

Emma Goldman Biography

Born in Kovno, Russian Empire (now Lithuania) to a Jewish family, Goldman emigrated to the United States in 1885.

Attracted to anarchism after the 1886 Haymarket riots, Goldman became a writer and a renowned lecturer on anarchist philosophy, women's rights, and social issues, attracting crowds of thousands.

She and anarchist writer Alexander Berkman, her lover and lifelong friend, planned to assassinate industrialist and financier Henry Clay Frick as an act of propaganda of the deed. Goldman was imprisoned several times in the years that followed, for “inciting to riot” and illegally distributing information about birth control (circa 1892).

In 1917, Goldman and Berkman were sentenced to two years in jail for conspiring to “induce persons not to register” for the newly-instated draft. She was deported back to Russia. Initially supportive of that country’s October Revolution which brought the Bolsheviks to power, Goldman reversed her opinion in the wake of the Kronstadt rebellion and denounced the Soviet Union for its violent repression of independent voices. After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, she traveled to Spain to support the anarchist revolution there.

She died in Toronto on May 14, 1940, aged 70. During her life, Goldman was lionized as a freethinking “rebel woman” by admirers, and denounced by detractors as an advocate of

politically motivated murder and violent revolution. Her writing and lectures spanned a wide variety of issues, including prisons, atheism, freedom of speech, militarism, capitalism, marriage, free love, and homosexuality.

Today Goldman is heralded as a founder of anarcha-feminism and queer-anarchism, because she was also an outspoken critic of prejudice against homosexuals. Her belief that social liberation should extend to gay men and lesbians was virtually unheard of at the time, even among anarchists. As German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld wrote, “she was the first and only woman, indeed the first and only American, to take up the defense of homosexual love before the general public. She also was a trans activist, in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, like hundreds of years before that was even close to being socially acceptable, basically she was a badass woman who distributed info about birth control, abortion, was a trans and gay rights activist, feminist, and revolutionary.