The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Kevin Morgan
A ‘splendid field’? Emma Goldman in South Wales
2009

Retrieved on Nov 1 2026 from https://www.academia.edu/33805349/A_splendid_field_Emma_Goldman_in_South_Wales

theanarchistlibrary.org

A ‘splendid field’? Emma Goldman in South Wales

Kevin Morgan

2009

achieved this sort of clarity over the course of the 1940s.[85] Just because of her self-absorption, Goldman is not the most authoritative of witnesses. Nevertheless, to the extent that she is worth citing in this context, it is in support of the latter view.

> I have been made to realise, painful as it is, that there is no anarchist movement in this country if ever there was one, and that there are not enough comrades who could, even if they would, create a movement … After many months of incessant hammering on behalf of the politicals in Russia … the work had to be given up for lack of financial support and interest. … we could not close our eyes to the fact that in England the socialist and trade-union element will have nothing whatever to do with critical work on Russia.[86]

The time when British Labour would be seen as the mainstay of anti-communism in the international labour movement was still to come.

A.A. Purcell. Bolshevism and the British Left part 3 (London, forthcoming 2010), ch. 5.

[85] See Morgan, *Labour Legends*, pp. 9–22: 'Introduction: Bolshevism and the British left'. For a cogent statement of the other point of view see Andrew Thorpe, 'Stalinism and British politics', *History*, 83, 1998.

[86] Goldman to Michael Cohn, 8 November 1925.

Contents

'Nothing short of a bomb explosion': Emma Goldman in London 7
A dismal situation? Emma Goldman in South Wales 14
The Russian superstition 20
A comrade's duty: Goldman and Jim Colton 25
Postscript 29

ordinary humanity to evince interest in either myself or my work'.[83] The implicit depreciation of her anarchist comrades did at least give rise to an afterthought:

Of course, I have met a few human beings among my own comrades, very lovely personalities, but they are simple folk and though rich in sentiment they can do very little to help me gain a foothold in England or to make my stay more interesting and worth while.[84]

Goldman did not return to Britain until the early months of 1937, when she arrived re-energised by the struggle in Spain. As steadfast as ever in the cause, Colton had died of cancer the previous summer.

Postscript

Both South Wales and the marriage to Colton figure only marginally in *Living My Life*. It would therefore be mistaken to make too much of their significance for Goldman biographically. Nor, just because of her notoriety and subsequent historiographical interest, should the status of Goldman's impressions of the coalfield be inflated. Her experiences do, however, provide insight into the vexed question of the relationship of Bolshevism and the British left. Few doubt that Russia between the wars provided a significant source of cleavage and allegiance in British politics. For some historians, already at this early stage, the cleavage was primarily one between a reformist labour movement and communism; exactly as it was in a country like Germany. For others, the present writer included, this amounts to a Cold War view of history, not in the usual pejorative sense, but the sense of predating a development that took place unevenly over some three decades and only really

[83] Goldman to Harris, n.d., c. May 1925.
[84] Goldman to Harris, n.d., c. May 1925.

encouragement of the Conservative MP and president of the Save the Children Fund, Nancy Astor. Timing, once again, was against her, for with the intrusion of the General Strike and miners' lockout Astor determined that events at home should have the first call on her priorities. Marriage to Colton now revealed its second and more lasting benefit: the provision of a British passport precisely as a way of getting out of the country. On 11 May 1926, with two million workers out on strike, Goldman set sail for St Tropez.

Five months later, as the miners' lockout entered its final stage, she made her way to the more familiar and congenial political territory of Canada.

Occasionally while still in France she had written to Colton. Sending him a pound to celebrate the anniversary of their marriage, she excused herself for not doing so more often and explained that her other friends had to make do with postcards.[81]

This, though tactful, was not entirely true, and Goldman's tone with other correspondents was apparently less constrained:

> By the way, June 27th will be the first year of my 'marriage', another reason why you should come to me, don't you think? Now don't laugh, it made it possible for me to go about freely. I might not have been in this heavenly place but for Mr Colton. Really it was worth it, the only thing I gained in His Majesty's Country.[82]

Even within the intimacy of the anarchist movement, it would seem, the bridging of social distance was often limited. A few weeks after staying in South Wales Goldman complained to the novelist Frank Harris that she had 'not met one single English person who has shown enough warmth and

[81] Goldman to Colton, 22 June 1926.

[82] Goldman to Gabriel Jousicas, 24 May 1926.

In May 1925 the 'anarchist communist' weekly *Freedom* carried a glowing report of the meetings in Britain of the American anarchist Emma Goldman. The object of Goldman's meetings was to expose the tyranny of the Bolshevik regime and publicise her campaign for the defence of Russian political prisoners. Fearlessly she took this message, not only to London and the English provinces, but to what she called the 'very hotbed of Communism' in the South Wales coalfield.[1] Speaking in the Rhondda, in Penygraig, Treorchy, Pentre and Trealaw, she succeeded, according to *Freedom*, in reducing the Bolsheviks' supporters to sullen acquiescence. Just for once, the 'Communist dovecotes of the Rhondda Valley' had had a proper shaking.[2]

Papers of radical movements would have no purpose if they never exerted themselves to promote the standard-bearers of their cause. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between *Freedom*'s claims and Goldman's private observations was in this instance more than usually wide. The Welsh in Goldman's view had one indispensable advantage: that they were not the English. Beyond that, her experience in South Wales induced a mood that was close to despair. Her marriage of convenience to the Ammanford miner Jim Colton has occasionally suggested a more romanticised treatment of the connection. Goldman certainly admired the miners' fortitude and humanity, and the 'splendid

[1] Goldman to W.S. Van Valkenburgh, 5 April 1925. Unless otherwise stated, all correspondence cited in this article derives from the excellent microfilm edition: Candace Falk, Stephen Cole and Sally Thomas, eds., *Emma Goldman. A guide to her life and documentary sources*, Chadwyck Healey, 1991. This was consulted at the International Institute for Social History (IISG) in Amsterdam and does not appear to available in any British Library. For details of the project see http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Goldman/Guide/. For outstandingly edited printed selections, unfortunately not projected to cover Goldman's years of exile, see the two volumes already published: Candace Falk et al (eds), *Emma Goldman: a documentary history of the American years. 1. Made for America, 1890–1901* (Berkeley Cal., 2003); *Emma Goldman: a documentary history of the American years. 2. Making Speech Free, 1902–1909* (Berkeley Cal.,2005).

[2] 'Emma Goldman's lectures', *Freedom*, May 1925, p. 23.

material' that existed in the union rank and file. Nevertheless, the immediate political prospects seemed about as gloomy as they could be, and the communist dovecotes almost unassailable. For Goldman, the 1920s was a decade of relentlessly declining expectations of the anarchist movement.

Ironically, it was in Ammanford, where at least it had a presence, that she found herself wondering whether there was something inherently the matter with the movement that it could take no root either in Britain or America.[3]

The aims of the present article are modest. It seeks to show why the South Wales coalfield figured so prominently in Goldman's itinerary. It gives a sense of her first-hand impression of the coalfield as a cultural and political outsider. And it offers her reflections on why the seed fell on such stony soil, even where an anarcho-syndicalist strain within the British labour movement proved relatively resilient. As far as possible, it presents the story in her own words, using the comprehensive microfilm edition of her correspondence produced by the Emma Goldman Papers Project.[4] It would be interesting to view the episode from the perspective of the coalfield itself, through local newspapers or the Welsh labour press. It would also be worth locating within a longer sequence of transnational exchanges: for example, by comparing it with what appears to have been the more effective visit to the coalfield of the American syndicalist Big Bill Haywood in 1910. For the time being, however, the focus here is very much on Goldman's own immediate reactions to what she saw in South Wales.

The wider significance of her comments need not be overstated. Goldman's, as will be seen, was very much a surface impression of the area, based on just a few weeks' stay. Nor

[3] Goldman to Stella Ballantine, 27 March 1925.

[4] See above n. 1. Unlike the editors of the Goldman project's published volumes, I have occasionally tidied up Goldman's idiosyncrasies of spelling and punctuation. These occur rather frequently in her letters and are a reminder that she was not originally an English-speaker.

If Colton, as he seems to have suggested, had become acquainted with Goldman on one of her earlier visits to Britain, there is no need to suspect any sentimental attachment. Immediately on their marriage, Colton had returned to South Wales, satisfied, according to Goldman, to have done something useful for the cause. To Berkman, Colton wrote proudly of the memory 'of how two fighters Thwarted the Powers that Be … i had a Comrades Duty to Perform, to hit back at our Enemies for the Cruel treatment Meted out to you and Emma and for that i am Thankful'.[77]

Her marriage may have settled the issue of her dependence on the indulgence of a Conservative government. There is little sign, however, of Goldman testing the opportunities this now provided for revolutionary propaganda on any other subject than Russia. When the British edition of *My Disillusionment in Russia* appeared in the autumn of 1925, she was dismayed by the welcome it received in the reactionary press.[78] She did not, however, taken any active steps to correct the impression.

Discouraged by the response to her meetings, and needing to secure a livelihood, she canvassed for opportunities to lecture on the theatre, as she had done before the war, and briefly even weighed the prospects of opening a beauty salon. Returning to speak in Neath in November, she contributed her speaker's fee of £1 to the fund for Russian prisoners, commenting: 'It is such bettel Gesshichte [beggarly vision] in the mining district it makes me feel rotten to even take a train fare.'[79] The following spring, she made a last attempt at a London meeting, this time supported by Sylvia Pankhurst, but again described it a 'measly' affair lacking energy, fire or even interest.[80] A last attempt to reignite her Russian campaign was made with the

[77] Colton to Berkman, 22 July 1925, cited Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise* (Chicago, Ill., 1961), p. 257.

[78] Goldman to Harry Weinberger, 23 October 1925.

[79] Goldman to Alexander Berkman, 23 November 1925.

[80] Goldman to Ben Reitman, 15 April 1926.

status, and declined to do so only because she preferred to do this in an English-speaking country.[75] In thus securing her legal position, however, Goldman's marriage to Colton had the further justification of answering both public allegations and inner misgivings regarding her dependence on a Conservative government for the privilege of remaining in Britain.

Writing to her niece immediately after her marriage, and making clear if confused allusion to the Soermus case highlighted by Aldred the previous month, Goldman described it as a 'long thought of proposition' to meet an impossible situation:

> You see, the reactionary outfit have been sending out Communists, one of them a Pianist (sic) who had nothing whatever to do with politics. Yet I was allowed to go about lecturing. I was not deceived, I knew it was because of my stand on Russia. In fact I have been confronted with the question why I am allowed to remain when others [are] being deported. If I myself did not know why, I should have cared as little about the Communist vulgarians than about anything else they charge me with. But I knew and I felt rotten. Another thing, the conditions here are growing worse from [day] to day, the terrible unemployment, the attempt to increase the hours of work and cut down wages. In the face of all that I could not face this winters work talking about Russia exclusively and ignoring the wrongs at hand. The only way out of it was the step I took on Saturday.[76]

[75] Goldman to Alexander Berkman, 8 July 1925.

[76] Goldman to Stella Ballantyne, 30 June 1925; also Goldman to Berkman, 8 July 1925: 'I had to do it in order to be able to do real work here and not only R[ussia].'

indeed did she suggest otherwise: and with the exception of the brief account that appeared in her autobiography *Living My Life*, none of these observations appeared in print.[5] Goldman's political capital was not immediately transferable into the British labour movement currency, and the failure of her campaign can be explained in a number of ways. Indeed, it would doubtless have been less comprehensive had Goldman herself understood these better. Even so, and when all

such personal factors have been taken into account, the insight she provides into the prevalence of pro-Bolshevik views in Britain is an important one. In spite of 'incessant hammering', she concluded mournfully, in Britain the socialist and trade-union element 'will have nothing whatever to do with critical work on Russia'.[6]

'Nothing short of a bomb explosion': Emma Goldman in London

Her timing was anything but auspicious. Arriving in Britain at the tail-end of the first Labour government, in September 1924, Goldman straight away witnessed the government's fall over the issue of the Russian treaties. In the ensuing general election Labour was then exposed to the most flagrant red-scare tactics in British history. Had Goldman primarily aimed to link up with the ailing British anarchist movement, this might have had a very different bearing on her fortunes; indeed, would most likely have led to her status in Britain being viewed rather differently by the incoming

[5] Goldman, *Living My Life* (New York, 1970 edn), pp. 973–4.

[6] Goldman to Michael A. Cohn, 8 November 1925. Where Goldman, in the American fashion, refers to 'England' clearly meaning Britain, I have (except in direct citation) indicated Britain. Where the context is indeterminate, or Goldman is clearly differentiating England from Wales, I have followed that usage in the text.

Conservative government. Goldman's ambitions, however, were set much higher than this. Her first British engagement, two weeks after the election, was a 'semi-private' dinner at London's Anderton hotel attracting some 250 well-wishers. Among them were such luminaries of the intellectual left as Harold Laski and Bertrand Russell – the latter, according to *Freedom*, providing the evening's 'most complete avowal of Anarchist convictions'.[7] Also providing a speech of welcome was the feminist writer Rebecca West,who was to prove one of Goldman's most steadfast supporters. Presiding over the meeting was the Liberal-turned-Labour MP Josiah Wedgwood, who had described himself to Goldman as the sole member of parliament who disapproved of the Bolshevism regime from a radical standpoint.[8] As Goldman at the dinner declared her intention of adding her own voice to the clamour against Bolshevism, she got a sense straight away of how true that was.

The venue must have seemed a long way from the East London 'haunts' with which anarchism was associated in the popular imagination.[9] Nevertheless, the engagement was characteristic of the approach on which Goldman had built such a reputation in the USA. Born to a German-speaking Jewish family in Kovno, Lithuania in 1869, she moved to the States at the age of sixteen and like many was drawn to the revolutionary movement by the scandal of the Haymarket executions of 1887.[10]

[7] 'Dinner to Emma Goldman', *Freedom*, November-December 1924, p. 60.

[8] See Wedgwood to Goldman, 19 November 1924. 'There are only three classes of members … Those who disapprove of the Soviet Government because it has established a "new order"; those who disapprove of it because it has destroyed the old order, and those who approve of it because it has destroyed the older. The only class you want to see is the first one, and I am the only member of it.'

[9] See William J. Fishman, *East End Jewish Radicals 1875–1914* (London, 1975), appendix 1 and passim.

[10] On this, see Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton, 1984).

deflect such criticisms, Goldman publicised her rejection of an invitation to speak from a branch of the Women's Guild of Empire.[71] For her critics, however, the mere fact of her being the subject of such approaches was more revealing. 'If Emma Goldman still wrote and spoke in [the old] strain, would she be invited … by the Women's Guild of Empire?', asked the anarchist communist Guy Aldred. 'Would she receive the right of asylum from a Tory Government that deported Soermus?'[72] The invidiousness of her position remained.

A comrade's duty: Goldman and Jim Colton

It was as an attempt to rectify this anomaly that Goldman explained her marriage to Jim Colton in June 1925. Her rejection of the institution of marriage was a matter of public record.[73] Readers of her autobiography will also know that she had passed through a number of relationships; the *Daily Express*'s description of her as the Red Virgin was singularly inapposite.[74] Already in Germany, however, Goldman had been urged by comrades like Rudolf Rocker to regularise her legal

still sympathetic to the Bolsheviks themselves. Holdsworth, however, may note have been; or at least his wife Ethel Carnie Holdworth, with whom he published the anti-fascist paper *Clear Light*, was in the same period contributing poems to *Freedom* about the plight of the anarchist prisoners in Russia; s ee forexample *Freedom*, October 1924, p. 54; November-December 1924, p. 61.

[71] *Freedom*, March-April 1925, p. 18.

[72] 'The decline of Emma. Ex-anarchist's capitalist alliances exposed', *The Commune*, May 1925. The Russian violinist Edvard Soermus was deported from Britain in 1919 and although the order was temporarily revoked by the Labour home secretary Arthur Henderson it remained in force and occasioned much comment in parliament and the left-wing press.

[73] Goldman, 'Marriage and love' in her *Anarchism*, pp. 227–39.

[74] Parliamentary Archives, Beaverbrook papers, BBB/C/322, Rebecca West to Beaverbrook, n.d., c. late 1924.

compounded by her ability to do so without molestation by the British government. In the more politically charged context of South Wales, the explanation for such generosity of treatment seemed self-evident. 'Everywhere I went I met with terrific opposition on the part of the Communists', Goldman wrote.

> Not only do they charge me with having sold myself to the enemy, but they are trying desperately to make the Foreign Office apprehensive. At every meeting they point out that others are being deported while E.G. is allowed the hospitality of G.B. – why?[67]

Ironically, given her own somewhat reductionist view of the Moscow subsidies, she also referred more specifically to the allegation of her being paid by the Mensheviks and the Rothermere press – the latter, in a technical sense, obviously being the case.[68]

The issue went deeper than communist smear tactics. Within the anarchist movement, what Goldman called 'the old sectarian school' was also opposed to writing for the bourgeois press. Even her old comrade Berkman urged the importance of such principle in the case of views, like these, that reinforced the general tenor of the press rather than undermining it.[69] Within the pages of *Freedom* itself, Goldman was accused of 'lin[ing] up, shoulder to shoulder, with the dirtiest hacks of the dirtiest Press that has ever polluted the minds of the masses, and that at a time when the Reaction is in the ascendant'.[70] In a somewhat desperate endeavour to

[67] Goldman to Frank Harris, n.d., c. May 1925,

[68] Goldman to Isaac Don Levine, 8 April 1925 and Minna Lowersohn, 12 May 1925;

[69] Goldman, *Living My Life*, pp. 936–7; Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, pp. 63–4.

[70] Alfred Holdsworth, *Freedom*, January 1925, p. 3. Similar views were also expressed by the anarchist-communist Guy Aldred, who atthis time was

Anarchism, as Goldman came to see it, was in this period confined to a linguistic and political ghetto, and the mission she took upon herself was to break out and reach a wider 'native' American public. Speaking mainly in English, she thus abandoned the 'dingy halls' and sectarianism of proletarian anarchism to construct a personal platform centred on the headline lecture tour and her magazine *Mother Earth*.[11] Eclectic and inclusive, anarchy was presented, not as future prescription, but as 'liberating ideal', embracing themes of literary revolt, sexual emancipation, Nietzschean elitism and educational iconoclasm.[12] An individualist both by precept and practice of politics, Goldman's was an almost entrepreneurial model of activism in which the road manager took the place of local organising committee and the entrance fee that of membership subscription. In the words of her biographer Alice Wexler, she built up a 'personal following of middle-class liberals and intellectuals' almost as 'an alternative movement' to proletarian anarchism.[13] At the same time, Goldman gave active support to the syndicalist agitations with which anarchism to some degree became melded, published syndicalist writings in *Mother Earth* and briefly helped to instigate a somewhat ineffectual syndicalist league.

It was doubtless a reflection of the diffuseness of her attachments that Goldman should at first have rallied almost unreflectingly to support of the Soviets. One of 249 foreign-born anarchists deported to Russia from the USA in December 1919, at this point she was a fervent defender of the revolution from

[11] On this, see Kevin Morgan, 'Herald of the future? Emma Goldman, Friedrich Nietzsche and the anarchist as superman', [*Anarchist Studies*?], forthoming.

[12] Goldman, *Living My Life*, p. 395.

[13] Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile*, p. 155.

its anarchist critics.[14] Given her deep-seated individualism, it is nevertheless difficult to see how such a commitment could have survived exposure to the atmosphere of war communism. Though she did not suffer personally at the hands of the Bolsheviks, Goldman's language skills and breadth of political contact meant that she was quickly aware of a range of dissenting opinion including the anarchist Peter Kropotkin and the leader of the left SRs Maria Spiridinova, who at this time was living underground.[15] Along with her comrade Alexander Berkman, Goldman was consequently one of the first of the revolution's western supporters to register its bleaker sequel. Irrevocably alienated by the suppression of the Kronstadt mutiny in March 1921, they left Russia together later that year and henceforth dedicated themselves in their different ways to the exposure of left-wing delusions about the regime. Initially Goldman moved to Sweden, and then to Germany, where she wrote her book *My Disillusionment in Russia*. Though this was widely noticed in the USA, and Goldman even found an outlet for her articles in the *New York World*, she saw little immediate prospect of returning to her adopted homeland. When the Labour government was formed, she therefore jumped at the chance of coming to Britain and picking up the threads of her lecturing career. Probably in no other country were Bolshevik sympathies so extensive on the left. This was a measure of the challenge that faced her. It also meant, ironically, that her sponsors themselves were of pro-Bolshevik outlook and associated with Labour's newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, which was notorious for adopting such an attitude.[16] As Goldman soon discovered,

[14] For her immediate reaction see 'The Russian Revolution' (December 1917) in Peter Glassgold (ed.), *Anarchy! An anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth* (New York, 2000), pp. 406–9.

[15] For her own account of these experiences, see Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (London, 1925).

[16] For the *Herald* and Russia, see Kevin Morgan, *Labour Legends and Russian Gold. Bolshevism and the British Left part 1* (London, 2006), ch. 4

by Bolshevism. Just because conditions in the coalfield were so desperate, the idea of a better future ostensibly being constructed in Russia was thus a crucial political asset and the second of the obstacles to a more critical and defensible view of the revolution. Perhaps impressed by the evidence of nonconformity all around her, Goldman likened the phenomenon to that of the religious believer resenting any challenge to their 'faith in the spook'.[63] 'No wonder the Communists are strong there', she wrote, again of the Rhondda.

You can well imagine the time I had and how rotten I felt that I had to take away the last ray of hope from the unfortunate Welsh slaves in regard to the 'Heaven' in Russia. There is no doubt, we who have taken a stand against the Dictatorship are in a rotten position since we are compelled to tell the same tale reiterated by the reactionary press.[64]

In the Rhondda, it was the communists who derived most advantage from the Russian 'heaven', but the delusion was by no means confined to their immediate supporters. 'The fact is that the Russian superstition holds everybody in its snare. Nothing outside of sympathy with the regime attracts attention.'[65]

The third of Goldman's arguments concerned what she saw as the dominance of party allegiances in British politics. Repeatedly she complained of the impossibility of constructing what was essentially a personal political platform. More than that, however, she found that even sympathetic figures around the labour movement wanted nothing to do with a campaign that seemed to be providing grist to the Conservative mill. Already her contributions to the Hearst press had provoked controversy in the anarchist press.[66] Once in Britain, her willingness to write for papers like the *Sunday Times* was

[63] Goldman to Minna Lowensohn, 12 May 1925.

[64] Goldman to Isaac Don Levine, 8 April 1925.

[65] Nettlau papers 159, Goldman to Nettlau 17 April 1925.

[66] W.C. Owen, 'Why attack Emma Goldman?', *Freedom*, May 1922.

> if they have to pay. The expenses are made up through collections and that very rarely.[59]

Far from providing a livelihood, there was not even the prospect of covering a speaker's board and fares. Much could be done in Wales, 'if only one had the means for free meetings'. But in fact, it was only the communists whose means were unlimited:

> Moscow cannot feed the unfortunate Russian people, but it has no end of means to supply its foreign parties. Well, the Communists are welcome to it. One thing is certain, no movement can be built by means of money alone. And that is all the Communists have.[60]

It was not, perhaps, quite all. Between what Chris Williams has called a 'largely inert Labour Party' and a 'rather manic Communist Party', Goldman somewhat grudgingly conceded the qualities of the latter.[61] 'The dreadful thing to me', she wrote:

> is that the Communists are the only ones who do actual revolutionary propaganda, no one else. We have no movement whatever, the other socialist branches are trimmers, so remain only the Communists and all those who go with them.[62]

While Russian subsidies might have provided the means of such propaganda, Goldman understood that a more important motive force was the fascination and attraction exercised

[59] Goldman to Michael Cohn, 3 April 1925.

[60] Goldman to Minna Lowensohn, 12 May 1925

[61] Chris Williams, '"An able administrator of capitalism"? The Labour Party in the Rhondda, 1917–21', *Llafur*, 4, 4, 1987, p. 29.

[62] Nettlau papers 159, Goldman to Nettlau 17 April 1925.

a single-minded focus on Russia meant a breach with those who might otherwise have been her closest supporters and invidious dependency instead on the leniency of a conservative establishment.

Already at her welcoming dinner she declared her intentions with a 'heartfelt exposition of her reasons for concentrating upon the plight of liberty in Russia'.[17] The effect, in her own words, was like 'nothing short of a bomb explosion'. Goldman at this point had little expectation of Labour's political leaders, but much of unattached individuals like Russell, Henry Nevinson and the 'very brilliant' Laski.[18] Even these hopes were to be dashed. Laski did set up a meeting with prominent left-wingers, but all of them, including Laski, preferred to keep their distance. Timing again was against her, and Goldman ascribed a heavy responsibility to the return from Russia of a TUC delegation consumed with admiration and a spirit of solidarity with the Bolsheviks. The wide publicity the delegation received only further provoked Goldman, and at the end of January she launched her campaign with a meeting at London's South Place Institute. Wedgwood again was in the chair. West, the main co-speaker, also provided a link to well-connected feminists like Lady Rhondda and the opportunity to write for her magazine, *Time and Tide*.[19] These, however, were her only nationally prominent supporters, and it was on this slender basis that Goldman had to set up her 'British Committee for the Defence of Political Prisoners in Russia'. There was one trade union subscription, from an East London tailoring

[17] 'Dinner to Emma Goldman', *Freedom*, November-December 1924, p. 60.

[18] Goldman to Sonya, 28 November 1924; IISG, Max Nettlau papers, Goldman to Mr Hawkes, 13 December 1925, copied to Nettlau 15 Decemeber 1924.

[19] 'Women of the Russian revolution, *Time and Tide*, 8 May 1925, pp. 452–3; 'The tragedy of the Russian intelligentsia', *Time and Tide*, 31 July 1925, pp. 748–9.

union.[20] Otherwise, the labour movement was virtually closed to her. Indeed, when the published report of the TUC delegation appeared at the end of February, even Wedgwood refused to join in the outcry to which its endorsement of Bolshevism gave rise. When Goldman through her committee published her own rebuttal of its findings, Wedgwood then withdrew all further co-operation, in high dudgeon at her

failure to consult.[21] This again was characteristic of the cleavages that existed in Britain. When, later in the year, the Conservatives provided Britain with its own political prisoners in the shape of the twelve arrested communist leaders, Wedgwood was among those expressing concern for the issue under the auspices of the communist-sponsored International Class War Prisoners' Aid.[22]

As far as the left was concerned, Goldman had little else to fall back on but her anarchist contacts. Three times before she had visited and spoken in Britain, in 1895, 1899–1900 and 1907. International links were also strongly represented in *Mother Earth*, whose British contributors included the trade unionist John Turner and the journalist William C. Owen, both of whom now joined Goldman's committee. As editor of *Freedom* and a longstanding admirer of Goldman, Owen also provided generous coverage of her activities and had already had her pamphlet *The Crushing of the Russian Revolution* published by the Freedom Press.

At best, this might have meant a return to the 'dingy halls' that Goldman once thought to have left behind her. In reality, anarchism in its East London heartlands had been decimated by the combined forces of anglicisation, the halting of immigration into Britain, wartime internment, forced or vol-

[20] The 'National Tailors' Union of Subdividisional Workers'; see C. Horwitch to Goldman, 22 December 1924.

[21] Goldman To Berkman, 11 March 1925.

[22] RGASPI 539/3/284, ICWPA, report of meeting of London contacts, 10 Novemeber 1925; report of London conference, 12 December 1925.

tribalism which served to delegitimise anti-Bolshevism as the argument and weapon of labour's class and political enemies. Each is illustrated briefly here with specific reference to South Wales. Those interested in Goldman's wider impressions are referred to the relevant chapter in my *Bolshevism and the British Left*.[56]

The corrupting influence of Russian gold, chief cause of the imbalance of material resources, had already been strongly emphasised in Goldman's *My Disillusionment in Russia*. Doubtless this reflected an older suspicion of political machinery and tendency to the explanation of conspiracy. Goldman had no hesitation, for example, in describing the TUC leaders as 'Moscow men', or suggesting that with its 'unlimited resources to carry its work to the far corners of the earth' the Bolshevik government managed to 'buy, corrupt and blind everybody'.[57] That may have been overstatement. Goldman, on the other hand, had no resources with which to sustain a campaign. The practice of the paid public lecture, for which the Americans, as Russell put it, had an 'unintelligible' fondness, and which before the war had supported Goldman and *Mother Earth*, was hardly established even in London.[58] In the Rhondda, the sheer economic hardship she encountered made such a form of activity seem unthinkable:

> there are no means to be raised in England [sic]… The people here are frightfully poor, all their lives they have figured in pennies …The English have never been trained to paying admission, they are used to free meetings and simply do not attend

[56] See Kevin Morgan, *Workers of all Countries? Syndicalism, internationalism and the lost world of*

[57] Nettlau papers 158, Goldman to 'Dear Comrades', 15 December 1924 (copy).

[58] *New Leader*, 22 August 1924.

Last night we had a desperate tussle with a gang of Communists. They are bad enough when they are sober, but when they are half filled on bad liquor they are raving. And that seems to be the trouble here, all Labour clubs are connected with bars, the workers sit around for several hours before the meeting in suffocating air and drink to forget the drabness of their existence.[53]

Whatever these audiences were, it was not enthusiastic. If they were not 'half under the influence of bad whiskey and beer', it seems they were 'too dulled by their poverty' to care for anything that did not bring immediate results.[54] The instant impressions of a disappointed speaker need not be taken at face value. Readers will have noticed that Goldman was somewhat prone to stereotype and subjectivism. One thing seems certain, however; that her audiences, whatever their mental state, were 'in no mood for a serious lecture on Russia'.[55]

The Russian superstition

Goldman's correspondence suggests a number of possible explanations for the failure of her campaign. Some of these had no particular application to South Wales. There was, for example, no attempt to link the presumed appeal of Russian trade, on which she otherwise laid such stress, with the strength of communist sentiment in the coalfield. There were, however, three distinct lines of argument that did have a particular resonance or application. One was the massive imbalance of material resources; a second was the mood of despair or desperation, against which the illusion of a workers' Russia served as a sort of opiate; and the third was the dominance of a sort of political

[53] EG to WS Van Valkenburgh, 5 April 1925.

[54] Nettlau papers, Goldman to Nettlau, 2 April 1925; Goldman to Minna Lowensohn, 12 May 1925.

[55] Goldman to Nettlau, 2 April 1925.

untary return to revolutionary Russia and the rival political attractions of Bolshevism and Zionism.[23] Nationally, the movement was at a pitifully low ebb and her committee attracted only living corpses, 'lifeless, uninteresting and uninterested'.[24] Thomas Keell, the publisher of *Freedom*, sucked away one's very spirit. Beyond him, not an anarchist in London could as much as 'give out a handbill', while elsewhere the movement was said not have held an indoor meeting in several years.[25] Nevertheless, it was exactly such a programme of meetings that Goldman sought to organise through *Freedom*.

Though aware that it was standard local practice – 'like bacon for breakfast' – she baulked at the idea that one should 'huckster one's wares on street corners', and in any case doubted whether her throat was up to the demands of the open-air meeting.[26] The weather, about which she complained with some fervency, was only the least of her problems. 'But inasmuch as our own people are arranging things I am going with much apprehension as to my success', she confided to an American friend, not perhaps very fraternally. 'I still have my first fifteen years activity in America in my bones …'[27]

Her schedule of meetings included dates in London, Northampton, Leeds, Manchester, Bristol and Norwich. Norwich provided the biggest audience, of around 900, and a collection of nearly £5 on behalf of Russian political prisoners.[28] A similar sum was raised at the Manchester's Milton

[23] Fishman, *East End Jewish* Radicals, ch. 12. See also e.g. International Institute of Social History, Alexander Berkman papers III g, Thomas Keell to Berkman, 2 September 1925: 'truly the worst three months I can remember for years'.

[24] Goldman to Minnah Lowenshohn, 22 January 1925.

[25] Goldman to Berkman, 13 and 26 August 1925; Thomas Keell to Goldman, 6 February 1925.

[26] Goldman to William C. Owen, 22 June 1926; Goldman, *Living My Life*, p. 163.

[27] Goldman to Michael Cohn, 27 February 1925.

[28] 'Emma Goldman's lectures', *Freedom*, May 1925, p. 23.

Hall.[29] In Bristol, where Goldman discovered the country's one really 'responsive group of anarchists', she spoke twice and arranged for a return visit.[30] The greatest concentration of activities, however, was in South Wales. In any event, in March-April 1925 Goldman spent a fortnight addressing meetings in the relatively prosperous west of the coalfield as well as in the Rhondda.[31] Though the experience was not an encouraging one, she returned again in the autumn to speak on the fate of the Russian, German and Austrian revolutions under the auspices of the Neath Trades and Labour Council.[32] It is from the earlier visit, however, that the most vivid impressions remain.

A dismal situation? Emma Goldman in South Wales

The appearance of Northampton in Goldman's itinerary was due to the efforts of a 'personal friend' and local JP, J. Flinton Harris.[33] In Bristol the efforts of a small

group of comrades around Julie Gibson appear to have made the difference. If South Wales alone of Britain's industrial regions provided the opportunity for a series of such meetings, this too was testimony to the resilience and commitment of relatively small groups of activists. These, it is true, must be located within an unusually vibrant militant

[29] Goldman to Berkman, April 1925. The Norwich meeting raised £4 12s. 6d. The Manchester meeting raised £4 3s. 8d.

[30] Goldman to Senya Fleshin, 22 August 1925.

[31] *Freedom* mentions meetings in Swansea (for Young Socialist League, 22 March 1925), Garnant (25 March), Ystalfera (ILP branch, 26 March), Ammanford (27 March); also Neath, Gwaun-cae-Carwen; and Penygraig, Treorchy, Pentre and Trealaw in the Rhondda.

[32] Goldman to Rudolf Grossman, 20 October 1925.

[33] Northampton *Daily Mercury*, undated cutting, EGPP.

of the miners who would furnish a great asset for our work' and described South Wales, at least potentially, as a 'splendid field' for activity that could be worked with great results.[48]

The fact nevertheless remained: whatever the anarchist movement might once have been, it was now as 'dead as a door nail'.[49] Already, from the Amman valley, Goldman wrote that even the Welsh seemed 'miles removed from ideas of a revolutionary nature' and that her meetings were 'so poorly attended they paralyze me'.[50] At least the area appeared to her comparatively beautiful and prosperous. The Rhondda, on the other hand, seems to have overwhelmed her, and she described it as 'a dreadful dump with miles and miles of drab barracks where the miners live in squalour and congestion'.[51] Staying with Mainwaring in Treherbert in the Rhondda Fawr, she described it as:

> the worse (sic) dump I have yet seen, the drabness of the place, the bleakness of the houses and the barren hills are all too awful to contemplate. The whole Valley is closed by these bleak hills, the soil is hard and unyielding, nowhere a bit of green to relieve the deadening monotony. The pits are of soft coal, the work more difficult, the pay less and there are three thousand unemployed in this pit. You can imagine how dismal the situation is.[52]

Bad enough in themselves, such conditions led to demoralisation which Goldman could not help but view in political terms:

[48] Goldman to Michael Cohn, 3 April 1925; Goldman to Isaac Don Levine, 8 April 1925

[49] Goldman to Michael Cohn, 3 April 1925.

[50] Goldman to Stella Ballantine, 27 March 1925

[51] Goldman to Frank Harris, n.d. c. May 1925.

[52] IISH Nettlau papers, Goldman to Nettlau, 2 April 1925.

people are as different as if they lived in France or some other Latin country. They are certainly much warmer and [more] impressionable than the English.'[44] Living in St John's Wood, and moving among London's literati and fashionable set – 'Invitations from Lady so and so at least several times a week', she wrote before the interest began to wear off – Goldman may have crossed over a social boundary as much as a national one.[45] Nevertheless, it was in terms of the 'Welsh', not the miners, that the difference was primarily though not exclusively registered.

They are most responsive to ideas, they are warm hearted, they are of a touching simplicity, so uncorrupted as I have not seen for a long time. And what took my fancy most is their truly beautiful hospitality. They are miners barely make enough to live on, yet they are so generous and will spread their table and give gladly to those who come to them as if they had known him all their lives.[46]

One of the fascinating features of the correspondence is the invisibility within it of the women of the coalfield. Other outsiders were struck by the exclusion from public activities of the miners' wives, and the special responsibility they bore for hospitality. 'They won't lift a teapot off the hob to pour themselves out a cup of tea', the communist Pollitt wrote of the miners a decade later. 'The women are almost chattel slaves to the men …'[47] If Goldman did encounter such experiences, she did not describe them. Strongly impressed by the activists she did meet, she noted that there was 'splendid material in the rank and file

[44] Goldman to Stella Ballantine, 27 March 1925.

[45] IISH Nettlau papers 158, Goldman to Mrs Hawkes, 13 December 1924, with covering letter to Nettlau 15 December 1924. At this stage, with her constant round of lunch and dinner engagements, Goldman thought the British 'tremendious hospitable (sic). Much more so than I had expected.'

[46] IISH Nettlau papers 158, Goldman to Nettlau, 2 April 1925.

[47] See Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen and Andrew Flinn, *Communists in British Society 1920–1991* (London, 2006), p. 156, also pp. 63–8.

culture distinctly tinged with anarcho-syndicalism.[34] Nevertheless, its links with organised anarchism were apparently tenuous. Neither in her autobiography nor in the published chronologies of the Emma Goldman project is there any indication of Goldman visiting the region on her previous stays to Britain. Only an ambiguous remark in a letter, that she saw no sign of progress in thirty years, suggests that she may have visited Wales on her first stay in 1895. In the syndicalist moment before the First World War, the ferment of radical ideas included a movement of 'Workers' Freedom Groups' in the west of the coalfield, boldly espousing principles of 'Anarchist-Communism' though barely receiving coverage in the 'official' anarchist press.[35] In any case, by the time of Goldman's arrival in 1924 syndicalist impulses had been largely channelled into a 'minority' movement of basically communist inception. One straw in the wind was the vote of a 1921 coalfield conference in favour of miners' affiliation to the Moscow international. Another, two years later, was the formation of a Miners' Minority Movement, providing focus as well as an organisational model apparently consistent with syndicalist traditions. Goldman's meetings were to show that neither Labour nor communist orthodoxy had entirely squeezed out political alternatives. Nevertheless, it was from Ammanford, where the anarchist-communist current had been strongest, that Goldman commented wearily on the lack of progress over thirty years.

The contribution of those individuals who carried on undeterred consequently assumes an almost heroic quality. In the Rhondda, the principal organiser of her meetings was Will

[34] Hywel Francis, for example, refers to this '"anarcho-syndicalist" rank and file outlook towards industrial and political questions'; Francis, *Miners Against Fascism. Wales and the Spanish Civil War* (London, 1984), p. 33.

[35] John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: the lost history of the British anarchists* (London, 1978), pp. 278–9.

Mainwaring, son of the anarchist stalwart Sam Mainwaring.[36] A veteran of the Socialist League and a close associate of Tom Mann's, Sam in 1900 had shared a London anti-war platform with both Mann and Goldman, and three years later founded the short-lived anarcho-syndicalist paper *The General Strike*. Sam had also spent some years in the USA and his death in 1907 had been marked in *Mother Earth* by another anarcho-syndicalist active in both Britain and the States, Harry Kelly.[37] Carrying on in the same cause, Will, according to Goldman, was the staunchest of the local comrades, and both his brother and sister were also anarchists. In the unions and among the unemployed he 'kept up the banner of his father most faithfully', always 'as an anarchist'. As Goldman commented: 'I marvel at his courage to go on in this barren soil and yet keep up his enthusiasm'.[38]

In the Amman valley, she stayed with Jim Colton, whom she was shortly to marry. A Scottish-born miner then in his mid-sixties, Colton, like Goldman herself, had become an anarchist as a result of the Haymarket scandal.[39] Also in the west of the coalfield, Will's cousin, also Sam Mainwaring, proved another hardy supporter. Politically educated by his uncle, he had been a subscriber to *Freedom* since 1903, with, as he put it, 'a few breaks through being in inaccessible parts of the globe'.

[36] Will should not be confused, as he initially was by the present author, with the sometime syndicalist, communist and Labour MP for East Rhondda, W.H. Mainwaring. My thanks to Chris Williams for pointing me in the right direction.

[37] *Mother Earth*, December 1907, pp. 456–7; Falk et al, *Emma Goldman: a documentary history of the American years. 1*, p. 382; also Ken John, 'Sam Mainwaring and the Autonomist tradition', *Llafur*, 4, 3, 1986, pp. 55–66

[38] IISH, Nettlau papers, Goldman to Max Nettlau, 2 April 1925.

[39] Goldman to Berkman, 19 March 1925; Goldman, *Living My Life*, p. 974. For biographical details see Huw Walter, 'Emma Goldman. The queen of anarchy: the Carmarthenshire connection', originally published in *Carmarthenshire Antiquary* (2003), here accessed through http://www.terrynorm.ic24.net/emma%20goldman.htm (site accessed 28 March 2008).

It was through young Sam's initiative, Ken John reports, that Goldman got to speak in Neath.[40] Ironically, however, he also offers insight into the scale of the challenge that Goldman now faced. Four years earlier, still an anarchist, Sam had written to *Freedom* defending Bolshevism as the 'only effectual way' to economic freedom through the scientific organisation of industry. Moreover, it was Goldman herself whom he adduced as his authority. 'Emma Goldman … said that as long as outside Capitalism and inside counter-revolutionaries were attacking, it was having her undivided support', he wrote of the Bolshevik regime; adding that this would have been the attitude of 'nineteen out of twenty followers of Michael Bakunin'.[41] As subsequently Goldman revised her view of Russia, Sam at some unspecified point followed suit. Nevertheless, his sentiments remind us how deep-seated were the instincts that Goldman would have to overcome. Still in 1925 it was axiomatic for many on the left: first, that outside capitalism was by no means reconciled to Bolshevism; and secondly, that critics and opponents at home, as a simple matter of definition, should be regarded as counter-revolutionaries.

It was this that made for such difficult work. Towards the people of the coalfield, Goldman's attitude was broadly positive. In the autobiography she wrote six years later, she even described the 'enthusiasm' of the 'Welsh crowds' as a respite from the 'English icicles' she had tried and failed to melt.[42] That was a characteristic emphasis. Stung by the lack of interest in her work, her anglophobia had by this time become almost obsessive and her letters are full of complaints about the icy, unreachable race who froze your blood and made you clutch at your throat.[43] Wales, by contrast, was 'not English at all. The

[40] *Freedom*, March 1921, p. 20; John, 'Sam Mainwaring', p. 60.

[41] *Freedom*, March 1921, p. 20.

[42] Goldman,*Living My Life*, pp. 973–4.

[43] See e.g. Goldman to Berkman, 28 May 1925, Goldman to Bayard Boyesen, 5 June 1925.