

Intersections of Anarcho-Feminism: Emma Goldman, *Mujeres Libres*, and the Spanish Civil War

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“You have no idea how primitive everything in this direction is. Enlightenment among women is desperately needed. But our comrades are too engrossed in winning the anti-Fascist war to devote much time to this kind of necessary labor. A beginning has been made of course. But one cannot sweep away the ignorance, prejudice and superstition of a people in four months.”<sup>1</sup>

This sigh of dissatisfaction found in a letter from Emma Goldman to her niece Stella Ballantine highlights the root of Goldman’s frustration with the Spanish women’s emancipation movement in the context of the Spanish Civil War—it just was not moving fast enough. Goldman herself was an anomaly within the anarchist movement, but one of its strongest voices. Her involvement in the Spanish Civil War made her aware of the gaps between her vision of women’s emancipation, and the wider international—but specifically the Spanish—anarchist movement. The women’s anarchist group in Spain, *Mujeres Libres* (Free Women), founded in 1936, had much in common with Goldman. They shared a common goal, women’s emancipation, and took similar stances on most issues facing women, but because of the chaos of war from 1936 to 1939, *Mujeres Libres* put “the woman question” on the backburner. Both Emma Goldman and *Mujeres Libres* are considered part of the anarchist feminist canon; but, neither Goldman, nor *Mujeres Libres*, considered themselves feminists. This begs the question—what does being an anarchist feminist mean and is it an anachronistic label that our society has placed upon them?

The short answer to the latter question? Yes. But, the ideological tenets that place both groups under one ideological umbrella are similar if not universal. Margaret S. Marsh, in her article entitled, “The Anarchist-Feminist Response to the ‘Woman Question’ in Late-Nineteenth Century America,” argues that, “Anarchist-feminism...developed directly from the cornerstone of anarchist philosophy—the primacy of complete individual liberty...If women truly intended to achieve equality, the first step must be a declaration of independence from men and from

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<sup>1</sup> Emma Goldman, “Letter to Stella, November 18, 1936,” in *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*, ed. David Porter (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006), 256.

male-dominated institutions, beginning with marriage.”<sup>2</sup> Both subjects of this paper have these goals in common, but ultimately it is their method that is different. For Spanish anarchists, it is their roots in anarcho-syndicalism that guides their path, while Goldman approaches women’s emancipation from the anarchist communism perspective.

The groundbreaking analysis of *Mujeres Libres* in Martha Acklesberg’s *Free Women of Spain* centers on the ideology, organization, and experience of women in *Mujeres Libres*.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, it focuses on the ideology and its incompatibility with the reality of anarchism in the Spanish Civil War. While her first chapter discusses *Mujeres Libres*’s ideology and the proverbial “game plan” for women’s emancipation, the second chapter deals with real-life implementation—a far cry from the ideal. Similarly, Mary Nash analyzes women’s sociopolitical reality in *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*.<sup>4</sup> She looks specifically at women’s agency, and *Mujeres Libres*’s role in collectivizing smaller spontaneous women’s groups, creating a women’s anarchist force that reached over 20,000 members.<sup>5</sup>

*Mujeres Libres*’s intersection with Emma Goldman is mentioned in almost every chronicle about Goldman’s life, as well as works analyzing her ideology. Bonnie Haaland has based her work on the ideas of Emma Goldman as revealed by Goldman’s writings and speeches.<sup>6</sup> This persona that Emma Goldman consciously created of herself rarely intersected with her actual reality, as Alice Wexler argues in her landmark biographies, *Emma Goldman: An*

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<sup>2</sup> Margaret Marsh, “The Anarchist-Feminist Response to the ‘Woman Question’ in Late-Nineteenth Century America,” *American Quarterly* Vol. 30, No. 4 (1978): 536.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> Mary Nash, *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War* (Denver, CO: Arden Press, Inc., 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Bonnie Haaland, *Emma Goldman: Sexuality and the Impurity of the State* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1993).

*Intimate Life and Emma Goldman in Exile.*<sup>7</sup> Letters between Goldman and her close personal friends—the historical Emma Goldman—contrasted with her autobiography, *Living My Life*, which depicts the legendary Emma Goldman, forms the basis for Wexler’s work.

Historians agree that the Spanish Civil War is one of the most complicated events in history. Antony Beevor writes, “It is perhaps the best example of a subject which becomes more confusing when it is simplified.”<sup>8</sup> George Esenwein and Adrian Shubert argue that not only is the war complex, but it is obscured by controversy.<sup>9</sup> General histories of the event are rare because of the event’s complexity, but also because of its many protagonists. This paper will focus on the anarchist perspective of the war and its fundamental opposition to the Spanish Nationalists, and their role in the social revolution that transpired in liberated areas of the country. Robert Alexander in his comprehensive work on anarchists in the Spanish Civil War argues that few works focus on the social revolution, but almost all of the works I have consulted go on at some length about the social revolution in Spain, with particular emphasis on the anarchist collectives, the largest of which was in Barcelona, and their short-lived success, but ultimate tragic failure.<sup>10</sup>

In this paper, I will use these sources to construct an image of the intellectual tensions that plagued the relationship between Spanish anarchist women, especially those involved with *Mujeres Libres*, and Emma Goldman during the Spanish Civil War. To accomplish this, I must first attempt to give a brief background of anarchist involvement in the Spanish Civil War, preempting the creation of *Mujeres Libres*, including an introduction to the myriad splinter

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<sup>7</sup> Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman: An Intimate Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Antony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War* (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1982), 7.

<sup>9</sup> George Esenwein and Adrian Shubert, *Spain at War: The Spanish Civil War in Context, 1931-1939* (New York: Longman Group Limited, 1995), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Alexander, *The Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War* (London: Janus Publishing Co., 1998), xvii. There are chapters on the Social Revolution in Esenwein and Shubert, Chapters 5 and 7, and James M. Anderson, *The Spanish Civil War: A History and Reference Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), Chapter 4.

anarchist groups in Spain. I will then move onto the ideology behind *Mujeres Libres*, both how this ideology formed, and how successfully or unsuccessfully it was implemented in actuality. Because it is at the implementation stage that Emma Goldman found the most frustration with Spanish women's anarchist movement, it is there that I will introduce her and her ideology, focusing on her public persona. While using some excerpts from Goldman's historical life, I will focus mainly on her ideas, using her writings and Bonnie Haaland's analysis to construct an intellectual profile with which to compare *Mujeres Libres* and examine why Goldman's frustration with Spanish anarchist women was so apparent, despite their relative agreement on most women's issues in the context of the Spanish Civil War. Finally, I will argue that while there were tensions between Emma Goldman and *Mujeres Libres*, their feminist ideology was much the same. They differed in their respective anarchist ideologies, proving that it is not their feminism that is different, but their anarchism that founds the basis of the problem between them.

The root of the problem between Goldman and *Mujeres Libres* begins not with Spain, or with Spaniards, but between two Russians: Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. Bakunin, the foremost proponent of anarchist collectivism, through ties with the International Workers' Association, or the First International, aligned himself with the syndicalist movement, highlighting the importance of trade unions within the anarchist framework. Robert Alexander summarizes:

Bakunin pictured the progression of organization of the workers as moving from the establishment of a union of workers in a particular 'shop', followed by the joining together of all of the unions in a particular trade or industry in a single country, followed by an international organization of the unions in that particular branch of economic

activity, and ultimately all of those international organizations joining the International Workingmen's Association.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, Peter Kropotkin, the intellectual powerhouse behind anarchist communism, emphasized the importance of the community over worker's unions. He came to this conclusion by the Darwinian principle of mutual aid.<sup>12</sup> Kropotkin argued against the Social Darwinists, Spencer and Huxley specifically, the first of which coined the term "survival of the fittest."<sup>13</sup> Human competition, Spencer argues, is the root of social evolution; Kropotkin disagrees by arguing:

But it is not love and not even sympathy upon which Society is based in mankind. It is the conscience—be it only at the stage of an instinct—of human solidarity. It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependency of every one's happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own.<sup>14</sup>

This mutual aid focused on the community as a whole and not workers in specific trades or industries.

Both anarchist communists and anarchist collectivists saw their actions as a path toward the larger goal of social and political revolution. For Bakunin, this revolution began with 'propaganda by the deed,' the practice of using terrorist acts to spread the word and open discussion for and about the anarchist cause.<sup>15</sup> Small insurrections would eventually build into a mass rebellion. Both viewed the lack of social revolution in France as the reason for the failure of the French Revolution. By pursuing a political revolution without economic and social

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander, *Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War*, 20.

<sup>12</sup> George Crowder, *Classical Anarchism: The Political Thought of Godwin, Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 162.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Kropotkin, "Introduction" in "Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution, 1902" *Marxists Internet Archive*, accessed October 25, 2012, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/kropotkin-peter/1902/mutual-aid/introduction.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Crowder, *Classical Anarchism*, 149.

freedom as its central and essential goal, the great uprising “lost its way and became anti-democratic and bourgeois in character.”<sup>16</sup> This revolutionary movement required some violence. Bakunin and Kropotkin emphasized the destruction of property and institutions, but recognized some loss of life was inevitable, but necessary to realize an anarchist society.<sup>17</sup> In Spain, the Spanish Civil War would prove to be the perfect revolutionary atmosphere for anarchist development.

Though the dividing line between these two ideologies was thin, in Spain, it opened the doors for an ideological schism in the 1880s.<sup>18</sup> The immediate precursor to anarchist organizations during the later civil war was the *Federación de Trabajadores de la Región Española*, or FTRE.<sup>19</sup> Formed in 1881, the FTRE was the first exclusively anarchist organization with syndicalist leanings in Spain affiliated with the First International.<sup>20</sup> But, with the introduction of anarchist communist thought into Spain in the early 1880s, the support behind the FTRE and its syndicalism quickly splintered into three groups: “those who supported the FTRE, those who were willing to stay within the trade union movement but who did not support the ‘legalist’ orientation of the syndicalists, and those who were so violently opposed to the programs of the FTRE that they deserted it.”<sup>21</sup> In 1888, the FTRE was all but obsolete and dissolved, leaving only Valencia and Catalonia as strong syndicalist bastions until 1910.<sup>22</sup>

Arguably, the most important anarchist organization formed in Spain was the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*, or the CNT, in 1910. Delegates from most major urban

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<sup>16</sup> Crowder, *Classical Anarchism*, 150.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> George Esenwein, *Anarchist Ideology and the Working Class Movement in Spain, 1869-1898*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 113.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

areas came together to form this new national labor organization, including a strong representation from Catalonia.<sup>23</sup> As a syndicalist organization, there was much debate about the role of the strike during the founding congress. The strike was to be ‘essentially revolutionary’ and nationally based within the various craft unions.<sup>24</sup> There were also arguments on the role of women workers. Women were not required to do work ‘superior to their physical powers,’ but the CNT did want them to join the labor force and actively recruited them into the organization.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, the CNT had two basic functions: “the immediate improvement of the economic situation of its members...[and] the longer-term objective of ‘revolutionary expropriation of the bourgeoisie.’”<sup>26</sup> By the 1930s, the CNT had a firmly established hierarchal structure with local, regional, and national organization, but each organization operated according to its own rules to maintain an anarchist ideology.<sup>27</sup>

Two other anarchist groups were officially recognized during the Spanish Civil War, the *Federación Anarquista Iberica*, or FAI, and the *Federación Ibérica de Juventudes Libertarias*, or JJLL. Both organizations, made up of many *grupos de afinidad*, were originally organic, radical, small groups that were political in nature and not only sought the collectivization of private property, but also employed violence to achieve their goals.<sup>28</sup> The FAI, in 1927, unified most of the *grupos* together on both regional and national levels. By 1936, in the face of impending civil war, the CNT had essentially folded the FAI into its larger infrastructure, creating a united, anarcho-syndicalist front.<sup>29</sup> The JJLL, established in 1932, was the principle anarchist youth organization during the war. The Youth encountered much controversy when it

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<sup>23</sup> Alexander, *Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War*, 72.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 80.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 87.



voted to federalize from factions in Catalonia which opposed a national organization. The opposition viewed the local groups as affiliates of each regional syndicate instead of a stand-alone federation.<sup>30</sup> The concept of a youth organization also challenged the perceived unity of the Spanish syndicalist movement, creating divisions between the youth and the older generation.<sup>31</sup> These organizations remained relatively small compared to the CNT, most with membership less than 50,000, but these two groups ballooned to over 100,000 in membership after the start of the civil war.<sup>32</sup>

The Spanish Civil War is far too complex an event to briefly explain here. Instead, focusing on the collectives that sprung up in Republican areas during the military revolution is appropriate. To anarchists, any revolution had to be fought on two fronts—the obvious military/political revolution, but, even more importantly, the social revolution. In Republican areas, whichever trade union or political party was in the majority ruled.<sup>33</sup> Where anarchists were in power, a sweeping reorganization of the social system took place. Universal healthcare, the barter system, and new education programs were all facets of anarchist villages and towns, all led by principles of social equality and local economic control.<sup>34</sup> The JJLL, for example, “carried on an extensive program of propaganda and indoctrination, holding classes, meetings and conferences on a wide variety of subjects.”<sup>35</sup> Often anarchists found themselves caught between their platform of decentralized government and their need for outside help. In Catalonia, they

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<sup>30</sup> Alexander, *Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War*, 91.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>33</sup> James M. Anderson, *The Spanish Civil War: A History and Reference Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), 67.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander, *Anarchists in the Spanish Civil War*, 92.

cooperated with the Generalitat out of necessity, but the government in turn supported their social programs.<sup>36</sup> It is in this state of organized chaos that *Mujeres Libres* had its beginning.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the feminist movement consisted largely of different answers to problems concerning women collectively referred to as “The Woman Question.” These answers more often than not fell along political ideological lines, instead of a concrete feminist ideology. For anarchists, this question was answered by the acceptance of a shared humanity between men and women, rather than the mainstream “separate but equal” argument.<sup>37</sup> The anarchist feminist position stems directly from anarchist ideology itself, specifically “the primacy of complete individual liberty.”<sup>38</sup> The emphasis on individualism directly influenced the anarcho-feminist aversion to women’s dependence on men, particularly the institution of marriage. “Free love” was not isolated to the feminists within the anarchist movement, but the other anarchists did not see any reason to change the family or household structure.<sup>39</sup> Anarcho-feminists diverged mainly on the topic of children, which split into two groups. On one hand, there were those who believed childcare should be split between the two parents. On the other hand, there were those who believed that the mother should be the sole caretaker. Both groups agreed though, that eventually, in a fully anarchist society, children would be taken care of by people who chose childcare as their profession.<sup>40</sup> While household structure and childcare are inherently feminist issues, neither Emma Goldman, nor *Mujeres*

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<sup>36</sup> Anderson, *The Spanish Civil War*, 70.

<sup>37</sup> Marsh, “The Anarchist-Feminist Response,” 535.

The “separate but equal” argument is based on the idea that even though men and women are “naturally” made for different things and occupy different spheres, both sexes are equally important to the society as a whole. See Karen Offen, “Contextualizing the Theory and Practice of Feminism in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe (1789-1914),” in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, ed. Renate Bridenthal et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 536.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 537.

*Libres* would define themselves as feminists. Neither Emma Goldman, nor *Mujeres Libres* would define themselves as feminists. The latter, “associated feminism with bourgeois middle-class political feminism and thus rejected it for its social limitations.”<sup>41</sup> But, “the theory and practice of *Mujeres Libres* can undoubtedly be defined as anarcho-feminism, for the organization recognized the gender specificity of women’s oppression and the need for an autonomous female struggle to overcome it.”<sup>42</sup> These ideological tenets were near universal for all anarcho-feminists, but not all anarcho-feminists subscribed to one set of anarchist ideas.

In Spain, once the Spanish Civil War started in 1936, revolutionary anarchist thought took a backseat to revolutionary anarchist action. It was during this social tumult that *Mujeres Libres* was formed in 1936.<sup>43</sup> Although women were encouraged to participate in the unions and anarcho-syndicalist organizations, “they found the existing organizations of that movement inadequate to address the specific problems confronting them as women, whether in the movement itself or in the larger society.”<sup>44</sup> Women had been organizing for two years previous to the breakout of the war in Barcelona and Madrid, but the war and subsequent social revolution propelled that organizing force forward. They felt that anarchist men within the CNT, FAI, and JJLL did not treat them with the respect of an equal.<sup>45</sup> Many anarchists opposed the organization of a separate women’s group. They believed it would emphasize the difference between men and women, ultimately undermining the anarchist movement as a whole.<sup>46</sup> Suceso Portales—a central figure in the organization of *Mujeres Libres* in central Spain—referred to the subordination of women in Spain as a “double struggle,” meaning not only were anarchist

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<sup>41</sup> Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 84.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

<sup>43</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain*, 87.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 87.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

women fighting against the State and institutions that socially subjugated all people, but anarchist women also participated in a parallel struggle against male domination and the patriarchy.<sup>47</sup> Three educated women, Mercedes Comaposada, Lucía Sánchez Saornil, and Amparo Poch y Gascón, organized *Mujeres Libres* from the ground-up in Madrid. The three women were also the editors of the group's eponymous journal. Their initial efforts included reaching out to syndicalist-affiliated women's groups that had already been formed. In Barcelona the *Grupo Cultural Femenino* had been active since 1934.<sup>48</sup> Most of these smaller women's organizations were geared toward collectivizing women into their own unions, rather than specifically targeting the subjugation of women. When the war began, *Mujeres Libres* groups sprouted wherever the Republican Front moved. In spite of the widespread membership of *Mujeres Libres*, the group was never given official recognition by the libertarians, and was never seen as equal with the CNT, FAI, or Juventudes.<sup>49</sup> Saornil recognized early the diminutive status they might endure:

There are a lot of *compañeros* who sincerely desire women's collaboration in the struggle; but this desire does not spring from a modification in their concept of women; they want her collaboration as a constituent who can help achieve victory, as a strategic contribution we could say, but that does not imply for one minute that they think of female autonomy, or renounce considering themselves as the center of the earth.<sup>50</sup>

Women's groups formed previous to *Mujeres Libres* fulfilled this purpose; they acted as branch arms of other anarchist organizations, and not exclusively to elevate the position of women to one of equality.

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<sup>47</sup> Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 84.

<sup>48</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain*, 92.

<sup>49</sup> Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 87.

<sup>50</sup> Lucía Sánchez Saornil, "La cuestión femenina en nuestros medios," *Solidaridad Obrera*, 2 October 1935, in *Defying Male Civilization: Women in the Spanish Civil War*, Mary Nash, auth, (Denver, CO: Arden Press, Inc., 1995), 87.

With a war and a revolution happening simultaneously, *Mujeres Libres* developed a statement of purpose rather quickly. Toward the end of 1936, their manifesto proclaimed two goals:

(a) to create a conscientious and responsible female force that can act as a vanguard of progress; and (b) to this end, to establish schools, institutes, conferences, special courses, etc., designed to empower women and emancipate them from the triple enslavement to which they have been, and continue to be, subject, the enslavement of ignorance, enslavement as a woman, and enslavement as a worker.<sup>51</sup>

This “dual orientation” developed itself in two ways: *capacitación*, or empowerment, and *captación*, or incorporation.<sup>52</sup> Both of these goals required an education program. Most women in Spain, especially in the working class, were largely illiterate. The ultimate goal of this education program was creating activists—a goal that *Mujeres Libres* saw as only beneficial for the women’s movement as a whole and the best hope for change regarding women’s positions within the anarchist movement.<sup>53</sup> What began as a widespread literacy program, by the fall of 1936, became a revolutionary women’s education movement. In Barcelona, there were intensive courses in culture, social history, economics, and law.<sup>54</sup> Every course contained discussion on, “what it meant to be a woman,” stressing the importance of taking responsibility for their lives and not depending on a man to tell her what to do.<sup>55</sup> In July of 1937, *Mujeres Libres* had developed skills-based education for women to replace men in industry who had left to fight the war.<sup>56</sup> Their programs and messages were being spread via newspaper, journal, pamphlet, and books. In an interview with Martha Ackelsberg, Pepita Carpena explained, “We would call the women together and explain to them...that there is a clearly defined role for women, that women

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<sup>51</sup> *Mujeres Libres*, “Statement of Purpose,” in *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*, Martha Ackelsberg, auth. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 115.

<sup>52</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain*, 115.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 119.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 120.

should not lose their independence, but that a woman can be a mother and a *compañera* at the same time.”<sup>57</sup> But, as revolutionary as this education was for women in Spain, Mary Nash points out:

The anarchist women failed to consider such issues as the sexual division of labor and women bearing sole responsibility for child care...most members still tended to exalt motherhood as the primary task of women...*Mujeres Libres* never openly broached the subject of abortion or dealt with such issues as family planning and birth control. Its educational drives related to these subjects were limited to preparation for maternity, childcare, and some elementary knowledge of anatomy.<sup>58</sup>

These issues separate Spanish anarchist women from many European and American anarchist women, where the birth control movement was beginning and woman’s curse of the uterus had long been discussed.

*Mujeres Libres*’ shortcomings regarding the more pressing social issues of women and motherhood open the discussion to the introduction of Emma Goldman. Anarchist communists, especially Peter Kropotkin, greatly influenced the anarchist theory of Emma Goldman.<sup>59</sup> They had points of tension, specifically in regards to sexuality and the essential place of women in the anarchist movement, but she referred to him as her greatest teacher throughout her life. Kropotkin’s theories on mutual aid and the primacy of human instinct are some of Goldman’s greatest influences.<sup>60</sup> Her views about sex come largely from his work, an interesting truth, seeing as he continually harped on her for being too concerned with sex and for being loose.<sup>61</sup> Their collective focus on Darwinist theories of nature clouded their concept of society and its traditions. Bonnie Haaland adds, “Goldman, although greatly aware of the presence of women in

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<sup>57</sup> Pepita Carpena, interview, in *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women*, Martha Ackelsberg, auth. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 121.

<sup>58</sup> Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 91.

<sup>59</sup> Haaland, *Emma Goldman*, 8.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

‘anarchist society,’ fails, like Kropotkin, to recognize the ‘custom or habit’ of patriarchy as being a potential force limiting individual freedom.”<sup>62</sup> By ignoring a large part of the historical custom of subjugating women via the patriarchy, it makes sense that she denies the bifurcation of society into “public” and “private” spheres. Instead, she created an essentially new marriage of the two by pushing “private” matters such as sex and reproduction into the “public” theory of anarchism and inextricably linking women’s issues as essential to human economic freedom.

Goldman’s rejection of traditional gender roles, what some call the nature/culture dichotomy and what Simone de Beauvoir termed immanence and transcendence in *The Second Sex* nine years after Goldman’s death in 1940, was central to her anarchist theory.<sup>63</sup> Historically, desire was a feminine trait, but Emma Goldman speaks universally in terms of desire, no matter the sex of the subject.<sup>64</sup> Woman, mothering, feeling, darkness, and desire were all qualities associated with nature and the “private.” Man, thinking, knowledge, science, and light were all associated with culture and the “public.” In terms of anarchist thought, the rejection of the public seems almost logical because the public is indirectly linked with the State and repression, and the emphasis of instinct over intellect, desire over reason is the only way to true emancipation—for all people, but especially for women.<sup>65</sup>

The best example of Goldman’s rejecting the public and emphasizing the private is her writings on women’s suffrage. Emma Goldman viewed suffrage as completely and utterly useless. The bourgeois women participating in suffrage marches and wearing suffragette sashes knew little, and cared little, she thought, about working-class women’s issues. As an anarchist, Emma Goldman viewed the State, and all participation in it, as the root of economic oppression.

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<sup>62</sup> Haaland, *Emma Goldman*, 13.

<sup>63</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

<sup>64</sup> Haaland, *Emma Goldman*, 53.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 37.

The prevailing feminist thought of the day saw the vote as a means of purification due to the mothering, pure nature of women. Emma Goldman argues against this:

I see neither physical, psychological, nor mental reasons why woman should not have the equal right to vote with man. But that can not possibly blind me to the absurd notion that woman will accomplish that wherein man has failed. If she would not make things worse, she certainly could not make them better. To assume, therefore, that she should succeed in purifying something which is not susceptible of purification, is to credit her with supernatural powers. Since woman's greatest misfortune has been that she was looked upon as either angel or devil, her true salvation lies in being placed on earth; namely, in being considered human, and therefore subject to all human follies and mistakes.<sup>66</sup>

She presents two of her core beliefs in this argument: (a) that women are placed in opposed spheres from those of men, and (b) that the State is inherently evil and cannot be reformed or purified.

Women's sexual emancipation represents Emma Goldman's third belief core to her anarchist theory. Goldman viewed the suffrage movement as women's "external emancipation," which was essentially useless without a complementary internal emancipation.<sup>67</sup> If women did not seek an internal emancipation from sexual repression, "woman's future would be one in which her true nature was perverted by social custom and tradition..."<sup>68</sup> In "The Tragedy of Women's Emancipation," Goldman laments the inability of woman to become human without the expression of her true nature:

Emancipation should make it possible for woman to be human in the truest sense. Everything within her that craves assertion and activity should reach its fullest expression; all artificial barriers should be broken, and the road towards greater freedom cleared of every trace of centuries of submission and slavery....Merely external emancipation has made of the modern woman an artificial being, who reminds one of the

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<sup>66</sup> Emma Goldman, "Woman Suffrage," in *Red Emma Speaks*, Alix Kates Shulman, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 193.

<sup>67</sup> Haaland, *Emma Goldman* 57.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 58.



products of French arboriculture with its arabesque trees and shrubs... anything, except the forms which would be reached by the expression of her own inner qualities.<sup>69</sup>

Only through expression of this natural assertion can women truly become free. She later explains that because of “ethical and social conventions,” women are prey to “internal tyrants” that stifle women’s freedom.<sup>70</sup>

Whether or not all of these grand ideas rang true in her historical life is the job of Emma Goldman’s biographers. Her public persona is what historians are charged with interpreting, and also what women—and men for that matter—who came into contact with her would have been forced to reckon with. Goldman visited Spain for the first time in September of 1936, just a couple of months after the war first broke out, at the peak of the social revolution.<sup>71</sup> She spent most of her time there with agents of the CNT, and only crossed paths with *Mujeres Libres* a few times, though she was very interested in their work. The emancipation of the Spanish woman became one of the reasons Emma Goldman involved herself in the civil war multiple times. In December of 1936 after she had returned to her London exile, she wrote to another anarchist:

You must remember that the anti-Fascist war and the revolutionary reconstruction our Spanish comrades have before them are not all of their colossal task. There is the education and emancipation of woman, the new approach to the child, to common ordinary questions of health. All that has been sadly neglected by our comrades. Perhaps they had to concentrate all their energies on the economic struggle [so] they could not reach out into many directions. But that does not alter the low status of woman and the depressing ignorance of method of the care of woman and the child... Yes, I will go back to Spain.<sup>72</sup>

That same month, she wrote an impassioned appeal to the women of Spain in the *Mujeres Libres* newspaper. She implored women to recognize the desperation of their situation, writing, “woman

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<sup>69</sup> Emma Goldman, “The Tragedy of Woman’s Emancipation,” in *Red Emma Speaks*, Alix Kates Shulman, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 159.

<sup>70</sup> Goldman, “The Tragedy of Women’s Emancipation,” 165.

<sup>71</sup> Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in Exile: From the Russian Revolution to the Spanish Civil War* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 201.

<sup>72</sup> Emma Goldman, “Letter to Harry Kelly, December 5, 1936,” in *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*, ed. David Porter (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006), 257.

seems still to be considered very much inferior to man, a mere sex-object for his gratification and child-bearing. This attitude would not be so surprising were it only to be found among the bourgeoisie. But, to find the same antediluvian conception among the workers, even among our comrades, is a very great shock indeed.”<sup>73</sup> Even though her overall opinion of women’s efforts to emancipate themselves was low, she championed the progress *Mujeres Libres* was attempting to make. In a letter to an anarchist friend in Chicago, she writes, “Our blessed comrades have been the pioneers of a great many things in Spain and they are also in their efforts to emancipate and educate the bulk of Spanish women.”<sup>74</sup> Though *Mujeres Libres* affected some change in the Republican zones, the social revolution was not happening fast enough for Emma Goldman.

Perhaps Emma Goldman found frustration in the lack of agreement between Spanish anarchist women. Mary Nash touches on Spanish motherhood as the foundation for Spanish women’s identity in the article “Un/Contested Identities: Motherhood, Sex Reform, and the Modernization of Gender Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Spain.”<sup>75</sup> She points out that even though there were dissenting voices on Spanish woman’s role as Mother, such as Lucia Sánchez Saornil, a founder of *Mujeres Libres*, who wrote, “by the theory of differentiation a woman is no more than a tyrannical womb which exercises obscure influences to the utmost folds of her brain,” there were still influential women within the anarchist movement who acknowledged their cultural identity as mothers.<sup>76</sup> Such a woman, Federica Montseny, was one of the foremost

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<sup>73</sup> Emma Goldman, “*Mujeres Libres*, December, 1936,” in *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*, ed. David Porter (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006), 257.

<sup>74</sup> Emma Goldman, “Letter to Jeanne Levey, March 30, 1937,” in *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*, ed. David Porter (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2006), 259.

<sup>75</sup> Mary Nash, “Un/Contested Identities: Motherhood, Sex Reform, and the Modernization of Gender Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Spain,” in *Constructing Spanish Womanhood: Female Identity in Modern Spain* ed. Victoria Lorée Enders and Pamela Beth Radcliff (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 25.

<sup>76</sup> Lucia Sánchez Saornil, “*Solidaridad Obrera* 15, October 1935,” in Mary Nash’s “Un/Contested Identities: Motherhood, Sex Reform, and the Modernization of Gender Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Spain,” in *Constructing Spanish Womanhood: Female Identity in Modern Spain* ed. Victoria Lorée Enders and Pamela Beth Radcliff (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), 41.

leaders of the FAI during the early phase of the war. Nash points out that, “Although motherhood was reframed around a more political reading of social motherhood, which was linked with the notion of differential citizenship in the process of modernization of Spanish society, it still revolved around a traditional, biological notion of motherhood.”<sup>77</sup> *Mujeres Libres*, like Emma Goldman, held to the belief that women were people, not just mothers.<sup>78</sup>

Emma Goldman, like most anarchist communists, questioned anarcho-syndicalism as being “anarchist enough”. She saw the State as one of the most corrupting forces on the planet and longed for localized, communal life.<sup>79</sup> In Spain, with the Spanish Civil War in full swing, the women of *Mujeres Libres* came from the strong anarcho-syndicalist traditions of their country. The original foundation of *Mujeres Libres* was as expedient as possible during the early stages of the war. The founders of the organization hoped for an organization that would, “[attend to] dissatisfaction with male hostility and indifference to women within the anarchist movement.”<sup>80</sup> Much of the activities and goals of *Mujeres Libres* were sidelined by lack of funding.<sup>81</sup> The money they did receive from the CNT and FAI went toward increased incorporation into the political movement and militancy among women, rather than women’s empowerment.<sup>82</sup> In truth, *Mujeres Libres* envisioned a Spain much like Emma Goldman, but they lacked the organization and funding to achieve the broad-based reeducation and acculturation it would take to achieve the reordering of women’s basic Spanish identity.

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<sup>77</sup> Nash, “Un/Contested Identities,” 41.

<sup>78</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain* 129.

<sup>79</sup> Haaland, *Emma Goldman*, 39.

<sup>80</sup> Nash, *Defying Male Civilization*, 81.

<sup>81</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain*, 116.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

One of *Mujeres Libres*'s most successful campaigns was against prostitution, an institution they saw as the direct link between capitalism and women's sexual subordination.<sup>83</sup> Emma Goldman expounded upon this link between capitalism and subordination in her article entitled, "The Traffic in Women." She writes, "What is really the cause of the trade in women? Not merely white women, but yellow and black women as well. Exploitation, of course; the merciless Moloch of capitalism that fattens on underpaid labor, thus driving thousands of women and girls into prostitution."<sup>84</sup> During the Spanish Revolution, *Mujeres Libres* focused on the economic exploitation aspect of prostitution and instead of making prostitutes feel worthless, they created rehabilitation programs to educate them.<sup>85</sup> *Mujeres Libres* trained these women to be productive workers in their reimagined anarchist society.<sup>86</sup>

It is a testament to the sheer wills of the women of *Mujeres Libres* that an independent women's organization could be created against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War. The tensions between Emma Goldman and Spanish anarchist women were merely on an organizational level that neither party could find common ground on. There had always been tensions between anarchist communists and the anarcho-syndicalists. The feminist aspects of both Emma Goldman's and *Mujeres Libres*'s ideologies were similar in nature. Both parties wanted women to be economic, social, and political equals with men, a hallmark of anarchist thought. Goldman's unique sexually-focused anarchism was too much, too soon for the women of Spain who were dealing with so much more than just their own emancipation. The relatively chaotic atmosphere in Spain during 1936-1939 did not prove to be conducive to many lasting reforms especially at the conclusion of the war, which the anarchists ultimately lost, but it left a

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<sup>83</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain*, 135.

<sup>84</sup> Emma Goldman, "The Traffic in Women," in *Red Emma Speaks*, Alix Kates Shulman, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 176.

<sup>85</sup> Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain*, 135.

<sup>86</sup> Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War*, 89.

legacy of women's empowerment and demonstrated women's agency. The fact that women could recognize their own oppression and do something about it in the 1930s was a true revolution in and of itself.

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