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The "Queen of the Anarchists" Returns

Emma Goldman's 1934 American Lecture Tour

Tom Goyens

17 March 2023

Niagara Falls, NY, February 1, 1934.

American reporters await the arrival by train of sixty-four-year-old Emma Goldman, the famous anarchist who had been deported from the United States more than fourteen years ago. She was staying in Toronto and had for years expressed a desire to return to her old "stomping ground," as she put it. President Franklin Roosevelt's 1933 Christmas amnesty for persons who had opposed the draft and espionage laws opened the door for a ticket to America. Finally, on January 9, 1934, Emma Goldman was granted a ninety-day visa for a lecture tour in the United States on the condition that she refrained from speaking about anarchism. She resolved to speak about literature, the rise of fascism, and her autobiography *Living My Life*, of which the second volume had just appeared with some critical acclaim. Goldman had been an activist, orator, and editor in the American anarchist movement for thirty-four years until she and many others were deported in December 1919 after serving a sentence for conspiracy to "induce persons not to

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register” for the draft. After two years in Soviet Russia, where she witnessed the repression inflicted by the Bolsheviks, Goldman made her way to Britain and eventually to Canada. She courageously denounced the Soviet regime in her 1923 book, *My Disillusionment in Russia*.

When Emma Goldman crossed the international bridge at Niagara Falls, she entered a country amid a devastating economic depression. Unemployment stood at 21%, and workers nationwide were becoming more militant. She was no stranger to hard times. As a young activist, she once urged those in need to take bread during the depression of the 1890s, an action that earned her one year in prison. A week before arriving in the United States, a journalist got her on the phone and asked her what “American comforts of food” she anticipated. “What?” she retorted, “you ask Emma Goldman that? That I should care for comfort, that it should make any difference to me...”¹ A better topic would have been the situation in Europe where Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin enjoyed dictatorial power and were able to project some of it through Nazi, fascist, and Communist groups abroad, including in the United States. Goldman took the opportunity to speak candidly not about anarchism but about the real threat of war and the erosion of human freedom and dignity.

After a brief stop in Rochester, New York, where she visited her sister and other relatives, Goldman made her way to New York City, the place of a thousand memories, where she stayed with her niece Stella Ballantine until February 16. There was a dinner in her honor at the Town Hall Club on 43rd Street, a popular venue where Theodore Roosevelt and Booker T. Washington once spoke, and she gave a radio interview where she first spoke her mind about world affairs. A few days later, she delivered her first public lecture in America since her depor-

¹ Margaret Frawley, “Emma Goldman Still Fiery, Telephone Interview Shows,” *Ogdensburg Journal*, Jan 24, 1934, p.10

in it, there is the spirit of adventure, there is something refreshing and stimulating in the air.”¹³

¹³ Quoted in Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma: The Anarchist Odyssey of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman* (Belknap, 2012), 371

tation in 1919. Two thousand people came to hear Goldman deliver a eulogy to her great mentor, the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who had died exactly thirteen years ago. Only when denouncing Hitler did her voice, according to one reporter, “ring with the indignation that formerly provoked her sympathizers and opponents to stormy demonstration.”²

Planning for Goldman’s subsequent lectures in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, DC, ran into some headwinds. The Daughters of the American Revolution denied permission to speak at Constitution Hall in Washington DC, although the venue’s management disputed this. Her agent Ann Lord booked the National Theater instead, where Goldman implored her audience to do more for Europe’s political exiles.³ A Philadelphia hotel declined to book a room for her, at least according to the arrangement committee for that city.⁴ Her lecture at the Lyric Theatre in Baltimore went as planned but was poorly attended; only two hundred people sat silently in an auditorium of nearly three thousand seats. She spoke about the collapse of culture in Germany and the imminence of war. Fascism can’t live in peace, she warned; it will end in war. Her audience, however, remained entirely unanimated. “I did not know that audiences in Baltimore were so lacking in the awareness of life,” she told them suddenly, “Yes, Europe is an armed camp with war imminent.”⁵ Later in March, a veteran’s organization pressured the Mayor of Cleveland to disallow a scheduled lecture by Goldman, but nothing came of it.⁶

² “Emma Goldman Extols Anarchist,” *New York Times*, Feb 12, 1934, p.17

³ “Miss Goldman Hires Hall,” *Washington Times*, Feb 17, 1934, p.1

⁴ “Hotel Won’t Provide Emma Goldman Room,” *Washington Times*, Feb 16, 1934, p.1

⁵ “Few Hear Lecture of Emma Goldman,” *Baltimore Sun*, Mar 5, 1934, p.5

⁶ “Czy Emma Goldman Ma Przemawiać Publicznie,” *Dziennik Dla Wszystkich* (Buffalo, NY), Mar 17, 1934, p.1

Emma Goldman's general message to America, at least to anyone who listened, was that fascism was killing the human spirit and craving war to stay alive. In her private moments, she almost certainly expressed frustration, even anger, at the apathy of regular people, something she once called "the incurable naivety of the American makeup."⁷ Her knowledge of conditions in Germany and Russia confirmed that all dictatorships—left or right—must be opposed. This may seem obvious, but during the 1930s, the Communists and many other leftists went to defend Stalin's Soviet Union. The only personal attacks during her ninety days in America came from the Communist journalist Sender Garlin who called Goldman an "arch-defamer of the Soviet Union" and a "retired prima donna." He also attacked her for staying at a hotel when its workers were on strike, which she was unaware of.⁸ She did walk through snow and ice from the train station to the hotel out of solidarity with the taxi drivers' strike. The Socialist journalist Heywood Broun described her as "a very gallant figure but also a futile one" and confidently explained that "anarchists have gone the way of antediluvian mammals. They lacked mobility and have become extinct."⁹

Anarchism did not go extinct, and Goldman was on the right side of history about Hitler and Stalin, a significant tribute still rarely given to the anarchist movement. "Russian sovietism is only 'left wing' fascism," was her pithy answer to a reporter asking her assessment of her country of birth.¹⁰ In hindsight, it is remarkable that a visiting anarchist should not command more attention in the year 1934. For decades, Gold-

⁷ Emma Goldman to Rudolf Rocker, Jan 2, 1934, Emma Goldman Papers, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam.

⁸ Garlin, "Emma Goldman, Here to Make Some Cash, Sneers at U.S.S.R.," *Daily Worker*, Feb 3, 1934, p.2

⁹ Broun, "It Seems to Me," *Indianapolis Times*, Jan 20, 1934, p.7

¹⁰ "Emma Goldman Plans to Carry Red Gospel to U.S. For 90 Days," *Evening Star* (Washington DC), Jan 10, 1934, p.2

man and her fellow anarchists had denounced capitalism and the State and warned of their inherent dangers. Now, in 1934, those dangers had come to pass. Capitalism failed in 1929, and evil men captured the State and turned it into an instrument of terror. Only two years before, a reporter asked her who could have foreseen the calamity of the depression, to which she replied, "Only an anti-capitalist."¹¹

The United States and Franklin Roosevelt seemed the exception to the global descent into authoritarianism, and Goldman acknowledged this fact when questioned by journalists. Referring to the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act, Goldman believed that Roosevelt had done more for workers than any other president by recognizing the right to organize, bargain collectively and strike. This was as far as she was prepared to go. When a reporter asked if she wanted to thank the president for the amnesty, she bluntly retorted, "Why should I thank him? He ought to have made this gesture of undoing a wrong."¹²

Goldman returned to Canada on April 30 after a visa extension request was denied. Financially, the lecture tour failed partly because of the lower-than-expected attendance and some management issues. Undoubtedly, she thoroughly enjoyed being back in the American atmosphere. It was not the politicians or the bureaucracy that mattered, but this amorphous energy of America that, despite the depression, could still warm the heart and stir the spirits. "True, America remains naïve, childish in many respects in comparison to the sophistication of Europe," she wrote to her companion Alexander Berkman, "but I prefer its naivety, there is youth

¹¹ Neil Hanson, "A 'Red' Sees America Out of the Red," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, Feb 14, 1932, p.3

¹² "Emma Goldman Here, Still Holds Revolution Only Hope," *Evening Star* (Washington DC), Feb 24, 1934, p.6