Anarcho
Red Emma and the Reds
a reply to Lance Selfa's "EMMA GOLDMAN: A life of controversy"
July 7, 2008

Retrieved on 28th January 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com

A reply to a Leninist (ISO) article on Emma Goldman and her politics. It corrects the distortions and selective quoting, as well as showing her support for syndicalism. It shows that rather than being an elitist individualist, her politics were about collective class struggle while defending individuality. In other words, like all communist-anarchists, her ideas were rooted in both solidarity and freedom. It shows that it is the Leninist tradition which is elitist, before concluding that Goldman's politics have important ideas for modern radicals.

Red Emma and the Reds

a reply to Lance Selfa's "EMMA GOLDMAN: A life of controversy"

Anarcho

July 7, 2008

Yes, anarchism is not perfect. No theory can be. It needs to develop and change to take into account the new situations we face. We need to learn from the past. However, this is not what Selfa does. He rewrites it to bolster a bankrupt ideology whose cure (state socialism) is worse than the disease (capitalism). Selfa's dishonest diatribe on Emma, in its own way, shows why more and more radicals are turning to anarchism. An honest account of Red Emma and her ideas would confirm their constructive and practical nature. That is why Selfa does not provide one.

activism. A movement which participated in the class struggle and proposed a means (syndicalism) to that end. He casts her as a *"sideline critic, holding to anarchist ideals even when the struggle demanded answers that were practical and concrete."* However, these ideals were both practical and concrete. If we look at the Russian revolution, it strikes the impartial investigator that the anarchist Makhnovists were much more successful in creating the proclaimed goals of socialism than the Bolsheviks. Where the latter crushed soviet democracy and working class freedoms, the former encouraged them. If we look at Spain, the libertarian militias and collectives are far more inspiring from a socialist perspective than Bolshevik party dictatorship and one-man management.

Selfa argues that that this *"was the main political reason why the Socialist and Communist Parties eclipsed anarchists in the early part of the last century."* Would Selfa apply this logic to his own tradition? After all, Trotskyist parties were dwarfed by both Social Democracy and Stalinism. Is he really suggesting that Stalinism is more *"practical and concrete"* than Trotskyism? That Stalinist parties can *"carry that vision forward"* better than Trotskyist ones? It is doubtful.

For Selfa, *"in a period when real world, revolutionary events put anarchist theories to the test, the theories came up short."* Unlike Marxism? Social Democracy failed (as Bakunin predicted). Bolshevism produced a "dictatorship over the proletariat" (as Bakunin predicted). Neither form of Marxism produced the claimed results and, as such, they *"came up short."* And what of anarchism? Here the conclusion to be drawn is more complex than Selfa can admit to. In Russia, state repression broke the back of the movement yet the Makhnovists in the Ukraine show the anarchism can be successfully applied in a revolution. In Spain, the anarchists failed to apply their ideas in the face of extremely difficult circumstances but even in their failure the Spanish revolution is still the most advanced working class revolution of all time.

Contents

gle for socialism." For Selfa, only *"a revolutionary party"* can. Unlike Emma who continually stressed that the masses could organise their own *"collective, mass struggle"* as well as create a (to use her words) "*revolution at the bottom*" by their own efforts (aided as equals by anarchists, one of the *"enlightened"* minorities the concept of which the vanguardist Selfa has such problems with).

While Selfa acknowledges that Emma *"called herself a small-c communist,"* he insists that *"she was above all else, an individualist who believed that the enlightened few made social change. For her, the masses were an abstraction, or often, a curse."* This, as I have proven, is nonsense and can only be maintained if you ignore important aspects of her ideas which, of course, Selfa does. As I have indicated, Selfa's *"enlightened few"* comment could not be further from the truth. Emma was a communist-anarchist and a firm supporter of syndicalism. Her defence of minorities against majorities amounted to little more than acknowledging the simple fact that radical ideas and actions always start with a minority and spread to the majority. As such, she is expressing a law of evolution and society. She saw the task of the *"enlightened few"* to aid the process of self-liberation and to encourage tactics (such as direct action in the workplace and in society) which encouraged the majority to break their conditioning, the conditioning which class society requires to continue.

As for the masses being an *"abstraction"* or a *"curse,"* it seems strange that Selfa goes not compare Emma's position to that of Victor Serge. If he did, then the reader would have to consider that Emma was the true friend of the masses while Serge and the Bolshevism he eulogised its enemy. Given that Selfa knows about the extreme elitism of Serge, it is clear that he is simply not reflecting reality by dismissing Emma's politics in this way.

While Selfa argues that she did not *"really build an organization of anarchists that could carry that vision forward,"* he presents enough evidence to show she built a movement by her

struction of the new society. Worldwide, the best of the anarchists – the anarcho-syndicalists – whose libertarian ideas were most connected to workers' struggles, joined the Communist Parties." Emma, he asserts, *"like many other anarchists, never really articulated a strategy of getting from here to the society she desired."*

Yet, as I have shown, he can only say this by ignoring Emma's syndicalism and long standing active support for labour struggles and organisations. And it should not be forgotten that by "*best of*" Selfa means those libertarians embraced the Bolshevik position of the *"dictatorship of the party"* and the suppression of basic working class freedoms and rights. Moreover, *"worldwide"* most anarcho-syndicalists did not, in fact, join the Communist Parties — quite the reverse. Once the truth about the Bolsheviks became known in Spain, Italy, Sweden and elsewhere, the syndicalist unions disaffiliated from the Russian dominated Red Trade Union International. Syndicalists across the globe saw the errors of Bolshevism and rejected it. Only in Britain, America and France did more than a few syndicalists become Leninists and even in those countries syndicalists remained active in the labour movement.

So most anarchists who were *"connected to workers' struggles"* also they rejected Bolshevism for what it was — a dictatorship of a minority over the masses. They knew that replacing capitalist autocracy over the workers with a Marxist one could never produce socialism. And they were right. Anarchists like Emma, in other words. Little wonder, then, Selfa continually fails to mention her syndicalism and other class struggle ideas.

This makes a mockery of Selfa claim that people like Serge *"came to the conclusion that only collective, mass struggle could attain socialism and that only a revolutionary party could organise that struggle."* Yet anarchists like Emma knew that the former was true but the latter was not. It is interesting that for all his scorn at Emma's *"elitism"* Selfa concludes by arguing that the masses themselves cannot organise "collective, mass strug-

Given that anarchist ideas are on the rise (particularly in the "anti-capitalist" movement), it comes as no surprise that the guardians of Leninist dogma seek to discredit anarchism. To do so, they rarely ever attack anarchist ideas as such. Instead, they concentrate on individuals and their personal failings. When that does not suffice, they stoop to distortion, half-truths and even inventions to combat the anarchist menace. I've lost track of the number of times I've fact checked Leninist articles and discovered the references provided rarely support the claims made (and, on numerous occasions, say the exact opposite).[1] Which, of course, seems strange: after all, if anarchism was so bad, they would not need to doctor the facts so.

The latest in a long series of such distortion dressed up as factual analysis is Lance Selfa's article *"EMMA GOLDMAN: A life of controversy"* in **International Socialist Review** (Issue 34, March-April 2004). Even after all these decades, the anarchist Emma Goldman still provokes, to quote Lance Selfa's deeply inaccurate article, *"passionate political debate."* For good reason: Red Emma's ideas and life still inspire. Her criticism's of capitalism and the state still ring true, as do her criticism's of Marxism and Leninism. Undoubtedly, they will inspire a new generation of radicals to embrace anarchism. And that, for Leninists, is the problem.

Perhaps unsurprising, given the track record of the British parent party of Selfa's organisation (the **Socialist Workers Party**) attacks on anarchism, his article is, to say the least, economical with the truth. Needless to say, it will be impossible to correct every distortion, so I will concentrate on just a few. Moreover, I will concentrate on the references he himself uses in order to show how he cherry-picks "evidence" to use against Emma, suppressing key aspects of her ideas and life in order to distort her politics and, by implication, anarchism in general.

[1] For those interested in these articles, please visit my webpage at: anarchism.ws

The point of Selfa's article is to evaluate anarchism: *"what interests us here is whether her politics, as reflected in her actions and her writings, should guide a new generation of radicals today. By looking at her ideas, we want to determine if the ideology she spent her whole life promoting – anarchism – provides a guide to action for people who want to change the world."* Sadly, he fails to do this, preferring quoting out of context, half-truths and down-right inventions rather than presenting a clear and honest account of her ideas. This is to be expected for if he did present an honest account of Emma's ideas, his readers would soon realise that she was right not only about anarchism about also about Selfa's own brand of authoritarian politics and political tradition. Ironically, he claims that *"socialists"* (as if Emma was not a libertarian socialist!) have *"a strong critique of anarchism."* If they did, then Selfa would have no need to distort the truth as he does.

Cherry-picking evidence

A good example of Selfa's technique can be seen from his claim that Emma held *"ultraleft"* positions. He states that it *"was telling that the first speeches she gave, under Most's influence, were 'about the waste of energy and time the eight-hour struggle involved, scoffing at the stupidity of the workers who fought for such trifles.'"*

Based on these quotes from chapter five of Emma's autobiography, **"Living My Life"** he summarises that *"so early on, Goldman displayed a trademark of her politics throughout her life – a purist, ultraleft position on a number of the questions of the day."*

For some strange reason, Selfa fails to mention that she changed her opinion on this quite quickly. In fact, it took three meetings for her to do so. As she recounted in the very same chapter of **Living My Life**, when an old man

driving the Catalan CNT's decision would totally undermine Selfa's argument.

Conclusion

Selfa argues that *"the socialist tradition"* cannot *"embrace"* Emma Goldman.[72] If Selfa is anything to go by then all I can say is thank goodness for that!

Perhaps *"the socialist tradition"* could do us all a favour and *"embrace"* the truth and such minor things as honest debate? His essay on Emma shows the typical revisionist techniques that would shame any genuinely revolutionary tradition. I have indicated how Selfa distorts Emma's life and ideas to fit into his ideologically driven picture of both her and anarchism. He consistently suppresses facts which contradict his claims even though they are in the same books he references (sometimes even in the same chapters!).

Anarchists can draw comfort from the fact he stoops so low simply because our ideas, not his, are on the rise. We can also thank him for his terrible essay as it provides an opportunity to not only discuss anarchist ideas but also to highlight the bankruptcy of an ideology whose advocates which would sink to rewriting history so. Perhaps we should be grateful that Selfa, unlike one of *"the best of the anarchists"* who became a Communist (and later a Stalinist!), did not claim she was an agent of the American state! [74]

Selfa's aim is two-fold. Firstly, to paint Emma as an elitist whose politics were impractical. And, secondly, to contrast her with other anarchists who became Bolsheviks. The aim of both is clear, to convince modern-day anarchists to do the same. Therefore he compares Emma to the "Sovietsky" anarchists who, he claims, *"realized not only the necessity of defending the revolution, but the necessity of participating in the con-*

[72] **Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 954

obvious that this is nonsense. If we look to, say, Bakunin, we discover what they should have done:

"[T]he federated Alliance of all labour associations ... will constitute the Commune ... there will be a federation of the standing barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council will operate on the basis of one or two delegates from each barricade ... these deputies being invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times... An appeal will be issued to all provinces, communes and associations inviting them to follow the example set ... [and] to reorganise along revolutionary lines ... and to then delegate deputies to an agreed place of assembly (all of those deputies invested with binding mandates and accountable and subject to recall), in order to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces ... Thus it is through the very act of extrapolation and organisation of the Revolution with an eye to the mutual defences of insurgent areas that the ... Revolution, founded upon ... the ruins of States, will emerge triumphant...

"Since it is the people which must make the revolution everywhere, and since the ultimate direction of it must at all times be vested in the people organised into a free federation of agricultural and industrial organisations ... being organised from the bottom up through revolutionary delegation ..."[71]

The tragedy of Spain is that the anarchists did not follow Bakunin's advice. Contra Selfa, it was ***because*** they junked their principles that they failed. Rather than this being a product of anarchist theory, this junking was driven by the real problems they faced after defeating the fascist coup in Barcelona. To divorce the decisions made by the CNT militants from the circumstances they were made in and blame anarchist theory is simply incredulous. But unsurprising, as to give an accurate account of that theory or the pressures

[71] **No God, No Masters**, vol. 1, Guerin, Daniel (ed.), AK Press, Edinburgh/San Francisco, 1998, pp. 155–6

questioned her position *"his clear analysis of the principle invoked in the eight-hour struggle, brought home to me the falsity of Most's position."* Thus her *"first public experience"* broke her allegiance to what Selfa's uses as an example of a "*trademark of her politics throughout her life."*[2]

Given that Emma wrote this in the very same chapter of her autobiography as the quote Selfa provides it does not take a genius to discover why he fails to mention it. To do so would be to expose his assertions to the grim light of reality and show that Selfa's proclaimed *"trademark"* did not, in fact, exist. And so the fact that Emma quickly rejected this *"purist, ultraleft position"* after discussing it with the masses he claims she disdained goes unmentioned. Thus while Selfa uses this example to illustrate her *"earliest incarnation as 'Red Emma' ... which lasts until about 1906"* he fails to mention that she held this position for three public meetings at the start of a career which lasted over six decades. Hardly a *"trademark"* by anyone's standard.

Squeezing reality into the ideology

This is not an isolated example. Selfa systematically suppresses any and all information on Emma's ideas and life which fail to fit into his distorted vision of Emma and, by extension, anarchism.

Which is to be expected, given the assumptions of the *"socialist tradition"* Selfa identifies himself with, namely the neo-Trotskyism of Tony Cliff. It is well known that, like most Leninists, the followers of Cliff think that anarchists can be divided into two camps.

First, there is the anarchists proper. People like Bakunin, Kropotkin and Emma are usually lumped into this camp. They

[2] **Living My Life**, vol. 1, Dover Publications, New York, 1970, pp. 52–3

are labelled "elitist" and "individualist" and, it is asserted, they are utterly indifferent to the importance of collective working class struggle and organisation. Then there is the second camp, the "anarcho-syndicalists" (who are somewhat patronisingly labelled the *"best of the anarchists"*). These are generally limited to those anarchists who became Leninists, people like Victor Serge and some French syndicalists.[3]

Both camps are mutually exclusive, regardless of the facts. In the Leninist schema, camp one rejects "mass, collective struggle" and working class organisation in spite of their well known support for such things. Selfa's essay is rooted in this utterly inaccurate classification. This explains his total avoidance of Emma's articles and arguments for syndicalism and mass, collective struggle. That would clash with his ideological assumptions about her and anarchism and so, understandably, is placed into Memory Hole.

Exceptions?

Of course, Selfa is aware that few real anarchists actually fit into the model he is trying to paint by his distorting of Emma's life and ideas. He plays the usual Leninist card by mentioning that some anarchists do stuff he approves of. For example, he somewhat lamely argues that *"while individual anarchists participated fully in trade union life and issue-oriented campaigns for free speech and the like, their philosophy impeded their ability to connect the immediate day-to-day issues with the struggle for an anarchist future. No national anarchist organisation existed."*

Obviously the lack of a *"national anarchist organisation"* is irrelevant to whether anarchists were connected to *"day-to-day*

[3] And, in the case of Selfa, non-anarchists! He states that Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Big Bill *Haywood "actually left the ranks of anarchists and joined the Communist Parties."* Yet Flynn and Haywood were (Marxist) socialists, which gives you a flavour of his grasp of the facts.

Aware that some anarchists in Spain did propose anarchist solutions to the problems facing the Spanish revolution, Selfa tries to present them as Marxists. He calls the **Friends of Durruti** (FoD) a *"group of anarchists who began to draw these conclusions"* and *"broke from anarchism and moved toward revolutionary Marxism. For this decision, the CNT expelled them."* Trotskyist Felix Morrow made those claims in his book *"Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain"* and Leninists have parroted them every since. However, the facts are radically different. Rather than move towards Marxism, the **FoD** in fact returned to the ideas current in the CNT before the start of the civil war. In other words, they remained true to anarchism while the CNT leadership did not. The attempt at expulsion and the smearing of them as "Marxists" was not due to any *"decision"* to move *"toward revolutionary Marxism"* by the FoD but rather an attempt to neutralise a growing alternative within the CNT to the leadership's bureaucratic and failed policies. And while the CNT leadership tried to expel them, the rank and file did not let them.[70]

I will not discuss Emma's decision to defend the leadership of CNT and FAI and their *"abandoning of principle."* She does so well enough herself. I do think, however, she strayed too far from the needs of solidarity by not being critical in public and posing an alternative. One thing is true, when Selfa states that Emma's defence of her position *"encapsulated all of the problems of anarchism when faced with revolution"* he is simply wrong. He asserts that the anarchists *"could remain irrelevant to the struggle and true to their principles, or they could junk their principles to become relevant."* Yet looking at the unions, collectives and militias created by the Spanish anarchists, it is

[70] For a discussion of the Friends of Durruti and their (non-)relation to Marxism see *"Appendix 3.2: 7. Were the Friends of Durruti Marxists?"* of **An Anarchist FAQ**

the anarchist leaders were incapable in spite of the heroism of the anarchist workers), is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society."[68] Thus "workers' power" meant the party leadership seizing power, ***not*** the workers. A strange definition of *"workers' power,"* I must admit. The *"leaders"* of the CNT and FAI quite rightly rejected such a position — unfortunately they also rejected the anarchist position at the same time due to fear of isolation and splitting the antifascist struggle.

So rather than seeing, as anarchism does, working class organisations running society, Trotsky saw the party doing this. *"Because the leaders of the CNT renounced dictatorship for themselves they left the place open for the Stalinist dictatorship,"* he argued. This was part of a general argument about how the *"revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party"* was *"an objective necessity imposed upon us by the social realities."* While the *"dictatorship of a party belongs to the barbarian prehistory"* we could *"not jump over this chapter."* In fact, the *"revolutionary party (vanguard) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution."* Simply put, *"it would be very well if the party dictatorship could be replaced by the 'dictatorship' of the whole toiling people without any party, but this presupposes such a high level of political development among the masses that it can never be achieved under capitalist conditions."*[69]

Sadly Selfa does not explain how the *"dictatorship of a party"* which would not renounce *"its own dictatorship"* would result in a "*workers' solution.*" Perhaps he is unaware of this advice by the world's the leading Bolshevik? However, it should not come as a surprise as Trotsky, like all the Bolshevik leaders, had been arguing this since at least 1919. Which was a key reason why Emma broke with them and proposed the traditional anarchist ideas of workers' self-management as an alternative.

[68] **Writings 1936–37**, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1978, pp. 513–4

[69] **Writings 1936–37**, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1978, pp. 513–4

issues." Equally, if *"some"* anarchists *"participated fully"* in the labour movement it hardly follows that this is despite their politics rather than because of them. Given that, as Kropotkin put, *"Revolutionary Anarchist Communist propaganda within the Labour Unions had always been a favourite mode of action in the Federalist or 'Bakuninist' section of the International Working Men's Association"* it would appear that anarchists ***did*** have a means of connecting their current struggles with revolution.[4]

This can be seen from Emma's vocal and consistent support for syndicalism, a support Selfa consistently fails to mention. However, by mentioning that *"some"* anarchists did not fit into his model of anarchism, Selfa can defend his inventions by saying that any anarchist which disproves his theory is simply an exception. In reality, of course, it is his theory which is wrong and his *"some"* anarchists were, in fact, the majority. And this majority included Emma, whose arguments for syndicalism and economic direct action and organisation Selfa cannot bring himself to mention.

This is understandable as Selfa's aim is clear, to paint Emma as an ineffectual elitist. Thus he claims that her fans *"ignore her own elitist politics"* and he is at pains to paint a picture of her as being indifferent to working class people and their struggles and organisation. Selfa asserts that she was *"an individualist who believed that the enlightened few made social change. For her, the masses were an abstraction, or often, a curse."* The article concludes that we should come, like the *"best of the anarchists"* and rank and file wobblies *"to the conclusion that only collective, mass struggle [can] attain socialism"*

Thus Selfa claims two things, that as an elitist Emma ignored collective, mass struggle as the means to achieve a free society. Both claims are related and both are false. It is easy to see why when we do what Selfa consistently does not, discuss Emma's

[4] **Act For Yourselves: articles from Freedom 1886–1907,** N. Walter and H. Becker (eds), Freedom Press, London, 1988, pp. 119–20

syndicalist ideas. Once we do that, we can easily dismiss the claim of elitism he throws at her.

Emma the syndicalist

Selfa asserts that anarchist *"philosophy impeded their ability to connect the immediate day-to-day issues with the struggle for an anarchist future."* Such an assertion could only be made by ignoring key aspects of Emma's politics. For all his claim to be *"looking at her ideas,"* Selfa does not once mention her consistent and vocal support for syndicalism, for, as she put it, *"direct , revolutionary, economic action"* by labour unions. For Emma, direct action *"is the logical consistent method of Anarchism"* and was to be applied *"against the authority in the shop ... against the authority of the law"* and *"against the invasive, meddlesome authority of our moral code."*[5]

Clearly, Selfa considers mentioning her classic essay *"Syndicalism: Its Theory and Practice"* would simply confuse the reader. After all, how could an *"elitist"* who thought the *"enlightened few made social change"* also subscribe to the ideas of *"the best of the anarchists"*? Best then not to mention that Emma considered syndicalism to be (*"in essence"*) the *"economic expression of Anarchism"* and as well as means of *"daily warfare against capitalism"* one of its *"most vital efforts"* was *"to prepare the workers ... for their role in a free society ...so that when labour finally takes over production and distribution, the people will be fully prepared to manage successfully their own affairs."* Emma wholehearted supported direct action (*"the assertion of the economic power of the workers"*) and the general strike.[6]

[5] *"Anarchism: What it really stands for"*, **Red Emma Speaks**, 3rd Edition, Humanity Books, New York, 1998, p. 76–7

[6] *"Syndicalism: Its Theory and Practice"*, **Red Emma Speaks**, p. 91, p. 92, pp. 99–100 and pp. 94–5

as Leninists do seems an extremely superficial explanation of what happened.

Selfa is, however, right to note that the CNT's decision *"caused quite a scandal in anarchist ranks around the world"* but he is wrong to state that *"even the critics conceded that they really had no alternative to offer their comrades in Spain. The CNT could have maintained its principles and abstained from the government, but they didn't have a positive alternative to offer."* Most critics of the CNT did offer an alternative, namely apply anarchist principles from the start. In other words, smash the state, organise a federation of communes/councils/collectives and a militia to defend against the counter-revolution. This had been the position of anarchism since Bakunin. Berkman had recommended it in his classic introduction to anarchism, ***"What is Anarchism?"*** And, unmentioned by Selfa, this was actually done in Aragon with remarkable success. Unsurprisingly, most Leninists fail to mention the Council of Aragon when attacking Spanish anarchism. To do so shows the weakness of the Marxist argument. The continuity of what happened in Aragon with the ideas of anarchism and the CNT's 1936 Zaragoza Resolution on Libertarian Communism is clear.[67]

But rest assured. While he fails to mention the anarchist alternative, he does mention a Leninist one. *"That alternative,"* he argues, *"would have meant building a Bolshevik-type organization that would campaign for workers' power – for a workers' solution to the crisis (i.e. doing exactly what they had refused to do in Catalonia when power was within reach)."* What does that mean? Let us see what Trotsky had to say. It was, to say the least, interesting.

Trotsky was clear what "workers' power" meant. As he put it, the *"revolutionary party, even having seized power (of which*

[67] See *"Appendix 3.2: 8. Did the Friends of Durruti 'break with' anarchism?"* of **An Anarchist FAQ**

country. To pursue anarchist politics at such a time, it was argued, would have resulted in the CNT fighting on two fronts — against the fascists and also against the Republican government. Such a situation would have been unbearable and so it was better to accept collaboration than aid Fascism by dividing the forces of the anti-fascist camp. In the words of a CNT report from 1937:

"The CNT showed a conscientious scrupulousness in the face of a difficult alternative: to destroy completely the State in Catalonia, to declare war against the Rebels [i.e. the fascists], the government, foreign capitalism, and thus assuming complete control of Catalan society; or collaborating in the responsibilities of government with the other antifascist fractions."[65]

While the CNT leadership did provide numerous spurious arguments to defend their decision in terms of libertarian principles, these came long after the decision and when the CNT itself had changed.[66] When the decision to postpone the revolution, to not implement anarchism, was made what was driving the CNT was simply the immediate issue of fighting fascism, the fear of isolation within Spain and dividing the anti-fascist forces. Selfa's "*revolutionary government*" would have been faced with the same problems. He seems unconcerned about how the central government or the imperialist powers would have reacted to such a development. For him, all that seems required is a Spanish Lenin to seize power and the real and pressing problems facing the revolution would have been solved. In reality, the problems of isolation and hostility by the Republic would have remained.

Few anarchists today would deny that the CNT made the wrong decision yet to blame anarchist theory for the decision

[65] quoted by Robert Alexander, **The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War**, vol. 2, , Janus Publishing Company, London, 1999, p. 1156

[66] See *"Appendix 3.2: 8. Did the Friends of Durruti 'break with' anarchism?"* of **An Anarchist FAQ**

Thus Emma stressed the need for collective class struggle and organisation, urging workers to form militant unions to both combat and replace capitalism. As she put it a few years after her essay on syndicalism:

"It is this war of classes that we must concentrate upon, and in that connection the war against false values, against evil institutions, against all social atrocities. Those who appreciate the urgent need of co-operating in great struggles ... must organise the preparedness of the masses for the overthrow of both capitalism and the state. Industrial and economic preparedness is what the workers need. That alone leads to revolution at the bottom ... That alone will give the people the means to take their children out of the slums, out of the sweat shops and the cotton mills ... That alone leads to economic and social freedom, and does away with all wars, all crimes, and all injustice."[7]

It seems strange that Selfa does not mention this, after all he quotes from and references the same book (**Red Emma Speaks**) these quotes are from. Nor can this be considered as a new development. After all, the Haymarket Martyrs who so inspired Emma advocated and practised what was to become known as "syndicalism."

It does not take a genius to know why Selfa fails to inform his readers of this essential aspect of Emma's politics. Unsurprisingly, this is not the only aspects of Emma's ideas and life he fails to inform his readers.

Got no class?

While arguing that she was an elitist who ignored the masses, he time and time again has to acknowledge that Emma brought her ideas to the general public. Rather than ignore the masses, she sought to spread her ideas amongst them. He states, for ex-

[7] *"Preparedness: The road to universal slaughter,"* **Red Emma Speaks**, pp. 309–10

ample, that *"Goldman's speeches and **Mother Earth** attempted to reach a wider audience"* and **Mother Earth** was used *"to propagate their [Emma's and Berkman's] particular version of anarchism,"* an anarchism Selfa makes no attempt to discuss beyond a few superficial denunciations of "elitism." Looking at the contents of **Mother Earth**, it can hardly be said to have ignored the *"social question"* nor the mass struggles of the working class.[8] And even he has to mention that she and Berkman formed the **Non-Conscription League** in 1917 against the war, yet he fails to draw the obvious conclusion from this.

Clearly, neither **Mother Earth** nor Berkman's or Emma's politics ignore the masses. Rather, it is Selfa who ignores key aspects of her ideas in his essay. Unsurprisingly, therefore, his own essay refutes his argument. To get around this obvious contradiction, Selfa resorts to failing to understand English. He argues that *"other anarchists who were more oriented on the working class accused her of going too far to seek allies in the middle class"* and quotes Emma defending herself as follows: *"The men and women who first take up the banner of a new liberating idea generally emanate from the so-called respectable classes.... [T]o limit oneself to propaganda exclusively among the oppressed does not always bring the desired results."* Does Selfa not know what *"exclusively"* or *"limit"* mean? Emma is clearly arguing that anarchist propaganda must be directed to all interested people and not purely to the oppressed. It is a jump of epic proportions to, as Selfa does, assert that this meant that

[8] A useful anthology has recently been published called "**Anarchy! *An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth***, Peter Glassgold (ed.), Counterpoint, Washington, 2001. It contains 10 essays on ***"The social war"*** including Max Baginski's *"Aim and Tactics of the Trade-Union Movement"* and Voltarine de Cleyre's *"A Study of the General Strike in Philadelphia."* Clearly a paper which ignored collective mass struggle! Significantly, Selfa quotes from this book in his essay and so is aware of such articles in Emma's paper.

Spain: Anarchism refuted?

By failing to acknowledge that Berkman (like Emma) had summarised the anarchist lessons of the Russian Revolution, Selfa is now open to go onto his real target: the role of the anarchists in the Spanish Revolution.

The Spanish revolution is a favourite of Leninists when it comes to attacking anarchism. On the face of it, this is understandable. The anarchists after all failed to smash the state and agreed to join a bourgeois government. Selfa presents the usual Leninist case, stating that *"the choice was stark: the CNT-FAI could overthrow the existing government and set up a revolutionary workers' government or it could leave the bourgeois government in power. The Catalonian CNT debated it and resolved to leave Companys in power because to take power in a revolutionary government would mean a compromise of anarchist principles – a compromise with the state. So they let an opportunity to take power pass them by."*

However, such an argument is rooted in philosophical idealism of the worse kind. It significantly fails to present, never mind discuss, the circumstances in which the Catalan CNT made its decision. This is unsurprising, for once these conditions are discussed the decisions reached by the CNT can be understood, if not approved of. More importantly, it also indicates that anarchist theory cannot be blamed for the decision. Simply put, it was not a choice between seizing power or not but rather between co-operating with the Republic against Franco or applying anarchist ideas and, potentially, having to fight both the fascists and the Republic.[64]

These were the circumstances that the CNT faced. After defeating the military in Barcelona, the Catalan CNT militants did not know for sure the situation in the rest of the

[64] See "Section I.8.10: Why did the C.N.T. collaborate with the state?" of **An Anarchist FAQ**

Makhnovists had applied in the Ukraine and which Berkman himself points to in his classic introduction to anarchism.[62]

In general, most of Berkman's book simply mirrors his own and Emma's conclusions from their experiences in Russia. These confirmed her anarchism. As she put it, only *"popular participation in the affairs of the revolution can prevent the terrible blunders committed in Russia."* Thus the *"industrial power of the masses, expressed through their libertarian associations — Anarchosyndicalism — is alone able to organize successfully the economic life and carry on production."* She pointed to *"the Soviets, the trade unions and the co-operatives-three great factors for the realization of the hopes of the Revolution."*[63] Ironically, this is what modern day Leninists say they believe in. The key difference is that anarchists do not undermine and marginalise these organs of popular self-management by placing a highly centralised state and Leninist government over them. If Selfa is arguing against Emma's conclusions then he is arguing that revolution makes working class self-management of society impossible. If so, he should, like Lenin and Trotsky, admit it.

As such, it seems incredulous for Selfa not to mention that both Berkman and Emma had answered his own question from 1920 in his subsequent writings. But not surprising. After all, Selfa's major technique in his essay is to ignore those facts and ideas of Emma's which utterly contradict his case. Thus, for example, he fails to discuss her support for anarcho-syndicalism. Should we be surprised that he fails to mention those writings of Emma and Berkman which summarise the lessons from the Russian Revolution? Of course not.

[62] see the *Appendix: Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?* of **An Anarchist FAQ"**.

[63] See "Section I.8.10: Why did the C.N.T. collaborate with the state?" of **An Anarchist FAQ**

for Emma *"broadening her appeal was to appeal to the cultural Bohemia."*

The reader need not look far to get an idea of the activist Selfa calls *"Emma the Bohemian anarchist"* did to spread the anarchist message. They could read, for example, one of Selfa's sources. In **Living My Life**, Emma recounts that on her return to New York in 1909 *"new struggles absorbed me. There was the shirtwaist-makers strike, involving fifteen thousand employees, and that of the steel-workers at McKeesport ... The anarchists always being among the first to respond to every need, I had to address numerous meeting and visit labour bodies to plead the cause of their fellow unionists."*[9] And this is someone Selfa claims was not "*oriented on the working class"*!

And should I remind our comrade that Lenin, like Emma, argued that radicals should spread their ideas in all classes of society? Has he not read **"What is to be Done"**? Perhaps not, as he would be less likely to conclude Emma was an elitist after reading that true homage to the role an elite vanguard plays in educating the masses. Or, perhaps, he is arguing that working class people have no interest in art, sex education, women's liberation and the other non-economic class struggle issues covered by **Mother Earth** and Emma? If so, then it is he who is the true elitist. Be what may, the fact is that Emma, like (the middle-class) Lenin, argued that radicals should not focus *"exclusively"* on the oppressed and be willing to let non-working class people join the movement. Hardly an example of *"going too far to seek allies in the middle class."*

Minorities versus Majorities

Given that Leninism is based on elitist principles and glorifies the role of the vanguard party, it seems strange that Selfa takes Goldman to task for "elitism." He notes that *"Goldman never*

[9] **Living My Life**, vol. 1, p. 456

turned away from the idea that heroic individuals, not masses, make history" and quotes from her 1910 essay ***"Minorities Versus Majorities"*** to prove this. Strangely enough, he does not actually refute the arguments Emma expounds in that essay. He does, needless to say, misrepresent them. The aim of that essay was to state the obvious — that the mass is not the source for new ideas. Rather, new, progressive, ideas are the product of minorities and which then spread to the majority by the actions of those minorities.

Even social movements and revolutions start when a minority takes action. Trade unionism, for example, was (and still is) a minority movement in most countries. Support for radical and sexual equality was long despised (or, at best, ignored) by the majority and it took a resolute minority to advance that cause and spread the idea in the majority. The Russian Revolution did not start with the majority. It started when a minority of women workers (ignoring the advice of the local Bolsheviks) took to the streets and from these hundreds grew into a movement of hundreds of thousands.

I could go on, but the facts are clearly on the side of Emma, not Selfa. Given that Emma is expounding such an obvious law of social evolution, it seems incredulous that Selfa has a problem with it. This is particularly the case as Marxism (particularly its Leninist version) implicitly recognises this. As Marx argued, the ruling ideas of any epoch are those of the ruling class. Likewise for Emma: *"Human thought has always been falsified by tradition and custom, and perverted false education in the interests of those who held power ... by the State and the ruling class."* Hence the *"continuous struggle"* against *"the State and even against 'society,' that is, against the majority subdued and hypnotised by the State and State worship."* If this were not the case, as Emma notes, no state could save itself or pri-

So what Selfa inaccurately suggests was hypocrisy was, in reality, Berkman's evaluation of arguments like Serge's. It is to his credit that Berkman rejected Serge's arguments, particularly as Serge was himself utterly hypocritical in praising the government in public while denouncing it in private to other radicals:

"In the summer of 1921 the anarchist Gaston Leval came to Moscow in the Spanish delegation to the Third Congress of the Communist International. In private, Serge confided to him that 'the Communist Party no longer practices the dictatorship of the proletariat but dictatorship over the proletariat.' Returning to France, Leval published articles in ***Le Libertaire*** *using well documented facts, and placing side by side what Victor Serge had told him confidentially and his public statements, which he described as 'conscious lies.'"*[60]

So what did Berkman record in his diary? *"Many vital problems find no adequate answer in our books and theories,"* Berkman wrote. *"Result – the tragedy of the Anarchists in the midst of the revolution and unable to find their place or activity?"* It wasn't good enough just to oppose the *"'dictatorship of the proletariat.' Have we anything to offer in its place?"* Selfa states that *"the possibility of answering Berkman's question arose fifteen years after Goldman and Berkman left Russia in 1921."* Yet this is false. If you read Berkman's ***"What is Anarchism?"*** you discover exactly what anarchism had to *"offer in its place,"* namely a federation of self-managed workers' councils and a free militia to defend the revolution.[61] Which was what the

[60] Daniel Guerin, **Anarchism: From theory to practice**, , Monthly Review Press, New York/London, 1970, p. 97

[61] **What is Anarchism?,** AK Press, Edinburgh/London/Oakland, 2003. Of particular interest are chapters XXVII (*"Organisation of Labor for the Social Revolution"* — which discusses the need for the working class to organise itself), XXVII (*"Principles and Practice"* — which covers the need federations of shop and factory councils) and XXXI (*"Defense of the Revolution"*). Also of note is chapter XIII (*"Socialism"*) which surely covers some of the ground of his proposed reply to Lenin's **"Left-wing Communism"**.

nunciations of the Bolsheviks throughout the 1920s as evidence that one of 'them' had realized the error of her ways." Whatever happened to Gramsci's famous words that *"telling the truth is a revolutionary act"*? But, then again, telling the truth is something Selfa is hardly familiar with. Moreover, his logic smacks more of Stalinism than anything else. In the 1930s the Stalinists labelled their opponents as "Trotsky-fascists" for denouncing (some of) the horrors of the USSR. After the war, they attacked socialists who exposed the obvious state capitalist nature of the regime as providing comfort to capitalism. It seems sad that a modern-day Leninist fails to see the obvious lesson here: the radical movement is still suffering the harm done by the liars and apologists of Stalinism and, before that, Leninism.

The question is, would Selfa have preferred Emma and Berkman not to discuss their experiences and try to learn from them? Or to warn the working class of the dangers of Bolshevism? If so, would he have also urged Trotsky to remain silent about the evils of Stalinism? I doubt it.

Russian Lessons

Selfa claims that *"in public, Berkman denounced the government. But in private, he considered the criticisms of comrades like Serge"* and quotes from Berkman's diary from December 1920. Yet, at this time Berkman was still in Bolshevik Russia and was struggling with the reality of the Bolshevik dictatorship and whether his support for the revolution against the capitalist counter-revolution could be squared with his support for the Bolsheviks. He did not publicly denounce the regime as there was no free speech under Lenin and so his comments were (by necessity) limited to people he could trust. It was only once he had left Russia that Berkman could denounce the government to the public without fear of arrest (or worse).

vate property from the masses.[10] Hence the need for people to break from their conditioning, to act for themselves. As Emma argued. She saw direct action as *"the salvation of man"* as it *"necessitates integrity, self-reliance, and courage."*[11]

Thus Emma was not dismissing the masses, just stressing the obvious: namely that socialism is a process of self-liberation and the task of the conscious minority is to encourage this process by encouraging the direct action of the masses. Hence Emma's support for syndicalism and direct action, a support Selfa fails to inform his readers of.

So was this position the elitism Selfa claims? No, far from it. What did Emma mean? In a debate between her and a socialist she used the Lawrence strike *"as an example of direct action."*[12] The workers in one of the mills started the strike by walking out. The next day five thousand at another mill struck and marched to another mill and soon doubled their number. The strikers soon had to supply food and fuel for 50,000. It was the direct action of a minority which started the strike (a strike Emma supported and fund raised for). Emma herself wrote of the general strike be started by *"one industry or by a small, conscious minority among the workers"* which *"is soon taken up by many other industries, spreading like wildfire."*[13] Is Selfa really arguing that this was "elitist"? If so, then every spontaneous revolt is "elitist."

It seems obvious that Selfa takes Emma to task for clearly stating what he, in his own way, agrees with. By joining a vanguard party, Selfa agrees with Emma. Every time he praises a struggle, strike or demonstration which involves only a mi-

[10] *"The Individual, Society and the State,"* **Red Emma Speaks**, p. 111; *"Minorities versus Majorities"*, **Red Emma Speaks**, p. 85

[11] *"Anarchism: What it really stands for"*, p. 76

[12] **Living My Life**, vol. 1., p. 491

[13] *"Syndicalism: its theory of and practice,"* **Red Emma Speaks**, p. 95; For details of the Lawrence strike see Howard Zinn's **A People's History of the United States**, (2nd ed.), Longman, Essex, 1996, pp. 327–8

nority of the population then he agrees with Emma. Every time he denounces a "backward" attitude within the masses, he agrees with Emma. Every time he attacks left-wingers for adjusting themselves to a reactionary "popular will" he agrees with Emma. And every time the "moral majority" call for the suppression of radicals, denounce "Reds" and attack unions, Emma is vindicated and Selfa exposed as talking nonsense.

Leninism, true elitism

So why the hypocritical denunciations of Emma as an elitist by someone who subscribes to the far more elitist politics of Leninism? As Emma noted in her essay, the *"Socialist demagogues know that [her argument is true] as well as I, but they maintain the myth of the virtues of the majority, because their very scheme means the perpetuation of power"* and *"authority, coercion and dependence rest on the mass, but never freedom."*[14] What with Selfa's call for a *"revolutionary workers' government,"* she is obviously still right. By urging that power be concentrated into the hands of a few party leaders, he is implicitly arguing that the masses cannot manage their own lives nor their own revolution. The glorification of the masses is simply a means of justifying minority power. As Lenin put it when he replied to a critic in 1920 that *"[h]e says we understand by the words dictatorship of proletariat what is actually the dictatorship of its determined and conscious minority. And that is the fact."* This *"minority ... may be called a party,"* Lenin stressed.[15] Not that Lenin was an elitist, of course.

Somewhat embarrassingly for Selfa, Trotsky (a person whom Selfa contrasts favourably with Emma despite the fact he was a practitioner and advocate of party dictatorship)

[14] *"Minorities versus Majorities"*, p. 85

[15] quoted by Arthur Ransome, **The Crisis in Russia 1920**, Redwords, London, 1992, p. 35

man management and party dictatorship from Lenin. He simply intensified certain aspects of it. And, ironically, even by Cliff's own analysis Lenin's Russia was "state capitalist" as it was locked in military competition with the West from the start.

I would say it is obvious that Emma represents the authentic communist tradition, not Leninism. She remembered what socialism was meant to be about and ably analysed the failings of both Lenin's and Stalin's regimes based on this. Thus her *"small-c"* communism is a much more reliable guide for radicals than the Bolshevik tradition which repeated called (and still calls) regimes which are obviously state capitalist, like Lenin's, "socialist."

From Russia without love

Once they were out of Russia, Emma and Berkman wrote extensively on their experiences and the lessons they drew from it. Even here Selfa cannot get basic facts right. He notes that she was *"a lifelong opponent of Marxism and socialism"* and that her *"two years of praise for the Bolsheviks in 1917–18 were the exception, not the rule."* He then states *"that's why it was somewhat disingenuous of her to characterize her experience in Russia as 'disillusionment,' since she wasn't a supporter of socialism."* Yet Emma made clear in the preface of her account, the title was not her choice. It was imposed by the publisher without her knowledge.[59] Selfa, let us not forget, quotes from this book. Does this mean he has not bothered to read it?

Given that those who fail to understand the lessons of history are doomed to repeat it, Emma's account of her experiences in Russia should have been essential reading for all radicals. Yet Selfa attacks her decision to expose the truth about Leninist Russia, stating that the capitalist press printed *"her de-*

[59] **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. li

defended the Stalinist economic system as being socialist. Perhaps this is to be expected, as he had advocated and imposed similar policies (and uttered similar rationales) when in power between 1918 and 1923.

But, then again, Selfa has problems understanding Emma's communism. For example, he states that Emma *"immediately denounced"* Lenin's New Economic Policy as *"a reversal of communism itself."* Yet Emma did no such thing. Looking at the page Selfa references, we discover her noting that it was *"most Communists"* who saw it as *"a reversal of communism itself."* For Emma, *"[t]rue Communism was never attempted in Russia."*[58] As such, Selfa's comments are simply a distortion of what Emma actually wrote.

Unlike the Leninist tradition, Emma had no more difficulty in seeing Lenin's regime for what it was (*"state capitalist"*) than she had seeing what Stalin's was (*"state capitalist"*). It should be stressed that the tradition Selfa identifies with only came to the conclusion that Stalin's regime was "state capitalism" in the late 1940s. Yet even here Emma is right. For Tony Cliff Stalinist Russia was "state capitalist" not (as for Emma) due to the social relations in production and society but because it was part of the global (capitalist) economy and locked in military competition with the West. But, as Marx argued, capitalism is a mode of production, not exchange. Thus the USSR could not be "state capitalist" in Cliff's sense for the same reason Native American tribes producing tomahawks and arrows to resist White settlers did not become "capitalist" or slave holding in the American South did not become "capitalist" by selling its goods on the world market.

Perhaps this superficial analysis is understandable as the social relations under Stalin did not differ from those under Lenin. Stalin inherited a regime based on nationalised property, one-

[58] *"Afterword to My Disillusionment in Russia,"* **Red Emma Speaks**, p. 387 and p. 389

agreed with Emma on the importance of minorities. As he put it during the debate on Kronstadt in the late 1930s, a *"revolution is 'made' directly by a **minority**. The success of a revolution is possible, however, only where this minority finds more or less support, or at least friendly neutrality, on the part of the majority. The shift in different stages of the revolution ... is directly determined by changing political relations between the minority and the majority, between the vanguard and the class."*[16] Trotsky did not explicitly explain in that article what would happen if the majority rejected the minority whose "support" had hoisted into power. A few years later he did:

"The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves ... if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the proletariat is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself."[17]

Of course, everyone is "backward" compared to the vanguard and Trotsky is providing the ideological justification for party dictatorship. And unsurprisingly Trotsky, like all leading Bolsheviks, had been a vocal advocate of "the dictatorship of the party" for some time (from at least 1919). It is clear that Trotsky is simply acknowledging that the fate of the Kronstadt rebels awaits the majority if it rejects the vanguard, the Leninist ruling minority. Not that this makes Trotsky an elitist for Selfa, of course.

To summarise, Selfa's attack on Emma's supposed "elitism" simply backfires. Not only is it factually nonsense but in reality

[16] *"Hue and Cry over Kronstadt"*, **Kronstadt**, , Monad Press, New York, 1986, p. 85

[17] *"The Moralists and Sycophants"*, **Their Morals and Ours**, Pathfinder, New York, 1973, p. 59

it is his own political tradition which is elitist. It advocates the rule of the majority by a small minority of party leaders. That these leaders talk of and praise the masses whom they govern should not fool us for one moment. Nor should Selfa's cherry-picking evidence.

Political Action

The first form of Socialism Emma critiqued was, of course, social democracy, not Leninism. Selfa discusses "*Goldman and American socialism*" and notes that *"two strains of Goldman's thought – elitism and utopianism – put her at odds with the first attempts to form the socialist party."* He talks about the rise of Social Democracy in America and yet significantly fails to indicate that *"attempting to assemble a socialist party that would reach a mass audience"* by means of electioneering provided Bakunin, rather than Marx, right. As such, Selfa, not Emma, is the utopian.

According to Selfa, Emma *"argued that workers' political action – that is, any participation in electoral activity – was a betrayal of ideals."* This is a half-truth, which becomes a whole lie. Yes, Emma (like many anarchists) opposed *"political action"* on principle. However, this is hardly the end of it. Emma, like other anarchists, also argued against it in practical terms too. She correctly argued that such action saw radicals ***"caught in the political trap."*** This meant that such activity promoted reformism in the ranks of labour, replacing principled socialism with opportunism and vote chasing. She argued that *"class consciousness"* could only develop by means of solidarity of interests as *"demonstrated in the Syndicalist and every other revolutionary movement."*[18]

The history of pre-war "revolutionary" socialism confirms Emma's argument, an argument Selfa fails to mention or ad-

[18] "*Socialism: Caught in the Political Trap*", **Red Emma Speaks**, p. 107

it simply followed Trotsky's support for party dictatorship.[55] Serge's more critical appraisal of the Bolsheviks only came in the late 1930s, an appraisal which saw him move back towards the classical anarchist positions expounded by Emma and the other anarchists who rejected Bolshevism. Trotsky, unsurprisingly, was unsparing in his attacks on Serge's new found critical voice. Ironically for Selfa, Trotsky labelled Serge's belated support for working class freedom and democracy an *"anarchist"* spirit. For Trotsky when he was *"demanding freedom 'for the masses'"* Serge *"in reality"* only demanded *"freedom for himself … The 'masses' have nothing at all to do with it."* Serge was just expressing *"the vacillations of a disillusioned petty-bourgeois intellectual"* which oppose *"an assault on his individuality."* Which is, ironically, pretty much Selfa's conclusions about Emma.[56]

"There is no Communism in Russia"

While Selfa acknowledges that Emma *"called herself a small-c communist,"* he insists that *"she was above all else, an individualist."*

His counterpoising of communism to "individualism" is significant. The aim of communism is, after all, to increase individual liberty (to use Marx's expression, the full development of each individual). As such, authentic communism ***is*** "individualist" in its aspirations. Given this, Selfa's comments simply expose the state capitalist nature of Bolshevism. This can be seen from comparing Emma's evaluation of Stalinist Russia to Trotsky's. Emma was clear, communism did not exist in Russia, *"state capitalism"* did — under Lenin and Stalin.[57] Trotsky

[55] For more on Trotsky's support for party dictatorship in the 1920s see "Section 3 What about Trotsky's *"Left Opposition"* in the 1920s?" of **An Anarchist FAQ**

[56] *"The Moralists and Sycophants"*, **Their Morals and Ours,** pp. 59–60

[57] *"There is no Communism in Russia,"* **Red Emma Speaks**

poverty of Serge's (and Selfa's) claims. Simply put, Russian anarchism was betrayed by the Bolsheviks and crushed by state violence. It was not a natural death nor was it a product of anarchist ideas or ideals.

The Dictatorship of the Party

Selfa justifies Serge's conversion to Bolshevik authoritarianism and elitism by arguing that *"he, like most anarchists in Russia who joined the Communist Party, recognised that only victory against the counterrevolution would create the possibility for anything the anarchists said they stood for."* Needless to say, subsequent events proved how wrong Serge was and how right Emma was to break with Bolshevism. The means shape the ends. Non-libertarian means are unlikely to result in libertarian ends. The rise of Stalinism proved who was right between Serge and Emma.

Selfa is aware of this. Stalinism is hardly a glowing recommendation for his argument and so he defends Serge, asserting he *"was far from an apologist for the Bolsheviks, and certainly no Stalinist."* Yet his arguments in favour of Bolshevism in the 1920s ***were*** clearly apologetics and while he did become *"a Trotskyist, opposed to Stalin's dictatorship"* he was wholeheartedly in favour of the Bolshevik party's dictatorship under Lenin. Serge in the 1920s was a true elitist, eulogising the role and dictatorship of the vanguard.

He was not alone. As a good Trotskyist he supported the Left Opposition in the 1920s. This wing of the ruling bureaucracy proclaimed in 1927 *"the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party."*[54] In this

[54] **"The Platform of the Opposition"** available at: www.marxists.org

dress. Just as the antics of his sects parent organisation, the **Socialist Workers Party**, in Britain today with the **"Respect Unity Coalition"** confirm Emma's argument. The SWP is happy to let Respect water down socialist politics to gain more members and votes. Not that Selfa is not aware of Emma's argument against "political action." He does quote from her essay, but only to paint her as an elitist. He simply decides it is not in the best interests of his readers to confuse them with an accurate and honest account of the nature of her argument. Which is nice of him to save his readers the heavy task of making their own minds up whether Emma was right or not.

Ironically, he admits that *"much of what Goldman said about the Socialist Party was true."* Rest assured, however, as *"the left of the Socialist Party"* also *"criticised the large number of middle-class members in the party, its lack of coherence, and its character"* as well as slamming *"the decision of the party executive in 1912 to expel anyone who advocated 'direct action' to take on the bosses – a move aimed against supporters of the radical Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the party's ranks."* He somewhat lamely argues that while *"the left made these points to win wider layers of workers within the Socialist Party to its positions – and later to the necessity for forming an explicitly revolutionary party – Goldman used them to attack socialism in general."*

Which ignores two things. Firstly, the Socialist Party was meant to be *"an explicitly revolutionary party."* Years of electioneering had eroded that position, as Emma correctly argued. Secondly, while "the left" may have attacked the rise of reformism within the party, they could not explain why it happened in the first place. Unlike Emma, who could provide an analysis of tactics which explained the shift towards reformism, "the left" could only seek to reproduce the same tactics and hope they had a different result. Just as the Leninists of today are doing, ironically enough.

This inability of Marxists to learn from history seems to have a long legacy. Emma recounts how in one debate with the Socialists her opponent *"conveniently ignored"* all the *"historic data and current facts I advanced to prove the deterioration of socialism in Germany, the betrayal on the part of most socialists who had achieved power, the tendency in their ranks everywhere towards petty reforms."* He simply *"repeated verbatim what he had said in his opening round."*[19] How little things have changed!

So while Selfa summarises that *"in her attacks on socialism, she displayed the same elitist disdain for the masses she showed in other contexts"* he does not attempt to refute her analysis. Given its validity, it is unsurprising that Selfa distorts it by ignoring its central and most important aspect.

Size Matters?

Selfa goes on to compare the size of the Socialist Party and the circulation its paper to that of the anarchist movement and Emma's **Mother Earth**. So, apparently, size does matter when evaluating the revolutionary potential of a movement. What matters if *"almost 120,000"* were in the SP in 1912 if that party was reformist and expelling its militant wing? Selfa does not ask the question.

He justifies his fixation on size by asserting that the *"relative influence of socialism and anarchism in the first decade of the twentieth century spoke to the degree to which the two sets of politics addressed the real questions that faced ordinary people at the time."* Conversely, perhaps, it shows the willingness of socialism to become reformist in order to attract votes — precisely what Emma so correctly analysed. Moreover, given that Republican and Democratic politicians got significantly more votes than the Socialists, does that mean for Selfa, these cap-

[19] **Living My Life**, vol. 1, p. 491

Selfa shows his grasp of facts by asserting that *"one group of anarchists whose libertarian ideas were most connected to workers' struggles – people like Victor Serge, Alfred Rosmer, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Lucy Parsons, and Big Bill Haywood -actually left the ranks of anarchists and joined the Communist Parties."* Yet Flynn and Haywood were Marxists. Parsons may have worked with the Communists (even after they had become Stalinists) but she never joined the Party. Serge and Rosmer embraced Bolshevik dictatorship ***over*** the proletariat. Nor was Serge particularly *"most connected to workers' struggle"* when he was an anarchist. Rather he was an elitist individualist who dismissed such struggle. It was only in 1917 when he was in Spain that he embraced syndicalism. He soon after left for Russia where he eulogised Bolshevik elitism and dictatorship. Once in Russia he was *"connected to"* workers and their struggles in the same way a jailer is *"connected to"* the lives and struggles of their prisoners.

And what of the Russian anarchists? Selfa writes that *"noting the dwindling of their influence, Serge wrote that anarchists would find themselves either 'trailing behind the more determined Communists' or 'following in the footsteps of reaction.'"* Yet Selfa, like Serge, does not mention the use of state repression by the Bolsheviks for the *"dwindling"* influence of the Russia Anarchist movement. This repression did not differentiate between anarchists of ideas and "bandits." The former became the latter whenever reasons of state dictated. Moreover, the example of the Makhnovist movement and the "Nabat" anarchist federation in the Ukraine show that the anarchists were able to *"adopt a clear and distinct position"* and implement anarchist ideas successfully in the Revolution.[53] These examples, both of which mentioned by Emma, show the

[53] For more on Makhnovists, see the "Appendix: Why does the Makhnovist movement show there is an alternative to Bolshevism?" of **An Anarchist FAQ**

*what **ought to**, be the case"* but this *"seems doubtful"* in reality. *"For it appears that by force of circumstances one group is obliged to impose itself on the others and to go ahead of them, breaking them if necessary, in order then to exercise exclusive dictatorship."* The militants *"leading the masses ... cannot rely on the consciousness, the goodwill or the determination of those they have to deal with; for the masses who will follow them or surround them will be warped by the old regime, relatively uncultivated, often aware, torn by feelings and instincts inherited from the past."* And so *"revolutionaries will have to take on the dictatorship without delay."* The experience of Russia *"reveals an energetic and innovative minority which is compelled to make up for the deficiencies in the education of the backward masses by the use of compulsion."*[51]

And so the party, he argued in 1919, *"is in a sense the nervous system of the class. Simultaneously the consciousness and the active, physical organisation of the dispersed forces of the proletariat, which are often ignorant of themselves and often remain latent or express themselves contradictorily."* And what of the masses? What was their role? Serge is equally blunt. While the party is *"supported by the entire working population,"* strangely enough, *"it maintains its unique situation in dictatorial fashion."* He admits *"the energies which have just triumphed ... exist outside"* the party and that *"they constitute its strength only because it represents them knowingly."* Thus the workers are *"[b]ehind"* the communists, *"sympathising instinctively with the party and carrying out the menial tasks required by the revolution."*[52]

Such are the joys of socialist liberation. The party thinks for the worker while they carry out the *"menial tasks"* of the revolution. Like doing the work and following the orders. And Selfa calls this elitist the *"best of the anarchists"*!

[51] **Revolution in Danger**, p. 106, p. 92 and p. 115

[52] **Revolution in Danger**, p. 67, p. 66 and p. 6

italist parties *"addressed the real questions that faced ordinary people at the time"*? It is doubtful, but logically he would have to argue so. And will Selfa now join the Democratic Party or the Greens? After all, they are much larger than his sect and, by the logic of his argument, much more revolutionary than his branch of Leninism. Equally, does the vastly larger size of Stalinist parties compared to Trotskyist ones from the 1930s to 1980s means that Stalinism, not Trotskyism, *"addressed the real questions that faced ordinary people at the time"*?

So, clearly, size does not matter when evaluating the revolutionary credentials of a movement. If it did, the Selfa would have to conclude his own politics are irrelevant and do not express the interests of the working class.

But, then again, Selfa does narrow down his terms of comparison. This is because Emma's activity was not limited to just **Mother Earth**. *"Interest in our ideas,"* she noted, *"was growing throughout the country. New anarchist publications began to appear: **Revolt** in New York ...the **Alarm** in Chicago ... and the **Blast** in San Francisco ... Directly or indirectly it was connected with all of them."* The latter "was closest to her heart" and it was edited by Berkman, who *"had always wanted a forum from which to speak to the masses, an anarchist weekly labour paper to arouse the workers to conscious revolutionary activity."*[20] Needless to say, Selfa never mentions these other papers Emma was involved with. Unsurprisingly, as her support for the **Blast**, for example, would be hard to square with his attempt to paint Emma as being uninteresting in reaching the masses.

Propaganda of the deed

Given Selfa's highly selective approach to Emma's life and ideas, we discover that he spends some time on "propaganda of the deed." This, of course, fits into his narrative of anar-

[20] **Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 567

chism as "individualism" somewhat better than Goldman's syndicalism and so is stressed. Yet even on this subject, reality of Emma's politics can be seen through the whitewash he covers them with.

Failing to indicate the collective struggle aspects of anarchism, Selfa can therefore summarise by arguing that *"the anarchism that Goldman first subscribed to exalted this kind of individual act."* Yet he then contradicts himself by quoting Emma issuing a leaflet that was *"a flaming call to the men of Homestead to throw off the yoke of capitalism, to use their present struggle as a stepping-stone to the destruction of the wage system."* Clearly, then, Emma was hardly ignorant of the need for mass struggle and collective action. But rather than discuss the interactions between her support for mass direct action and propaganda of the deed, he instead focuses on Berkman's attempted assassination of Henry Frick.

It should be stressed that Selfa's summary of why the act happened is at odds with the rationale given by Goldman. In **Living my Life**, Emma is quite clear that the assassination of Frick was not seen as ushering in a revolution nor as a substitute for mass action. Rather it was an act of revenge, an attempt to make Frick responsible for his decisions and draw attention *"to the real cause of the Homestead struggle."*[21] It was not expected to led to revolution. As such, it suggests a distinct failure of Selfa to understand that support for Berkman's act did not mean opposition to the strike, to mass, collective action. His one-dimensional analysis — either for the "individual act" or for "collective action" — simply fails to do justice to Emma's ideas, i.e. the obvious fact that you can support both and assign different roles to each one.

Similarly, Selfa fails to mention that anarchists turned against the idea of "propaganda of the deed" a long time before Trotsky wrote his pamphlet against the Russian Populists.

[21] **Living My Life**, vol. 1, p. 87

anarchists," while Emma is an elitist. In reality, the opposite is the case.

Selfa was at pains to cherry-pick quotes to paint Emma as an ultra-leftist elitist and he does the same for Serge, simply ignoring the elitism of Serge's new-found Bolshevism. Not that this elitism is hard to find, given that it is contained in the very same book Selfa quotes Serge from. As such, he is aware of Serge's elitism but fails to consider it important enough to mention. But all is forgiven as Serge was *"an anarchist who joined the revolution."* More correctly, of course, Serge joined the Bolsheviks. This equating of the Bolsheviks with the revolution, Selfa is well on his way towards party dictatorship. In this typically Bolshevik schema, opposition to the ruling party becomes, by definition, counter-revolutionary. This mentality was exactly the reason why Bolshevism proved to be such an authoritarian nightmare in practice. So it must be stressed that those Anarchists who really did *"align themselves with the revolution"* were precisely those ones who came into conflict with the Bolshevik dictatorship over the proletariat **not** those who became Communists.

Selfa quotes Serge writing to his anarchist comrades: *"It is vital to respond to this necessity for revolutionary defence, as to the necessity for terror and dictatorship, on pain of death. For the grim reality of revolutions is that half-measures and half-defeats are not possible, and that victory means life, defeat means death."* He argues that Serge *"criticised the anarchists for being unable to offer anything other than criticism and opposition to the regime"* and quotes him saying those who failed to *"adopt a clear and distinct position…if they do not unhesitatingly and everywhere align themselves with the revolution…then they will be worthless."*

Yet Serge said much more than this. By *"dictatorship"* Serge did not mean some kind of "proletarian" dictatorship by the masses. He, like Lenin and Trotsky, explicitly argued against this. Yes, he wrote, *"if we are looking at what should, that is at*

"Lenin enthusiastically endorsed" this but that *"they refused to continue on the project after Lenin suggested that it be organised through the Comintern."* This, is however, not true. Emma and Berkman had sound political reasons for refusing Lenin's "suggestion." As she put it, their *"efforts would prove effective if free from any affiliation with known Bolshevik organisations ... we knew the American psychology and how best to conduct the work."* Moreover, they *"wrote to Lenin"* explaining their concerns and, significantly, *"enclosed a detailed outline of our plan."*[49]

The relevant point of all this is one that by-passes Selfa totally. Clearly Emma and Berkman *"were eager to help Russia and to continue our work for America's liberation"* but the Bolsheviks were not willing to co-operate with them in this task as comrades and equals. Rather all work was to be done under Bolshevik control. This was an early example of the fact that *"the dictatorship was all-pervading and that it would brook no independent effort."*[50] Little wonder the revolution became bureaucratic and top-down if that was the Bolshevik attitude to offers of help from non-Bolshevik revolutionaries.

Obviously, for Selfa, Emma and Berkman should have simply done what they were told and followed the orders from above. Just as the ex-anarchist Victor Serge did.

Victor Serge, Bolshevik Elitist

A key aspect of his defence of Bolshevism consists in contrasting Emma to the likes of Victor Serge. While both came to Russia as anarchists seeking to help the revolution, their consequent political developments were radically different. Emma broke with the Bolsheviks while Serge became a Bolshevik. For Selfa, Serge is the hero, one of those he labels *"the best of the*

[49] **Living My Life**, vol. 2, pp. 767–8

[50] **Living My Life**, vol. 2, p. 768

For example, Kropotkin argued that a *"structure based on centuries of history cannot be destroyed by a few kilos of explosives."* One of Kropotkin's biographers summarised his position as being in favour of *"mass resistance to the oppression of the state, collective action against tyranny, and the spontaneous violence of the people during a revolution. Masses, not individuals, make the social revolution."*[22] During the height of support for "propaganda of the deed" in anarchist circles, Kropotkin always stressed the need for mass workers organisation and struggle.[23]

Given the incorrect assumptions he is working under, he quotes a subsequent article by Most and Goldman: *"We believe Anarchy – which is freedom of each individual from harmful constraint by others, whether these others be individuals or an organized government – cannot be brought about without violence, and this violence is the same which won at [the ancient battles of] Thermopylae and Marathon."* He notes that *"this seems to move away from the idea of individual acts of violence and toward the idea, more accepted by Marxists, that force plays an important role as the 'midwife of history.'"* Of course, it is nothing of the kind. Anyone with even a passing acquaintance of the logic of "propaganda of the deed" would know that such acts were seen as a ***complement*** of mass revolutionary action, not its replacement. As such, Goldman's arguments are consistent with her previous ideas, not a *"move away."* And, as is obvious, is consistent with previous and subsequent anarchist politics.

Clearly, Selfa is distorting Emma's ideas on this subject, like so many others, to fit into his ideology.

[22] Martin A. Miller, **Anarchism**, The University of Chicago Press, London, 1976, pp. 174–5

[23] See Caroline Cahm's **Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism,** Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.

On Organisation

Selfa is on firmer ground when he argues that Emma did not form a national anarchist organisation nor *"attempt to build an anarchist organisation in the way Debs' speeches aimed to build the Socialist Party."* Yet he has to admit that *"local anarchist groups would sponsor her talks,"* which suggests that her activities and speeches built a ***movement*** rather than a party. As is clear from **Living My Life**, Emma spent a great deal of time travelling the country helping these local groups who would also sell Mother Earth and produce their own newspapers.

Selfa argues that while *"decentralism may have been one of the principles that she upheld ... it made for an incoherent movement that operated as a collection of small groups."* Yet the leadership of the centralised Socialist Party, as he acknowledged, sought to expel their radical members. It also grew, as he acknowledges, increasingly reformist as time went on. And has Selfa forgotten that he had just lambasted the blessed Socialist Party for "*its lack of coherence*"? Clearly Debs' Socialist Party suffered from some of the same problems he accuses the anarchist movement of having. While it cannot be denied that a lack of federation can cause an apparently *"incoherent"* movement to develop, the sad fact is that the Socialist alternative was much worse.

And, perhaps, the attempts by the right-wing of the party to expel the members who supported direct action can be seen as an example of imposing "coherence" from above? Rosa Luxemberg was aware of this process, attacking Lenin's vanguardism as being a means to *"enslave a young labour movement to an intellectual elite hungry for power."* It would be a *"bureaucratic straightjacket, which will immobilise the movement and turn it into an automation manipulated by a Central Committee."*[24]

[24] *"Organisational Question of Social Democracy"*, **Rosa Luxemburg Speaks**, Mary-Alice Waters (ed.), Pathfinder Press, New York, 1970, pp. 126–7

be remembered that the suppression of Kronstadt was just one of a series of actions by the Bolsheviks which began, **before** the start of the Civil War, with them abolishing soviets which elected non-Bolshevik majorities, abolishing elected officers and soldiers soviets in the Red Army and Navy and replacing workers' self-management of production by state-appointed managers with "dictatorial" powers.

Revolutionary obedience?

That the Leninist traditions seems based on the assumption of unquestioning obedience to the party leadership seems clear when we look at how Selfa describes Emma's relationships with the Bolsheviks before her break with them.

Interestingly he complains that unlike Serge or Shatoff, *"Goldman and Berkman were unwilling to compromise their autonomy by identifying too closely with the government."* Presumably as an example, he indicates that when the Comintern asked Berkman to translate Lenin's **Left Wing Communism**, he *"agreed until he read its contents, which was an attack on the ultraleft, antiparliamentary politics of people like him. He said he would continue if he could write a rebuttal. The Comintern thought better of that."* From this it appears that meekly doing what your leaders ask is the task of a revolutionary. Needless to say, Selfa does not explain why Berkman's request was so outrageous. In the interests of debate it would have been sensible for radicals to hear the opposing viewpoint. But, then again, the opposing viewpoint is something most Leninists are at pains to exclude (as Selfa proves). Given this, it seems strange that he mentions this incident as it puts the Bolshevik leadership in an exceedingly bad light.

Then there is Emma's proposal that she and Berkman head up a group called ***"Russian Friends of American Liberty"*** for political prisoners in the United States. Selfa recounts how

italism as its economic expression"[45] within which the working class had no freedom of speech, association, or to strike or protest, what exactly was there left to *"roll back"*?

Let us move on from such trivial matters as working class freedom and ask whether, in fact, the Kronstadt rebellion would ensured the victory of the Whites. Sadly for Selfa, the whites were **not** a threat.[46] As Lenin himself acknowledged during the revolt on March 16th *"the enemies"* around the Bolshevik state were *"no longer able to wage their war of intervention"*[47]

Little wonder Kronstadt was so important to Emma. Occurring as it did after the end of the civil war, Kronstadt played a key role in opening her eyes to the real role of Bolshevism in the revolution. Until then, she (like many others) had supported the Bolsheviks, rationalising their dictatorship as a temporary measure necessitated by the civil war. Kronstadt smashed that illusion, *"broke the last thread that held me to the Bolsheviki. The wanton slaughter they had instigated spoke more eloquently against than aught else. Whatever the pretences of the past, the Bolsheviki now proved themselves the most pernicious enemies of the Revolution. I would have nothing further to do with them."*[48]

Kronstadt is important as it provides a deep insight into the political thinking of contemporary revolutionaries. Its exposes their basic attitude to what socialism is about. So when Leninists like Selfa justify the suppression of Kronstadt, we can only draw the conclusion that faced with a similar revolt against party power in a future revolution then those in power will not hesitate to do the same again, repressing the actual working class in the name of "workers' power." For it must always

[45] **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 247

[46] For details see , "Section 11: Were the Whites a threat during the Kronstadt revolt?" of **An Anarchist FAQ**

[47] *"The Campaign of Lies"*, **Kronstadt**, p. 52

[48] **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 200

As Lenin put it:

*"Bureaucracy **versus** democracy is in fact centralism **versus** autonomism; it is the organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy as opposed to the organisational principle of opportunist Social-Democracy. The latter strives to proceed from the bottom upward, and, therefore, wherever possible ... upholds autonomism and 'democracy,' carried (by the overzealous) to the point of anarchism. The former strives to proceed from the top downward..."*[25]

Given that Selfa places himself in the tradition of ***"socialism from below,"*** it seems strange that he recommends an organisational method rooted in *"the top downward."* Any such "coherence" so created would be by means of ***"socialism from above"*** and doomed to failure. All it would create would be, as in Russia, a new boss class.

As such, while there is a distinct need for anarchist groups to federate together to be effective and co-ordinate their activities, Selfa's proposed cure of a vanguard party is worse than the disease.[26]

Red Emma in Russia

Which brings us to a key rationale of his article, to attack Emma's analysis of the Russian Revolution and the role and ideology of the Bolsheviks. As Selfa notes, how Emma *"responded to the Russian Revolution and the Spanish Revolution defines not only her politics, but also places in sharp relief the differences between socialism and anarchism. In fact, the divide between socialism and anarchism that opened up because of these two events largely shape the differences that still exist*

[25] **Collected Works**, vol. 7, pp. 396–7

[26] For more on the limitations and failures of vanguardism, see *"Section H.5: What is vanguardism and why do anarchists reject it?"* of **An Anarchist FAQ"**.

between the two forces." Ironically, how Selfa does this is far more illuminating on the differences than he would like. Simply put, his defence of Bolshevism rests on inaccuracies, illogical arguments and hypocrisy. However much he may seek to deny it, Emma's account of why, when and how the revolution degenerated is much more accurate than his and, furthermore, been confirmed by recent research.

Even Selfa has to admit that Emma was *"willing to accept"* that the problems and evils of the Bolshevik regime were *"small matters compared to defending the revolution against counter-revolution, and working with the revolution."* However, events made *"her unable to defend the Bolsheviks anymore,"* namely the *"1921 suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion."* Then *"she adopted the essential anarchist view of the Russian Revolution – with the Russian people in the revolution, against the Bolsheviks."* Given that the Bolsheviks had created a party dictatorship ***over*** the masses, repressed their strikes and protests, destroyed their basic rights and freedoms Emma's perspective seems justified.

Given this, Selfa seeks to distort Emma's analysis and conclusions from the Revolution. He argues that to Emma, *"the civil war to defend the revolution is merely the excuse the Bolsheviks use to unmask their real agenda – or as she put it in the preface to My Disillusionment, 'an insignificant minority bent on creating an absolute State is necessarily driven to oppression and terrorism.'"* Selfa forgets two things.

Firstly, when Emma wrote this (in 1922) she had just returned from a country where all the Bolsheviks she meet had talked about the need for party dictatorship. Thus mainstream Bolshevik was based on the party leaders exercising power in a highly centralised state system and, moreover, happy to use any and all means to protect it. In **Living My Life** she records that Zinoviev considered the main political policy as the *"[c]oncentration of all power in the hands of the proletarian **avant-garde**, which is the Communist Party."* He was convinced that the *"dictatorship of the proletariat is the*

know that neither of these two claims are true.[41] But, then again, truth is usually absent when Leninists argue that *"the government suppression of the rebellion of sailors at the Kronstadt garrison in 1921 ... can be defended."*[42]

The gist of his argument is that if the *"sailors had succeeded in their uprising against the government, the counterrevolutionary Whites would have had a breach that they would have exploited to roll back the revolution."* This would mean that the rebels would *"get the elimination of the soviets, the return of pogroms, and a right-wing dictatorship."* It would be churlish to note that the Bolsheviks had eliminated the soviets in all but name back in 1918[43] or that they had been proclaiming the necessity of the "dictatorship of the party" for quite a few years by this time.[44] And given that the Bolshevik regime was a party dictatorship with an *"all-powerful, centralised Government with State Cap-*

[41] Avrich notes that *"'Soviets without Communists' was not, as is often maintained by both Soviet and non-Soviet writers, a Kronstadt slogan."* As far as being anarchists, he points out that while the *"influence of the anarchists ... had always been strong within the fleet"* and *"had by no means dissipated"* in 1921, in fact the "Political group clostest to the rebels" were the SR Maximalists who occupied *"a place in the revolutionary spectrum between the Left SR's and the anarchists while sharing elements of both."* (**Kronstadt 1921**, W.W. Norton and Company Inc., New York, 1970, p. 181, p. 168, p. 169 and p. 171)

[42] For more on Kronstadt and Leninist lies against it, see the *"Appendix: What was the Kronstadt Rebellion?"* of **An Anarchist FAQ**

[43] See *"Section H.6.1: Can objective factors explain the failure of the Russian Revolution?"* and *"Section 6: What happened to the soviets after October?"* of **An Anarchist FAQ**

[44] At the 1920 Comintern congress, Zinoviev announced to the world that *"the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party."* This was applicable everywhere: *"Today, people like Kautsky come along and say that in Russia you do not have the dictatorship of the working class but the dictatorship of the party. They think this is a reproach against us. Not in the least! We have a dictatorship of the working class and that is precisely why we also have a dictatorship of the Communist Party."* (**Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920**, vol. 1, Pathfinder, New York, 1991, pp. 151–2)

anarchists when it broke its agreement with the Makhnovists when the last White General had been defeated with their help. Thus civil war cannot explain the Bolshevik repression against the anarchists.

But put such minor concerns to one side. The important thing is that *"Anarchist bookstores remained open throughout the 1920s."* Who cares about party dictatorship, repression of strikes, arrests by the secret police and freedom of association and speech when you can go to an anarchist bookshop? Then, of course, there is Selfa's claims that *"in 1921 the state organised a funeral for the death of anarchist leader Peter Kropotkin at which Goldman spoke."* Except that is not how Emma remembered it. While the state allowed the funeral (subject to its approval and censorship), it was organised by anarchists. The state refused to release anarchist prisoners to attend it.[39] Victor Serge recounted how the *"shadow of the Cheka fell everywhere."*[40] This was the last officially allowed anarchist protest until the end of the USSR, so it seems strange that Selfa should even mention it. It hardly amounts to much evidence for his case.

The same can be said of his account of the Kronstadt revolt.

Kronstadt

Selfa leaves no Leninist invention unuttered. Talking of Kronstadt, he states that *"the Kronstadt anarchists"* demanded ***"Soviets without Bolsheviks"*** which is wrong on every count. The Kronstadt rebels were not anarchists nor did they raise that demand. Selfa quotes from Paul Avrich's book on Kronstadt in his essay yet he obviously has not read it. If he had, he would

[39] **My Disillusionment in Russia**, pp. 189–192

[40] **Memoirs of a Revolutionary**, **1901–41**, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1963. p. 124

only workable program during a revolutionary period." Thus once in power *"[a]ll the succeeding acts of the Bolsheviki, all their following policies, changes of policies, their compromises and retreats, their methods of suppression and persecution, their terrorism and extermination of all other political views – all were but* ***the means to an end*** *the retaining of the State power in the hands of the Communist Party. Indeed, the Bolsheviki themselves (in Russia) made no secret of it."*[27]

Secondly, this dogma of party dictatorship had been enshrined in Bolshevik ideology for four years and was considered a fundamental lesson of the revolution. Before that, in 1917, they had advocated party power. In October 1917 they created the kind of "revolutionary government" Selfa supports and the fate of the Russian masses now rested with the handful of members of Lenin's government and the Bolshevik central committee. Thus an *"insignificant minority"* had ruled the Russian masses from the start. Initially, the masses supported the Bolsheviks but soon this changed. Faced with rejection in soviet elections across Russia, the Bolsheviks disbanded them. They gerrymandered others to ensure their majority. They even gerrymandered the Fifth All-Russian Congress of Soviets to maintain in power (which provoked the revolt of the Left-SRs). This process started before the start of the civil war Selfa seeks to used to justify and excuse Bolshevik authoritarianism. The shift from party government to party dictatorship was relatively quick, under six months in fact.[28]

Emma, regardless of Selfa's claims, did not blame Bolshevism as such. Rather she argued that the ideology of the Bolsheviks played a key role in this process but that it *"would be*

[27] **Living My Life**, vol. 2, pp. 738–9; **My Disillusionment in Russia**, Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York, 1970, p. 245

[28] For more on Bolshevik onslaught against the soviets in 1918, see *""Section H.6: Why did the Russian Revolution fail?"* and *"Section 6: What happened to the soviets after October?"* of **An Anarchist FAQ"**.

an error to assume that the failure of the Revolution was due entirely to the character of the Bolsheviki. Fundamentally, it was the result of the principles and methods of Bolshevism. It was the authoritarian spirit and principles of the State ... Were any other political party in control of the government in Russia the result would have been essentially the same. It is not so much the Bolsheviki who killed the Russian Revolution as the Bolshevik idea. It was Marxism, however modified; in short, fanatical governmentalism. Only this understanding of the underlying forces that crushed the Revolution can- present the true lesson of that world-stirring event... The Russian Revolution was a libertarian step defeated by the Bolshevik State, by the temporary victory of the reactionary, the governmental idea."[29]

Selfa repeats the usual Leninist apologetics for Bolshevik tyranny, asserting that Emma's account *"may sound credible to someone picking up her books for the first time"* but *"it ignores the most important point,"* namely *"that it takes place two years into a civil war that has devastated industrial production, and in which the workers' government is fighting for its survival."* However, he is simply taking the piss here. No one reading her book could fail to notice that Emma indicates and discusses the civil war and the collapse of industry. As even he had to note, Emma's break with the Bolsheviks took time as she struggled with the reality of the regime and the excuses used to justify it.

Significantly, these excuses came not from the leading Bolsheviks but from libertarians who sought to justify their cooperation with politicians who did not consider their authoritarian policies and actions as anything other than necessary and of no real concern. The Bolsheviks, in other words, considered their actions and policies as socialist and in no way detrimental to the fate and nature of the revolution. As socialist Samuel Farber notes, *"there is no evidence indicating that Lenin or any of the mainstream Bolshevik leaders lamented the loss of*

[29] **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 250

activity. Its capricious nature would not make it any less horrific.

Selfa does not discuss what this *"inconsistent"* repression was like. He does not discuss what it would be like to live under a regime which could arrest you at the drop of a hat, what it would be like to be incarcerated without knowing if you would be dead or free the following week, to see your papers banned and your attempts at organisation forced underground. To live, in other words, at the mercy of the secret police and their whims. This, for Selfa, is of little concern. What matters is that the repression was *"inconsistent"* not the terror of living under a regime whose repression was arbitrary and could strike at any moment.

Not only was it *"inconsistent,"* *"most [anarchists] who promised not to take up arms against the government were released,"* Selfa claims. Which, of course, explains why Emma had to go to Red Trade Union Congress in 1921 to raise the issue of anarchists on hunger-strike in Soviet prisons. After all, the head of the All-Russian Cheka had announced, like Selfa, that there were no anarchists in soviet prisons, just bandits and Makhnovists.[38] That Selfa repeats this state propaganda is deeply worrying, but unexpected. Clearly injustice and repression is acceptable when they are Red rather than White. So Emma's experiences in Lenin's Russia utterly disprove Selfa's assertion that *"the government repressed the anarchists who destabilised the regime during the civil war."* For the Bolsheviks, holding alternative opinions and daring to criticise them destabilised their regime. This is to be expected, as it had no popular base at all in the Russian masses.

And what of the government taking up arms against the anarchists? Or the Russian masses? Apparently, state violence against radicals is acceptable, radical violence in self-defence is not. And, of course, the Bolsheviks had arrested numerous

[38] **Living My Life**, vol. 2, pp. 910–2

anarchists opposed this rather than organise it.[36] To state otherwise is simply a lie.

As for the bombing of the Moscow Communist Party in September 1919 by anarchists and Left SRs, it should be remembered that it was in response to a regime practising "Red terror" against the left as well as right. Anarchists and Left SRs, along with ordinary workers and peasants, had been imprisoned and shot by the Bolshevik secret police. As Emma records in relation to this bombing, the Bolsheviks had *"maligned, persecuted and hounded the Anarchist movement as such"* and it was *"this Communist treachery and despotism"* which caused the attack. *"It was an act of protest"* which resulted in *"reprisals against all Anarchists,"* including those who *"publicly expressed their condemnation of such methods."*[37] Such state repression had been going on for some time. About 40 anarchists had been killed when the Cheka attacked the Anarchists in April 1918, for example. Selfa fails to mention that the Bolsheviks had been practising repression for some time, dating from before start of civil war. Clearly, for Selfa, state terrorism is acceptable, not the violence of its victims.

But rest assured, for *"even with these outrages, the repression meted out against the anarchists was far more inconsistent than Goldman made it out to be. Anarchists arrested one week were released the next."* Yet Goldman's account is from first hand interviews with anarchists in Lenin's Russia. You would think that they would know how *"inconsistent"* their repression was rather better than Selfa, but obviously not. I'm also sure that if Selfa was continually arrested one week by the Bush administration and released the next he would consider this as unacceptable state repression. He would not consider it *"inconsistent"* but rather a clear impediment to his liberty and political

[36] Paul Avrich, **The Russian Anarchists**, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1978, pp. 183–4

[37] **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 206

workers' control or of democracy in the soviets, or at least referred to these losses as a retreat, as Lenin declared with the replacement of War Communism by NEP in 1921."[30]

So when Selfa argues that *"there is no doubt that these conditions led to a degeneration of the revolution, committed communists felt the only possibility of reinvigorating the revolution lay in its defence against the counterrevolution"* he is simply not accurately reporting the opinions of the Bolshevik leadership. Rather the Bolshevik leadership saw nothing wrong with their authoritarian policies. Quite the reverse. Not only did they generalise their experiences and policies as lessons for revolutionaries in the west, they refused to change them once the civil war was finished. As we will see, Trotsky was defending party dictatorship into the 1930s.

For the Bolshevik leaders, their policies were not the product of holding *"out against the indigenous counterrevolutionaries and fourteen foreign armies, hoping that a revolution in Europe would come to its aid"* as Selfa claims. Rather they considered these "communist" policies and generalised them into lessons for all revolutions. Now, even assuming that Selfa's claims were true, that Bolshevik policies were the result the pressures of civil war (and I must stress, they were not as they started before the civil war started and the Bolshevik leaders did not justify them in those terms) a greater indictment of Bolshevism could not be found. After all, Leninism is meant to recognise that civil war is inevitable during a revolution. Is Selfa really claiming that Leninism failed because the inevitable happened? That is hardly convincing.[31]

Moreover, Selfa should know that when Emma arrived in Bolshevik Russia in January 1920 the civil war *"appeared to be over."* The Whites had either been totally defeated or were in

[30] **Before Stalinism : The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy,** Polity Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 44

[31] For further discussion of this see the *"Appendix: What caused the degeneration of the Russian Revolution?"* of **An Anarchist FAQ**.

retreat. Yet Bolshevik policies were not changing. In fact, *"the Communist Party decreed that economic reconstruction should be brought about by an intensification of War Communism policies."* Emma was there when the *"mood of euphoria which gripped the Communist party after the defeat of the main leaders of the White movement ... put it on a course leading to conflict with its chosen political constituency — industrial workers."* The return of conflict with the Polish war and Wrangel's attack did not determine Bolshevik policy, which continued as it was after the end of the civil war in November, 1920. The *"mood of optimism which prevailed in Soviet Russia in the autumn of 1920 was even more intense than in the spring."* The government, again, intensified its authoritarian its policies and soon brought it into conflict with the working class. The *"industrial unrest which erupted in Soviet Russia in early 1921 ... encompassed most of the country's industrial regions,"* which the Bolsheviks overcame *"by changing the direction of its economic policy and applying firm repressive measures."*[32] The political policy of party dictatorship remained sacrosanct. Indeed, it was only after the end of the civil war that the Bolsheviks, under Lenin and Trotsky, finally crushed the other left-wing parties.

Emma heard the Bolshevik's defend of their dictatorship over the proletariat and its central position in their ideology. She saw firsthand how they used repression to crush the strikes in Petrograd and the Kronstadt revolt in broke out in solidarity with the strikers. It is to her credit she sided with the workers and not their political masters. As she put it:

"the truth of the matter is that the Russian people have been ***locked out*** *and that the Bolshevik State — even as the bourgeois industrial master — uses the sword and the gun to keep the people out. In the case of the Bolsheviki this tyranny is masked by a world-stirring slogan ... Just because I am a revolutionist I refuse to side with the master class, which in Russia is called the Communist Party."*[33]

"The thought oppressed me," she wrote, *"that what [the Bolsheviks] called 'defence of the Revolution' was really only the defence of [their] party in power."*[34] And she was right.

Repression against the Anarchists

As a Leninist, Selfa must defend their state repression against the anarchists. After all, if he gets into power he will do the same so best get the rationales practised now. He states that *"Goldman wrote that the government imprisoned anarchists for their ideas. But most of the anarchists who fell victim to the Cheka police were those who took action against the revolutionary state."* Selfa is just repeating Bolshevik claims which Goldman herself heard and dismissed as the self-serving nonsense it is.[35]

Of course, like most justifiers of state tyranny, he portrays the most violent institution on earth, the state, as the victim. Anarchists, he states, *"didn't confine their criticism of the government to words. In fact, they engaged in terrorism against the regime and bank robberies to finance their movement. Moscow anarchists organised Black Guards, which criminal elements infiltrated, to carry out these actions."* However, in 1918 there are **no** accounts of terrorism against the regime. Yes, in Moscow some criminal elements did infiltrate the Black Guards but the

[32] Jonathan Aves, **Workers against Lenin: Labour protest and the Bolshevik dictatorship**, Tauris Academic Studies, London, 1996, p. 5, p. 93, p. 111 and pp. 155–6. Aves book is essential reading to get a feel of the dynamics of the class war against the Bolshevik dictatorship. See also *"Section H.6.3: Were the Russian workers "declassed" and "atomised"?"*

[33] **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. xlix

[34] **My Disillusionment in Russia**, p. 57

[35] **My Disillusionment in Russia**, pp. 33–4; **Living My Life**, vol. 2, 765–6