

Anarchy in Interpretation

The Life of Emma Goldman

Jason Wehling

March 15, 1994

Contents

A Life in Context	4
Reasons Behind Biography	5
Conformity Over a Nonconformist	7
An Anarchist Even Among Believers in Anarchism	8
Emma's Anarcho-feminism	11
The Influence of Berkman and Czolgosz	12
Subjective Sources and Interpretations of Revolution	12
Final Assessments of an Anarchist Life	13

Emma Goldman was many things — a feminist, a writer and an incredible public speaker — but first and foremost, she was an anarchist. Not coincidentally, her life in many ways parallels the life of anarchism as a movement. Anarchism, although its roots are dated much earlier, was born just two years after Emma's birth. Bakunin, a Russia revolutionary, like Emma was to become, split the international communist movement in two, creating anarchists, who followed Bakunin, and Communists, who saw Karl Marx as their teacher. Emma lived through the era of anarchist terror reigned upon the rulers of the world and experienced the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. Ironically, George Woodcock writing in 1962 about the history of the anarchist movement declared anarchism dead in 1939 with the untimely demise of Spanish anarchism (Woodcock, 443); Emma died a mere year and a half after this defeat at the hands of Franco's Fascists.

Interestingly, with the rebirth of anarchism in the 1960s, seen with the emergence of the New Left's emphasis on decentralization and opposition to hierarchy and at its height in the explosive Parisian General Strike of 1968, Emma was reborn as well. Starting in 1961 with Richard Drinnon's *Rebel in Paradise*, biographies of Goldman have continued to bloom. Drinnon was followed by many other biographers: Candace Falk in 1984, Alice Wexler in 1984, Martha Solomon in 1989, John Chalberg in 1991 and Marian Morton in 1992. Wexler, Solomon and Falk all agree that the resurgence in the interest of Emma in the late 1960s and early 1970s is a reflection of renewed interest in feminism and anarchism. "In part, this fascination with Goldman reflects a general upsurge of interest in anarchism since the sixties" (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, 2).

Emma was incredibly controversial during her own lifetime. Teddy Roosevelt called her a "mad-woman... a mental as well as a moral pervert", the *New York Times* said she was a "mischievous foreigner... apart from the mass of humanity". The *San Francisco Call* said she was a "despicable creature... [a] snake... unfit to live in a civilized country". The government called her the "ablest and most dangerous" anarchist in the country.

On the other side was Kate Richards O'Hare, a socialist who occupied a neighboring jail cell with Goldman, who said "the Emma Goldman that I know is not the Propagandist. It is Emma, the tender, cosmic mother, the wise understanding woman, the faithful sister, the loyal comrade... Emma don't believe in Jesus, yet she is the one who makes it possible for me to grasp the spirit of Jesus" (Drinnon, 251). William Marion Reedy of the *St. Louis Mirror* said this: "there is nothing wrong with Miss Goldman's gospel that I can see except this: SHE IS ABOUT EIGHT THOUSAND YEARS AHEAD OF HER AGE!" (Drinnon, title page). It is hard to believe that these contradictory quotes could possibly describe the same person.

Emma was even controversial within the radical movement itself. She was one of the first radicals to address the issue of homosexuality, she opposed women's suffrage and touted the virtues of "free love". Such ideals were bourgeois-inspired at best to her counterparts who placed their faith in the cure-all solution of class warfare. Her ideological mentors included Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Peter Kropotkin, Mikhail Bakunin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Some of her acquaintances included Wobbly organizers "Big" Bill Haywood and Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, writers like Eugene O'Neil and Jack London and socialists like John Reed and Eugene Debs. She had a tremendous influence on Margaret Sanger and Roger Baldwin, the founders of two of the most important institutions of contemporary American Liberalism, Planned Parenthood and the ACLU respectively.

But to mainstream Americans Emma was known to as a demonic, "dynamite-eating anarchist". Goldman was hounded for much of her life by two of the most notorious law enforcement officials in American history: Anthony Comstock and J Edgar Hoover. As a result of this image, she was

jailed in 1893, 1901, 1916, 1918, 1919 and in 1921 — from charges ranging from inciting to riot to advocating the use of birth control to opposition to World War I. She was exiled by the United States, Soviet Russia, Holland, France and was denied entry into many more.

A Life in Context

All of this started with her birth on June 27, 1869, in Kovno, Lithuania. By 1886, Emma and her sister Helene emigrated to Rochester, New York. That same year, in Chicago following the foundation of the May Day workers holiday, the Haymarket affair transpired. This event enthralled young Emma who was devastated when the anarchists were executed the following year. Goldman credited this event for her divorce to her husband of less than a year. In 1889, Emma moved to New York City where she joined the Yiddish Anarchist movement and met her life-long companion, Alexander Berkman.

This friendship proved to be a decisive occurrence in her life; in 1892, she conspired with Berkman in his failed attempt to assassinate Henry Clay Frick in retaliation for Frick's role in the attack on the strikers at Homestead. Berkman eventually served 14 years in Western Penitentiary for his crime; her guilt over Berkman's sole responsibility for a crime they both participated in remained a major influence for the rest of her life. Following the failed assassination, Emma gained not only national prominence, but became prominent in the anarchist movement as well. In 1895 she traveled to Vienna to study medicine, attending lectures by Freud. In London, she met her ideological mentor, Peter Kropotkin. Returning to America a year later, she made frequent cross-country speaking tours over the next few years.

Her anarchist agitation was interrupted in 1901 when Leon Czolgosz, a self-proclaimed anarchist, assassinated President William McKinley. Emma was blamed for Czolgosz's action and was forced into hiding by a massive wave of anti-anarchist hysteria. The same year Berkman was released from prison Emma began publishing *Mother Earth*, in 1906. A couple of years later, Emma met Ben Reitman, who would remain her lover until her arrest in 1917. She was jailed as a result of her work in the No-Conscription League and her anti-war stand against World War I, also causing *Mother Earth* to be shut-down by the government.

After serving out their two year sentence, Emma and Berkman were deported in 1919 to Soviet Russia. At first, Emma was excited to see first hand the revolution she had fought to bring about all her life. But it didn't take long for her to realize that the Bolsheviks were no anarchists and that the massive dictatorship created by Lenin was crushing the "spontaneity of the masses." In 1921, Libertarian sailors revolted at Kronstadt against the Bolshevik government. The suppression of Kronstadt by the Communists was too much for Emma and Berkman and they made the decision to finally leave Russia in a state of disillusionment. For the next few years, traveling from country to country as she could get permission, she wrote a long series of articles and two books about her experience in and the ideological contradictions she perceived within Soviet Russia.

Living in Britain for many years, she eventually married James Colton in 1926 for the convenience citizenship offered — allowing her to travel to Canada. Emma lived in seclusion for a few years in France in order to write her autobiography, which was published in 1931. During this long exile, Emma continually wanted to return to the United States, her chosen home. But the notorious anarchist was, well, still notorious and was denied entry except for a brief, 90 day visit in 1934. The year 1936 was the highest of the highs and the lowest of the lows for Gold-

man. Her cerebral second half, Alexander Berkman committed suicide after prolonged agony caused by an aggravated case of prostate cancer. Just a week later, an anarchist-inspired revolution erupted in Spain. For the next three years, Emma committed herself to the support of the anarcho-syndicalists and their fight against Communists, Republicans and especially Fascists — all of which would not accept the revolution in Spain.

This long and incredible life finally came to an end in 1940. While attempting to save an Italian anarchist from deportation, where he faced certain death in Fascist Italy, Emma died from a stroke in Toronto. Only after her death was she admitted back into America, where Emma found her eternal resting place at Waldheim Cemetery in Chicago, buried near the Haymarket martyrs, who unwittingly helped to shape her life.

Reasons Behind Biography

Needless to say that Emma's life, infamous and full of contention, has been interpreted many different ways. The first attempt to create a life of Goldman was done by one of her lovers, Hippolyte Havel, a fellow anarchist. This "sketch" — it is a mere 40 pages in length — was written as an introduction to a collection of essays by Emma published in 1910. Because of its relatively early publication, written more than 30 years before her death and its obviously preferential view, it is limited in its ability to portray Goldman's life accurately. The intention of the piece was not necessarily to glorify Goldman, but was written at a time when Emma was personified as a walking she-devil by a sensationalizing press and a belligerent government. This piece was mainly a response to this disparaging view of anarchists in general. In fact, the last section of this short biography is wholly devoted to a defense of anarchism against the gross misrepresentation it was receiving at the time.

It was not until 30 years after her death that a more solid attempt at biography was attempted by Richard Drinnon. His *Rebel in Paradise* is considered by most of the biographers that have followed to be the standard biography of Emma. This life is largely devoted to a revision of the distorted view left by the media of Goldman's day, and therefore focuses primarily on her historical life. Drinnon devotes an entire chapter to the conspiracy by the federal government, mainly at the behest of a young and ambitious J. Edgar Hoover, to deny Emma of her American citizenship in order to eventually deport her. Drinnon is very frank in his introduction about his bias, stating that just choosing someone like Goldman is in itself subjective. "No doubt my basic sympathy for the radical style in politics helped shape this empathy and understanding" (Drinnon, vii). But unlike Havel's, "this book is, first and foremost, a critical biography of the woman" (Drinnon, viii). Drinnon's book comes off as sympathetic yet avoids any partisanship.

Candace Falk relates in her introduction how she and her dog, "Red Emma", stumbled upon a box of letters written by Emma to her lover, Ben Reitman in the early 1970s. Obviously with a dog named after your subject, like Drinnon and Havel, Falk is empathetic towards Goldman. But unlike her predecessors, Falk is not interested in Emma as an anarchist, but as a lover, a woman and a human being. Using previously unknown letters, Falk investigates Emma's private sexual life, focusing primarily on her relationship with Reitman.

Falk wrote *Love, Anarchy and Emma Goldman* because "no single source could answer my questions about Emma. There was a path-breaking biography by Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise*, but it did not delve deeply into the relationship between Emma and Ben" (Falk, xiii). She

doesn't try to compete with past material nor does it try to rewrite Emma's public life in light of the new information. "Rather than chronicle her public life in parallel detail, I chose to write a companion piece to her own account in the autobiography and to the Drinnon biography" (Falk, xiii). Because of this focus, the biography emphasizes the decade of the relationship (1908–1917), while purposely neglecting much of the rest.

Alice Wexler wrote a two volume biography of Goldman. The first volume arrived the same year as the Falk book, 1984, which is described as "An Intimate Life". The first volume chronicles Emma up to her deportation from America; the second — Emma Goldman in Exile, finishes her life. Wexler's biography attempts to investigate Emma's inner or personal life. "While the historical Emma Goldman was more problematic, more contradictory, and less romantic in certain ways than the ebullient figure of legend, the reality of her life was no less heroic and in many ways more interesting and moving" (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, xviii). Again, Wexler is not antagonistic to Emma; in fact, Wexler may herself be partial to anarchism, for she writes for anarchist journals such as *Our Generation*.

Wexler's life not only covers the previously uncovered territory of Emma's personal life (besides her relationship with Reitman of course), but Wexler is the best at placing Goldman in the proper context of the anarchist movement for which Emma was an integral part. Each figure in Emma's life, often described in passing in other biographies, is detailed and oriented properly in the context of his or her impact upon Emma Goldman. The reader gets to know Berkman, Peter Kropotkin, the Isaaks and Johann Most in a way that the others do not reproduce. But at the same time, Wexler states that she is attempting to demystify Emma's life on both sides — demystify the demon created by the government and the angel by Emma in her autobiography.

Martha Solomon admits that Goldman's life has been chronicled adequately by the past biographers. "This work will not attempt to compete" with past works which chronicled her life, such as *Living My Life*, Drinnon, Falk and Wexler, "but will try, instead, to focus on Goldman as a writer and rhetorician" (Solomon, preface). Solomon's goal is to analyze Goldman the writer. Emma did write a great deal, churning out six books and hundreds of pamphlets and articles — not to mention the myriad of speeches she gave throughout her life. The first chapter is the biography, while the rest of the book is devoted to an analysis of Goldman's writings and places her writings in context to the life. Solomon's goal "is to evaluate her in a spirit she would have preferred: appreciating her creative contributions and acknowledging her limitations" (Solomon, 149). But, like her predecessors, Solomon too is sympathetic; "Goldman, who lived this remarkable life, is the key to any interest [this book] contains. The flaws are my own" (Solomon, acknowledgments).

Interestingly, the political biography, *Emma Goldman and the American Left*, by Marian Morton, is perhaps the most unsympathetic, but it is by no means belligerent. As the title implies, this life focuses on Emma as a member of the Left. "This is therefore a political biography and a story of the American Left" (Morton, x). Much of the book details the histories of radical organizations like the Socialist Party of America and the Communist Party (CPUSA). Because of Goldman's unusual role in the Left as an anarchist, Morton has a rough time relating Emma to her Leftist contemporaries. Usually Morton falls into a pattern of explaining what Emma was doing at a particular time and then detail the accomplishments of other Leftists — often without making any connection.

Not surprisingly, when the reader reaches the book's conclusion, there is a feeling that Emma's life ended in failure. A guess is that Morton is some variety of Socialist and found Goldman's anarchism annoying, or at least unrealistic. Unfortunately, Morton does not reveal her personal

politics. Beyond this, the book is poor especially when compared to Wexler's work, which details the American Left in much better detail (An example is the fact that Wexler mentions the Seattle General Strike of 1919, Morton does not).

John Chalberg's biography was written as an installment to a series of "great" American biographies. The author is obviously not an anarchist nor even a radical and therefore is most prone to criticism, but the biography comes off clear and relatively sympathetic. Instead of the usual influence a biographer has on a subject's life, it seems that in Chalberg's case the tables were turned: "As a white male, a native Minnesotan, a reticent Scandinavian, a husband and a father of more children than the national average, and a suburbanite with the inevitable two-car garage and obligatory mortgage, I can testify that living with Goldman has not been reassuring or comforting. But it has been interesting" (Chalberg, ix). Chalberg's biography adds little as far as new historical interpretations and can be seen as a brief version of the one sketched by Drinnon thirty years earlier.

Conformity Over a Nonconformist

Because the biographies, taken as a whole, are very sympathetic to Emma Goldman, controversy has not been easily forthcoming. This is a result of a number of factors. First and foremost, the dates of publication are relatively recent and are clustered in a very narrow period of time – most were written in the last decade. In her contemporary setting, Emma was viewed by a overwhelming majority as worse than the devil. Anyone out to malign her would have a tough go at it to out-smear the yellow journalism that helped to create the myth of Emma the dirty bomb-thrower.

But perhaps most importantly, as Drinnon described in his introduction, just the act of choosing Goldman tells volumes about the author. Interestingly, all the biographers found Emma both inspirational and annoying. Drinnon states, "when I began research on her life, I began skeptically, for her autobiography and the other accounts of her career seemed to make her too extraordinary a woman to be taken seriously. And along with everyone else, I regarded her anarchism as a particularly bizarre form of political lunacy. Months of research passed before I learned that my skepticism was pseudo-sophistication and my condescension was only conventional ignorance. Emma Goldman was in truth a remarkable woman" (Drinnon, vii). Said in a different way, Wexler relates that "when I first learned about Emma Goldman I found her both admirable and irritating. As I studied her memoirs and vast correspondence, I was often dismayed by her self-deceptions and vanities, her frequent scorn for other radicals and feminists. Gradually, however, I found my vexation changing to empathy" (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, xix). Interestingly, Agnes Ingis, a contemporary of Emma, thought the same way; "Emma was an irritant and an inspiration to many. I cannot think of her as beloved, but surely as an inspirer to courage" (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, 184).

Another important factor in the conformity of the biographies is the fact that they all rely, to varying degrees, on Emma's autobiography, *Living My Life*. "In *Living My Life*, Emma Goldman set out to write a great American female epic, an anarchist odyssey, showing how, after she committed herself to anarchism at the age of twenty, she remained true to her 'ideal' through the vicissitudes of a long, adventurous life" (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, 141). Solomon agrees with Drinnon that "her autobiography was a work of art primarily because her life was

as well” (Solomon, 130). Although Chalberg states that “Goldman did not always tell her story accurately or well, but she did tell it at great length and with great passion” (Chalberg, 181), he relies heavily upon Emma for the anecdotal stories he uses to animate Emma from the pages of his book. Morton admits in the preface that she “relied heavily” on *Living My Life*. Drinnon also admits he used her autobiography extensively in writing about her earlier years. In fact without Emma’s testimony, the details of situations like her meetings with Lenin and Kropotkin would be unknown.

This is not to say that the biographers took Emma at her word. All agree that *Living My Life* is highly prone to bias for obvious reasons. Wexler argues that Goldman underrepresented Reitman’s contribution to the anarchist movement, focusing only on her problems with him (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, 149). Also, she charges Emma with an unfair attack on Johann Most, who disassociated himself from Goldman and Berkman after the failed assassination on Frick. Wexler maintains that Most repudiated “propaganda of deed” years before Berkman’s attentat in 1892 (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, 150). While Wexler takes Emma to task for fudging anarchist facts, Solomon primarily criticizes Goldman’s literary style. Summing up, Solomon says “ironically, her autobiography remains interesting not as a history of anarchism (which she envisioned to be its value) but as a chronicle of a personal struggle to live a free life as a woman” (Solomon, 154).

Living My Life seems to have effected the biographers more than many would like to admit. With the exception of Wexler, the biographers place most of their emphasis on the times covered by Goldman’s autobiography. Up until her deportation, there is a large amount of information in the various lives, but the time after where *Living My Life* leaves off, the time seems to move along rather quickly, with little detail. This problem is most pronounced in the Chalberg book; Emma departs from Russia on page 160, leaving a scant nineteen pages to finish her life.

An Anarchist Even Among Believers in Anarchism

Where the biographies really diverge most profoundly is over Emma’s particular brand of anarchism. Havel described Emma as “an Anarchist pure and simple” (Havel, 44), but it seems that this assertion is not so simple. Chalberg makes a bizarre statement that “Emma considered herself an anarchist for many years but did not establish a formal party affiliation” (Chalberg, vii). Chalberg does not seem to understand that anarchism is inherently antagonistic to the rigid and institutional nature of a party apparatus. Nearly all the biographies devote at least a couple of pages to a description of what anarchism stands for, but the way each biographer comprehends anarchism has a large effect on how they portray Emma’s life.

Drinnon admitted his disdain for anarchism in his introduction, yet he gives a noble attempt at a clear definition by stating that “a forest of confusion may be bypassed by realizing that Emma was simply an extreme federalist-democrat” (Drinnon, 132). For Falk, anarchism was not important to her focus, but this is not true of Morton. Yet, both Falk and Morton reserve similar opinions of anarchism. Falk states at one point that Emma’s depression was the result of “the inevitable effect of an unattainable political philosophy” (Falk, xiii). Morton seems to agree; “because it cut its adherents loose from institutional restraints, anarchism was a lonely philosophy. The exhilarating freedom from country, creed and sometimes family was often accompanied by

the frightening realization of solitude... An anarchist is supposed to be at home nowhere” (Morton, ix-x).

Solomon grapples with the problem of anarchism clumsily. She quotes Emma, “the function of anarchism in a revolutionary period is to minimize the violence of the revolution and replace it by constructive efforts” (Solomon, 62). Solomon takes this and immediately states: “in essence, Goldman was forced to acknowledge that the theory she cherished was too avant-garde to be useful in correcting immediate problems” (Solomon, 62). Solomon’s analysis is not congruent with Emma’s statement. Solomon accuses Goldman’s explanation of anarchism as being “too vague and unconvincing” (Solomon, 62). Yet later on, when Emma defends the syndicalism of the Spanish CNT, Solomon praises Emma for being specific, seemingly without understanding the difference between syndicalism and anarchism (Solomon, 49).

Throughout her biography, Solomon remains convinced that Goldman’s ideology is contradictory. “Like a wide-angle lens on a camera, her anarchism widens her field of view but distorts her vision” (Solomon, 86). She says that Goldman’s “theories are better as a model for the life of a rebel than as a foundation for a new society” (Solomon, 60). But in the end Solomon seems to give a little; “regardless of our attitude towards her theories, we must respect her personal integrity and her commitment to an ideal” (Solomon, 155).

Not surprisingly, all biographers, without exception, agree on the causes of Emma’s decision to embrace anarchism. All agree with Drinnon that “Emma soaked in the ideas of Chernyshevsky as rain is soaked in by the desert sands” (Drinnon, 29). Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s *What Is To Be Done?* (1863) was very influential on the Russia intelligentsia. Along with Chernyshevsky, most agree that Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backwards* was another big influence on the ideological growth of Emma. There is no dissent in the assertion that the Haymarket affair was the pivotal event that pushed Emma into the world of radical anarchists. According to Havel, “the Haymarket tragedy developed her inherent Anarchist tendencies: the reading of the *Freiheit* made her a conscious Anarchist” (Havel, 18). This agreement is the result, again, of the influence that *Living My Life* has. Goldman was very clear about the importance the Haymarket tragedy had encouraging her radicalism.

So what was Emma’s anarchism? Emma herself said that “[Kropotkin] was a prominent figure in the realm of learning, recognized as such by the foremost men of the world. But to us he meant more than that. We saw in him the father of modern anarchism.” (Avrich, 81). Drinnon agrees, “fortunately and quite understandably, Peter Kropotkin became Emma Goldman’s true teacher and inspiration” (Drinnon, 41). But Wexler disagrees with this, arguing that while Kropotkin exerted a large amount of influence on Emma, she was able to go beyond his theories. This is especially true of her commitment of sexual liberation (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, 48). Wexler, going further, asserts that Emma’s anarchism was much more sophisticated than many realize because Emma actually created her own moral code, even though Goldman might have argued with this assertion (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, 97).

In fact some biographers like Solomon like to point out the differences between Kropotkin and Goldman. A common quote that is used comes from Kropotkin who says that “the [Free Society] is doing splendid work, but it would do more if it would not waste so much space discussing sex”. Most end the quote there, but the “quarrel” continues in *Living My Life*. Emma relates her reply to Kropotkin: “All right, dear comrade, when I have reached your age [she was thirty, Kropotkin fifty-seven], the sex question may no longer be of importance to me. But it is now, and it is a tremendous factor for thousands, millions even, of young people”. Emma continues,

“Peter stopped short, an amused smile lighting up his kindly face. ‘Fancy, I didn’t think of that,’ he replied. ‘Perhaps you are right after all’ He beamed affectionately upon me, with a humorous twinkle in his eye” (Goldman, 253).

A theme developed by all the biographers is the tension between Emma’s individualism and her collectivism. All agree that such a tension exists, but disagreement arises when some place more importance on one side over the other. Chalberg thinks Goldman closer to collectivism than individualists like Benjamin Tucker (Chalberg, 29–30) and that Bakunin and Kropotkin are her teachers, while he may be right, his earlier statement throws his knowledge of anarchism into question.

Taking up the argument from the other side is Solomon who argues most fiercely that Emma was an “individualistic anarchist” and that “Goldman’s anarchism was essentially libertarianism” (Solomon, 52 & 46). “The clearest conflict in Goldman’s thinking was that between the elitism implicit in her commitment to individualism and the egalitarianism intrinsic to anarchism” (Solomon, 59). Interestingly, Wexler agrees with Solomon to a degree, arguing that Emma sided more with the individualism of Max Stirner than with Kropotkin’s communism. (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, 137). But Wexler finds it important to point out that the “spirit of revolt” is perhaps the most important aspect of Emma’s thinking (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, 92).

Wexler’s position is much more believable. Since a number of statements make it appear that Solomon may never have even read Kropotkin, it would make it problematic for her to maintain a credible argument. Havel puts her in line with Josiah Warren, Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Tolstoy, while making no mention of Stirner or Nietzsche as Solomon does. The political biographer states that Emma was a communist of the Bakunin and Kropotkin variety while leaning “towards the individualism of American Anarchists” (Morton, ix). Interestingly, Emma places herself in the company of Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown and Henry David Thoreau (Chalberg, 136).

Much of this controversy may be the partial result of what many biographers see as Emma’s disdain for the masses – a sort of intellectual elitism. Again, it is Solomon who goes out on a limb, saying that “she increasingly perceived the masses as impediments to social change” (Solomon, 54). Wexler maintains that “Goldman always insisted that this pessimism grew directly out of her experience in Russia” (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, 79). Obviously one who champions the masses, drawing directly from Kropotkin, cannot at the same time maintain that the masses are inherently reactionary – Emma at times is guilty of just this dilemma.

Another theme that fuels the controversy over Emma’s anarchism is what Wexler describes as Goldman’s “anti-Communism”, in which Emma may have confused her disdain of the Bolsheviks with a rejection of collectivism. Wexler blames Emma’s anti-Communism to a degree on her isolation and loneliness in exile. “Emma Goldman experienced her two years in Russia as a personal defeat” (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, 57 & 110).

The controversial deviation in Emma’s ideology has led to a historical disagreement over when this shift occurred. Once again, Solomon takes the extreme position, stating “not only [did] Goldman defend the internal and external policies of the Bolsheviks, but she cavalierly dismisses the opposition of many revolutionaries, like her theoretical mentor Peter Kropotkin, to Bolshevik policies” (Solomon, 56). Solomon maintains that Goldman made a sudden break after the Kronstadt uprising. In fact, if one only read what Emma wrote this would be a logical conclusion. But Emma was much more complicated. Chalberg is correct in pointing out that Emma may have been confused by Lenin’s “The State and the Revolution”, for in this pamphlet Lenin argues, like

an anarchist, that freedom cannot co-exist with the continuation of the State. Chalberg agrees that Emma's public break did occur after Kronstadt, but privately Emma was questioning the Russian Revolution much earlier.

Wexler argues that Emma may have become disillusioned with Bolshevism while still in Prison in the United States (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, 258). By May, 1920, Emma was definitely disillusioned with authoritarian-Communism; Wexler points out that John Clayton of the Chicago Tribune quoted Emma as saying the Bolsheviks were "rotten" and tyrannical (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, 35). Wexler also described the agony that Emma experienced in trying to decide whether or not to attack the Bolsheviks in "pro-capitalistic" papers like the *New York World* — which was after Kronstadt. It seems that this was even hard for Emma to decide on.

Emma's Anarcho-feminism

Another area of disagreement is Emma's Feminism, like with everything else having to do with Goldman, she always had her own particular brand. This time the extreme position is taken by Morton, who finds Emma bordering on anti-Feminism. Morton quotes Emma: "woman, essentially a purist, is naturally bigoted and relentless in her effort to make others as good as she thinks they ought to be". Morton admits that this is a reference to women who were trying to make prostitution illegal in States where women could vote (Morton, 65). This controversy is almost expected, for Goldman took a highly contentious position of opposing the women's suffrage movement. Solomon takes Emma to task, stating that "her attacks on woman's suffrage overlooks the symbolic importance of that measure" (Solomon, 85).

Wexler, who seems to be best at analyzing Emma's ideology, argues that Emma was a strong Feminist, perhaps stronger than the middle-class women who wanted the vote without thinking about the abysmal conditions that lower-class women had to endure. Solomon was right, voting is symbolic; Emma was more interested in putting bread in the mouths of poor women, and to hell with symbolism. While Wexler defends Goldman, she does not address the charge of anti-Feminism. This may be a result of the fact that Wexler's book came out before Solomon's or Morton's biographies.

The issue of Feminism spills over into the question of who came first to the issue of birth control, Goldman or Margaret Sanger. Interestingly, Morton comes to the aid of Emma, stating that Sanger was second to Emma on this issue. Sanger maintains in her autobiography that the issue was always her's — Goldman had little to do with popularizing birth control. In fact, Sanger is widely acknowledged with coining the term, "birth-control". Morton backs his assertion by pointing out that the first person to be arrested for birth-control was an anarchist, Ezra Heywood (Morton, 75). Margaret Sanger did work for Emma's *Mother Earth* before she began her crusade for birth control — that is not disputed. But Chalberg disagrees, giving Sanger the credit for creating the issue (Chalberg, 119 & 121). Drinnon leaves the issue open, but quotes an unnamed student of the movement, "Margaret Sanger borrowed much from Emma Goldman and the anarchists in the terminology and theory of reform which characterized 'The Woman Rebel'" (Drinnon, 210). Either way, no one disputes the fact that Sanger became more involved than Emma later on, eventually making birth control her only issue.

The Influence of Berkman and Czolgosz

“Despite her stature in the anarchist movement, she was subordinate to powerful male leaders” (Morton, 62). There is no denying the fact that the anarchist movement was largely made up of men — Emma along with Voltairine de Cleyre were the exceptions. Emma was deeply influenced by the men in her life, particularly by Leon Czolgosz, publicly and Alexander Berkman, personally.

For a person to begin a biography of Goldman, it would become apparent quite quickly that such a project would necessarily mean a sub-biography of Berkman, because their lives were inseparable from the time they entered the anarchist movement together. Chalberg attempted to write a biography without a life of Berkman, but this was problematic and was not attempted by the others. Wexler exemplifies this importance to Emma, while exposing the conflict between them, stating that Emma “lived her life party as a performance for [Berkman’s] benefit, as a rivalry with him, and an attempt to win his love and approval” (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, 152). Wexler also maintains that Emma waited as long as she did in breaking openly with the Bolsheviks because she was waiting for Berkman’s disillusionment as support (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, 49). “Emma would turn loyalty to Berkman almost into a religion” (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, 70).

Many took this love for Berkman as a reason for Emma’s staunch defense of Leon Czolgosz after he assassinated President McKinley. Even though Berkman repudiated the act as misguided, many biographers, like Chalberg, speculate that Goldman was fighting for Berkman when she was defending Czolgosz (Chalberg, 79). In other words, Emma saw Czolgosz’s act not unlike Berkman’s attempted assassination, which she was an integral part. Havel, writing in defense of Emma, also takes this position. Wexler, on the other hand, asserts that Goldman’s defense of Czolgosz was a result of Emma feelings of responsibility, at least in some small way, for inciting Czolgosz’s act (Wexler, *An Intimate Life*, 110).

Subjective Sources and Interpretations of Revolution

Much of the level of emphasis the biographers place upon the anarchist movement can be analyzed by the sources they use. Solomon uses some standard anarchism survey texts like Irving Horowitz’s *The Anarchists*, Paul Avrich’s *The Haymarket Tragedy*, and George Woodcock’s *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. Wexler’s much stronger emphasis is seen in her inclusion of many specific histories of anarchism such as Paul Avrich’s *Kronstadt*, Voline’s *The Unknown Revolution*, Peter Arshinov’s *History of the Makhnovist Movement*, G. Maximov’s *The Guillotine at Work*, Gerald Brenan’s *The Spanish Labyrinth*, George Orwell’s *Homage to Catalonia*, Burnett Bolloten’s *The Spanish Revolution* and Jos* Peirats’ *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*. Wexler also includes more contemporary anarchist theoreticians like Noam Chomsky, Murray Bookchin and Sam Dolgoff, which none of the other biographers deem necessary to include.

Interestingly, Chalberg, the most mainstream view of Emma, includes a large assortment of histories from the anarchist perspective. Chalberg lists a long assortment of histories of the Spanish Civil War/Revolution, rivaling the list Wexler produces, yet one questions whether or not he used them for none of the information ends up in his biography. Solomon’s and Falk’s emphasis,

on Emma's writing and her relationship with Reitman respectively, doesn't require a lengthy detail of Emma's experience in the anarchist movement. Morton, whose focus is the American Left, relates a dismal four pages to the Spanish conflict; this is surprising because the Spanish Civil War was not only important to Emma's life, but was equally important to the Left, not just in America — this may result from the sparse number of sources Morton included. Drinnon's life was written before many of these anarchist histories were written (or at least translated into English), yet he proves to be sympathetic and does a remarkable job in detailing the events from Emma's perspective. In fact, Drinnon includes Franz Borkenau's eye-witness account of anarchist Spain, *The Spanish Cockpit*, which the other authors neglect.

The chosen chapter titles for the last period in Emma's life often expose the biographer's point of view. Morton: "Nowhere at Home: Nowhere the Revolution" — Falk: "Against an Avalanche" — Drinnon: "Spain: the Very Top of the Mountain" — Wexler: "Spain and the World" — and Chalberg: "At Home, But Never at Peace". Morton's title portrays a bleak picture, "Nowhere the Revolution". Perhaps Morton picked subjects that are important to "mainstream" Left, but was not the Spanish Republic an important rallying cause for the American Left in the 1930s? Falk's title gives a similar impression. Wexler's title is non-descript, but is the most sympathetic to Emma's Spanish inspiration. Drinnon's title is perhaps the most accurate, for Spain was the closest Emma ever got to seeing the realization of what she fought for all of her life. As was alluded to earlier, the latter part of Emma's life was neglected by many of the authors, which may be responsible for the wide differences in chapter titles. Wexler devotes the most, 37 pages to the Spanish Civil War, with Drinnon close behind with 23 pages. From there in drops fast, Falk gives seven pages, Morton's political life has four and Chalberg gives a scant three pages.

It is interesting that these biographers left these important years so thin. Wexler noticed the greater attention paid to Goldman's career in America before 1920, but says "in some respects the most dramatic years of her life were yet to come" (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, 2). Wexler goes on to state that "it is one of the many ironies of Emma Goldman's life that the historical record of her career in America is so thin while her quieter years in exile are documented by mountains of letter" (Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, 4). In other words, there is no reason why this period has been neglected by other biographers. Falk, who relied heavily on Emma's letters quotes her as saying that "I must say I find it infinitely easier to express myself in letters than in books" (Falk, xvii). In fact, Emma wrote so many that there are two books devoted just to reprinting her letters, *Nowhere at Home: Letters from Exile of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman*, edited by Richard and Anna Marie Drinnon, *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*, edited by David Porter.

Final Assessments of an Anarchist Life

Both Drinnon and Wexler end their lives of Goldman with quotes assessing her life. Drinnon uses a letter written by Evelyn Scott to Goldman (February 14, 1936): "You were the only one there, I often feel, who had a third attitude and the power of personality to carry it into activities not representable in art. But you to me are the future they will, paradoxically, hark back to in time" (Drinnon, 412).

Wexler uses a quote from Emma herself, who was at the time describing Mary Wollstonecraft, but Wexler felt it appropriate for Emma's life as well. "In conflict, with every institution of their

time since they will not compromise, it is inevitable that the advance guards should become aliens to the very ones they wish to serve; that they should be isolated, shunned, and repudiated by the nearest and dearest of kin. Yet the tragedy every pioneer must experience is not the lack of understanding — it arises from the fact that having seen new possibilities for human advancement, the pioneers can not take root in the old, and with the new still so far off they become outcast roamers of the earth, restless seekers for the things they will never find” (Wexler, Emma Goldman in Exile, 245).

Biographies of Emma Goldman Cited:

John Chalberg, *Emma Goldman: American Individualist*, New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991.

Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.

Hippolyte Havel, “Biographical Sketch” in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, Emma Goldman, New York, NY: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1910.

Marian J. Morton, *Emma Goldman and the American Left: Nowhere at Home*, New York, NY: Twayne Publishers, 1992.

Candace Serena Falk, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990 (originally published in 1984).

Martha Solomon, *Emma Goldman*, Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1987.

Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman: An Intimate Life*, New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1984.

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

Other Works Cited:

Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1982.

George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Jason Wehling
Anarchy in Interpretation
The Life of Emma Goldman
March 15, 1994

Retrieved on 28th August 2020 from
http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/goldman/emmabio.html

theanarchistlibrary.org