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Herbert Read Commemorates Emma Goldman

Allan Antliff

2019

In the late 1960s, the University of Victoria was fortunate enough to acquire the papers of British anarchist Herbert Read. A collection of letters from Emma Goldman were listed among Read's correspondence but proved to be missing. Read could not account for their whereabouts and was deeply troubled. I learned about the missing letters from archivist Chris Petter when I began teaching at the University of Victoria in 2003.

Goldman has been on my mind this year, as anarchists around the world mark the 150th anniversary of her birth (June 27, 1869), so imagine my delight when I discovered Goldman's lost letters to Read this April.¹ In addition to the letters, Read composed this personal tribute which I found among the correspondence:

It was the Spanish Civil War that brought us into contact, and from the beginning of 1938 until her death we

¹ Indeed, in May I spotted a poster honouring Goldman in a Kurdish-owned bar in Van, Turkey. I toasted her 150th birthday with a group of comrades then and there.

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giving context to the cover.

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meet frequently in London or, when she was abroad, exchanged letters. Other people have written at length about her, and I can only repeat that for me too she was one of the most dynamic personalities I have ever encountered. To the public at large she must have seemed like a political tornado, appearing where ever liberty was threatened or justice disregarded. That side of her nature survives in her books and letters. What one should perhaps speak of is the human side of her nature. That too is evident enough in her autobiography. But one should perhaps put on record that the image of her in one's memory takes the form of an infinitely kind mother to countless lost children, rather than the political orator and pamphleteer. She was ardent as a fighter in the cause of freedom, but I think her real motivations sprang from a simple devotion to her comrades and friends (Herbert Read, March 16, 1952).²

The photograph of Emma Goldman was taken on May Day, 1937 in Hyde Park, London.³ Goldman is speaking about the anarchist struggle in Spain and the banner celebrates the CNT's (Confederación Nacional del Trabajo/National Confederation of Labour) repression of the Spanish fascists' attempted coup in Barcelona on July 19, 1936. Working in concert with General Francisco Franco's forces in Spanish-occupied Morocco, a network of generals plotted to simultaneously seize control of Spain's major cities, however, in Barcelona, masses of men and women in the CNT and its sister organisation, the FAI (Federación Anarquista

² This statement, along with copies of the correspondence, will now rejoin the holdings of the Herbert Read Fonds, University of Victoria, Canada.

³ The photograph (dated) is from John Taylor Caldwell, *With Faith Conspire: Memoirs of a Glasgow seafarer and anarchist* (Close Lea, Rastrick, Brighouse, West Yorkshire: Northern Herald Books, 1999), p115. A second photograph of Goldman delivering her speech is reproduced in the British anarchist newspaper, *Spain and the World* (May 14, 1938).

Ibérica/Iberian Anarchist Federation), stormed a military barracks, seized weapons and munitions, and took over the center of city.⁴ After a protracted battle they defeated the fascists, a dramatic turn of events that ushered in the CNT/FAI's ascendancy throughout Catalonia.⁵ Visiting the region during fall 1936, Goldman would write 'the most impressive phase of the Revolution to me is that it has no leaders, no great intellectuals. It is entirely a mass Revolution risen from the depth of the Spanish soil, the depths of the needs and aspirations of the workers. Never again will anyone dare say Anarchism is not practical or we have no program. The constructive work done here disproves this false accusation hurled against us by all sorts of people ... I feel it was worth all I have given to the Anarchist movement to see with my own eyes its first buddings. It is my grandest hour'.⁶

⁴ Garcia Oliver, '19th July 1936 in Barcelona', Spain and the World (August 26, 1938) in *Spain: 1936-1939: Social Revolution - Counter Revolution: Selections from the anarchist fortnightly Spain and the World*, Vernon Richards (ed.), (London: Freedom Press, 1990), pp26-29.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p30.

⁶ Emma Goldman to Roger Baldwin, November 30, 1936 in David Porter (ed.), *Vision on Fire! Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006), p70.