

SHOOTING THE BOLSHEVIKS*

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In May 1919, an American motion picture crew filmed a German firing squad executing eighteen Latvian Bolsheviks at Jelgava. The story behind this episode illustrates how Latvia became a fiercely contested battleground in the months after the Armistice ended the Great War. The shocking film footage may have persuaded Woodrow Wilson and the peacemakers in Paris to rein in the rampant Germans, whose policing of the Baltic they had tolerated as a way to prevent Russian Bolshevism from spreading westward. The execution footage was included in the documentary film *Starvation*, which premiered in New York City in January 1920, the first of its countless appearances over the decades in films about the World War I and the Russian Revolution.

Key words: World War I, Latvia, Bolshevism, hunger, motion pictures.

In the late afternoon of May 26, 1919, in a field about thirty miles outside Riga, Latvia, a squad of nine German riflemen executed eighteen Latvian Bolsheviks. The prisoners were shot in groups of three, each victim receiving one bullet to the chest and two to the head before toppling backwards into a freshly dug grave. "It was German efficiency at its best," wrote U.S. Army Captain Howell Foreman, an American relief worker who witnessed the execution.¹

Captain Foreman was one of a dozen Americans whose presence on the scene may have influenced the operations of the firing squad that day. If so, this was because one of their number, Lieutenant Frank Johnson, happened to be a newsreel cameraman. His camera recorded the scene for the ages: the reading of the death sentence, the removal of the prisoners' boots, and the businesslike procedure

* The original version of this article was published in *Hoover Digest*, 2012, No. 2.

of the German soldiers. In its day, Johnson's celluloid was one of the most sensational film sequences ever shot. Even today, after decades of atrocities recorded on film and tape, the choreographed dispatch of the eighteen Bolsheviks is a spellbinder. That piece of film is now housed at the Hoover Institution Archives, as part of the Herman Axelbank Motion Picture Film Collection. The irony in this is that at its first public showing, in New York in January 1920, Johnson's film sequence was associated with the name of Herbert Hoover.

After the armistice of November 11, 1918, Hoover had joined President Woodrow Wilson and the other U.S. diplomats serving in Paris with the American Mission to Negotiate Peace. Among Hoover's several roles, as head of the American Relief Administration (at that time for a U.S. government agency) he had the enormous job of coordinating American food delivery throughout Central and Southeastern Europe and the Near East. The delivery of food was complicated by the persistence of military hostilities in the scramble for territory that once belonged to the German, Russian, Austrian, and Ottoman empires.²

A chief concern of the Allied diplomats in Paris was that Bolshevism would fill a vacuum left by the withdrawal of the German military from the Baltic region. The Allies thus arranged for German troops to remain in place and help prevent the Russian Bolshevik infection from spreading. In the words of a report sent by the chief of the mission dispatched to the Baltic by the American Commission to Negotiate Peace, "Bolshevism is the supreme peril, not Germany. Bolshevism is still uncontrolled and threatens the world. Germany, though still a danger, is beaten and can be controlled. At whatever cost, we must see that Bolshevism does not break through these barrier states, Finland, Esthonia, Latvia and Lithuania. This is the key-note of all my recommendations to Paris."³

Latvia became the decisive battleground of this contest in the spring of 1919. Latvia had belonged to the Russian Empire until it fell to the German invaders after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Then came a brief period of independence in the wake of the German surrender in November 1918, followed in January 1919 by the establishment of a Soviet government in Riga, the capital, whose residents were subject to a furious Red Terror.⁴

Beginning in February, German soldiers started to arrive on the scene to help stem the Red tide. They included the 1st Guards Reserve division, sent from Berlin, and *Freikorps* volunteers recruited

by means of vague promises of land in the Baltic. These recruits joined up with a *Freikorps* unit called the Iron Brigade (later Iron Division) and the *Baltische Landeswehr*, a formation dominated by Baltic Germans. Together, these anti-Bolshevik forces, under the overall command of General Rüdiger von der Goltz, were successful in their effort to drive out the Red forces, yet in the process they chased the Latvian Provisional Government from its seat in the port city of Libau (today Liepāja) on the Baltic. And after Riga fell on May 22, 1919, that city became the scene of a White Terror that rivaled its Red predecessor in savagery.⁵

Hoover's American relief workers, demobilized officers who had served with the American Expeditionary Force, were poised to enter the scene on the heels of anti-Bolshevik forces and help restore a semblance of normal life. These Americans were scandalized by the behavior and attitudes of the German soldiers, who were quick to say that while they may have lost the war on the Western Front, they had won the war in the East. The objective of the German forces, the Americans concluded, was the establishment of German supremacy in the Baltic, the gateway to Russia.⁶

Later, after their Baltic adventure had come to an end and they had been forced to return to Germany empty handed, these German Freebooters would claim they had been "stabbed in the back" by the Weimar government; for the time being, however, they were doing a considerable amount of shooting in the head and chest. The victims numbered in the thousands, with the heaviest toll in Riga. The Germans classified their prey as "Bolsheviks," but while this label was no doubt accurate in some cases, as often as not it was applied indiscriminantly in order to target uncooperative Latvians.⁷

The Americans gained admission to the execution at Jelgava on May 26 for the price of a pack of cigarettes – at least that is the story told by the cameraman, Lieutenant Johnson. Other testimony supports his statement that the German officer in charge obliged the Americans by moving up the time of the execution so as to catch the afternoon light. The Latvian soldiers went to their deaths dressed in their military uniforms – minus their boots because at the time shoes were as coveted as cigarettes. It is unclear whether the prisoners understood before the death sentence was read out that they were to be shot. Cameraman Johnson observed that "None of them ever had seen a motion picture camera before, and they

stared at us, uncertain and bewildered as to whether we had brought a new form of sudden death or not.”⁸

One of the doomed men in Johnson’s film, however, appears undaunted by the proceedings. Ordered to lie on his stomach like his comrades, he nonetheless lifts his head and laughs at the camera. His laughter seems to be an act of defiance – or perhaps he has lost his grip in the face of looming death. In fact, this particular prisoner literally dies laughing, as Captain Minard Hamilton noted in his description of the execution: “When all was ready the officer called the name of the first detail. The men named immediately jumped to their feet and ran to the hole, took a look at their grave, turned, faced the firing squad and stood to attention. No bandages over their eyes, nothing. They just trotted into place like boys lining up for a Virginia Reel – and the first one actually looked his executioners in the eye, threw back his head and laughed.”⁹

A striking detail visible on the screen but which goes unmentioned in eyewitness accounts is the performance of several of the victims’ hats, which, at the moment the bullets hit their mark, are launched several feet skywards before descending into the open grave after their owners. This, as well as the laughing Bolshevik’s hysteria literally on the edge of the grave, gives the sequence the feel of slapstick, an impression enhanced by the unnaturally fast speed of the 35 mm film. Such thoughts may have run through the mind of the cameraman, who as head of a film production company in New York City had some theatrical experience. “I’ve taken lots of executions,” he told Captain Hamilton once the performance was over, “but they have always got up and walked away afterward.”¹⁰ Yet Johnson’s final shot, a look down at the tangle of victims in their mass grave, leaves no doubt that these Latvian extras would be unavailable for any future performance.

The U.S. Army officers who arrived to administer the delivery of food relief sounded the alarm to their superiors in Paris about what Johnson called “the ruthless advances of the Hun”. In order to clinch their case, they rushed Johnson’s execution film to the Peace Conference, where it was screened for the assembled diplomats. By several accounts, the scenes of the German firing squad in action helped convince the peacemakers to order the immediate withdrawal of the German troops from the Baltic.¹¹

Johnson, a motion picture man with a flair for self-promotion, later boasted in a story he wrote for the Hearst newspapers that,

HERBERT HOOVER ARCHIVES
FIRST SHOWING IN ANY LAND

FREDERICK B. WARREN
 presents

The Tremendous Picturization of

HERBERT HOOVER
and the American Relief Administration Work in

STARVATION

Made under the Complete Supervision
 and Direction of

GEORGE F. ZIMMER

Covering These Countries:

RUSSIA	POLAND	AUSTRIA
COURLAND	LETVIA	ESTHONIA
UKRAINIA	HUNGARY	EAST GALICIA
TURKEY	ARMENIA	RUMANIA
GERMANY	HOLLAND	BELGIUM
FRANCE	SWEDEN	DENMARK

ITALY, with glimpses in other lands

Photographed by eight daring camera-men frequently facing death. It is the only record the world will ever have of the hunger and salvation of a Continent: of the greatest disaster in the history of Civilization.

In the prints for the other large cities and the various sections of the United States there have been prepared sections of this picture dealing with men and women local to those particular regions, so that, as seen nationally, each section of the nation will see its own people, photographed in Europe, engaged in their splendid work of humanity as the representatives of the American people and the generous American pocketbook.

A handbill announces the documentary film *Starvation*
 in New York City in January 1920

thanks to its Paris screening, his Latvian horror film had proved to be “a deciding factor in the deliberations of the greatest legislative body of modern times. Never was a more amazing motion picture performance given, nor will such a one ever be possible again.” In Johnson’s telling, President Wilson, watching in disbelief as the Latvian soldiers are laid low, turns white with revulsion. Rising to his

feet, he voices outrage at this manifestation of German brutality and gratitude to the Americans who captured it on film: "The gentlemen of the motion pictures have rendered a service to humanity!"

A starkly different portrait of the contributions of the motion picture men comes from a contemporaneous article published in a Berlin newspaper under the title "Brutality of American Officers". Here the Americans on the scene are portrayed as heartless scoundrels, goading the German occupiers to finish off their Red captives. As the eighteen prisoners were being led through the streets toward their place of execution, "the Americans drove three cars beside or behind them and photographed and filmed them in a conspicuous manner. When the prisoners then advanced in groups of three to the open grave, the Americans had it arranged that the prisoners should face them in order that the photographs would be as ideal as possible. The elaborate preparations, which were accompanied by laughing and joking, protracted the cruel minutes of waiting for the prisoners, so that most of them entirely lost their up to that point passably good composure, and unspeakably painful incidents ensued."¹²

In this account, while the Germans conducted themselves with dignity and reserve throughout, the Americans behaved to the end like uncivilized brutes. Before driving off in their cars, "They inquired with great interest concerning the place and time of the next executions." Because none of the Americans appears on camera, the film offers no evidence to support these allegations. Cameraman Johnson seems to have been aware of such charges, however, to judge by a defensive note he struck in his self-inflating newspaper article. The German executioners, he wrote, were "laughing and jesting" while the American eyewitnesses behaved in accordance with the principles of "humanity and justice". In fact, Johnson's film shows the Germans to be coldblooded killers accomplishing their task without a hint of frivolity. The only laughter recorded by the camera is that of the convulsing Bolshevik prisoner.

* * *

The Paris Peace Conference was only the first noteworthy performance of Johnson's notorious film sequence. The following year it came to the big screen as part of the documentary film *Starvation*, a nearly two-hour compilation of footage shot by a variety of American newsreel cameramen accompanying American relief



In December 1918, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson arrives in Paris, where French President Raymond Poincaré escorts him past cheering crowds



Herbert Hoover, chairman of the American Relief Administration

officials throughout Central and Eastern Europe in those chaotic months after the Armistice. *Starvation* was set to premiere at the Manhattan Opera House on January 9, 1920, and then be distributed to theaters across the country.

The impresario behind the film was ARA publicity chief George Barr Baker, a former magazine editor and longtime associate of Herbert Hoover who had arranged to send the motion picture men into the field alongside the American relief workers. *Starvation*, as the uplifting story of America's postwar benevolence, would feature images of American relief ships steaming into ports on the Baltic and the Black Seas, long lines of emaciated children and adults waiting to receive their food, children being fed in soup kitchens, and the obligatory scenes of worst-case children suffering from severe hunger and hunger-related disease.¹³

Starvation's subtitle was "The Camera-Drama of a Hungry World," yet the film's true villain was Bolshevism, which Baker identified as the "twin-brother" of starvation.¹⁴ Thus, among the heartwarming images of American relief, room was found for Johnson's Latvia execution sequence, as well as a chilling episode captured on film by one of Baker's teams of cameramen in the Russian city of Pskov, where a White Russian army general arranged for the public hanging of three Bolshevik "spies" for the camera. The fact that alleged Bolsheviks were on the receiving end of this violence, and not its perpetrators, could easily be accommodated. The implicit message of *Starvation* was that wherever the "Bolshevik element" is allowed to gain a foothold atrocity begets atrocity. As Baker wrote to Hoover two weeks before the film's premiere: "The definite value of the picture is that it is the first anti-Bolshevik document possessing any potential strength with the masses. No normal mother who sees it will be likely to tolerate talk of direct action in her home."¹⁵

George H. Nash, who as Herbert Hoover's biographer has tracked Baker's public relations activities and his close association with Hoover, considers it "likely that this was in effect a Hoover campaign film designed by Baker to advance Hoover's presidential prospects in 1920".¹⁶ Hoover, who had recently returned from Paris to Washington, was a rising political star. There was much speculation that he would become a presidential candidate in 1920, and even though he was serving in Woodrow Wilson's Democratic administration, both major political parties were taking him seriously as a potential candidate. None of this was lost on Baker, who figured that Hoover's

endorsement of *Starvation* would be a win-win, serving to promote a film that would publicize Hoover's postwar statesmanship and humanitarianism. On December 30, 1919, Baker cabled Hoover in Washington to ask that he allow his name to appear prominently in the announcement for the film – although Hoover himself would make only two brief appearances on the screen.¹⁷

Edgar Rickard, another Hoover confidant associated with American food relief, was skeptical, warning that Baker's film, far from giving a boost to Hoover and the ARA, might well boomerang. As Rickard reasoned, "One picture of children's feeding is just like another, no matter in what country it may have been taken, and the only films which have come over, particularly Lieutenant Johnson's films, are so filled up with Bolshevik outrages and atrocities of the Germans that we could not possibly stand for them." Rickard was also sensitive to the mood of the American people in an election year. "From now until November of next year the entire country will be completely swamped in a presidential election," he observed, which meant that the American public was turning inward, especially at a time of deepening economic recession. "The whole country is absolutely and thoroughly sick of the European war and has settled down to a definite fight on domestic problems which are very serious."¹⁸

Baker won the argument, and Hoover's name appeared in large print on the opening-night announcement for *Starvation*. The premiere, on January 9, 1920, was preceded by an aggressive publicity campaign carefully coordinated by Baker. His preparations paid off, as the chief movie review outlets of the day all came through in the way he had hoped. *Variety* praised the film as a record of America's "work of humanity" and "also a stirring object lesson why America should not permit the radical element to obtain a hold and overthrow any of the present governmental institutions".¹⁹ According to *Photoplay*, "The picture is calculated to make you want to help feed the starving nations. It very likely will."²⁰ *Moving Picture World* applauded the film for bringing to vivid life the story of how "America erected a bulwark of food to stem the tide of the Bolsheviks".²¹

These and similar reviews may have cheered Baker, but he knew better, because he had been at *Starvation*'s premiere and had seen for himself the depressing effect the film had produced on its audience. People were shocked by what they saw on the screen, but not in the way Baker and the filmmakers had intended. The reviewer for *The New York Times*, echoing a complaint of many others

in attendance, noted that while the scenes of American mercy were heartwarming, the film “unhappily and irrelevantly dragged in ghastly executions of Bolsheviki by German firing squads, and even more excruciating hangings of Bolsheviki for some unnamed crime by some unnamed enemy”. Such scenes “left one cold with an unameliorated terror”.²²

Baker recognized that the *Times* reviewer was correct, and that he and the film’s producers had miscalculated. Concerned about having associated Hoover’s name with what was shaping up to be a serious flop, Baker could take comfort in one sentence in the *Times* review: “These pictures, ‘photographed through the assistance of Herbert Hoover,’ give no internal evidence of having passed under his eye in their final form.” More consolation came in the form of *Variety*’s only reservation about the film: “As a picture it may be propaganda for the coming boom to secure the presidential nomination for Herbert Hoover, but there is so little of Hoover in the picture that if it is propaganda for him it is of the most subtle sort.”

The distance between Hoover and *Starvation* in the public mind was just about the only good news that Baker could report in his letter to Hoover of January 13, four days and eight performances after the premier. By then the film had been recut and shortened and its run in New York scheduled to end within a few days. “I said that I would not get you into trouble,” a chastened Baker wrote to Hoover. “I have not done so. The enclosed clippings indicate that the public is not led to believe that you have any interest in the film.”²³

Starvation never made it beyond New York City. No print of the film survives, although Johnson’s execution sequence was salvaged and eventually landed in the Hoover Archives. It may not be the first execution ever captured on film, but it may well be the oldest surviving such footage. It has appeared in numerous documentary films about World War I and the Russian Revolution over the years, often improperly identified as visual evidence of Whites slaughtering Reds during the Russian Civil War. This is no doubt due in large part to Max Eastman, the socialist writer and former associate of Leon Trotsky who, in editing the 1937 documentary film *Tsar to Lenin*, identified the executioners as soldiers of the White Russian Army under Admiral Alexander Kolchak. Eastman also contrived to heighten the drama of the sequence by manipulating the images. Instead of taking his place among the first trio of victims, the laughing Bolshevik, after nine of his comrades have been shot dead, is shown



The “laughing Bolshevik,” one of the doomed Latvians, appeared to taunt his executioners to the very end



Three Latvian “Bolsheviks” — of a total eighteen — facing a firing squad in May 1919, moments before being shot to death and toppling backward into their grave

looking up from the ground and cackling, in what is meant to be a spine-tingling cutaway shot. Thanks to the editor's handiwork, the laughing Bolshevik exits last, taunting his executioners to the end, as narrator Eastman intones: "The Red soldier is *still* laughing!"²⁴

Baker, together with Rickard, would help get Herbert Hoover elected to the White House in 1928. By then Baker had recovered from the considerable financial loss he took as a result of *Starvation*, a total of nearly \$11,000. He never recovered his enthusiasm for moviemaking. As he wrote to a New York State tax auditor a few years after his cinematic debacle, "My advice to a young man about to risk money in a motion picture is – 'No.'"²⁵

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BOĻŠEVIKU NOŠAUŠANA

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1919. gada maijā amerikāņu filmēšanas grupa nofilmēja, kā no vācu kareivjiem izveidota šāvēju komanda Jelgavā nošauj 18 latviešu boļševikus. Ar šo notikumu saistītais stāsts ilustrē, kā Latvija drīz pēc pamiera noslēgšanas, kas izbeidza Pirmo pasaules karu, kļuva par kaujaslauku, kurā norisinājās sivas cīņas. Iespējams, tieši šis šokējošais filmas materiāls pārliecināja Vudro Vilsonu un citus pamiera slēdzējus Parīzē, ka nepieciešams savaldīt trakojošos vāciešus, kuru kārtības uzturēšanas metodes Baltijā viņi bija pacietuši kā līdzekli, kas novērsis krievu boļševisma izplatīšanos uz rietumiem. Filmamateriāls ar nošaušanas ainām tika iekļauts dokumentālajā filmā ar nosaukumu "Bads", kas pirmizrādi piedzīvoja 1920. gada janvārī Ņujorkā, un kopš tā laika vairāku gadu desmitu garumā tas ir neskaitāmas reizes demonstrēts filmās par Pirmo pasaules karu un revolūciju Krievijā.

Atslēgas vārdi: Pirmais pasaules karš, Latvija, boļševiki, bads, kinofilmas.

Kopsavilkums

1919. gada 26. maija vēlā pēcpusdienā kādā laukā netālu no Latvijas pilsētas Mītavas (mūsdienu Jelgavas) šāvēju komanda, kurā ietilpa deviņi vācu strēlnieki, izpildīja nāvessodu 18 latviešu boļševikiem. Ieslodzītie tika nošauti grupās pa trim, katrs upuris saņēma vienu lodi krūtīs un divas galvā, tad atmuguriski iegāzās svaigi izraktajā kapa bedrē. Amerikāņu filmēšanas grupa šo skatu iemūžināja kinolentē. Filmēšanas grupa bija ieradusies Latvijā, lai dokumentētu amerikāņu organizētās pārtikas izdalīšanas operācijas, kuru veikšanu sarežģīja nemītīgā karadarbība cīņā par šo Austrumeiropas teritorijas daļu. Vislielākās raizes sabiedroto lielvalstu diplomātiem darīja apsvērums, ka pēc vācu karaspēka atkāpšanās no Baltijas reģiona viņu vietu ieņems boļševiki. Tāpēc sabiedrotie panāca, ka vācu karaspēks apņēmas palīdzēt aizkavēt krievu boļševisma izplatīšanos uz rietumiem. Tādējādi Latvija kļuva par kaujaslauku, kurā norisinājās sīvas cīņas.

Sākot ar 1919. gada februāri, vācu karavīri ieradās Latvijā, lai palīdzētu atspiest atpakaļ sarkano karaspēkus. Viņu vidū bija 1. gvardes rezerves divīzija no Berlīnes un *Freikorps* brīvprātīgie, kas bija savervēti ar miglainiem solījumiem, ka viņi tiks pie sava zemes stūrīša Baltijā. Šie rekrūši iestājās par Dzelzs brigādi (vēlāk Dzelzs divīziju) sauktā *Freikorps* vienībā un Baltijas landesvērā, kurā dienēja galvenokārt baltvācieši. Abi kopā šie pret boļševikiem noskaņotie spēki, kurus komandēja ģenerālis Rīdigers fon der Golcs, guva panākumus cīņā pret sarkanajiem, tomēr vienlaikus viņi arī padzina Latvijas Pagaidu valdību no tās sēdekļa Baltijas jūras ostas pilsētā Libavā (mūsdienu Liepājā). Un, kad 1919. gada 22. maijā krita Rīga, šī pilsēta kļuva par vietu, kurā plosījās baltais terors, kas savā nežēlīgumā neatpalika no sarkanā terora.

ASV armijas virsnieki, kuri bija ieradušies Latvijā, lai uzraudzītu pārtikas sadali, sacēla trauksmi par vāciešu izrēķināšanos ar latviešu boļševikiem un steidzās nogādāt filmas materiālu Parīzes miera konferences dalībniekiem. Spriežot pēc vairāku aculiecinieku stāstiem, tieši šie dokumentālie kadri palīdzējuši pārliecināt miera sarunu vedējus izdot pavēli par vācu karaspēka tūlītēju atsaukšanu no Baltijas.

Nākamajā gadā epizode, kurā redzama latviešu boļševiku nošaušana, nonāca uz lielajiem ekrāniem kā daļa no gandrīz divu stundu ilgās dokumentālās filmas “Bads”, kurā bija samontēti kadri, kas fiksēja amerikāņu piegādātās pārtikas izdalīšanu Centrālajā un Austrumu Eiropā haotiskajos mēnešos pēc pamiera noslēgšanas. Filma “Bads”, kuras pirmizrāde notika 1920. gada 9. janvārī Ņujorkas Manhetenas Operas namā, izgāzās, pa daļai tāpēc, ka publiku šokēja šaušalīgās nāvessoda izpildes ainas. Šī filma tā arī nenonāca kinoteātros ārpus Ņujorkas, un no tās nav saglabājusies neviena kopija, lai gan materiāls ar minēto nošaušanas epizodi tika izglābts, un galu galā tas nonāca Stenfordas Universitātes Hūvera institūta arhīvos. Gadu gaitā tas ir ticis izrādīts daudzās dokumentālajās filmās par Pirmo pasaules karu un revolūciju Krievijā, lai gan skatītāji to parasti uztver nepareizi – kā liecību par balto zvērībām pret sarkanajiem Krievijas pilsoņu kara laikā.