

Emma Goldman, One of History's Best-Known Anarchists, Was Born 150 Years Ago

Happy birthday, comrade Emma

Kim Kelly

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150 years ago today, a little girl was born into a Jewish ghetto in a western corner of the Russian Empire. Due to her gender, her religion, and her family's lack of resources, the course of her life seemed preordained—marriage, toil, children, an early death. Higher education was a luxury that her family deemed unnecessary; her father told her that “all a Jewish daughter needs to know is how to prepare gefilte fish, cut noodles fine, and give the man plenty of children.” As a Jewish woman in Tsarist Russia, her life was perpetually under threat; a rash of bloody pogroms broke out in 1881, and she bore witness to the violent antisemitism that continued to plague her homeland after she emigrated to the States in 1885 at age 16 in search of freedom.

Despite those seemingly insurmountable odds, she grew up to become one of history's best-known anarchists and fiercest feminist voices. She was born on June 27, 1869 in Lithuania and as a teenager in Rochester, NY and later in New Haven, CT, worked in a factory. She traveled in radical circles, eventually landing in New York City's vibrant Lower East Side, which was a hotbed of anarchist organizing.

As an adult, her speeches and writings on workers' rights, revolution, and women's oppression struck fear into the powers of state and capital, leading the press to christen her “Red Emma”. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover called her “the most dangerous woman in America.” As an elder, she continued to fight for anarchism, feminism, workers' rights, and collective liberation until her last breath at age 70.

Her name was Emma Goldman. The footprints she left cannot be measured.

She was a dyed-in-the-wool anarchist who founded an influential anarchist journal, *Mother Earth*, gained a reputation for her stirring speeches (delivered on extensive speaking tours to crowds of immigrant workers in German, Yiddish, and English), and wrote many books and essays on the subject. Goldman also wrote copiously on capitalism, labor, marriage, birth control, sexual freedom for people of all sexual orientations, prisons, war, art, and freedom of speech, and wrestled with thorny ideological issues within the ranks of leftist thought. She was proud of her Jewish identity but spurned religion as a tool of oppression. Her body of work (including her epic

1931 autobiography, *Living My Life*) spans decades, and thanks to her gifted writing ability and overall verve holds up far better than many other seminal anarchists' texts.

Though Goldman was ironclad in her convictions, she wasn't afraid to acknowledge her mistakes or to publicly change her mind on matters like Russia's Bolshevik regime, the social and political repercussions of which she experienced firsthand as a political exile and harshly criticized in her controversial 1923 book, *My Disillusionment in Russia*. There is no such thing as a perfect revolutionary; those who criticize her are quick to note that Goldman was willing to engage with liberals, progressives, and trade unionists as well as the intelligentsia in ways that many of her comrades scorned. She notoriously engaged in a public feud with her anarchist contemporary, Lucy Parsons, and as she got older, her core commitment to free speech began to supersede her desire for outright revolution.

However, Goldman's openness brought an altogether human element to the sometimes inflexible realm of radical ideological thought. For her, life was about roses as well as bread. She is remembered as an earthy, bohemian woman who loved art, music, and sex, and saw no reason for a revolutionary to deprive themselves of beautiful things. This attitude gave rise to one of the most popular quotes attributed to her: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be in your revolution."

Her journey out of Tsarist Russia and into a leading light of anarchism began on the factory floor and crystallized at the gallows. Though she had already been exposed to leftist politics by fellow workers at her factory job in Rochester, the 1886 Haymarket affair and ensuing state execution of the anarchists Albert Parsons, Adolph Fischer, George Engel, and August Spies became the crucible in which Goldman's radicalization and ongoing political self-education was forged. "I saw a new world opening before me," she wrote then, and as she wrote in a 1910 essay, "Anarchism is the great liberator of man from the phantoms that have held him captive"—and it became her life's work to spread the message of liberation far and wide.

It inspired her to leave her unhappy marriage and move to New York City at age 20, where she quickly became enmeshed in a community of Jewish radicals and other immigrant workers. There, she met Alexander Berkman, a fellow Lithuanian anarchist who would become her lifelong comrade and longtime romantic partner. While she was a big proponent of free love and enjoyed plenty of love affairs, for much of their lives, Goldman and Berkman were inseparable, their stories intertwined through times of peace, war, and a failed assassination attempt.

When Berkman landed in prison following the assassination attempt on industrialist Henry Clay Frick during the 1892 Homestead, PA steel strike, Goldman sent him letters; when he was freed in 1906, she welcomed him back with open arms. In 1919, during the first Red Scare, the politically motivated passage of the Immigration Act of 1918 led to the deportation of 249 anarchists, labor organizers, and other alleged political dissidents to the Soviet Union on a vessel that the press dubbed "the Soviet Ark;" Goldman and Berkman went together. During their stint in Communist Russia, the pair questioned Lenin himself about the repression of anarchists there and then fled the country together in 1921. Ultimately, they died four years apart, an ocean away from one another.

Goldman wasn't as loud as some of her peers were about the use of violence and direct action, she had no problem advocating for its use when deemed necessary to achieve a greater goal. "Isn't it stupid to be afraid of violence when you are in the midst of it all the time?" she asked the assembled crowd at a meeting in Harlem in 1909. "Anarchists don't propagate violence. They only struggle against what already exists, and it is necessary to fight existing violence with violence. That is the only way that a new peace can dawn."

Those words weren't empty. In an effort to bring about a revolutionary workers' uprising, she had helped Berkman plan the botched *attentat* (which Frick survived). She was falsely implicated in the assassination of President William McKinley by the anarchist Leon Czolgosz, who claimed her as an inspiration and was herself thrown in prison in 1893, for allegedly inciting a riot with a speech that urged her working-class female audience, "If they do not give you work, demand bread. If they deny you both, take bread."

Goldman was arrested a number of times throughout her life for "offenses" like distributing information on birth control, encouraging men to avoid registering for the draft, and for espionage. She remained fearless, even after a lifetime of constant government surveillance, repression, and eventual exile. Following her time in Russia, she bounced between Sweden, Germany, France, England, and Canada. When she was 67 and living in London, the Spanish Civil War broke out, and she threw herself into the cause, mustering support for its anti-fascist International Brigades in their battle against the Nationalist troops who were supported by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, and sharing her admiration for what she saw as the only working class revolution to have been fomented on anarchist ideals.

During the final year of her life, in 1939, Goldman moved to Toronto, where she organized on behalf of Spanish women and children refugees fleeing a victorious dictator General Francisco Franco. Before her death, Mariano Vázquez, the former Secretary-General of the CNT-FAI, a Spanish anarchist organization, sent her a message naming her as "our spiritual mother." Even as her own health failed, her last thoughts were with the oppressed working class, and her final actions were to do what she could to leave a better world behind.

Goldman continues to command an outsized legacy in the history of radical working class struggle. As she once declared, "Everyone is an anarchist who loves liberty and hates oppression;" thanks to her, I'm proud to call myself an anarchist, and based on that definition, you might be, too.

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