This paper examines how the Colorado National Guard troops that carried out the Ludlow Massacre understood strike duty and explained their actions against the mostly southern and eastern European immigrants who lived in the Ludlow tent colony during the 1913-14 southern Colorado coal strike. We know that successful union organizing campaigns and strikes among unskilled and immigrant workers before the 1930s were the exception rather than the rule, but we don’t know nearly enough about why workers so often lost these battles. More specifically, and in relation to my work, we know that military intervention helped business owners break hundreds of strikes between the end of the Civil War and World War II, but we don’t know much about why—-in a functioning democracy—such intervention was possible over such a long period of time. This is an important question. One scholar has estimated that somewhere between 500 and 800 workers were killed in U.S. industrial conflicts between 1872 and 1914. Only czarist Russia, with between 2,000 and 2,500 workers killed during the same years, eclipsed the United States among industrialized nations.1

Of course, militaries—whether the United States Army or the National Guards—were not responsible for all of these killings, but they certainly contributed more than their share. More to the point, historians of the United States seldom look to czarist Russia to find similarities. Clearly, military willingness—and eagerness—to break strikes is a site of anti-unionism that cries out for more attention.

The 1913-14 coal strike and the Ludlow Massacre tells us a great deal about the content of anti-union ideology in the U.S. West at the turn of the twentieth century. My paper will show that the Colorado National Guard was, to a significant extent, independent of the coal mining industry’s control. It’s not that the Guard was simply a tool of mine owners, or that Guardsmen, as some scholars have suggested, shared class sympathies with the mine owners. Such sympathies certainly existed, particularly in the Guard’s officer corps, but Guardsmen clearly had their own deeply felt reasons for strikebreaking, and those reasons were inextricably tied to the creation and maintenance of the U.S. empire. The Colorado National Guard had fought the Plains Indians in the West during the late nineteenth century, and more than a few of the troops who were at Ludlow had also served in the Philippines War (1899-1902). This history helps Guardsmen equate the immigrant miners they faced on strike duty with the “savage tribes” of the Western Plains and the Filipino "insurrectionists" who resisted U.S. imperialism. The striking immigrant coal miners emerged as racially inferior non-citizens who also violated white, native-born and middle-class sexual conventions and conceptions of masculinity. Guardsmen, therefore, believed these immigrant strikers had to be defeated because they threatened the Anglo-American “civilization” that the Guard had helped spread across the continent and across the Pacific.

Indeed, the belief that immigrant, working-class labor militancy posed a dire threat to white, native-born supremacy over the North American continent helps explain why turn-of-the-twentieth-century strikes were so violent and so often defeated with military force. The challenge these workers posed convinced National Guardsmen—and the larger public in Colorado—that nothing less than Anglo-American civilization was at stake. This larger social and cultural context is essential to a complete understanding of turn-of-the-twentieth-century anti-unionism.

Readers for the University of Illinois Press have recommended publication of the manuscript on which this paper is based. I believe that this seminar will be of tremendous help to me as I finish my research and continue working on the revisions recommended by the readers.