

David Mason

The language of the Gun

The Ludlow Massacre, April 20, 1914, was a major event in American labor history, yet too few remember it today. Its vandalized monument stands in a dry wasteland in southern Colorado, about a dozen miles north of the town of Trinidad. My novel, which climaxes at the massacre itself, is not concerned with making a political case about it. Rather, I wished to convey the lives of various Americans and their communities at the time: the immigrants trained in to work the mines, the WASPS and Latinos who had already been living there, the corrupt militia and the politicians. I wanted to bring their lost world to life and give it as much ground sense as I could.

Most of my characters are fictional, but the following excerpt, Chapter 8 of the novel, deals with two historical figures, the union leader John Lawson and the Greek immigrant Louis Tikas. The setting is the fall of 1913 just as the strike begins with its bloody confrontations. Baldwin-Felts detectives have killed a union organizer, Gerald Lippiatt, and Greek miners have responded in kind. This chapter is called "The Language of the Gun."

Tikas had seen the village of Segundo
west of Trinidad above the river,
its view of the snow-tipped Sangre de Cristo Mountains
sharp as a far-off picket of the gods.
That was where a band of his fellow Greeks
ambushed the mine guard, Robert Lee, and shot
him in the throat with buckshot. He bled to death
beside his cocked and loaded Winchester.

And Louis saw the corpse
of Gerald Lippiatt the night they came
to Trinidad, and knew the fight had started.
His job at first was to restrain the Greeks
who listened to him with untrusting eyes.
The killing at Segundo was bad news
of the sort he hoped to stop, but one man
could never cover every trouble spot.

He took his orders from a boss he liked,
John Lawson, tall and seasoned as a tree,

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who knew the work and knew what justice was
and won men over with his measured speech.
Like Lawson he would be
ubiquitous as far as train and car
and horse and telephone would help him to
appear wherever trouble had erupted.

The strike demands were posted. First demand:
recognition of the union. Second:
a ten per cent advance on tonnage rates.
Third: an eight-hour work day for all laborers.
Fourth: pay for all narrow work and dead work.
Fifth: weight men elected by the miners.
Sixth: the right to choose the stores we trade in.
Seventh: enforcement of laws, and no more guards.

He'd heard what Mother Jones and wild Frank Hayes
had said of these demands—that they made sense.
He'd seen John Lawson nod his weathered head,
declaring steadily the first demand
was the one that John D. Junior would resist.
“A difference of philosophy,” said Lawson
to a trusted few. “He thinks philosophy
can win against our hunger and our grief.”

This in the union office on the day
nine thousand miners dropped their tools and struck.
And Louis listened with a racing pulse,
the sense of danger close.
“I'll meet you boys at Ludlow,” Lawson said,
shaking his organizers' hands. “The tents
will come from West Virginia. We'll set up
the big encampment by the railroad tracks.

You men bring up your crews and families.
Tikas, you organize your people, hear?
Get them to hide their guns, come peacefully
and be prepared to wait.
That's the hard part for us now—the waiting.
and when they bring the scabs, don't beat them up,

but talk some sense to them. You understand?
Our job's to stay the course and keep the peace."

And Louis left the meeting in his suit
and tie, a full head taller in his mind
for having found both pay and purpose here
in Trinidad. He met a band of Greeks,
telling them when to gather for the hike
north to Ludlow, promising them good shelter
and the weekly union pay.

"Think of Mother Jones," he told compatriots.

"If she can show such courage, so can we."

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Lawson drove the union Model T,
black and rattling like a heap of tin cans,
over the rutted road, past dusty scrub
and lines of people hefting their possessions.
Some stopped at Forbes beneath the closing mines
where Lawson ordered men to set up shelters
any way they could. By the time he drove
across the railroad tracks at Ludlow

everyone he saw was soaked to the skin.
A storm had blown in from the west and north,
snuffing the sunlight, turning rain to sleet.
At the open ground where he had planned the camp
five hundred miners and their families
hunkered in the mud, surrounded by their luggage,
trying to shelter under oilskin, blankets-
whatever came to hand.

"The goddamn tents," said someone at his side.
"They haven't come. There's people leaving houses
up at the mines, hundreds more still coming
and we got nothing for them."

Lawson swore and leapt from the Model T
and splashed in his boot and jacket, giving orders.

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Out here in open ground, exposed to weather
and fresh September blizzard, Lawson worked

with steady fury that made others join him,
propping the wooden platforms built for tents
to use as windbreaks, overturning pushcarts,
sending men back south to Trinidad
for wagons and supplies. And as he worked
he tried hard not to see their disappointment,
the way ideals came slumping to the mud
and fear of what they'd chosen grew with the cold.

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Louis wore his brand new pair of puttees
bought at George Reed's mercantile on Main.
They made his suit look funny, but were good
for marching in the late September mud.
Behind him a ragged band of Greeks cursed
the close sky and soaking sleet, forged ahead
with heads bowed, their bare hands red and cold,
the high hills entirely obscured by cloud.

They stopped at Forbes and saw the immigrants
huddled and ruinous, a union man
unloading cans of kerosene for fires.
"Gamó to," said a Greek. "Fuck America.
"Fuck this weather. Fuck the union, the strike.
Fuck everything that fucking grandma said
about our fucking freedom. Fuck it all.
What did we come here for? For fucking ice?"

Louis called them close so they could hear him.
Bedraggled, cold, he was inclined to feel
agreement with the man's complaints. And yet
he thought of Lawson, who had gone ahead,
and told his people they should show the strength
of Greeks who fought Bulgarians in such snow.
"Think of our brothers still in Macedonia,
freezing for the fatherland.

We're strong like them. We know what suffering means.
 Don't let those union people see you whimper
 like women. Winter's early . When we get
 to Ludlow our friend John Lawson will have tents.
 He will have food and fires to warm your hands.
 Show pride. Brush off the snow and follow me!"
 And as he marched north Louis felt the line
 of sluggish Greeks as if he tugged them after.

Some carried rucksacks. Some had rifles slung
 across their shoulders. Some carried their clothes
 in sodden bags. When darkness tightened in
 and snow accumulated on the ground
 and Ludlow's flickering lights were still ahead,
 they crouched beneath a hill that blocked the wind,
 pressing together like farm animals
 for the little heat their tired bodies gave.

Now Louis cursed the union, cursed himself
 for wearing a flimsy jacket out of pride.
 Tomorrow would be better. It must be.
 Nothing could be worse than taking men
 out of their shelters for some promises
 he only half believed.
Tomorrow, he thought, kept by cold from sleeping,
 hearing the men beside him curse in Greek.

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At the first corpse-colored light on snowy ground
 the men were up and moving, stomping boots
 and swinging arms to pump blood into them.
 Louis thought of Gus in Denver, coffee
 heating on a stove, the Scholar's warnings:
 "The union's got you now, my boy. Watch out."
 "*Eláte paidiá,*" he said. "Let's go."
 They marched past snowy rabbit brush and sage.

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Now to their left the canyons cutting west
were silent, though the glow of coke ovens
bled from somewhere near the Berwind mines,
casting a pale orange light on low wet clouds.
They trudged beneath the store at Cedar Hill
and up the Ludlow street, its buildings silent,
till it seemed a moaning rose from all the mud
ahead, a rumbling mound beyond the tracks.

And it was not a hill. It was people,
a thousand of them shaking off wet snow
and breaking up their carts for kindling.
They were exposed and shivering, their eyes
as darkly disappointed as the Greeks'.
Disaster, Louis thought. *Symforá*. Chaos
of crying children, shouting men. Work crews
fumbling armloads of wood for oily fires.

John Lawson stood in woolen cap and boots
beside the Model T,
directing men to keep their spirits up,
and grimly smiled at the approaching Greeks.
"Glad you made it, Tikas. Don't look so sad.
We've had some trouble from the railroad men
refusing to transport our tents. What's wrong?
A little weather got you Cretans down?"

Wagons bearing cookstoves had arrived,
their heavy cargo moved by men to platforms
organized in rows. A little town
of rootless families were lighting fires
with stolen fuel. Lawson stooped to put an arm
around the young Greek's shoulders. "Get some soup
in your belly, something warm for your men,
and by nightfall they'll have their spirits back."

So Louis set to work and others followed.
In days the tents arrived, the weather turned,
the colony at Ludlow almost thrived
beneath the watchful eyes of Baldwin-Felts

and other guards who gathered out of range.
 Work parties went in groups to ward off beatings,
 and in the meeting tent John Lawson had
 an upright piano moved for sing-alongs.

Twelve hundred people lived here now—largest
 of the strike camps in the southern coal fields.
 When ground dried the men paced out a diamond
 for baseball games. Women strung laundry lines
 between the tents where twenty languages
 were spoken. Louis Tikas made his way,
 not only speaking for the Greeks, but also
 welcoming folk from every fatherland.

He was, with the Croatian, Mike Livoda,
 one of the right-hand men John Lawson used
 to run the camp. They set up phone lines, a tent
 for courtroom, another for a hospital,
 and that was where he met Pearl Jolly,
 the miner's wife who said that she could nurse
 and seemed to look at him with flirting eyes—
 this handsome Greek in his suit and new puttees.

The mine guards mounted searchlights on high ground
 and kept the strikers sleepless through the nights
 by playing beams across the tents, shooting
 rifles into the air and shouting curses.
 Tikas had a small tent to himself,
 a phone for calling Lawson in Trinidad.
 Some said they saw a woman in the searchlights
 dashing between the tents to be with Tikas.

Some said she wore the white dress of a nurse.

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Gunfire echoed from the hills. Out of breath,
 a boy came running with the news: Mack Powell,
 a striker who got work on the Greens' ranch
 herding cattle, was hit by a stray bullet.

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The Berwind guards were aiming for some Greeks
out stealing fire wood, and when they heard
they'd shot an unarmed, married man, they laughed
and told Powell's widow where to find his body.

A few days later Louis took his leave
to run an urgent errand up in Denver:
October 13, 1913, Tikas
raised his hand with other immigrants
and in the sight of all his Denver friends
became a citizen. Next day he marched
with Mother Jones to publicize the plight
of miners striking in the southern camps.

No time to waste. He kissed the granny's cheeks
and raced back on the train to Trinidad,
skillfully feigning innocence as guards
patrolled the aisles, eyes peeled for union men.
He met John Lawson in the union office.
"Fifty fellas just got jailed for picketing
here in town. I can't budge. You go to Forbes,
Louis, and tell me what they're up to there."

And Tikas, wanting nothing more than one
night's freedom in his solitary tent,
a brief liaison with the willing nurse,
hopped a north-bound freight and left the rails
to join men huddled in the camp at Forbes.
"They got a secret weapon," one reported.
"Steel plates on a car they call the Death Special.
They claim we shot at them, and now they aim

to mow us down first chance they get." That night
he got his broken sleep, a Yankee now
on the plank floor of a tent full of men
who snuffed their lamps and waited in the dark,
nudged each other when they could hear a car
above them on the hill.

"That's the Baldwin-Felts," a man named Ure
declared in a voice made reedy by his fear.

They woke to gunfire somewhere up the canyon, maybe close to where they'd moved their women. Louis looked at men who hadn't slept and felt his spirits dampened as he had the day he led the Greeks to Ludlow. Now he opened a tent flap and stepped outside and saw the strangely armored car, the guns, and men observing across open ground.

"Careful," said Old Man Ure. "These boys is mean and they's just looking for a reason to shoot. They know we ain't as strong as the Ludlow camp. They aim to break us up-one camp at a time." Louis saw that one of the guards had left the car and crossed the field, waving a white flag. Impulsively he started toward the man. "I wouldn't do that if I was you," said Ure.

But Louis kept on walking—Lawson said they had to keep the peace and he would keep it. The air was cool despite the early sun and he felt strangely unafraid. The man approaching him had strapped a gunbelt on over an unraveling sweater, his hat tipped back so Louis saw his narrow face, a flag in one hand, bottle in another.

"You speak English?" said the man, who stopped an arm's length off. "You want a drink?" He held the bottle out and Louis, who had had no breakfast, took it to his mouth and tasted whiskey for the first time in all his life. "So," said the guard. "You like that? English?" "Yes," said Louis. "I am interpreter." He drank again and passed the bottle back.

The Guard wiped it with his flag. He too drank. "Well, look out, son. We are liable to shoot. You understand me?" Louis felt his blood

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stand still, or seem to flow into the field,
all comprehension gone. "Excuse me, please?"
he said. "Excuse me?" And the guard: "I'd run
if I was you." He turned
and started walking back to the line of men.

Louis ran. He saw the tents ahead,
Heard his own quick breaths and the whipping grass
and then the snap of bullets past his head.
Before he knew it, Old Man Ure had grabbed
his wrist and yanked him up the slope. They drove
through an open flap, and Louis curled up tight
behind a stove. Someone made a noise,
and then he knew that noise was his own scream.

Bullets cut the tent. Across the field
the TAK-TAK-TAK was hardly noise enough
for all the havoc in the camp, bullets
hitting cookstoves, knocking stovepipes loose,
tossing coffee pots and china urns
in pieces everywhere. And then the screams
were coming too from other men in tents
not far away. And then the shooting stopped.

A yell went up across the field, as if
a crowd of cowboys had just joined a dance,
and distant laughter mingled with the screams
inside the tents. Louis looked at Ure
who shook his beard and seemed to mutter prayers.
"You like that?" a guard called across the field.
"You tell folks you just met the Death Special.
We'll keep at it till you boys leave the camp."

More shooting came, sporadic, just enough
to pin them down, but Louis crawled out back
beneath the canvas, snaking over mud
until he reached another tent. He heard
rain pattering on the cloth, now and then
another bullet ricocheting off

a stove or ripping fabric. Half the time
 he thought of the expense to clean his suit,

but such thoughts left him when he saw the boy
 named Marco with nine bullets in his legs,
 and later the man named Luca, shot dead
 and crumpled as if a fist had knocked him down.
All right, thought Tikas, what would Lawson do?
He'd try to keep the peace.
What peace, you idiot? There is no Peace.
So this is how you become American.

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When Louis got to Ludlow, he quickly called
 to Trinidad and gave a full report.
 Lawson hurried north on that night's train
 then went with him next morning back to Forbes.
 They found their way blocked by that covered car,
 but Louis stopped his boss from picking a fight—
 men paused in Denver,

Paused in Trinidad,
 New York and Washington, and held their breath.

One Mr. Steward, Ethelbert, would view
 reports quite distantly—how Rockefeller
 preached an “Open Shop” and saw the union
 trapping miners, now geared up to fight:
If Caliban learns
his masters' language and uses it to curse him,
the blame cannot be all on Caliban,
for he has learned the language of the gun.

It was a witty summary, to be sure,
 though wit means little in the face of war.

David Mason's books include *The Buried Houses*, *The Country I Remember* and *Arrivals*. He teaches at the Colorado College and lives in the mountains outside Colorado Springs.