

An Interdisciplinary Approach: Michael Novak's *The Guns of Lattimer*

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*The Guns of Lattimer*¹ is an important book. It defies classification and thus many readers and scholars don't quite know what to make of it.² It is not a novel, although it contains significant fiction. It is not a scholarly historical study, although it is heavily researched and documented. Even though it explores the late-nineteenth-century attitudes of a western European majority toward a non-English-speaking eastern European minority and investigates the psychology of killing unarmed men, it is neither a cultural study nor a psychological profile. Yet Michael Novak's book cannot be dismissed or ignored for one very critical reason: it is the only book-length study of a labor revolt that ended with the largest number of laborer deaths in such conflicts in nineteenth-century America.

Nineteen men died on September 10, 1897, and at least thirty-seven were wounded, and yet, as Mildred Allen Beik and M. Mark Stolarik point out in this issue, Lattimer has been all but ignored in the discussion of labor's fight for fair wages and tolerable working conditions. Although some fault Novak's lack of scholarly approach and others criticize *The Guns of Lattimer* for the distracting fictional account of a young miner's struggle in America, Michael Novak is very clear about his reason for writing this work. In his introduction, he notes: "Though not a historian, I found a gap in history. There was nothing to do but to fill the gap myself. Confronting painful daily evidence that one of America's largest minorities—the family of the Slavic peoples—needs creative stimulation and intellectual encouragement, I could not evade a sense of obligation" (xvii).

1. Michael Novak, *Guns of Lattimer* (New York: Basic Books, 1978). Page numbers are cited in the text.

2. A number of reviews illustrate a largely positive but uneasy reception of a book which is difficult to classify: T. R. Brooks, *New Republic*, January 6, 1979: 35; R. L. Filippelli, *Library Journal*, October 15, 1978: 2111; Richard Kluger, *New York Times Book Review*, January 28, 1979: 12.

A philosopher and theologian, Novak nonetheless "tried to meet the standards of historians. No sentence in this book, I trust, is factually, in tone or in context, at variance with recorded evidence"(xi). Novak began his research in the early 1970's. In the late 1940's, when Edward Pinkowski was gathering information for his forty-page *Lattimer Massacre* monograph, published in 1950,³ he was able to interview two of the Lattimer marchers, Andrew Meyer and John Miklos, as well as Mary Cheslak Sonderschafer, the eldest daughter of Michael Cheslak. Twenty-five years later such eyewitnesses were no longer available. Novak and his assistants, among them Lisa Lilienthal, granddaughter of Margaret Bonin, whose father had prepared the bodies of ten of the miners for burial, searched for and interviewed family members of the miners. They also discovered pictures of the Lattimer miners. Their collection of newspaper accounts, legal and church documents, notes, photographs, and letters can be found in the Stonehill College Library in North Easton, Massachusetts.

One of Novak's major difficulties is to find ways of representing the motives, sentiments and images of the miners. Although "both the newspaper records and the accessible books and archives tell us much about the reasoning, motives, and feelings of the owners, superintendents, generals, officers of the law, deputies, and soldiers of the Pennsylvania National Guard. . . few strikers were asked for interviews or were sought out for their reflections on America or were requested to deposit their recollections"(xii). To rectify this imbalance, Novak intersperses eleven fictional chapters⁴ that "reveal the feelings, fantasies, and inner lives [sic] of at least one miner who marched on Lattimer"(xiii) and draws on nineteenth-century memoirs and novels such as Karel Capek's *Hordubal* and Thomas Bell's *Out of this Furnace*.⁵

Who, then, is the audience for *The Guns of Lattimer*, if not literary critics or historians or sociologists or psychologists? This book appeals to educated readers who at times find academic prose tedious, who care very much about the story of the men and women who made sacrifices so that their children and grandchildren could thrive, and who are curious about the attitudes, biases, and assumptions of those who had a hand in the shooting, as well as a legal system—the attorneys, judge, and

3. Edward Pinkowski, *Lattimer Massacre* (Philadelphia: Sunshine Press, 1950).

4. These eleven chapters constitute approximately thirty-seven pages, or one-eighth, of the text.

5. Karel Capek, *Hordubal*, translated by M. Weatherall and R. Weatherall (London: G. Allen and Unwin, 1934); Thomas Bell, *Out of this Furnace* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1976).

jury—who acquitted Sheriff James Martin and his eighty-seven indicted deputies. Novak has a story to tell, and for this larger readership he tells it very well. He presents a five-part chronological account, beginning about six weeks before the massacre and ending with the verdict—a short epilogue provides information on later union-related labor events.

Part One: August 1897 provides the cultural backgrounds and interests of both the Slavic miners and the Markle and Pardee mine owners, presents the current unrest and distrust, profiles the major figures in the six-month drama of the massacre and the trial—defense attorney Henry Palmer, division superintendent Gomer Jones, Sheriff James Martin, union organizer John Fahy, and Father Richard Aust, describes the mining conditions, and introduces the fictional miner Benedikt (Ben) Sakmar. Ben is a nineteen-year-old miner who has been in the United States for two years and hopes in four more years to save \$3000 and return to his native Brutovce in eastern Slovakia a rich man. He is in many ways a typical young man in a foreign country trying to make his fortune; he is handsome and robust, works hard, allows himself few luxuries, and makes little effort to learn the native language or to meet and mingle with the Irish or other English-speaking miners and townsfolk. Yet a month ago, at the July 4th town picnic, Maureen Kearney had caught his eye and spent an hour walking with him and teaching him English words before her brother and four of his friends accosted and beat him, calling him “hunky” and “ape.” The scene poignantly portrays the prejudice and bias toward the “foreign” workers, who often made little effort to fit into the social structure of the rest of the community. In the three fictional chapters in part one, Novak also presents some of the customs of the Slavic community and the personalities and interests of five of the men who died at Lattimer: John Futa, Steve Jurich, Andrew Jurechek, Jacob (Jack) Tomashantas, and especially Mike Cheslak, who “was almost a father to the others”(57). His chapter on Steve Jurich's wedding introduces traditions and cultural behaviors:

In their best Sunday clothes and Sunday shoes, the men sat listlessly through the wedding mass. . . .In their flowered patterns, lace, and colorful embroidery, the women seemed transformed. Gone for the day were their baggy black skirts, dark babushkas, and dirty bare feet. . . .Weddings were like signs of resurrection. . . .

A touch of wildness and happiness were expected to break out. Relatives might quarrel. Guests might drink too much and fight. . . .At weddings. . . .alcohol flowed freely, and there was plenty to eat. Many stuffed themselves. The Slavs were usually quite inhibited about sexual matters; neither in dress nor in speech was much made of it. Yet

at a wedding a certain amount of ribaldry broke forth. Sweaty, boisterous dances marked the celebration; otherwise emotionally repressed, the Slavs felt abandon in their dances. Sweat trickled down the backs of the dancers (59-60).

Music at the reception was provided by the miners. John Futa, who was a member of the Hazleton Slavonic Band, played a silver trumpet; Mike Cheslak's maroon violin, which his father played before him, highlighted the folk songs. During the *redova*,

The bride was caught and whirled in a dance by every man present and virtually all the women, one after the other, without pause. The wedding cake was cut and each dancer as he or she finished was served a slice of cake and a drink. The best man was Andrew Jurechek, and he had the privilege of the last dance. Midway through their twirling, tradition commanded that Jurechek pretend to run off with the bride. The women shrieked. Then the groom was supposed to be alert and give chase. Steve Jurich ran through the crowd, caught his beloved by the arm and holding her hand high led her back into the center of the room. She was flushed, breathless, nearly exhausted, and now they belonged to each other forever(61).

In scenes such as this, Michael Novak presents a people who support and care for each other, not "apes" but men and women with friends, children, and traditions that form the core of their lives.

Part Two: September 1-9, 1897 begins with the strike vote of the Lehigh and Wilkes-Barre workers. Although Sheriff Martin did not consider the strike serious enough to delay his vacation to Atlantic City, he was soon summoned back by the mine operators. Novak's miner Ben is afraid and wants to stay out of trouble so that he can work to save enough money to go home: "he had nightmares in which uniformed officers grabbed him violently by the arms and wrote something on official documents so that he could never hold a job. Then he was trapped in America, without any money or any means of earning any"(83). Ben and Steve and Johanna Jurich discuss the value of joining the strike. While Steve is in favor of going on strike, Ben wishes that there were no strike; he prefers to keep a low profile. Ben doesn't like working underground and senses that learning English is the key to a job outside the mines: "His slowness in learning English discouraged him. . . .His tongue and teeth were entirely untrained for English sounds. . . .In all the different languages [of eastern Europe], he could recognize sounds and similar words and the rhythm of the sentences. English was a language beyond his capacities"(85).

The men whom Sheriff Martin deputized and armed with new rifles and ammunition on the evening of September 6th—Labor Day, ironically—could certainly speak English. All relied in some way on the coal industry for their livelihood; many were businessmen; most traced their roots to England, Germany, or Ireland. Novak also stresses the strategic importance of the Lattimer Mines. Since they were north of Hazleton and somewhat removed from the active strike zone, they provided a base from which to reopen other mines to the south.

John Eagler served as translator for John Fahy, the UMW union organizer who, on September 7, spoke to the Harwood miners and collected the union enrollment dues. Novak's miner Ben joins reluctantly:

Ben thought long about surrendering thirty cents to pay union dues. He believed he should go along with the others, but he wished they had decided there was no need for the union. Thirty cents represented a third of a day's work, and many weeks this summer he had earned only three dollars(96).

Part Three, the account of the massacre, opens with the beginning of the march in Harwood. Several times in this section Novak takes pains to remind us that these marchers were unarmed and carried not one but two American flags. Ben Sakmar's fictional actions and reflections frame the nine chapters of this section. He has joined the march reluctantly and is fearful that he may lose his job and any hope of returning to his family in Brutovce. He believes, however, that peasants everywhere need to join forces, especially in Slovakia, where "the troops of the empire kept a firm hand, and the organization of Magyar landholders could never be defied"(114).

Only after Novak's historical account of the killings does he give us his sense through Ben of what the many "unharmed" marchers must have seen and felt. Ben at first ran but realized that it might be safer to "hug the ground."

The shooting seemed to him impossible. It made a mockery of America. . . . [A]fter West Hazleton, [h]e had been afraid of the guns. Most of the men had seemed to feel that nothing could happen to them. Mr. Fahy and the leaders of the strike had told them the law. The police chief of West Hazleton had assured them it was so. Yet the acrid smell of gunpowder and the clouds of dust that shrouded the scene of battle. . . showed that they had been misled. The groans and screams of the wounded were pitiable. . . .

Ben wandered back to search for Cheslak, Jurich, and Futa. When he looked on the still bodies, so pale and without life, he could hardly

believe that an hour before, taking a drink a Farley's Hotel pump, they had been alive. He helped three men lift Cheslak's inert body, bullet holes in the forehead, onto a wagon. Sticky blood covered Ben's hands and clothes. He saw Jurich in the culvert beside the road, streams of blood flowing among the rusty rocks. He wondered who would tell his bride(134-135).

Novak concludes his presentation of the massacre with an account of the scene at Hilary Bonin's funeral home, one of two in Hazleton, by Bonin's daughter Margaret, who was then nine years old. Her father had no time for dinner that night; he was making coffins. A miner whom her father identified as Sebastian Brotkowski "had a gaping hole in the back of his head"(137). As an adult, every year on Memorial Day Margaret Bonin placed flowers on the victims' graves.

Part Four details the eighteen days immediately following the massacre: Sheriff Martin's conflicting accounts, the arrival of the National Guard in and around Hazleton, and the funerals of Cheslak, Futa, Jurich and Jurechek. Mark Stolarik's essay notes the importance of the fraternal benefit societies and Novak emphasizes the community and ethnic participation:

The members of the Hazleton Slovak Band came in uniform, some of them holding their gold-laced caps, all of the wearing long strips of black crepe (161)

[John Futa's] silver trumpet, which he had played in the National Slovak Society band, lay on the coffin amid the flowers. . . .The members of the St Joseph's National Slovak Society, wearing white, blue, and red sashes across the right shoulder (the colors of the Slovak flag), and the Italian St. Peter and Paul's Society members, wearing blue and gold uniforms and carrying silver cavalry sabers, began to form in ranks. Behind them formed the Polish Socrasa Fondata wearing gray uniforms and carrying traditional sabers (162).

The uniforms and weapons angered and concerned General John Gobin of the National Guard and he sent orders to the Poles not to carry any arms at the funerals scheduled for the following day.

Novak places Ben in the crowd of mourners. As he leaves the cemetery and the burial of four of his best friends, Maureen calls to him and the two spend the rest of the Sunday among the mourners and the national guardsmen. Ben agrees to come to McAdoo and "talk your father"(166); Maureen's company comforts his pain and loss.

Novak's focus in the rest of part four is on the change of venue from Hazleton to Wilkes Barre, the framing of the indictment so that it

would be very difficult to prove, and the coal companies' support of the sheriff and the deputies. He meticulously details the ways that the Commonwealth colluded with the defense in the hours and days immediately after the massacre to assure acquittal. The final indictment had named Michael Cheslak as the sole victim and warrants had been served on the sheriff and all the deputies, rather than just on the few who had pursued the strikers and had continued to fire on them. It would be impossible to prove who had fired the shots that had killed Michael Cheslak. It would also be very difficult to convince any jury to convict eighty-seven prominent citizens for a crime that not all of them had committed. In the November elections a new district attorney was elected and the trial was rescheduled for February.

The fifth and last major part of *The Guns of Lattimer* deals with the trial, which began on February 1, 1898 and ended when the verdict was read shortly after 10:00 a.m. on March 9. Novak documents the testimony of the miners but also documents at length the contradictions and untruths in testimony of Sheriff Martin and several of the deputies. He also details the biases and unethical behavior of Judge Stanley Woodward and Attorney John Lenahan, the chief defense attorney. Novak's sense of drama is sharpest in this section. Even though, on February 10, the defense agreed that the strikers had planned to march unarmed, that they had not been armed during the march, and that the deputies did kill and wound all who died or were hurt, the lies of the defendants and the derogatory slanders of Attorney Lenahan were more than enough to garner an acquittal for all the defendants.

The last three chapters of Ben's story occur near the end of part four and the beginning of part five. These sections detail the developing relationship between Ben and Maureen, rather than Ben's life as a miner, and may to some readers seem even more intrusive than the other fictive chapters. Yet Novak remains true to his goal of using Ben "to tell an essential part of the story that otherwise could not be told"(xiv). Ben meets Maureen's Irish parents and makes peace with her brother. He spends almost every Sunday—his only day free of the mines—with her. He begins to realize that he will marry Maureen and will not be able to return to Slovakia. His goal now is to save enough money to move to Pittsburgh, find work in the steel mills so that he can "stay aboveground [sic]." As he learns more English he begins to regard himself as an American: "his sons would speak English and play baseball and go to school. They would know nothing of the Old Country. They would never be half-men"(195). During the cold winter months of 1898 Ben

hears news of the trial but has no delusions about the outcome. His main concern is to find enough work to leave for Homestead in the spring(213). After he and Maureen are married in April, they settle in McKeesport, and he never returns to Slovakia. His sister continues to write to him for some years, but he does not share much of his past with his children. When he dies in 1962, one of his sons has played American Legion baseball and his grandchildren are attending college; one even becomes a lawyer(238-239).

Through this merging of historical fact and fictive action and reflection, Michael Novak attempts to give us a more complete sense of the Lattimer "events" than do the documents that remain available to scholars. The details of Ben's "life" ring true to the descendants of the Slavic immigrants who worked in the mines in and around Hazleton. Shortly after *The Guns of Lattimer* was published, I was part of a reading group at the Hazleton Art League who reviewed and discussed the book at a monthly meeting. Many of the members' eastern European great-grandfathers and granduncles were first-generation miners; they knew well the working conditions and the poverty of their forefathers and they have not forgotten their sacrifice.