

Hoffman's Hawk

A University of Kansas Jayhawk Carved During the Russian Revolution of 1917 Reappears at KU in the Twenty-First Century

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Nesting *matreshka* dolls featuring KU basketball stars can be found today in Moscow's Arbat. Nothing surprises us any longer in the hyper-globalized twenty-first century. But could a KU Jayhawk have emerged from Russia's 1917 Revolution? Strange to imagine, but true. This Russian carved sculpture, called the "Bolshevik Jayhawk" in 1921 in a brief article in the *Kansas City Star*, lay dormant through much of the Soviet period and resurfaced more than a decade into the twenty-first century, reminding us of KU's long engagement with the affairs of the world.

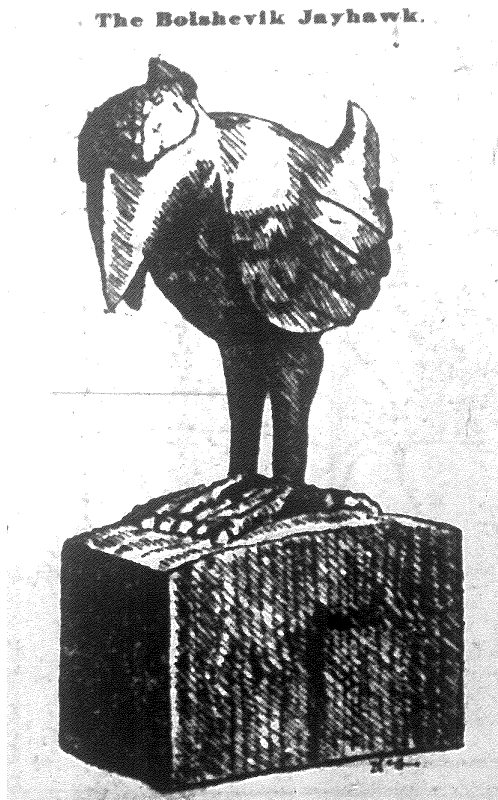


Figure 1: Illustration from the *Kansas City Star* (1921)

According to the 1921 *Star* article he was manufactured by a "Bolshevik Russian" prisoner of war in Germany and presented to the *Daily Kansan* by a former KU Student, Conrad Hoffman, where the bird was to be "inclosed [sic] in a glass case and have a prominent place in the museum of the department of journalism of the University of Kansas." The article speculated that the Jayhawk may have been carved by "some former student, interested in Bolshevik affairs, finding himself interned in a prison camp" who "spent the weary hours in reproducing in wood the symbol of his undergraduate days at the Kansas University." Alternatively, the article suggests, "some ingenious Russian prisoner may have obtained the image of the Jayhawk from some source and tried his hand. The only other solution is

that at some time or other a genuine Jayhawk lived, and that the image was

made from a fossil.” One of these explanations of the identity of the carver is indeed correct, though both the correct explanation and the wooden bird himself have remained hidden for nearly a century. As it turns out, the bird had neither a glass nor a gilded cage, but was put into boxed storage, from which it reemerged in 2009.*

Produced from an unshod prototype of the KU Jayhawk, this creature did in fact come from an early evolutionary stage of the Jayhawk species, though not—as the *Star* suggests—from a fossil. As is now known, the hybridization of the sparrow hawk and blue jay did not in fact occur as a biological process, but, rather, as a mythological one (Blackmar 1926).

Clues to the origins of “Bolshevik Jayhawk” are given on the sculpture itself. On each side of the base are penciled inscriptions. On the base of the left side of the Jay is the inscription “Sent to L. N. Flint, Alumni Secretary, by Conrad Hoffman, YMCA at a German Internment Camp in 1917.” On the Jay’s right side in another hand the inscription reads: “Conrad Hoffman had been YMCA [illegible] at K.U. before the War (1943).” Evidently the left-side inscription was made upon receipt of the item, establishing the original date of the gift and the terminus ante-quem for the manufacture of the carving itself. The right-side inscription was made over a quarter-century later, indicating that the item was at least once removed from storage after 1921 and proffering a hint about Conrad Hoffman’s relationship to KU.



Photos by Keah Cunningham

Figure 2: Base inscription, left



Figure 3: Base inscription, right

Before approaching the origins of the sculpture it is necessary to understand Conrad Hoffman’s KU connection and his role in acquiring the sculpture. An editor’s note to Hoffman’s 1913 article notes that Hoffman resigned his pro-

fessorship in bacteriology at the University of Wisconsin to become Secretary of the YMCA at the University of Kansas “last year” (Hoffman 1913: 86); the same event is mentioned also in the *KU Graduate Magazine* in the same year, which gives his date of appointment as commencing 1 August 1913 (Anonymous 1913: 225). Nowadays it is difficult to imagine a scholar leaving a professorial position to become a secretary in the YMCA. The position was an important non-governmental service performing a moral and social function during the First World War that otherwise would have been left to belligerent states. According to Kenneth Steuer,

“one of the missions of the YMCA in German prison camps was to help prisoners survive their captivity through the Four-Fold Program, a program designed to make idle men into more productive future citizens through education, social activities, athletics, and spiritual growth. One of the services provided by the YMCA was the distribution of tools to help prisoners establish and teach trades or encourage the development of hobbies. POW’s produced a wide range of artistic works during their incarceration in Germany. The Russian prisoners of war were among the most destitute—they did not receive much support from the tsarist government, especially in terms of food parcels, and even this meager support disappeared after the Russian revolutions. As a result, Russian prisoners became adept at establishing bazaars and trading posts in prison camps where they were constantly trading a wide range of goods and services, including carved works. The YMCA not only supplied carving tools to prisoners, they often held POW art exhibitions in neutral countries where the works would be sold to benefit the carvers, but to also help support YMCA POW relief operations. The Y worked closely with Crown Princess Margaret of Sweden who helped establish a POW relief program in her kingdom and hosted a number of art exhibitions. It was not unusual for Hoffman to receive presents, such as the Jayhawk, from thankful POW’s for all of his efforts on their behalf.”

Though the carving was quickly dubbed “Bolshevik Jayhawk,” it is unlikely that the carver was in fact a Bolshevik, since the numbers of Bolshevik prisoners in Germany at the time of the Revolution was negligible.

“In terms of the Bolshevik POW’s in Germany, while some trickled in during the course of the war, up to March 1918, the Bolshevik problem was not acute under Hoffman’s tenure as Senior Secretary. The Germans utilized Russian POW’s in agricultural labor wherever possible to help increase German food production in response to manpower mobilization for the German Army and the effects of the Allied blockade (Germany was a net food importer before 1914). The number of Russian POW’s arriving in German prison camps dropped significantly after the Soviets signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 and under the terms of the agreement, the Germans were supposed to begin the process of repatriation of Russian prisoners. However, the disrupted transportation system, the need for Russian labor on farms and as trustees in prison camps, the growing Russian Civil War, and the low priority of transporting Russian POW’s east made repatriation a very slow process. After the Armistice, the Allied Powers ended the Russian repatriation process—they did not want the Germans sending soldiers to Russia which the Soviets would impress into the Red Army. This created a continuing POW burden for the Germans who had to continue to care for and feed large numbers of Russians while the Allied blockade remained in force. The Bolshevik presence in German prison camps exploded in August 1920 when the Polish Army launched a counter-attack against the Red Army, which was threatening Warsaw, in the ‘Miracle of the Vistula’ in the Russo-Polish War. Red Army units had the choice of annihilation or escape into internment in East Prussia. By this time, Hoffman was no longer supervising War Prisoners’ Aid operations in Germany and other American secretaries had taken up the operation. Bolshevik prisoners were not as docile as tsarist POW’s and set up Soviets within the prison camps. Surprisingly, the American YMCA secretaries got along very well with the Bolshevik POW’s and many of the Soviet prisoners signed testimonials regarding the important work that the Y did among the Russian prisoners. The Germans began repatriating the Soviet POW’s after the end of the Russo-Polish War through Estonia, but because of the breakdown in transportation (as a result of the Russian Civil War and the lack of German merchant ships as a result of the Allied Armistice),



Courtesy of the Kautz Family YMCA Archives, the YMCA Photograph Collection, at the University of Minnesota

Figure 4: Conrad Hoffman (1882–1958)

this process would take several years” (Kenneth Steuer interview 2010).

As to the identity of the carver of the Jayhawk, we unfortunately have no name, but we do have Hoffman’s description of likely candidates, a master Russian woodcarver at the hospital of the camp in Worms, Germany, or his apprentices, who are described in Hoffman’s 1920 memoirs of his tenure as the YMCA Secretary:

“In this same camp we discovered a young Russian who was most expert with wood-carving tools. In the room which had been given him as a workshop he was making violins and the Russian musical instrument, the balalaika, several fine finished specimens of which he had on display. On examination one was surprised to see that these had been made from odds and ends of wood that he had been able to pick up, chiefly pieces of cigar-boxes, and packing cases. Our secretary was able, soon after his assignment to this camp, to secure permission to take this Russian artisan to the near-by city and there to permit him to pick out such additional tools as he required, as well as to go to one of the large lumber yards where he was told he could choose the kinds of wood he needed for his carving and that we would pay the bills. A happier individual would have been hard to find than this Russian, coming thus into a veritable paradise of material from which he was told to choose freely. Suffice it to say that all instruments used by the camp stringed orchestra were made by him and other prisoners, who served in an apprentice relationship to him and whose interest in wood carving had been aroused” (Hoffman 1920: 40).

Perhaps it would be more appropriate to call our figure the Revolutionary Jayhawk, for he was a product of the Revolution, regardless of the political convictions of its carver. More likely, the carver was, as so many, caught in the tragedy of war, about which he could do little, but he applied his skill to manufacture a token of appreciation to Conrad Hoffman of the University of Kansas, a heartfelt sign of esteem for the good works that Mr. Hoffman did for his fellow man on another continent. Hoffman’s Hawk is a fitting tribute to Hoffman as well as an enduring memento to the University of Kansas, symbolizing its role as an institution of understanding through education with both a local and an international reach.



Photo by Keah Cunningham

Figure 5: The Jayhawk in the Spencer Archives.

The carving is broken at the ankles, so it must be supported until it is repaired.

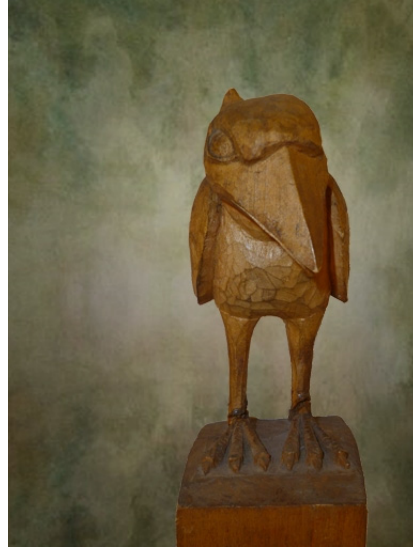


Photo and stylization by Keah Cunningham

Figure 6: The Jayhawk posed

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* I am grateful to Becky Schulte of the University Archives, Spencer Research Library, for providing access to the Bolshevik Jayhawk and permitting Keah Cunningham (Ermal Garinger Academic Resource Center, KU) and me to examine and photograph him. Ms. Schulte also provided the letter from Penny Hodge, Administrative Assistant to the Dean of the William Allen White School of Journalism, who reported on 24 July 2009 on the disposition of the recently discovered figure and proposed its housing henceforth in the Spencer Research Library at KU. My thanks go also to Brian Rosenblum, KU Scholarly Digital Initiatives Librarian, for drawing my attention to the article in the University Daily Kansan, which alerted me to the existence of the cargin; to Keah Cunningham for her fine photographic skills; and to Prof. Kenneth Steuer, historian at Western Michigan University, who generously shared detailed information and media pertaining to Conrad Hoffman and the broader circumstances of his activities in the YMCA serving European prisoners of war, information drawn from his seminal research on the activities of the YMCA during and after the Great War.