

# Emma Goldman Bought & Sold

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The Emma Goldman Papers Project, housed at the University of California at Berkeley, collects facsimile copies of the writings, letters and personal papers of Emma Goldman (1869–1940) and distributes them on microfilm.

The project is headed by Candace Falk, who discovered numerous lost love letters of Goldman's in a Chicago guitar shop and turned them into a book, *Love, Anarchy and Emma Goldman*. They also became the first documents of the project's collection.

However, since its inception a decade ago, numerous anarchists and leftists have quit the project in disgust charging Falk with portraying Goldman as a liberal reformer rather than a revolutionary, with arbitrarily controlling access to copies of her papers, with being a manipulative and authoritarian boss, and with commercializing Goldman for her own profit and career goals.

Other comrades who knew Goldman during her lifetime as well as two authors of writings on her life and anarchism agreed with the foregoing assessment of Falk.

Other critics included some who had a direct association with the project charge that Falk acts as if she owns Goldman, as if she has the right to decide who will be permitted to see the papers or be allowed to ask questions about the project. Even scholars with academic credentials have been kept away from the project with excuses such as, "We don't have the rights to the materials,- or "We don't have the staff time."

However, others with only a passing interest in Goldman have been granted full access to the collection bolstering claims that admission is open primarily to Falk's friends and those who might contribute financially to the project.

## Enviably Scam Going

Falk's sense of ownership over the person whose papers she collects was evident in the early years of the project when Falk sued author Alice Wexler to prevent her from issuing a biography of Goldman. Even though the biography took a different perspective than Falk's, she felt Wexler had no right to write about the same person. The suit was unsuccessful.

Falk appears to have quite an enviable scam going. The project receives money from the federal government, private foundations such as the Rockefeller and individual donors. She has taken what should have been a 2–3 year effort and extended it into a job lasting more than a decade—and there's still no end in sight. Falk receives \$65,000 per year salary, works short hours and has her expenses covered as she travels the world.

She has a dozen people working for her, helping on any project she deems important. She has hired friends and paid for their travel expenses and continued to pay a former editor a 25% salary for more than six months after he took a full-time job 2,000 miles away.

Much of the money for the project comes from unsuspecting individuals who think their donations are being used to help publish Goldman's writings. For instance, an anarchist activist who Goldman helped free from jail in

the late '30s, gave Falk \$10,000 before realizing that he was “duped” into believing that this was an anarchist project. He, too, strongly believes Falk has betrayed Goldman’s anarchist principles.

This last point, from an anarchist perspective, is crucial. The critical problem with Falk’s project is her attempt to reinterpret Emma Goldman’s philosophy and, in a sense, to rewrite history.

Howard Besser, who served for a year as editor of the microfilm edition of the Goldman papers, says one of his original attractions to Falk’s project was her attempt to show someone who has become a revered goddess figure in some quarters was just a human being. But, he was appalled at Falk’s attempts to portray Goldman as a liberal reformer and feminist, while downplaying or ignoring her belief in anarchism and revolution.

## **“Stalinists With Poor Memories”**

Besser feels Falk shows little understanding of the ideas closest to Goldman’s heart. “I was amazed at how little understanding Candace showed about the historical period she was dealing with and about what anarchism really was,” Besser said.

“She had me edit two chapters of her book that involved events central to Emma’s concerns: the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Revolution/Civil War,” he continued. “I ended up having to correct numerous gross factual errors. It seemed almost as if she had written these chapters after reading a simple encyclopedia article and listening to a few stories told by old Stalinists with poor memories.”

Several people interviewed for this article mentioned that Falk repeatedly claims, “Emma’s skirts are big enough for all of us,” to justify the portrayal of Emma as a liberal. One former employee likened this to Ronald Reagan or George Bush claiming they were carrying on the civil rights mantle of Martin Luther King. It is a constant repetition of opportunistically revised history which dramatically changes how most people view the past.

A recent small example will serve to illustrate Falk’s attempts to insure Goldman is portrayed as a liberal rather than a radical. Some months ago, Falk’s project held a contest to choose an “official” poster design to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Goldman’s death.

The staff was told that they would choose the winning poster and voted overwhelmingly for a design showing Goldman behind bars, striking a defiant pose, surrounded by excerpts from her letters. Falk, feeling this design gave the “wrong” impression of Goldman, pressured the staff into repeatedly re-voting until a “less confrontative” design received a tie vote.

The meeker poster showed a close-up of Emma’s face in a thoughtful pose, with a mom-and-apple-pie quotation at the bottom. It was designed by a British man who was uninvolved in politics and had never heard of Goldman. This has been widely distributed as the “official” poster for the 1990 anniversary year.

More than half a dozen people currently and formerly affiliated with the Goldman Project were interviewed for this article. A number of them asked that their names not be used for fear of retribution.

According to one, “The last time an article critical of the project appeared, I was subjected to severe harassment because Candace thought I was responsible for one of the unattributed quotes. I hate to think of what she might have done if it really had me quoted as saying something vaguely critical of the Project.”

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