

Alexander Berkman: Life of an Anarchist

Gary L. Doebler

a review of

Life of an Anarchist: The Alexander Berkman Reader, by Gene Fellner, Four Walls Eight Windows, P.O. Box 548, Village Station, New York, NY 10014, 354 pp.

Historians don't often agree on much, but for as long as I've been reading and learning about the life of Alexander Berkman, authors of books on anarchism and related subjects who make some mention of Berkman have decried in the same breath the lack of scholarship devoted to him.

By now, biographies exist of most of America's prominent and not-so-prominent radicals from the late 19th and early 20th centuries: Eugene Debs, Lucy Parsons, John Reed, Johann Most, William Haywood, Ezra Heywood, and Carlo Tresca, to name a few. And even more marginal characters like Ben Reitman have found their biographers.

There are, of course, many books about Emma Goldman, Berkman's lifelong comrade. But ironically, though Goldman herself declared her beloved Sasha to be "the great and inspiring force" in her life, there exists a disproportional paucity of published materials concerning him.

A search for substantial works on Berkman yields merely several short biographical pieces: A sketch in Paul Avrich's *Anarchist Portraits*, a thoughtful and intriguing depiction in William Reichert's *Partisans of Freedom*, and several introductions to Berkman's own books. These works are too brief, however, and only serve to whet the reader's appetite for a detailed biography.

A great deal of information about Berkman can be found in Goldman's *Living My Life* and in her many biographies; still, Berkman is not the primary focus of these books and, valuable as they may be, they necessarily fail to portray the full measure of the man.

Perhaps more than anyone, Richard Drinnon has tried to give Berkman his due, editing a reprint edition of Berkman's journal, *The Blast*, and an insightful and well-researched collection of Berkman and Goldman's letters, *Nowhere at Home*. The latter work appeared in 1975, and no substantial works about Berkman have appeared since. Berkman scholarship has been rather like the weather: everyone talks about it, but no one does anything about it.

Until now, that is. Gene Fellner—an artist and activist from New Jersey whose poignant drawings and paintings of Berkman and Goldman have been exhibited at the Tamiment Institute in New York—and the Berkman Remembrance held last summer in Pittsburgh (see FE #340, Autumn 1992) and featured in a *GLF Occasional* magazine along with a narrative text by Howard Zinn has just published this new collection of Berkman's writings.

Drawing on the full range of Berkman's works, Fellner has chosen the most significant and defining excerpts and arranged them in an anthology designed to introduce the reader to Berkman's life and thought. Since, when not completely neglected, Berkman has been unfairly characterized as a misguided zealot or pigeon-holed as Emma Goldman's associate, the editor makes a conscious effort to piece together his selections in such a way as to define a multi-dimensional, evolving, human figure whose life and ideas become at the same time more intellectually significant and emotionally accessible. In this effort, Fellner succeeds admirably.

Beyond choosing the documents for his mosaic, he limits his own participation in the book to a short introduction and brief, crisply written sidebars and editorial notes that offer essential facts and provide continuity and

contextual illumination to better equip the reader to understand the selections. Through this combination of editorial skill and restraint, Fellner's anthology allows Berkman to speak for himself and thus enables an authentic, unified literary voice to emerge from a man whose own voice was variously silenced, ignored, and misinterpreted during his lifetime and since.

The book begins with an abridged version of *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, Berkman's account of his attempt to assassinate industrial robber-baron Henry Clay Frick during the Homestead Strike of 1892, his subsequent fourteen-year imprisonment, and his "resurrection" from prison in 1906.

Powerful, moving, and compelling, *Prison Memoirs* is an extraordinary story of a young rebel who attempts to realize his philosophy by avenging the massacre of the Homestead steelworkers through a self-sacrificing revolutionary act of propaganda-by-deed—an attentat. His attempt on Frick decidedly fails when Frick survives, the attentat is repudiated not only by the Homestead workers, but also by many radicals, and when Berkman escapes the martyrdom-by-execution he anticipated only to be sentenced to 22 years in a maximum security prison—a sentence he was not expected to survive.

Despite the anguish over his failure, the almost unimaginable torture of being buried alive, and the repeated attempts by prison authorities to either break him or kill him, he survived. Arrested at age 21, Berkman was 35 when he was released. He returned to the outside world a man of considerable wisdom, courage, and intellect—to many around the globe a revolutionary hero and martyr. But the gaping fourteen-year hole in his life and the painful memories of prison made him physically sick and emotionally crippled.

Prison Memoirs ends with Berkman's triumph over prison and its lingering scars and his coming to terms with his own self and ideas. In the course of the book, Berkman is masterful in capturing the speech, ideas, and attitudes of his fellow prisoners and his warders. He demonstrates a talent for observation, characterization, and dialogue as well as an ability to clearly understand and describe his own thoughts. His stark, brutal, truthful portrayal of prison life (and death) stands as a convincing indictment of the penal system; but most importantly, *Prison Memoirs* lets us see Berkman evolve from a young, nihilistic zealot into a more mature, more broadminded, more compassionate man who is nonetheless a revolutionary, an anarchist, an idealist.

Richard Drinnon could not have been more accurate in calling *Prison Memoirs* a "ridiculously neglected" book. One suspects that it would have been more popular had Berkman's prison experience resulted in his political apostasy. However, his emotional, philosophical, and political transformation within the context of anarchism flies in the face of the popular conception of anarchism as a simple, monolithic idea with no room for internal change and development.

In choosing some parts of *Prison Memoirs* and omitting others, Fellner faced an insuperable problem, for the book stands too well on its own to suffer dissection. Excerpting from it makes it neither easier to understand nor more edifying to read. If I have one fundamental criticism of this otherwise well-crafted book, it is Fellner's decision to include *Prison Memoirs* as an abridgment rather than excerpting it in a more limited fashion.

Though I suppose the editor made the best of a bad job, his selections are, of necessity, somewhat arbitrary, and his summaries of the omitted parts at times fall short of providing smooth continuity or adequately describing the missing material. I would rather have seen less of *Prison Memoirs*—a few of the choicest parts that could stand on their own—and more of Berkman's lesser-known, less accessible works. This would have served the double purpose of getting more unpublished Berkman into the book while motivating the reader to go and get a copy of *Prison Memoirs* and actually read it rather than settling for this "Cliff-Notes" version.

The next two sections of the book, "The Blast" and "The No-Conscription League," mark an important contribution to our understanding of Berkman. From 1916 to 1917, as America cranked up for world war and repression of dissent became more organized and vigorous, Sasha boldly published a revolutionary journal called *The Blast* in San Francisco. Fellner includes a short, but representative, selection of articles from *The Blast* along with reproductions of some of its artistic covers.

In this and the two brief documents from the No-Conscription League, founded by Berkman and Goldman in May 1916 to oppose militarism and the approaching draft, readers will get a more personal feel for Berkman's agitational style and a sense of the broad range of issues he confronted with an anarchist alternative. Descriptions of police raids on *The Blast's* offices and minutes of a stormy anti-conscription meeting bring forth the danger and excitement of the times and afford a look at Berkman "in action" that is rarely seen by non-scholars.

In December 1919, Berkman and Goldman were deported from the United States to the newborn Soviet Union. Welcomed as a hero and eager to take part in the Revolution, Berkman at first accepted the Bolsheviks, but soon came to understand that the “proletarian dictatorship” was a uniquely virulent form of centralized state control.

The third part of Fellner’s book contains excerpts from Berkman’s writings about his stay in Russia from 1920 to 1922: *The Bolshevik Myth*, *The Kronstadt Rebellion*, and *The Russian Tragedy*. In *Bolshevik Myth*, Berkman’s journal reports of his experiences and travels during the Revolution, the reader will recognize the same talent for characterization and description that she found in *Prison Memoirs*. While not as artful as *Ten Days That Shook The World*, Berkman’s work is similar in its journalistic style and compares favorably to Reed’s in just about every respect but its popularity.

Appearing as it did on the heels of the Bolshevik victory, Reed’s book captured the world’s imagination and, ironically, helped establish the myth of Revolutionary Russia that Berkman later attempted to explode. Everyone wanted to believe Reed’s description of the beginning of the revolutionary millennium—by the time Berkman’s work was published, criticism of Russia was considered heresy. And unlike Reed’s story, Berkman’s doesn’t climax in the white light of the triumph of the People in a revolutionary apotheosis; rather, it ends in the darkness and fog of the Revolution gone mad—the dream not just dying, but being murdered. Not the rise of the workers, but the fall of the Kronstadt sailors, provides the denouement for Berkman’s saga.

The Kronstadt Rebellion chronicles the sad history of the failed uprising of sailors and workers against the Bolsheviks in 1921, and Fellner uses a part of it as a prologue for his excerpt from *The Russian Tragedy*, Berkman’s more analytical, theoretical critique of Communist government and society. Still enjoying a tense, but non-adversarial, relationship with Lenin’s government in early 1921, Berkman served on a committee that tried unsuccessfully to negotiate a non-military solution to the Kronstadt crisis, a service that enabled Berkman to write an account of the rebellion as an “insider” but undoubtedly helped to wear out his welcome.

After helplessly witnessing the massacre of the Kronstadt sailors and workers by Trotsky’s Red Army, he sardonically notes on March 18th: “The victors are celebrating the anniversary of the Paris Commune of 1871. Trotsky and Zinoviev denounce Thiers and Gallifet for the slaughter of the Paris rebels...” Berkman left Russia six months later. *The Russian Tragedy* is a reasoned distillation of the emotional disgust and disillusionment he felt at watching the subversion of the Revolution.

In applying an anarchist critique to the results of the Revolution, he draws valuable lessons from the Russian experience and clearly defines the anti-authoritarian case against statist socialism. For seventy years, the world argued about the true nature of Communist Russia—was it socialist, capitalist, fascist, a “decayed workers” state? Had Berkman’s books on Russia been more seriously considered, the answer might not have seemed so much of an enigma.

The final portion of Fellner’s book is an abridgment of *The ABCs of Anarchism*, Berkman’s most complete statement of the principles of anarchism and his main theoretical literary legacy. Constructed in a Socratic style, the book deals with a wide range of subjects and ideas as it describes the theory and practical implementation of anarchism through a question-and-answer format. Berkman’s goal in writing the *ABCs* is to tell about anarchism in “plain and simple language.” “Maybe I can show you that we can be decent and live as decent folks even without growing wings,” he suggests.

His interlocutor asks questions that an average person might and goes on to “test” Berkman’s answers through continued dialogue. Far from being tedious, this format moves the book along briskly as the reader anticipates the next argument and finds logical and concise answers to oft-heard questions.

The ABCs of Anarchism is a well-thought-out, clearly written, and surprisingly complete work that every critically-minded person should read before they waste their energies re-inventing the wheel. It’s a formidable theoretical introduction to anarchism and a fitting literary climax to a life spent in pursuit of peace, justice, and freedom.

Life of an Anarchist is a great starting point for anyone wishing to acquaint themselves with the life and thought of an extraordinary rebel who has remained in obscurity too long.

FE Note: G.L. Doebler is the author of several other articles on Alexander Berkman, two of which appeared in the Winter and Spring 1992 issues of the *Fifth Estate*. They are available at \$1.50 an issue. Fellner’s beautifully rendered *GLF Occasional* article is also available from the F.E.

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