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New Book Distorts History and a Life

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a review of

Emma Goldman in Exile: From the Russian Revolution to the Spanish Civil War, Alice Wexler, Beacon Press, Boston, 1989, 301 pp.

The nature and purpose of “doing history” are at stake in Alice Wexler’s new book, *Emma Goldman in Exile*. America’s best-known anarchist endured numerous personal and political crises from her 1919 deportation to Civil War Russia to her subsequent odyssey throughout Europe and Canada, her immersion in the 1930s Spanish revolution, and her death in 1940. Based on extensive research, Wexler’s book usefully describes this journey. But the book is more than this. Unfortunately so, since the interpretive voice of the author is usually louder than her subject.

One approach in writing history is to create a “time-machine” transporting readers to the lived experience of the past. Such an art emphasizes the subjectivities of historical individuals themselves, without framing their contexts according to present day categories. As when visiting abroad, ideally readers begin not only to recognize the scenery, but also to

sense the logic of “native” feelings, motivations and language. This relatively unmediated approach respects and enhances authentic historical “others.” However strange or disturbing, past societies and individuals are allowed to speak, human diversity is respected, the range of humankind is enriched and enlarged, the potential scope of human freedom expanded.

Of course, the “time-machine” is intrusive in itself. That is, the historian’s very presence necessarily distorts the “reality” of the context under study—as best-intentioned anthropologists can verify from field studies of their own. As social creatures of the present, historians inevitably filter past realities through current consciousness, deciding what evidence to search for and what is significant. But, like anthropologists, historians can find ways to consciously minimize intrusive distortion—at the very least by calling it to the reader’s attention.

Contrarily, most historians carry out colonizing expeditions—capturing and processing slices of the past to bring forward for exhibition and evaluation according to contemporary tastes and standards. Consciously or not, the goal is exotic titillation, confirmation of existing biases or proof of one’s “scientific” competence as a digger and labeler of artifacts.

Unfortunately, in *Emma Goldman in Exile*, Wexler appears to choose both directions at once. At times, Goldman’s energy, courage, wisdom, compassion, humor and sometimes irascible personal nature speak for themselves. Goldman, the sometimes self-contradicting, yet dedicated visionary stands out with inspiring qualities and flaws alike. Occasionally, Wexler gives the same autonomous voice to the overall anarchist movement as well—with its idealism and accomplishments, its inconsistencies and sometimes bitter internal disputes. To her credit, Wexler relies heavily on primary source materials from the 1920s and 30s, such as Goldman’s own prolific writing and interviews with Goldman’s contemporaries.

Yet Wexler isn't content to let us observe, to encourage too much our deeper empathy, though she clearly admires some aspects of Goldman and the anarchist movement. Eventually uncomfortable at both personal and political levels, she seems compelled through much of the book to diagnose Goldman's psychological drives and "political illusions" in order to tame them both. This competition between opposite approaches wrenches not only the author, but her readers and historical subjects as well.

Wexler is influenced by current theorists who view in autobiography a tendency toward distorted, self-serving mythologies. Curiously, she seems unaware of this in her own writing. In important ways, the book is an account of Wexler's attempt to coopt the person of Emma Goldman for the purpose of "reasonable, progressive reform."

Examples of Wexler's intrusiveness abound, but are most obvious in her "realist" political assessments of the Russian and Spanish revolutions and the rise of anti-Communist hysteria in the West, as well as in her anxious psychologizing of Goldman's every other move. I should clarify this point. It's fair for anyone to have a dialogue with voices from the past on political or emotional issues. Yet books of this sort should be identified as such (e.g., "Wexler's Debates with Emma Goldman on Political Change in the Interwar Period" or "Wexler's Theories on the Psychological Traits of Aging and Exiled Radical Females"). Without such labeling, when the biographer's interpretations become too major a voice, the central historical subject becomes diminished, disjointed and without integrity, a mere case-study for some other agenda.

Attempting to prove the "naiveté" or "poor judgment" or "emotionalism" of the subject forces the reader's attention, in this case, from Goldman's life to Wexler's. The latter may or may not be interesting, but it shouldn't be offered as the "reality" of what happened in the past. Where Wexler lets Goldman and her peers speak for themselves in sketching "an anarchist

geography of the world as she knew it in the 1920s and 1930s” or when she allows anarchist accomplishments (or failures) to stand on their own, she succeeds in creating a fair historical representation.

Where she insists that Goldman’s “emotionalism” and “naiveté” underlay her critical reaction to the Bolshevik regime or contributed “to the emergence of an anti-Communist consensus” in the West, she fails her readers. In asserting that Goldman was “a mythmaker whose most powerful myth turned out to be herself,” and that the exile of her final two decades became the “central thread of her existence, shaping her fictions and her truths, her limitations and her legacy,” Wexler sets herself up as ultimate judge and interpreter of fiction and fact. She declares herself; in effect, to be Goldman’s post facto political and psychological mentor.

Wexler argues that while Goldman’s central identity remained anarchist, her thoughts and actions were profoundly shaped by her traumatic uprooting from a stimulating and “heroic” radical political context in the U.S. In her bitterness, frustration, loneliness and despair, says Wexler, Goldman misread the nature of the Soviet regime, became fixated on its evils almost to the point of paranoia and thus unwittingly helped create the very strength of that anti-Communist ideology which kept her exiled abroad.

But Wexler has a larger agenda as well. For her, the ultimate political “flaws” of Goldman were also those of the anarchist movement generally, since, as Wexler states, “by the summer of 1922, Goldman could speak [about Russia] with the authority of the movement behind her, not only as an individual.” As well, “Goldman’s limitations as a propagandist and analyst were not hers alone. They were also those of the anarchist movement...” Additionally, “In the end, the anarchists, and Goldman herself, suffered most from their obsessive anti-Communism and anti-Marxism, for it drained their energies from more constructive anarchist efforts...”

Further reading on Emma Goldman and the Spanish Revolution

Vision On Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution by David Porter—\$8

The May Days: Barcelona 1937 with contributions by Augustin Souchy, Jose Peirats, Burnett Bolloten & Emma Goldman. Freedom Press, 128 pp. \$6

Sabate: Guerrilla Extraordinary by Antonio Tellez, translated by Stuart Christie. Elephant Editions 208 pp. \$6

Lessons of the Spanish Revolution by Vernon Richards 256 pp. \$8

In other words, after denigrating the significance of Goldman's critique through constant reference to her self-admitted turmoil and loneliness, Wexler pins the same judgment on the anarchist movement generally (though without even pretending to examine its diverse composition and experience). Ironically, Wexler's projection of "obsessive politics" onto anarchists as a whole also negates the purpose of psychologizing about Goldman herself.

This book, then, is Wexler's political text far more than Goldman's. Hidden beyond Goldman's psychological "paralysis" and her ensuing "subjective" and "shrill" distortions, according to Wexler, was the "more complex reality" of Soviet experience.

In Wexler's apologia for Leninism, the early move toward workers' control of industry "proved unable to cope with the disorganization of the war." Therefore, the Bolsheviks had to introduce the draconian measures of War Communism. While saving the cities from starvation and even yielding certain social gains, such measures also "led to massive abuses."

Bolshevik repression of anarchists began, in Wexler's view, in April 1918 only in response to anarchist terrorism, while the agonizing violent suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921 was politically justified because of the dangers it posed, if successful, to the ability of the regime to defend itself against White attacks.

Says Wexler, "The Stalinist state differed dramatically from that of Russia under the new Economic Policy," yet she admits that under the latter "it was no longer possible to question publicly the legitimacy of the one-party dictatorship, which civil war had made increasingly authoritarian" (emphasis mine). Rather than seeing Bolshevik repression as at least partly due to Leninist "vanguardism" and political power as inevitably corrupting in itself, Wexler attacks Goldman for denying the possibility of improvement in Russia and for insisting that Bolshevik evils were inherent in their politics. From Wexler's logic

it naturally follows that Goldman was also unreasonable and naive not to build alliances with socialists and dissident Communists on behalf of Soviet political prisoners. Goldman was equally at fault for “characteristically” blaming Marxist indoctrination for “training the German people in passivity,” which led to their lack of resistance to Nazi rule in 1933.

Despite Wexler’s understanding that anti-Red sentiment in the U.S. was well-formed with a strong momentum of its own before Goldman’s critiques of Bolshevik rule, she insists on blaming at least part of its success and influence on Goldman herself. She criticizes Goldman for attacking Russian exiles’ proposed revisions of anarchism (in 1926), though does not inform us of the hierarchical principles suggested.

Similarly, she describes Goldman’s picture of the Spanish revolution as “limited” and “romantic,” her anger toward all parties in the Spanish conflict as almost indiscriminate, and exhibiting a tendency “to ignore and distort the international context, and the military situation outside of Catalonia” (contrary to what Wexler describes as Communist realism on both scores).

Such assertions as the above are an author’s prerogative. But by consistently viewing (and forcing the reader to view) Goldman’s life and work of her last two decades through Wexler’s perspective, the author presents her apparent own left-liberal/socialist interpretation as the final word. While she could have at least invited readers’ participation in the dialogue by explicitly setting forth her own psychological, ethical or political criteria for judging Goldman and the anarchists, she fails to do so.

When she also speculates that Goldman’s ambivalence toward Alexander Berkman was perhaps a projection of her unconscious childhood guilt over her brother’s death or that part of the reason for Goldman’s ultimate wrath at the Bolsheviks was her unconscious Prussian hatred of everything Russian, one wonders what else was at stake in writing this book.

There are also several factual errors which perhaps suggest an (unconscious?) aversion to an anarchist perspective. In Barcelona of late 1936, Goldman and writer H.E. Kaminski did not visit a CNT-FAI prison since these didn’t exist, but rather a jail under the auspices of the new Catalan regime. The notorious SIM political police, established in mid-1937, did not “increasingly come under the control of Russian advisors and the Spanish Communist party;” it was created and controlled by the Communists from the start.

Although the POUM leaders on trial in Spain in late 1938 were “acquitted” of charges of high treason and espionage, they were still sentenced to long prison terms. Finally, the author consistently misspells the name of Federica Montseny, one of the most important FAI “influentials” during the Spanish Civil War.

More positively, when the author allows Goldman to speak for herself on various issues, when Wexler writes poignantly on the death of Berkman, and when she acknowledges the positive accomplishments and repression suffered by the Spanish anarchists, she comes closest to allowing us an unmediated glimpse of significant history.

While recapitulating accounts already available, her attempt generally to organize the principal themes and contexts of Goldman’s final two decades also provides a useful service. As well, her specific original research on persistent U.S. surveillance of Goldman in exile adds a sobering dimension to Goldman’s struggle abroad.

In general, Wexler’s book is serious and thoughtful, but its weaknesses are important. Informed readers will have to judge for themselves whether the positive features, surrounded as they are by Wexler’s political and psychological agenda, are worth the price involved. Portions of the account bring us closer to Goldman’s reality, but for me, there is too much which distracts, distorts and diminishes along the way.