

Sasha and Emma: The Anarchist Odyssey of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman

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Sasha and Emma is the story of one life-long relationship and the product of another. When the historian of Russian and American anarchism Paul Avrich died in 2006, he left behind a rich body of scholarly work (1) and an unfinished manuscript exploring ‘the passionate half-century friendship between legendary activist Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman’ (p. ix). In the days before his death, his daughter Karen Avrich agreed to complete his project, revising the early manuscript and conducting additional archival research to augment the rich material gathered by her father. The product of this collaboration is a lengthy biography of Berkman and Goldman: passionate advocates of anarchism, apostles of direct action, and a source of perpetual frustration for the authorities of every country they inhabited. As *Sasha and Emma* shows, Berkman and Goldman’s relationship was a great source of strength for both, as they endured bouts of imprisonment, official harassment, successive deportations, and constant financial uncertainty. Despite their differing temperaments, the ebullient Goldman and saturnine Berkman remained steadfast allies until the end. ‘It is not an exaggeration’, Goldman wrote to Berkman on his 65th birthday, ‘when I say that no one ever was so rooted in my being, so ingrained in every fiber as you have been and are to this day’ (p. 401).

While Berkman and Goldman’s lives and politicisation are intimately tied to the United States and its chequered history of labour relations, their story begins, like so many of anarchism’s pioneers, in the Russian Empire. Alexander, or Sasha for short, was born to a rich merchant in the Lithuanian capital Vilnius

in 1870, before moving to St. Petersburg to enjoy the fruits of a classical education. Material security gave way to uncertainty with the death of his parents, and his subsequent expulsion from school for attempting to bribe a caretaker for copies of a forthcoming exam. Berkman, from an early age then, acquired a reputation for possessing a 'distinctly antagonistic' character (p. 12). Goldman, a year older, was born in Kovno, and had a troubled childhood, in which her domineering father forced her to neglect her education in favour of seeking work to supplement the family income. They clashed frequently, and when he attempted to 'marry her off' at 15, she sought escape (p. 16). In 1885, Emma left for Rochester, New York, to join her sister who had started a new life in America shortly before. Three years later, Sasha, whose reputation as a troublemaker had complicated finding gainful employment, also left for New York. For both, emigration was a means of escaping the struggles of daily life and pressures of familial expectation, but the promise of the United States amounted to more than this. 'There beyond the ocean', Berkman wrote, 'was the land of noble achievements, a glorious free country ... the very realization of my youthful dreams' (p. 18).

As *Sasha and Emma* implies, both Berkman and Goldman shared an obstinate streak plainly evident in their early years. Although they were still yet to meet by the time they left for America, and while their political ideas remained instinctual, for both their early lives under the tumultuous rule of Alexander II and Alexander III left an indelible imprint. Throughout his life, Berkman would remain captivated by the revolutionary ideas that developed in Russia and the audacious acts of nihilist agitators, like those that assassinated Alexander II in 1881. In the crackdown that followed Berkman's favourite uncle, the nihilist-sympathising Maxim Natanson, who was also a member of the Chaikovsky Circle that featured the future anarchist theoretician Peter Kropotkin, was arrested and sentenced to death. Through literature too, an oblique home for political dissent in Russia given the readiness of the authorities to wield the red pen, Berkman was exposed to new ideas. Ivan Turgenev's exploration of nihilism in *Fathers and Sons* (1862) was a favourite, and Nikolai Chernyshevsky's novel *What Is to Be Done?* (1863), a question that would continue to resonate in Russian history, inspired Berkman with its model of revolutionary heroism. Rakhmetov, the book's central character, directed all his powers to the cause, shunning personal relationships that might 'soften or divert him', and adopting an ascetic lifestyle so as not to weaken his revolutionary virtue (p. 12). Rakhmetov's name, and example, is one that Berkman would resurrect later in life.

Berkman and Goldman may have been captivated by the prospect of a new life in America, but like so many immigrants, they quickly discovered that it was not the land of milk and honey they had hoped. Both struggled to find secure employment, something exacerbated by Berkman's habit of falling out with employers. After a brief stint shovelling snow off the New York sidewalks, he found temporary work packing boxes in a shirt factory, then as a cigar maker, and then as a machine operator in a cloak factory. Goldman similarly struggled in these early years, and primarily lived off her needlework, stitching corsets in a factory. An unhappy product of her factory work was a brief marriage to fellow Russian-Jew Jacob Kershner, a union that Goldman dissolved within a year, when Kershner struggled with impotence. Both Berkman and Goldman's experience as factotums amongst New York's lumpenproletariat revealed the reality of the 'dignity of labor' under capitalism, but their latent political radicalism was galvanised in the wake of a criminal trial that garnered international condemnation (p. 21).

On 4 May 1886, shortly after Goldman had landed at Castle Garden and two years before Berkman arrived, a labour demonstration held at Haymarket Square in Chicago went wrong. What started as a protest against violence meted out by the police in the suppression of a strike on the previous day, turned violent when the police ordered the crowd to disperse shortly after 10pm. At this point, a bomb was thrown into the police ranks, the explosion instantly killing one officer and injuring a number of others. Despite the darkness, the police opened fire on the protestors, killing a number of them and, in the process, shooting several of their own men in the melee. As one anonymous official confided to the *Chicago Tribune* shortly afterwards, 'a very large number of the police were wounded by each other's revolvers ... and while some got ... away, the rest emptied their revolvers, mainly into each other'.⁽²⁾ Although the identity of the bomb-thrower was never ascertained, in the climate of vengeance that followed the outrage eight prominent Chicago anarchists were promptly tried and convicted of murder. Following the rejection of their appeals, in November 1887, four of the charged, Albert Parsons, August Spies, George Engel, and Adolph Fischer, were hanged, all four

singing *La Marseillaise* as they went to the scaffold. The day before the executions, a fifth defendant, Louis Lingg, had defied the hangman's noose. After finishing a customary cigar, Lingg calmly placed a lit dynamite cartridge in his mouth, before laying back on his prison-bed.⁽³⁾

The Haymarket tragedy had a dual impact on anarchism in the United States. Vitriolic denunciations of morally bankrupt anarchists in the popular press fuelled panic, and there were significant desertions from the radical ranks as labour activists sought to escape the association with terrorism. But Haymarket also gave the anarchist movement martyrs. There was widespread condemnation of the authorities' cavalier approach to justice, and the dignified resilience of the accused stirred many young radicals. In Britain, William Morris deplored the 'spirit of cold cruelty, heartless and careless at once' that he thought characterised American society, and George Bernard Shaw saw Haymarket as a clear attack on freedom of speech.⁽⁴⁾ Berkman and Goldman were both inspired to immerse themselves in anarchist ideas, and in 1889, they met for the first time in Sach's café on the Lower East Side – a popular haunt for radicals. Through Berkman, Goldman met the fiery German anarchist Johann Most, editor of the newspaper *Freiheit*, and author of *The Science of Revolutionary Warfare*, a guide to bomb making. Soon both were self-identifying as anarchists, and Berkman quickly began building a reputation in anarchist circles as a gifted polemicist, and Goldman a powerful orator.

For Berkman, though, propaganda of the pen was no replacement for revolutionary activity, and when a strike in Homestead, Pennsylvania in 1892 culminated in an armed battle between strikers and Pinkertons, he saw an opportunity to act. Henry Clay Frick, the manager at the Homestead steel works, was intent on removing the union presence in his workplace, whatever the cost, and acquired a formidable reputation for intransigence. In an age of Ebenezer Scrooge he was, one anarchist commented, 'the meanest man the nineteenth century has produced' (p. 61). Appalled by events in Homestead, Berkman decided that it was time to follow in the footsteps of the Russian nihilists he admired, and revive the memory of the Haymarket anarchists. Checking into a hotel under the name Rakhmetov, Berkman set out for Frick's works, armed with a revolver and a dagger. Encountering Frick in his office, Berkman shot him twice, once in the shoulder and once in the neck, and, dropping his gun in the ensuing tussle, stabbed him three times. Frick, improbably, survived, and the next morning he was propped up in bed dealing with correspondence, and returned to work within ten days. Berkman was less fortunate. The police foiled his attempt to follow Lingg's example and explode a dynamite capsule in his mouth, and amidst objections that Berkman did not receive adequate legal advice, he was sentenced to 22 years in prison.

As *Sasha and Emma* shows, despite Berkman's faith that he had attempted to free the world of a tyrant, his actions were met with a hostility that confounded him. Frick's stoical recovery turned him, unexpectedly, into a figure of sympathy, and Homestead's workers quickly sought to disassociate themselves from Berkman's act. And while he tried to use his date in court as a means to promote the anarchist cause, the resulting press hostility did little to advance anarchism. The *New York Times* spoke for many when it depicted Berkman as a 'mere crank, a Nihilist' (p. 78). In contrast to prevailing opinion, Goldman remained resolutely supportive of Berkman's attentat, and a source of strength throughout his imprisonment. Later she would encourage him to distil his experiences into the book, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* (1912), an exposé of the penal system in the United States, and a work that explored with candour homosexuality in prison, informed by Berkman's own sexual experimentation. Beyond the prison walls, Goldman rose to prominence as a public figure in her own right, continuing to campaign for clemency, but also lecturing on a plethora of causes in nationwide lecture tours. While she pontificated on subjects as diverse as anarchism, patriotism, birth control, Nietzsche, and modern drama, it was with the cause of sexual freedom that she became most closely associated. 'I demand the independence of woman', she wrote in 1897, 'to live for herself; to love whomever she pleases or as many as she pleases ... freedom of action, freedom in love and freedom in motherhood'.⁽⁵⁾

The personal was certainly the political for Goldman, and *Sasha and Emma* is at its best when it explores the minutiae of her and Berkman's relationships. These were often intellectual, frequently sexual, and usually both. Berkman and Goldman were themselves briefly lovers, before they lived in an awkward love triangle with Berkman's cousin Modest 'Modska' Aronstam. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the book is

its rich vignettes on the characters that passed through both their lives. In exploring these individuals alongside Berkman and Goldman's formative relationship, the book is often poignant, occasionally has the pace of a thriller, and is frequently funny. The tale is skilfully told, and the Avriches were lucky to have such fascinating figures as subjects. Ben Reitman, a doctor turned social radical and one of Goldman's most passionate dalliances, is an especially noteworthy character. Possessor of the rather unsavoury moniker 'King of the Hobos', Reitman and Goldman's relationship was characteristically tempestuous, meeting when Reitman offered Goldman the use of his 'Hobo College' to deliver a lecture after her notoriety made securing a venue in Chicago impossible (p. 196). Goldman later reflected on her attraction to Reitman in her memoir, *Living My Life*, noting that he cut a dashing figure in his 'large black cowboy hat [and] flowing silk tie', but added that 'his fingernails, like his hair, seemed to be on strike against soap and brush' (p. 197).

If the authorities had hoped that Berkman's anarchist convictions would wane in prison, they were disappointed. Before his release in 1906, he told Goldman that his politics had been a source of strength during his incarceration, a 'sustaining elemental force of my every-day existence', and that his idealism had 'crystallized into the living truth of Anarchy' (p. 183). While his devotion may have been unaffected by his experiences, Berkman's health would never fully recover. And while both he and Goldman soon returned to their propagandist activities, the time was not propitious for anarchism. The assassination of President McKinley in 1901, by Leon Czolgosz, a Polish-American who said he was a 'disciple of Emma Goldman', heightened suspicion of America's anarchists. Delivering his first address to Congress the new President Theodore Roosevelt declared war on anarchism and the slack immigration laws he held responsible for its recent prominence in American politics. 'We should aim to exclude absolutely not only all persons who are known ... believers in anarchistic principles', he said, 'but all persons ... of a low moral tendency' (p. 167). While the stage was set for Berkman and Goldman's deportation, this would not ultimately come until the United States entered the First World War. Keen to remove anything that might hamper the war effort, Berkman and Goldman's ephemeral No-Conscription League led to their imprisonment in 1917, and their deportation, shortly before Christmas, in 1919.

Subsequent events tested Goldman's redoubtable enthusiasm, and exacerbated Berkman's endemic moroseness to the point of catastrophe. They returned to a Russia agitated by revolution, and were committed to playing their part in the birth of a new society. But like Kropotkin, who left Britain once reports from his homeland filtered through, their experience of Bolshevism left a bitter taste. This dissatisfaction had anarchist roots in that all three saw in Bolshevism an authoritarianism that would seek to harness the power of the revolution and ensure the political dominance of a particular cadre, but Goldman also faced an identity crisis, and deeply missed America. The suppression of the rebellion at the Kronstadt Naval base in 1921 killed any lingering faith Berkman and Goldman had in the brave new world being created in Russia. 'The Revolution is dead; its spirit cries in the wilderness', Berkman confided to his diary, 'the white sepulcher must be unmasked ... The Bolshevik myth must be destroyed' (p. 313). Their remaining years were itinerant: escaping Russia for Berlin, Goldman then embarked on lengthy lecture tours in the United Kingdom and Canada, and on returning to Europe settled in St. Tropez, to work on her memoir. Berkman lived quietly in Paris, writing for a number of radical journals and completing his primer on anarchist ideas *Now and After: The ABC of Communist Anarchism* (1929).

Given Berkman's sense for the dramatic, it is not surprising that his eventual separation from Goldman should take the form of a bold gesture. After undergoing a series of operations for a prostate complaint without resolution, Berkman found the pain too much, and anxious about being a burden, decided to take his own life. On 28 June 1936, the day after Goldman's 67th birthday, he attempted to shoot himself in the heart. In an echo of his previous excursion with a revolver, it was not a clean shot. An emergency operation attempted to extract the bullet, which missed his heart and pierced his lung, and became lodged in his stomach. Attempts to remove it were unsuccessful, and in excruciating pain, Berkman lapsed into unconsciousness dying that evening. Burying him in Nice, Goldman added an inscription to his simple memorial tablet: 'His dream was a new free and beautiful world. His whole life a ceaseless struggle. For the ultimate triumph of his ideal' (p. 388). Two weeks later, the anarchists' red and black standard was raised in Spain.

Sasha and Emma is an immensely readable contribution to the current revival of scholarly interest in anarchism that adds personal texture to the enduring picture of two of America's most prominent radicals. This is the book's great strength. A criticism that could be levelled is that the idiosyncrasy of Berkman and Goldman's intellectual contribution to the anarchist tradition is not made clear, and neither is their relation to some of the defining theoretical disputes in 19th-century anarchism. The Avrishes no doubt decided, perhaps wisely, that an excursus on the relative merits of communist and collectivist distribution in a post-capitalist society would hamper the book's impressive narrative flow. Nevertheless, issues like these were important points of contention in anarchist milieus, and were of especial significance given the presence of an indigenous strand of individualist-anarchism in the United States. Similarly, when it is stated that Berkman followed in Kropotkin's train when writing *Now and After*, 'illuminating the basic principles of anarchism' and introducing readers 'to the promise of cooperation, mutual aid, and peace', it is never entirely apparent how these ideas denote a self-consciously different political tradition (pp. 340–1). On Goldman's part, her enthusiasm for Nietzsche is mentioned on several occasions, but a commitment to Nietzschean elitism, which is certainly how she framed this intellectual debt, does not necessarily sit comfortably with anarchism's cooperative ethic. The image of both as knights-errant for the anarchist cause is pellucid, but what of their intellectual status?

It would be wrong to stress these quibbles. Built on extensive historical research, *Sasha and Emma* offers an engaging examination of two fascinating radicals, as they attempted to popularise their politics, and live by them. The exploration of press reactions to their actions and beliefs is a notable strongpoint of the research, but the book also builds on an impressive scholarly career. Indeed, Paul Avrich almost singlehandedly kept interest in anarchist history alive in academic circles in the 1970s and 1980s, and his work remains, despite the renewed attention, indispensable. With this in mind, being asked to complete his project must have seemed a daunting task. But in doing so, Karen Avrich has not only offered fresh insight, but left a fitting tribute to her father's work.

Notes

1. Paul Avrich's key works include: Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton, NJ, 1967); Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt, 1921* (Princeton, NJ, 1970); Paul Avrich, *Russian Rebels: 1600–1800* (New York, 1972); *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, ed. Paul Avrich (Ithaca, N.Y., 1973); Paul Avrich, *An American Anarchist: the Life of Voltairine de Cleyre* (Princeton, NJ, 1978); Paul Avrich, *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States* (Princeton, NJ, 1980); Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ, 1984); Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton, NJ, 1988); Paul Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti: the Anarchist Background* (Princeton, NJ, 1991); Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* (Princeton, NJ, 1996). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Quoted in Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, p. 209. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, p. 376. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, pp. 352–3. [Back to \(4\)](#)

5. Emma Goldman, 'Marriage', in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years: Volume One*, ed. Candace Falk et al (London, 2003), pp. 269–73. [Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/books/review/sasha-and-emma-by-paul-avrich-and-karen-avrich.html>
[2]

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/books/sasha-and-emma-the-anarchist-odyssey-of-alexander-berkman-and-emma-goldman/421725.article> [3]

Counterpunch

<http://www.counterpunch.org/2013/01/18/the-anarchist-odyssey-of-alexander-berkman-and-emma-goldman/>
[4]

Huffington Post

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/05/sasha-and-emma-the-anarch_n_2247620.html [5]

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[6] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMMbjI5IyZM>