

# Emma Goldman and the Russian Revolution

an exchange

Fifth Estate Collective

David Porter

Alice Wexler

1990

## Dear Fifth Estate:

While I appreciate David Porter's long and serious review of my book, *Emma Goldman in Exile* (see FE #333, Winter 1990), I'd like to take issue with some of his points. Porter criticizes my "intrusiveness" for allegedly imposing my own political agenda on Goldman's life, without making my politics explicit. Possibly he is right that I should have laid out my criteria for judgment more clearly.

I am not an anarchist, but closer to a libertarian socialist position. But his real argument seems to be with my interpretations of the Russian and Spanish revolutions, and what he takes to be my "apologia for Leninism." Indeed, how one sees Goldman's life in exile depends a good deal on how one views the revolutions in Russia and in Spain.

Here is where a biographer of Emma Goldman faces a considerable difficulty. Goldman not only lived and worked for thirty years in the United States, she also became involved in two of the greatest revolutions of the twentieth century. There is a vast literature about Russia and Spain, arguing many different points of view. Trying to place Goldman in the context of her times poses immense problems, because the context itself is such contested terrain.

Anybody writing about Goldman has to read an enormous amount of Russian and Spanish history and ultimately make a choice about whom to believe. If you read the younger social historians writing about Russia today—Stephen F. Cohen, Moshe Lewin, Sheila Fitzpatrick for example—you get a picture of Soviet Russia in 1920 and 1921 quite different from that of Emma Goldman. This is not to say that these historians try to justify or defend the Bolsheviks, but rather that they

present a much more complex and mixed picture than Goldman's rather simplistic version of an "inherently" totalitarian, monolithic, unchanging dictatorship.

Similarly, if you read Emma Goldman's views on Spain along with those of some of the best historians writing about Spain—Paul Preston for example, recommended to me by the British anarchist Vernon Richards—you get a picture of Goldman as both insightful and wrongheaded. In placing Goldman within the Spanish context, I was certainly influenced by what Preston, Peirats, Broue and Temime, and Richards had to say, and even Orwell in "Looking Back on the Spanish War," as well as the better known *Homage to Catalonia* and Porter's own book, *Vision on Fire*.

Porter criticizes me for imposing my own views on the past, but he seems unwilling to take into account the great amount of material available about the period when Goldman was writing. He seems more interested in attacking me than in addressing the actual historical questions, or in presenting his own alternative interpretations.

For whom did Emma Goldman speak in 1920, and whose interests did she serve? What impact did she have on the prevailing discourse about Russia in the West? Certainly Goldman was not the first Western radical to criticize the Bolsheviks. Plenty of socialists and anarchists had done so before her, such as Bertrand Russell and John Spargo and Rudolph Rocker, as well as many conservatives and liberals.

Goldman, however, could speak with greater authority than most other critics, because she had been there, spoke Russian, and because she had once been a passionate pro-Soviet defender. She also had wide access to the anti-Soviet capitalist press, which was eager to print her attacks—the *New York Times*, the *New York World*, the *London Times* for example. Does Porter really think she had no influence at all?

Furthermore, the crucial issue for the West in the early 1920s vis-a-vis Russia was whether to normalize relations with the Bolsheviks or to isolate Russia through non-recognition and denial of trade and credit relations.

Most Russians, whether pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet, wanted closer relations with the West, which they felt would ease the internal dictatorship and make things easier for dissidents. It would also help Russia rebuild after seven catastrophic years of war (1914–1921).

Goldman herself admitted on occasion that she favored diplomatic recognition and normalization of relations with Soviet Russia by the West. Yet her book, *My Disillusionment...*, and most of her statements implicitly argue for opposing or isolating Russia further. And indeed, Russia remained a pariah state for most of the 1920s, with the United States refusing to recognize that country until 1933.

One has to remember that Goldman's anti-communism, even though it came from an anarchist perspective, was the prevailing wisdom about Russia in the West, and even the Left was deeply divided in its attitude toward the Bolsheviks. Her vision of herself as "a voice in the wilderness" was extremely exaggerated. To speak out against the Soviet Union placed one in the mainstream, not on the margins.

The deeper problem, though, lay with Goldman's claim that the Bolsheviks, as Marxists, were inherently and inevitably totalitarian, monolithic and incapable of change. Her arguments anticipated the later Cold War claims of Western Sovietologists regarding the Evil Empire of Russia. Such views, in my opinion and that of many historians, obscured rather than enhanced Western understanding of Russia and helped strengthen the Cold War and the militarization of both Russia and the U.S.

Clearly, Goldman in her heart was writing to warn radicals in the West, both socialists and anarchists, not to follow the Russian model of revolution.

This was an extremely important point, and Emma Goldman was certainly prescient. But her work addressed to mainstream audiences in the Western mainstream press clearly had a different impact.

Perhaps the more important question for the biographer, though, is not whether Emma Goldman was "right" or "wrong" about Russia, but why she saw Russia the way she did, what influences, conditions, preconceptions, expectations, values, may have shaped her angle of vision. Clearly Goldman's critique grew out of her anarchist commitments, and her view of the Bolshevik regime as a dictatorship over the proletariat did not differ too much from that of other anarchists who sooner or later turned against the Bolsheviks.

I certainly did not mean to reduce her political opposition to a psychological complaint. However, she herself felt quite strongly that her point of view had been influenced by her emotional state following her deportation. One clear symptom of her depression in Russia, in my view, was her lack of interest in the impact of the revolution on women—which after all had been one of her great concerns in the United States—and her failure to pursue any leads to explore or study the situation of Russian women. To deny the psychological element, then, would be to deny the legitimacy of her own subjectivity, to claim to speak for her in ways that were not true to her own experience, to impose on her our own need for heroes.

Recent events especially raise new questions about Emma Goldman's life. Emma would have been thrilled by the growing liberalization in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but disturbed by the apparent rush toward capitalism. She would also have been surprised, I think, at the extent to which Communist regimes have shown themselves more capable of transformation than capitalist ones, which remain staunchly entrenched. And she would have been dismayed by the persistence of anti-Semitism and rising tides of nationalism, with renewed threats of pogroms.

So perhaps the important point is to reconsider her life in light of these events, and to ask what else we may learn from her today.

Sincerely, Alice Wexler  
Riverside, California

## David Porter replies:

Not surprisingly, I find that Alice Wexler's response to my review contains some of the same strengths and weaknesses I described about her book. I'm willing to believe Wexler when she says that she did not intend to reduce Goldman's "political opposition to a psychological complaint." I also welcome her statement that it is less important for a biographer to question whether Emma Goldman was "right" or "wrong" about Russia (or Spain, etc.) than to seek to understand "why she saw Russia the way she did."

However, I still believe that the overall nature of Wexler's book obscured readers' awareness of Goldman's vision through a constant barrage of negative psychological and political commentary suggesting Goldman's lack of credibility. This de facto censorship prevented us from hearing Goldman's perspective in the first place, let alone understanding the influences, values, etc. which "shaped her angle of vision."

Having spoken with other readers of the book, I know I am not alone in this impression of the book's effect. Contrary to Wexler's belief, it is this censorship, rather than Wexler's interpretations of the Russian and Spanish revolutions, which I find most objectionable.

Of course, I do disagree with Wexler's political interpretations. A short book review and a shorter response to the author's response is inadequate space for defining the reasons for our difference. I'm sure, however, that Wexler has read enough from Goldman and other anarchists to understand my position.

Furthermore, I'm fully confident that if Emma Goldman had all the benefits of data and hindsight currently available to the scholars cited by Wexler, Goldman's perspective would sound just as sophisticated as their own—while remaining, I think, very much consistent with her general orientation of the 1920s and 30s.

It seems clear from the book (and her response here) that while Wexler has read her anarchist sources, she has chosen (as she is certainly free to do) to remain outside of the influence of what she regards as anarchism's "limited" and "obsessive" perspective (pp. 231, 242). Her politics cause her 1) to assert that because Goldman fore-saw in Russia an inherently unchanging dictatorship, she would have been surprised at current developments in Eastern Europe (rather than distinguishing, as anarchists would, between what a regime chooses to do and what is forced upon it by popular resistance); 2) to state that "the crucial issue for the West in the early 1920s vis-a-vis Russia was whether to normalize relations with the Bolsheviks" (rather than, as anarchists believed, whether and how a vanguardist movement could successfully co-opt a mass-based social revolution which had begun to provide tremendous inspiration for workers in the West); and 3) to state that Goldman's position against the Soviet Union was in the "mainstream" not the margins (rather than to underscore that Goldman's sense of tragedy of a betrayed revolution was not at all in the "mainstream" of Western media and elitist politicians).

Whether Emma Goldman should have used the mainstream press as a means for communicating her social revolutionary critique is a legitimate question—one which was posed to Goldman in the 1920s by some of her anarchist comrades. This dilemma continues to be posed today. But in any case, Wexler apparently never attempted the detailed research needed—if possible—to truly determine whether Goldman's writings about the Russian revolution and Bolshevik regime had any significant impact on an already ardently anti-Bolshevik Western "mainstream."

Finally, I agree that Emma Goldman would have been thrilled by the fact of apparent changes in present-day Eastern Europe. However, I'm confident that her enthusiasm for grassroots initiatives would have been matched by her appropriately critical eye toward the rapid conversion of nomenklatura to capitalist entrepreneurs—and the continued domination of local populations by hierarchical regimes of different colors.

I endorse Wexler's suggestion that we reconsider Emma Goldman's life in light of the events of Eastern Europe and ask what else we may learn from her today. However, I remain doubtful that we'll come to similar conclusions.

David Porter  
New Paltz, N.Y.

## FE response

“An apologia for Leninism” seems no less accurate a description of Wexler’s views after reading her statement that somehow the Bolshevik imposture, their counter-revolutionary seizure of the state apparatus and its draconian application is anything less than an “inherently totalitarian, monolithic, unchanging dictatorship.”

Wexler’s lurid suggestions that Emma Goldman was “mainstream” (when in fact she attacked soviet tyranny and western capitalism with equal vigor) and somehow a predecessor to modern neoconservative ideologues, are, in a word, repugnant. Wexler would have us believe that Goldman somehow had something in common with the likes of Jean (the death squad queen) Kirkpatrick. Goldman is held responsible for the Cold War because her exposures of the soviet betrayals of world revolution “obscured rather than enhanced Western understanding” (an utterly bankrupt, liberal formula that conceals the reality behind cut-throat imperialist competition and counterinsurgency). Her message can only be that Goldman and other revolutionaries should have kept their mouths shut—a by now well-worn variant of the leftist saw “subjectively revolutionary but objectively counterrevolutionary.”

Another word—dishonest—comes to mind. It is one thing for a biographer to explore the psychological motivations of her subject, quite another to manipulate psychological analysis to promote her own authoritarian legitimations of dictatorship.

In support of Emma Goldman’s views then and ours now, may we offer the following volumes:

*History of the Makhnovist Movement* by Peter Arshinov \$10

*Bolsheviks & Workers Control* by Maurice Brinton \$3

*The Russian Tragedy* by Alexander Berkman \$6

*The Kronstadt Uprising* by Ida Mett \$3.50

*Living My Life* by Emma Goldman \$18

All are available from FE Books. Please use order form on bookstore page.

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Fifth Estate #334, Summer, 1990

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