

Writing on Fire

Passion & obstacles in writing about Emma Goldman in Spain

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Studying in Paris during the intense final year (1961 through 1962) of the Algerian war for independence, I became hooked on Algeria and the potentials of revolutionary politics. In 1965 through 1966, I pursued on-site doctoral research on Algeria's most radical political innovation after independence—a large-scale realm of worked' self-management in farms, factories and shops throughout the country.

While compromised and sabotaged from the beginning, this form of deep democracy and the grassroots enthusiasm and effort to make it happen were for me major inspiring revelations. Gradually, I came to understand that historical anarchism articulated the same principles, but more consistently—with much deeper insight and without statist intervention.

Like millions of others in this period, over the next few years I thrived in anarchistic dimensions of the antiwar movement, counter-culture and campus revolts. I also read more about anarchism, began to teach about it and, importantly, applied its principles to the classrooms where I taught.

After my second academic firing, in 1975, for radical pedagogy and leadership in campus upheavals, I ironically won a one-year fellowship for college teachers, including time for my research on lessons of the historical anarchist movement for contemporary education.

Gorging myself with anarchist reading, I also linked with anarchist networks in NYC and shared in the excitement about the rapid growth of the Spanish anarchist movement following Franco's demise. Importantly, I also discovered the largely untouched archive of Emma Goldman's 1930s correspondence at the New York Public Library.

Immersion in dozens of her personal letters, especially from the years of the Spanish civil war and revolution, drew me compellingly closer to this famous and inspiring anarchist. Her alternating exuberant and pained writing also carried me deeply into the realities of Spain, visited by Goldman three times during the late 30s. I saw through her words how, despite a civil war far more intense than American struggles in the 60s, the deep anarchist consciousness and creative efforts of the massive Spanish movement began to transform society in anarchist communitarian directions never before approached in the modern West.

Goldman's writings from this context were a wealth of anarchist insight into the political realities of anarchist revolutionary politics and simultaneously a frank self-revealing record of a militant's subjective turmoil. Together, these dimensions had important implications well beyond the Spanish experience.

In the midst of deadly conflict (the fascist military uprising and Communist-led repression of anarchists within the anti-fascist alliance), anarchists were forced to define a best path between constructing new anti-hierarchical political and economic relations and pragmatically collaborating with a coalition of hierarchical "allies" against the Right. Goldman's own writing thus revealed passionate alternations of elation and despair, a combination common enough in past and present radicals' consciousness generally, but rarely exposed publicly.

Goldman's accounts provided rich detail about the nature of the Spanish anarchist movement, its conflicts and compromises with allies, and its effort to build a new society. While other anarchist accounts from that period

already existed, there were very few in English by the time of my discovery in 1975. And most English-language accounts of the civil war were emphatically biased against anarchists.

To make Goldman's writings accessible and relevant for anti-authoritarian activists was an opportunity I couldn't resist. At the same time, I saw the book as adding a third volume to Goldman's autobiography, a project she herself considered after her immersion in Spain. Naively, I thought it might take me six months to complete. In fact, it was eight years before the book was published.

I followed use of the NYPL archive with visits to six others in the U.S., plus the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam). I also was soon introduced to Windsor-based Federico and Pura Arcos, anarchist veterans of the Spanish revolution. Beyond their valued constant encouragement, Federico offered me use of his own archives on Spanish anarchism and sent a constant stream of invaluable letters over the years assisting me with new details and corrections.

I selected the best Goldman material from each archive, wrote a book introduction, subsequent chapter introductions and detailed footnotes. My thematic chapter introductions highlighted the larger significance of issues for anti-authoritarian activist politics generally, as well as how Goldman addressed such issues before 1936 and in the ensuing tumultuous context of the Spanish revolution. Sequentially, these chapters focused on the Spanish anarchist movement; the new society; collaboration with statist forces; Communist sabotage; the international context; anarchists, violence and war; the role of women; overall assessment of the revolution; and general reflections on anarchism and the movement.

Given the compelling subject matter and the prominence of Emma Goldman, I was certain I'd find a publisher without undue delay. Naive again. Dozens of mainstream and academic publishers responded with the usual "not our line of subject matter" or "no funding for it at present," as well as "too scholarly" or "not scholarly enough."

Most frustrating were the initially interested publishers who sat on it for months with no response, who said that Goldman lost out to Bukharin in their anthology competition or who gave it to an outside reader who disliked its activist orientation and thus nit-picked spelling or alleged factual issues in the rough draft. All of this as if Goldman herself was now simply an intellectual commodity to measure and dissect for the market.

Worse yet was the response of the Montreal anarchist publisher who not only failed to respond for months but finally rejected it in part because of his distaste for Goldman's "individualism" and his claim that English-speaking anarchists were not yet mature enough to deal with the issues she raised. I was astounded at this patronizing claim to know the "maturity level" of the movement, and his wish to censor the writings of Emma Goldman.

While reeling from that blow, I received an attempted knockout punch from the Amsterdam IISH archive in early 1982. Typically all manuscript archives, including the IISH, wanted advance publishing notice (and to give official permission) for any directly quoted material from their collections. Quotations from Goldman letters at the IISH made up about 1/3 of the book since they drew from extensive collections on the Spanish revolution and correspondence of movement figures such as Rudolf Rocker and Max Nettlau as well as Goldman herself. The IISH curator of the anarchist and Spanish revolution archives was anarchist Rudolf de Jong, son of well-known Dutch anarchist Albert de Jong and himself author of a Dutch-language book on the Spanish civil war.

I'd met de Jong in Amsterdam earlier and also wrote several times at some length about the project. He was quite cooperative and photocopied and mailed to me about a thousand photocopied pages important for my research. Responding to my submitted draft, however, de Jong refused to grant permission to use the IISH letters. Mainly, it seemed, because the IISH claimed the right to determine whether a book would have a properly "scientific" (as opposed to an activist) approach to history as well as a format meeting "responsible" standards. Another anarchist censor?! I couldn't believe the message, an arrogant assertion of proprietorial and elitist "scientistic" control over the writings of one of the great proponents of free speech and anarchism. Federico and others, including anarchist historian Paul Avrich, were equally shocked. Sam Dolgoff said that he'd "go to the barricades" in my defense.

Stunned and angry and determined to proceed with the least delay, I removed some IISH material entirely and reduced other quotations to an automatically-permitted six lines and additional paraphrasing. I also decided to publish the work myself.

So began another stage of learning, but one encouraged by friends and comrades. Importantly, I was now freed from others' agendas and institutional controls. At this critical moment, Federico also linked me with Attilio Borlotti, the anarchist whose deportation to Mussolini's Italy Goldman had helped fight against in her last year of

life. As he had done so generously for various anarchist publications throughout the years, Bortolotti now offered funds to publish the book. After working closely over many months with a Long Island IWW printing collective to design the format and proof each page, I then sent galleys to Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Alix Kates Shulman, and Ursula K. Le Guin), all who agreed to write brief endorsements.

After eight years, in 1983, the book finally appeared, titled *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*, although my distribution work only began. For me, the real vitality of the project was not the final printed object, but the process itself. Despite disillusionments and barriers, I experienced a strongly supportive community, local and elsewhere, of individuals inspired by the power of the manuscript and ready to assist in careful readings and numerous discussions about the book. And the vitality of the process continued, I knew, with each new reader's engagement with the published work.

Vision on Fire sold about 3,000 copies in North America and abroad. Down to my final two dozen copies by late 2005, I unexpectedly got a call from AK Press expressing interest in putting out a new edition. *Et voilà!* With their quality editing and production, a new cover, a new introduction and slight revisions, the book is now available to a new generation of readers with, I think, all the same relevance as before.

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<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/375-spring-2007/writing-on-fire>
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