaten.

On November 1, the strike district was occupied by the Colorado National Guard who disarmed the strikers, but not the mine guards or company detectives. Strikers were told that the militia had been sent by the governor to keep peace and to mediate. They believed it for a time, but the ill-paid militia was soon corrupted by the CF&I and descended into partiality and injustice. One miner recalled the guardsmen catching "poor, ignorant foreigners" and "forcing them to dig what they told them were their graves (they were privy vaults), then laughing at them when they dictated their goodbyes to their wives."^{xii} Drunken soldiers came into the strike tents at night, and women were pushed out into the cold.

Later things would get even uglier. Papanikolas recounts how in the midst of the bitterly cold winter, Emma Zanatell, one of the striker's wives, labored with twins that she couldn't deliver. When the company's camp doctor refused to come, the union doctor arrived from Trinidad hours later, soaking wet. Company deputies had shot up his car and he'd had to abandon it to crawl up a creek bed. When he arrived the babies were dead. The next morning the militia moved in to raid the colony, stealing whatever was moveable

and tearing down the tents. When they entered the Zanatells', she told the guardsman who found her that she was ill and that her neighbors were burying her twins. He said "in that case they weren't going to tear her tent down, they'd just light a match to it." On this occasion another militiaman stepped in to prevent it.^{xiii} The families would not always be so fortunate.

It is at this point that Tikas became the leader of the Ludlow strike community, and in mid-November he attended the State Federation of Labor convention in Denver. There is a photograph from the Colorado State Historical Society of the famous union organizer, 82-year-old Mother Jones, leading 2000 striking miners down the streets of Denver with Tikas beside her carrying Ludlow's banner.² One of the miners' wives recalled, "...old Mother Jones thought there was nobody like him, [and] he called her mother." Both Tikas and Mother Jones were imprisoned for some weeks and as the news of Jones' arrest spread, a thousand women marched in protest through Denver, only to be attacked by the National Guard at the orders of General John Chase. Though no lives were lost, this was a huge political mistake that fanned public fury.^{xiv} Tikas was jailed again in Trinidad at the end of the year on unspecified charges. In late December a single snowstorm dumped a total of forty-two inches on Ludlow, and Tikas and the other Trinidad prisoners slept on bunks covered with three inches of snow. The authorities promised to let him go if he would convince the strikers to go back to work. He refused, and was finally released weeks later.

Winter dragged on to spring, and at the beginning of April 1814, Helen Ring Robinson, Colorado's only female senator, came to check out the strike conditions and the Ludlow tent colony. The atmosphere was tense, and she left saying that she felt that an attack on the camp by the National Guard was imminent.

On Good Friday the Orthodox of the tent city fasted, washed, and cleaned. Sunday, April 19 was Pascha that year and the Greek strikers had somehow obtained a lamb to roast for their traditional Paschal meal. A few who were able went into Denver on Saturday to make a *metanoia* in front of the

2 Mary Harris "Mother" Jones (1831-1930), was an Irish immigrant and prominent labor organizer who co-founded the Industrial Workers of the World. An effective speaker who engaged the audience with stories, humor and drama, she began in 1897, at age 66, to organize mine workers and their families. Within a few years she was known as "the most dangerous woman in America" for her success. In 1903, she protested the lax enforcement of child labor laws in the Pennsylvania mines and silk mills by organizing the Children's March from Philadelphia to the home of President Theodore Roosevelt in New York. By 1913, at 82, she was actively at work in the southern Colorado coal fields, and was imprisoned repeatedly, a huge embarrassment to mine owners and bosses.

flower-strew bier and to receive Holy Communion, but at midnight most of the Ludlow Greeks and Slavs followed a homemade *epitaphion* around the camp by candlelight, singing, “Christ is Risen from the dead, trampling down death by death...” The next morning, along with the spitted lamb, the families shared a couple of barrels of beer and presents for the miners’ wives. Both men and women spent the day playing baseball and Greek-dancing into the night.

In the middle of the festivities a handful of militia rode in to break up the ball game, and sneered to Maggie Dominiske, one of the wives, “Never mind, girlie. You have your big Sunday today and tomorrow we’ll get the roast.”^{xv} Tikas and other union officials were busy through the night trying to approach the company men who were hanging about the camp to pick fights with the strikers.

The next morning the Colorado National Guard ranged themselves in the surrounding hills with two machine guns pointed at the tent colony. As word spread, many of the Italian and Greek strikers ran out of the colony to draw off the militia’s fire, and give the women and children a chance to escape into the hills. But running down the road toward them was Tikas himself, waving a white handkerchief above his head to signal them to get back: a bomb had just gone off from the military camp. A second was heard and then the crossfire started. As Tikas ran by two striker’s wives, Maggie Dominiske and Mrs. Fyler, he waved his handkerchief, saying, “Goodbye, I will never see you anymore.”^{xvi}

Most women and children escaped into the arroyo and hid in the hills or scattered buildings above the camp. Some who couldn’t leave as quickly hid in the dirt cellars that had been dug under the tents in case of attack. Tikas’ friend, Pearl Jelly, a Red Cross nurse who’d gone from tent to tent checking on the women and children, stayed behind to make sandwiches for four of the strikers including Tikas, and barely escaped being shot as the Guard aimed at the Red Cross insignia on her dress. The militia’s bullets were already riddling the tents, and soon they were shooting dogs, chickens, and anything that moved.

Finally Karl Linderfelt, originally head of the company guards and now officially attached to the National Guard as a lieutenant of the 2nd Infantry rode into camp in a car. According to Papanikolas, Mrs. Tonner, a miner’s wife, lay on the dirt floor of her cellar with her five children, heavy with a sixth, listening to her neighbor begging Linderfelt not to kill her and her

Opposite: Mary Harris “Mother” Jones.



little children. “Linderfelt replied, ‘There’s no use in your crying and carrying on. We have orders to do this and we are going to do it, no mercy on any of you.’ A militiaman tore down the tent, and then set a broom on fire with coal oil and touched it to Mrs. Tonner’s tent. A neighbor helped her and the children get out and they ran to a tent further down... where Tikas helped her into the pit underneath, throwing water on her face to keep her from fainting.”^{xvii} The militia began to ransack and loot.

Tikas then ran back to the arroyo to rally his men to a greater effort to draw the Guard off from the tent village. Their ammunition, however, was

almost spent and now the militiamen began “operating the machine guns like hoses, swinging them back and forth in swaths.”^{xviii} When Tikas realized that they were setting the tents on fire, he ran back to beg the militia to stop the shooting so that the strikers could put out the fire and save the camp. According to his biographer, Papanikolas, Tikas ran toward the burning tents knowing that he would be captured. He had not taken his gun.

According to a sworn affidavit from John Davis, a sergeant in Company B, when Tikas ran into the camp to plead for the safety of the women and children, Linderfelt tried to hang the unarmed Greek

but was talked out of it. Instead, he broke the stock of his rifle over Tikas’ head, knocking him to the ground. Linderfelt then started to walk away, but turned back to call out, “shoot the prisoners.” Tikas was shot in the back three times...^{xix} A photo taken soon after his body was recovered showed heel marks on Tikas’ face. Two other strikers were murdered at the same time.

An accidental eyewitness to Tikas’ murder was a visiting electrical engineer, Godfrey Irwin, who was out for a tramp in the hills with an Episcopal clergyman from nearby Trinidad. “We were going down a trail on the mountainside above the tent city at Ludlow when my chum pulled my sleeve



John Sloan's cover for the June 1914 issue of *The Masses*.

and at the same instant we heard shooting. The militia were coming out of Hastings Canyon and firing as they came. We lay flat behind a rock and after a few minutes I raised my hat aloft on a stick. Instantly bullets came in our direction. One penetrated my hat....”

A few days later Irwin described Tikas’ murder to a *New York World* reporter:

Then came the killing of Louis Tikas, the Greek leader of the strikers. We saw the militiamen parley outside the tent city, and, a few minutes later, Tikas came out to meet them. We watched them talking. Suddenly an officer raised his rifle, gripping the barrel, and felled Tikas with the butt.

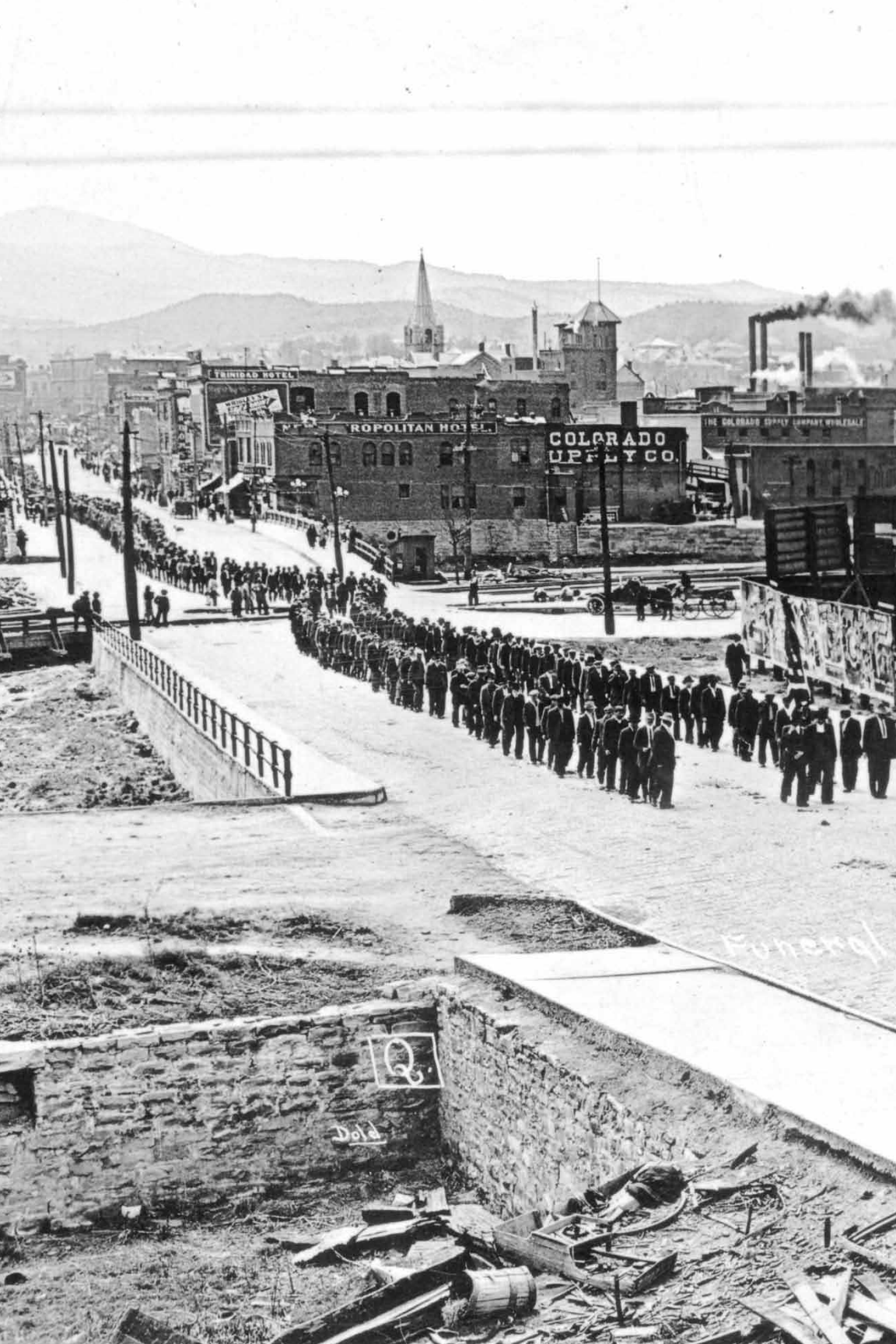
Tikas fell face downward. As he lay there we saw the militiamen fall back. Then they aimed their rifles and deliberately fired them into the unconscious man’s body. It was the first murder I had ever seen, for it was a murder and nothing less. Then the miners ran about in the tent colony and women and children scuttled for safety in the pits which afterward trapped them.

We watched from our rock shelter while the militia dragged up their machine guns and poured a murderous fire into the arroyo from a height by Water Tank Hill above the Ludlow depot. Then came the firing of the tents.

I am positive that by no possible chance could they have been set ablaze accidentally. The militiamen were thick about the northwest corner of the colony where the fire started and we could see distinctly from our lofty observation place what looked like a blazing torch waved in the midst of militia a few seconds before the general conflagration swept through the place. What followed everybody knows.^{xx}

Then “the militiamen went through the tent colony pulling women and children from the cellars. The women were screaming, begging the militia not to kill them.” Later investigations revealed that kerosene had intentionally been poured on the tents to set them ablaze.^{xxi} By early morning, April 21, 1914, the colony site — previously covered with hundreds of tents — revealed nothing more than charred rubble. Although many of the families

Following pages: Louis Tikas’ horse-drawn coffin leads procession of hundreds of mourners for Ludlow’s dead strikers and their families on North Commercial Street in Trinidad, Colorado, April, 1914.



TRINIDAD HOTEL

METROPOLITAN HOTEL

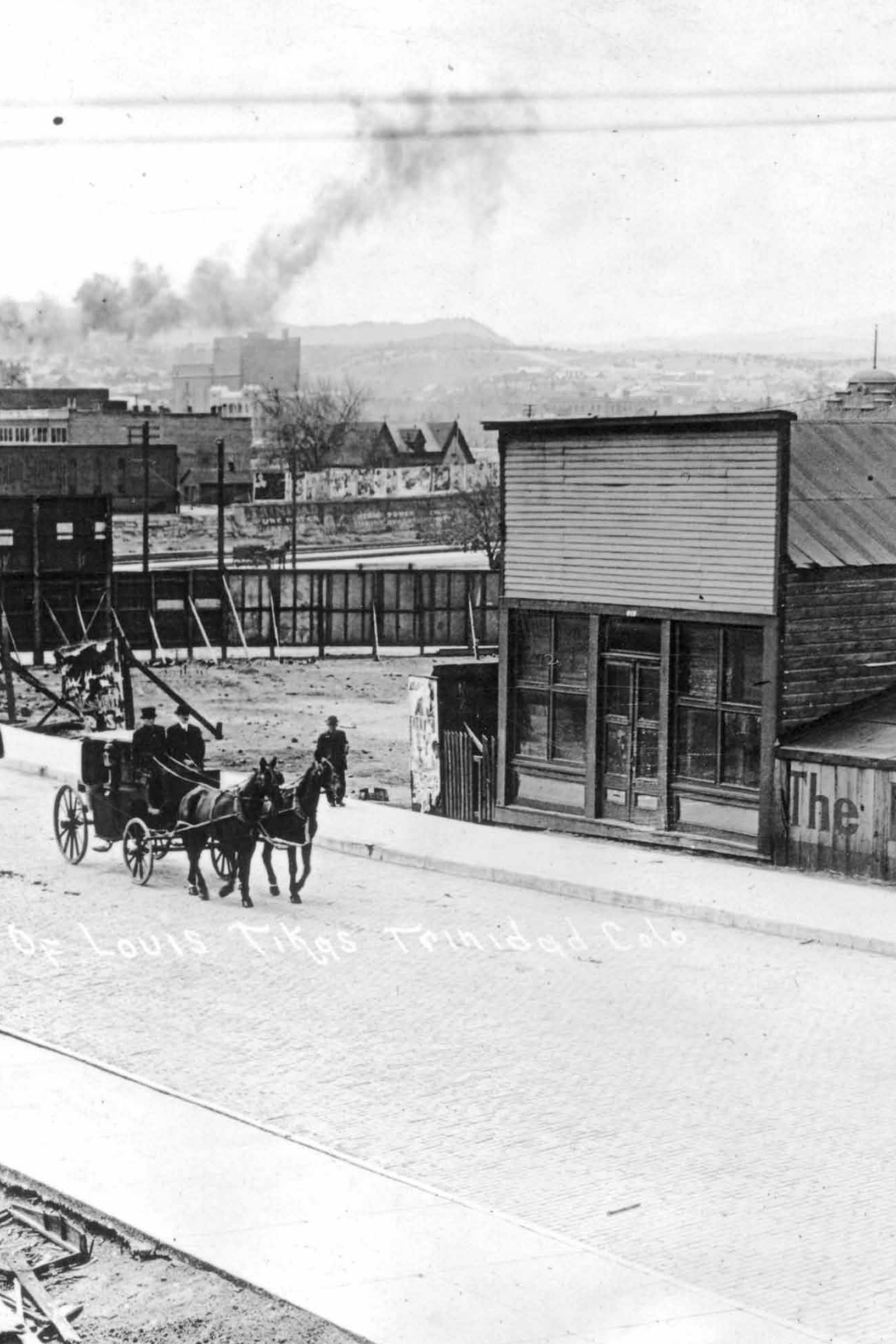
COLORADO SUPPLY CO.

THE COLORADO SUPPLY COMPANY WHOLESALE

Q

Sold

Funeral



By Louis Tikas Trinidad Colo



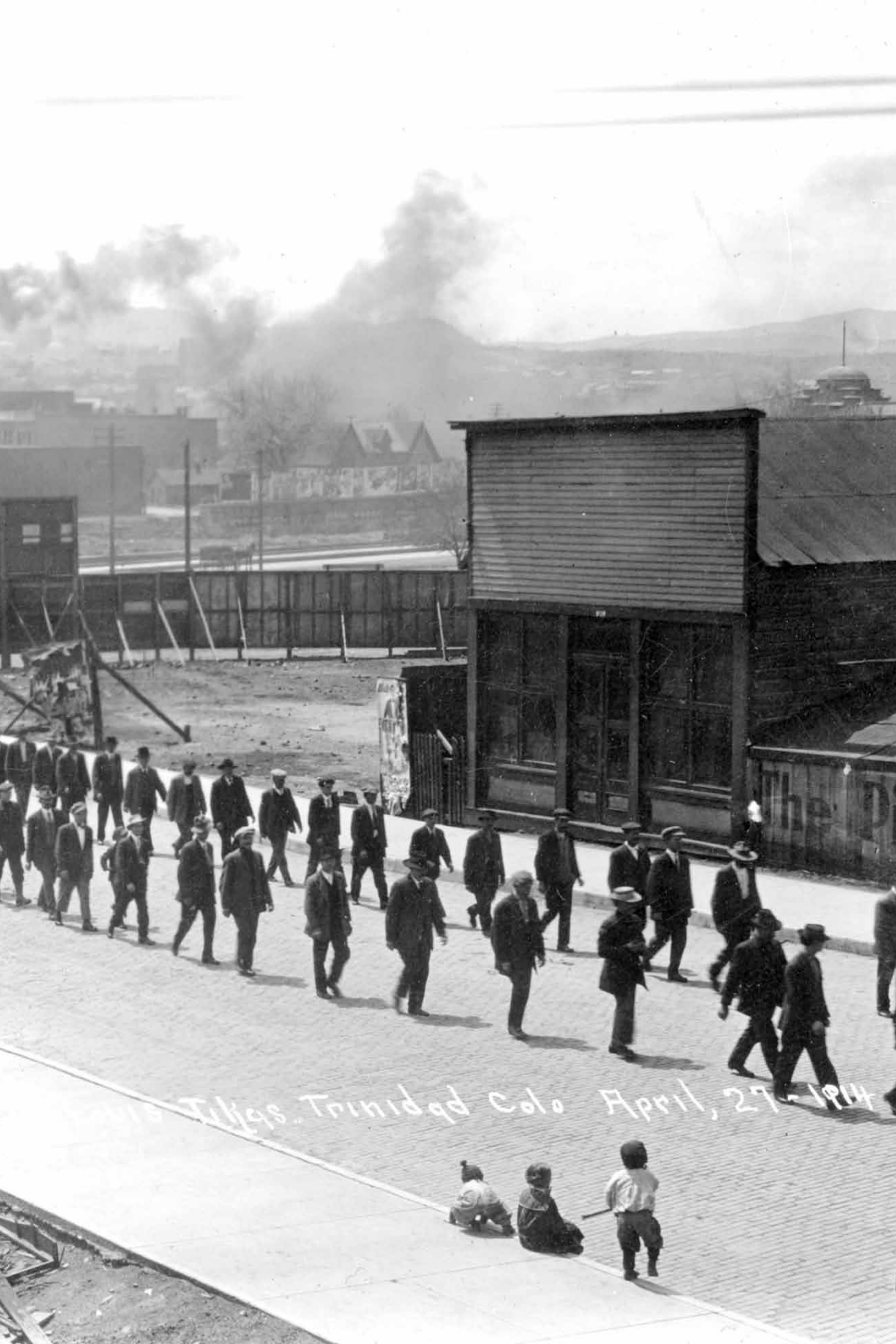
UNION HOTEL

HOPOLITAN HOTEL

COLORADO SUPPLY CO.

R

Dodd



Trinidad, Trinidad Colo April, 27, 1914

IN MEMORY OF
THE MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN,
WHO LOST THEIR LIVES
IN FREEDOM'S CAUSE
AT LUDLOW, COLORADO
APRIL 20, 1914.
ERECTED BY THE
UNITED MINE WORKERS OF AMERICA.



had escaped into the arroyo, the bodies of two women and eleven children, asphyxiated and burned to death, were found huddled in a cellar.

Decades after the fire, one of the survivors would recall Tikas: “Well, he was ...always rushing here and there to help the people. Especially the children, when there was the strike here at Ludlow. They burned two times the camps... When they start[ed] the shooting down here in Ludlow... that’s where they killed Louis Tikas. There he went to protect the women and children and they killed him.”^{xxii}

On April 27th Louis Tikas was buried in Trinidad by Fr. Paschopoulos, the Greek priest from Denver who served the funeral. A few days earlier, his horse-drawn coffin, covered with flowers, had led the procession of hundreds of mourners for the dead strikers and their families. Tikas died unmarried, and according to his biographer, “had this been the Old Country they would have buried him in the bridal crown and regalia of a groom, for Death was his bride now.”^{xxiii} Tikas died during Bright Week of the Resurrection, and as Orthodox tradition believes, his sins were forgiven through Christ’s victory and his own sacrifice.

As news of the massacre spread, workers from around the country went on strike to show solidarity with the remaining Colorado strikers and in sympathy with those who had lost loved ones in Ludlow. In the aftermath of the massacre, several Colorado cities were occupied by miners and some National Guard units even laid down their arms and refused to fight. The union, however, was close to bankruptcy. Unable to sustain the strike, the miners failed to obtain their demands and were replaced with non-union workers. Although sixty-six people had been killed by the time the Colorado coalfield violence ended, no National Guardsman was ever prosecuted. Despite regular telegrams informing him of strike events, at a federal inquiry by the U.S. Commission on Industrial Relations John D. Rockefeller, Jr., protested his innocence and ignorance of the Ludlow massacre. Blaming the strike on malcontents, he refused to answer questions about the violence, reading instead a list of his family’s philanthropic projects. Ludlow strike leader John Lawson called the deposition “a willful attempt to substitute philanthropy for justice”.^{xxiv} It would take another fourteen years for the United Mine Workers to sign their first union contract in Colorado, and almost sixty before Zeese Papanikolas unearthed the story that would honor

Opposite: Monument to victims of the Ludlow Massacre, erected 1920.

Louis Tikas as a martyr; in Orthodox terms, a passion-bearer who gave his life for his friends. Papanikolas' luminous account is a tribute well-sung. ✦

Zeese Papanikolas' narrative of Louis Tikas: *Buried Unsung: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre* published by the Univ. of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, can be obtained through the Univ. of Nebraska Press, local booksellers, or on Amazon.com.

i. Zeese Papanikolas, *Buried Unsung: Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre*, Univ. of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1982, pg. 11.

ii. BBC Online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/alabaster/A74782993>, accessed 6/20/2011.

iii. Papanikolas, pg. 39.

iv. Holt Labor Library, 4444 Geary Blvd. #207, San Francisco, CA, <http://www.holtlaborlibrary.org/ludlow.html>, accessed 6/20/2011.

v. Papanikolas, pg. 40.

vi. Papanikolas, pg. 261.

vii. Ibid. pg. 143.

viii. Ibid. 159.

ix. Ibid. pg. 159.

x. Ibid., pg.120.

xi. Ibid., pg. 143.

xii. Ibid. pg. 151.

xiii. Ibid., pg. 186-7.

xiii. David Mason, "Louis Tikas and the Ludlow Massacre", The Athens News, August 14, 2003, accessed at: http://www.athensnews.gr/old_issue/13027/10199

xiv. Papanikolas, pg. 215.

xv. Ibid., pg. 219.

xvi. Ibid., pg. 225.

xvii. Ibid., pg. 224.

xviii. Ibid., pg. 235

xix. April 20, 1914. New York World: "Rockefeller-owned CF&I massacres striking miners' families in Ludlow, CO; Eyewitness to Murder: Recounting the Ludlow Massacre", (Reprinted in Walter H. Fink, *The Ludlow Massacre (1914)*, 7–21. Reprinted in Leon Stein and Phillip Taft, eds., *Massacre at Ludlow: Four Reports* (New York: Arno and The New York Times, 1971), 22–23.)

xx. United Mine Workers of America, "Union History – The Ludlow Massacre," ref. 6/20/2011 at <http://www.umwa.org/?q=content/ludlow-massacre>

xxi. Papanikolas, pg. 196.

xxii. Ibid., pg. 241.

xxiii. Ibid., pg. 244.