



## Goldman, Emma (1869-1940)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Once called "one of the most dangerous women in America," by the F. B. I.'s J. Edgar Hoover, Emma Goldman was an energetic political organizer, a fiery radical, and a passionate free spirit.

She was also one of the first outspoken allies of gay and lesbian people anywhere in the world. Firmly believing that "the most vital right is the right to love and be loved," Goldman braved not only the disapproval of the mainstream, but also opposition within the radical left to defend the rights of homosexuals.

Born in a Jewish ghetto in Lithuania on June 27, 1869, Goldman grew up learning the politics of liberation under the shadow of discrimination and pogroms. In 1884 she emigrated to the United States to join her sister in Rochester, New York. Working under sweatshop conditions as a sewing machine operator in a corset factory, Goldman continued her education about oppression and the struggle for human rights.

She was politically galvanized when a violent political demonstration in 1886 led to the execution of four anarchists in Chicago's Haymarket Square. She moved to New York City and became an active anarchist.

Over the next years Goldman became an effective speaker and organizer for anarchist causes. She was attracted to anarchism as a philosophy not only because it sought economic and political justice, but also because anarchists advocated free speech, atheism, and sexual freedom.

Goldman had already left one unhappy marriage, and she valued the freedom to love without bondage as much as she valued the right of workers to adequate pay. She spoke out boldly in favor of contraception and against marriage, which she deemed a form of female slavery. Goldman's political speeches, writings, and other activities earned her admiration from many working people and fear and hostility from those in power. She was arrested and jailed in 1893, 1901, 1916, 1918, 1919, and 1921 for her radical activities.

In an era when gay writer Oscar Wilde was imprisoned for two years (1895-1897) for "gross indecency," Goldman spoke out publicly in defense of gay and lesbian people, defending their right to choose who and how they would love. For this outspokenness she faced criticism from her colleagues on the left who feared that embracing the cause of homosexuality would damage their other political work. Goldman was unaffected by these fears as she was by the condemnation of those on the right, and she continued to support homosexuals throughout her life.

In attacking the stigmatization and persecution of homosexuals, she drew upon the works of Edward Carpenter, Havelock Ellis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Sigmund Freud, and other sexologists.

Goldman herself embraced free love as a lifestyle and had many passionate affairs, notably with Alexander Berkman, her co-editor of the anarchist journal *Mother Earth*, and Ben Reitman, a Chicago radical. While she did not write or speak about her own relations with women, it is likely that she did have some.



Emma Goldman in 1934.  
Portrait photograph by  
Carl van Vechten, March  
6, 1934.  
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Margaret Anderson, lesbian editor of *The Little Review*, was a member of Goldman's circle, as were other lesbians and gay men. One of her admirers, Almeda Sperry, implied a sexual relationship, but it was never acknowledged by Goldman.

In words that still ring true almost a century later, Goldman wrote in a 1923 essay: "Modern woman is no longer satisfied to be the beloved of a man; she looks for understanding, comradeship; she wants to be treated as a human being and not simply as an object for sexual gratification. And since man in many cases cannot offer her this, she turns to her sisters."

However, she also criticized some lesbians, whose "antagonism to the male," she wrote, "is almost a disease."

Goldman was arrested in 1917 for speaking out against military conscription for World War I, and in 1919, she was deported to Russia.

Although she left Russia disillusioned by the failures of the Communist revolution there, she continued to work for progressive social and political causes until her death on May 14, 1940.

She was buried near Haymarket Square in Chicago, where her political inspiration had been ignited.

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### **About the Author**

**Tina Gianoulis** is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.