

Emma Goldman on the Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution of 1917 shocked the world. Russia entered into a new era of turmoil and uncertainty. Actually, there were two revolutions. The first, in March, overthrew the czar (emperor) and led to a parliamentary republic with a democratic form of government. But in a second revolution, on November 17, 1917, Bolsheviks led by Vladimir Lenin overthrew the democratic government and established a new Communist state. While the democratic government had remained in World War I, fighting on the side of the Allies, Lenin sought peace. And Germany imposed very harsh terms. Under a treaty signed in March 1918, Russia withdrew from the war and granted independence to many surrounding areas, including Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine.

Leftists (including many Socialists) in the rest of the world generally welcomed the Bolshevik Revolution. Many of them expected Russia to become a democratic Socialist state that would serve as a model for leftist revolutionaries in Germany and other nations. Leftists flocked to Russia to see what was happening and to help if they could.

Emma Goldman, a well-known American anarchist, was one of those leftists. Born in Lithuania (one of the Baltic states that were a part of the Russian empire), she had lived in the Russian capital, St. Petersburg. In 1886, she emigrated to the United States. Goldman worked in clothing factories and took an active part in union organizing and in anarchist activities. She became a U.S. citizen, but the government later revoked her citizenship. Like many other leftists, she opposed U.S. involvement in World War I and lectured against the draft. After serving a two-year prison term for her antidraft activities, she was deported in December 1919-along with 248 others-during the postwar "Red Scare."

*Arriving in Russia, Goldman found a nation plagued by hunger in the midst of a bitter civil war. Although she volunteered her services to the revolution, Goldman quickly became critical of the Bolsheviks. Among other things, she was appalled to find that Russia's Bolshevik leaders treated Russian anarchists as enemies of the revolution. In December 1921, Goldman left Russia for Western Europe. The following excerpts are from a book Goldman wrote in 1923, *My Disillusionment in Russia*.*

The population of Petrograd [name given to St. Petersburg at the start of World War I] before the war was almost two million; in 1920 it had dwindled to five hundred thousand. The people walked about like living corpses; the shortage of food and fuel was slowly sapping the city; grim death was clutching at its heart. Emaciated and frostbitten men, women, and children were being whipped by the common lash, the search for a piece of bread or a stick of wood...

Each day brought new conflicting thoughts and emotions. The feature which affected me most was the inequality I witnessed in my immediate environment. I learned that the rations issued to the tenants of the First House of the Soviet [the Russian word soviet means "council"; Russia's Communists referred to their representative governments as soviets]...were much superior to those received by the workers in the factories. To be sure, they were not sufficient to sustain life-but no one in the Astoria lived from these rations alone. The members of the Communist Party, quartered in the Astoria, worked in Smolny [the Smolny Institute at Petrograd's eastern edge served as Lenin's headquarters in the period of the revolution] and the rations in Smolny were the best in Petrograd...

The rations were distributed at the Commissary, but one had to fetch them himself. One day, while waiting my turn in the long line, a peasant girl came in and asked for vinegar. “Vinegar! Who is it calls for such a luxury?” cried several women. It appeared that the girl was Zinoviev’s servant [Grigory Zinoviev, high-ranking Bolshevik and a close associate of Lenin.]. She spoke of him as her master, who worked very hard and was surely entitled to something extra. At once a storm of indignation broke loose. “Master! Is that what we made the Revolution for, or was it to do away with masters? Zinoviev is no more than we, and he is not entitled to more.”

These working women were crude, even brutal, but their sense of justice was instinctive. The Revolution to them was something fundamentally vital. They saw the inequality at every step and bitterly resented it. I was disturbed. I sought to reassure myself that Zinoviev and the other leaders of the Communists would not use their power for selfish benefit. It was the shortage of food and the lack of efficient organization which made it impossible to feed all alike, and of course the blockade and not the [Bolsheviks] was responsible for it. The Allied Interventionists, who were trying to get at Russia’s throat, were the cause.

Every Communist I met [repeated] this thought; even some of the Anarchists insisted on it...But how reconcile the explanation given to me with some of the stories I learned every day—stories of systematic terrorism, of relentless persecution, and suppression of other revolutionary elements?...

Was this the Revolution I had believed in all my life, yearned for, and strove to interest others in, or was it...a hideous monster that had come to jeer and mock me? The Communists I had met daily during six months—self-sacrificing, hard-working men and women imbued with a high ideal—were such people capable of the treachery and horrors charged against them? Zinoviev, Radek, Zorin, Ravitch [Radek et al—Bolshevik leaders] and many others I had learned to know—could they in the name of an ideal lie, defame, torture, kill? But, then—had not Zorin told me that capital punishment had been abolished in Russia [when it was in fact still in use]?...

Why did Zorin resort to lies? Surely he must have known that I would not remain in the dark very long. And then, was not Lenin also guilty of the same methods? “Anarchists of ideas...are not in our prisons,” he had assured me. Yet at that very moment numerous Anarchists filled the jails of Moscow and Petrograd and of many other cities in Russia. In May 1920, scores of them had been arrested in Petrograd, among them two girls of seventeen and nineteen years of age. None of the prisoners was charged with counter-revolutionary activities: they were “Anarchists of ideas,” to use Lenin’s expression. Several of them had issued a [proclamation] for the First of May, calling attention to the appalling conditions in the factories of [Russia]....The two young girls who had circulated a handbill against the “labor book,” [a document required for changing one’s job or one’s place of residence] which had just then gone into effect, were also arrested...

The [halo] was falling from the Communists. All of them seemed to believe that the end justified the means...

In short, I had come to see that the [Bolsheviks] were social puritans who sincerely believed that they alone were ordained to save mankind...

Review Questions

1. Define: Anarchist, red scare, capital punishment
2. How did Emma Goldman originally feel about the Bolshevik Revolution?
3. What conditions did Goldman find in Petrograd in 1920?
 - a. What excuse did the Communists make for these conditions?
4. Why did Goldman become critical of the Bolsheviks?
5. What did Goldman mean when she questioned whether the revolution “was a hideous monster that had come to jeer and mock [her]”?
6. Why did Goldman feel that “a halo was falling from the Communists. All of them seemed to believe that the end justified the means”? Explain her reaction.