Arriving in the United States from Russia in 1885, in the first major wave of immigration of Eastern European Jews, Emma Goldman soon found the anarchist movement and rose to prominence there. By the turn of the century, she had become the best-known anarchist in the country. With her lifelong comrade Alexander Berkman, Goldman spoke, wrote, and organized on behalf of workers, women, political prisoners, children, immigrants, the unemployed, homosexuals, and “the people.” She served three prison terms: The first time she was convicted of inciting a riot for urging unemployed workers to take bread, and served a 1-year sentence; the second time she was in jail a few weeks for speaking in public about birth control; the third time, with Berkman, she served a grueling 2-year sentence for opposing conscription prior to World War I.

After completing their prison terms for anti-war activism, Goldman and Berkman were deported in 1919. They went first to the nascent Soviet Union; soon concluding that the Bolsheviks had strangled the revolution and installed themselves as the new ruling class, they fled the USSR and eventually settled in the south of France. Goldman continued her political activism, working with the anarchists in the Spanish Civil War and conducting lecture tours in England, Wales, and Canada, where she died following a stroke.

Goldman was part of a vibrant radical subculture connecting recent immigrants with native-born, Jews with gentiles, middle-class reformers with working-class labor activists, workers with artists, and radicals in the United States with those around the world. She supported herself as a garment worker, nurse, and midwife, supplemented by meager earnings from her writings. While based in New York City, Goldman conducted extensive cross-country lecture tours throughout the United States, with the exception of the South. She was a spellbinding orator, often drawing thousands of people to her lectures, which she initially delivered in German, Russian, and Yiddish before switching to English to reach a larger audience. Authorities frequently prohibited her lectures; she was arrested so many times that she always took a book with her to her own lectures so she would have something to read in jail.

Goldman’s entry into political radicalism was initiated during the worldwide protests over the Haymarket incident in 1886. Under circumstances that remain unclear, a bomb exploded during a demonstration and the police opened fire on the crowd, resulting in dozens of deaths and injuries. Eight Chicago anarchists were tried and convicted of murder in a legal proceeding widely recognized as fraudulent. Four were executed, one committed suicide before execution, and the others received long prison sentences; the survivors were pardoned 6 years later by Illinois Governor John Altgeld. The agitation surrounding the Haymarket executions radicalized many young people, including Goldman. She moved from sleepy upstate New York to Manhattan, where anarchism, socialism, and other radical perspectives were thriving, largely within immigrant communities.

The major intellectual influence on Goldman was a blend of European revolutionary ideology with American romantic individualism and her unique radical feminism. From Bakunin and Kropotkin she developed her ideas about popular struggles against capitalism, religion, and the state; from Stirner and
Nietzsche she cultivated ideas about the cultural transvaluation of values; from Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman she articulated her joyous erotic embrace of life’s possibilities. To this rich stew she brought an enduring commitment to sexual and gender equality, a keen eye for hypocrisy, and a fierce opposition to any form of injustice. Scorning suffrage as a weak and misleading reform, she insisted that women cultivate both internal (psychological) liberation from puritanical social values and external (social/economic) liberation from their dependence on men. While the anarchist movement had many successful women orators and writers, Goldman was the best known, becoming a radical celebrity as well as a very visible target for government surveillance.

Goldman was a prolific writer. For more than a decade she published a successful political and literary magazine, *Mother Earth*. She published four books: *Anarchism and Other Essays* collected some of her most outstanding articles from her journal and pamphlets; *My Disillusionment in Russia* contained her critique of Bolshevism, at the time most unwelcome in leftist circles; *The Social Significance of the Modern Drama* brought her analysis of progressive European theater to U.S. working-class and middle-class audiences, often for the first time; and her autobiography, *Living My Life*. She also wrote thousands of letters to activists and intellectuals, cultivating relationships and sustaining her energies in the face of enormous opposition, uncertain achievements, and vicious state persecution.

During Goldman’s lifetime, corporate and state violence against workers was extensive. Not only were working conditions miserable and dangerous, but state and private militias had virtual free rein to kill striking workers and their families. Laws restricting obscenity, immigration, and union organizing were used to curtail the dissemination of radical ideas. Yet there was enormous unrest among workers and other marginalized people, an unrest Goldman sought to cultivate and direct. It was a time during which capitalism had not yet won, and revolution seemed possible.

Goldman was a revolutionary. She dismissed the possibilities of reforming states, capitalism, churches, or schools. Instead, she called for radical transformation of the human relations these institutions sustain. Early in their lives, she and Berkman attempted to assassinate a representative of the ruling class in the hopes of stirring the masses to revolt. The dismal failure of their attentat (revolutionary assassination) led her to rethink the role of violence in social change; while she continued to defend the intentions of those who killed for justice, she shifted her efforts toward education, direct action via strikes, creation of alternative institutions, and cultivation of exemplary anarchist lives.

Along with her revolutionary goals, Goldman was a coalition-builder. She identified points of convergence between her radical goals and those of more moderate reformers: Her campaigns for the dissemination of birth control, freedom of speech, the creation of alternative schools, and fair treatment of political prisoners were successful sites for coalitions. While other anarchists criticized her for working with the bourgeoisie, Goldman extended anarchism’s reach to populations not usually inclined to consider revolutionary analyses of capitalism, marriage, government, and war.

Among her greatest successes were those struggles for which she could coordinate coalition efforts. Freedom of speech touched a chord among many Americans who would otherwise have little sympathy for radical causes; Goldman’s agitation helped to create the Free Speech League, which later became the American Civil Liberties Union. Similarly, liberals and radicals alike shared a critique of authoritarian education: Goldman, Berkman, and other anarchists were the driving force behind the creation of the Modern School movement that established dozens of libertarian schools around the world. One of the most successful was the Ferrer Center in Manhattan, where a free school flourished along with a
community center nurturing modern art, drama, revolutionary publications, and labor organizing. Goldman was one of the first to speak publicly about birth control, and she mentored Margaret Sanger in this eventually successful struggle for what Goldman called free motherhood.

Among her most disheartening failures was her inability effectively to combat war, colonial repression, and the growth of militarism. She saw patriotism as a cultural poison justifying global massacre. Like many radicals, she counted on the international working class to rise up against the demands of their respective states and capitalist classes that they go to war against their proletarian brothers. Like other radicals, she was deeply disappointed when nationalism trumped class loyalty in World War I.

She never gave up. Buoyed by the strength of popular resistance and reconstruction during the Spanish Civil War, she worked closely with Spanish anarchists and represented them abroad. She came to see revolution as a sort of natural force, like a hurricane, a great expression of revolutionary discontent that could only be successful if radicals cultivated the practical economic and cultural organizations to direct and sustain new life. At her death in 1940 in Montreal, she was conducting her final campaign for the release of some Italian anarchists who were threatened with deportation to fascist Italy, where they would no doubt have been executed. She was successful.

See also
Anarcho-Syndicalism; Direct Action; Feminism; Industrial Workers of the World (IWW); Sacco and Vanzetti

Further Readings

Kathy E. Ferguson
APA

Chicago
https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/goldman_emma_1869_1940

Harvard

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