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Archival Code-Breaking: The Editor’s Dilemma

Candace Falk

I became the editor of the Emma Goldman Papers while I was writing Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman—a biography in which the first codes broken were those of decorum. There was a kind of steamy delight on that day when I realized that the secret language in her love letters—the “m’s”, the “tb”, and the “w”—were not the Yiddish words I imagined them to be, nor the clandestine political messages, but a playful way to dodge the Comstock law against sending obscenity through the mail. Sizzling epistles went back and forth between Emma Goldman and Ben Reitman, a man who was not only her lover and road manager, but also a red light district gynecologist!

When the late Sara Jackson—who many of you remember as NHPRC’s longtime archivist of government records—began to declassify Goldman’s surveillance materials, I entered a very different realm of secret codes. The opportunity to be the conduit for offering a fuller view of Goldman, as she was perceived by those who feared her, felt like a rendezvous with the destiny of history—with a capital “H.” Boxes of photocopied government reports arrived daily from Washington, D.C., to my Berkeley, California office. These documents confirmed my worst fears about the ineptness of the intelligence gatherers, their widespread presence all throughout the anarchist movement, the ways in which careers were made (like J. Edgar Hoover’s rise from the Justice Department to his orchestration of Goldman’s deportation, and assumption of the role of first director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation) and broken (like the liberal Assistant Secretary of Labor Louis F. Post’s heart-rendering dilemma upon casting Goldman out of America). I was appalled to see the documentary evidence that her constitutional rights were infringed when private communications with her lawyer while she was in jail were intercepted and transcribed by government agents. As I read reports by the woman who had infiltrated Goldman’s office, her racial slurs about these anarchist “kikes,” it made me positively paranoid.
All the editors of the Emma Goldman Papers were blown away by the story of the police spy, a man named Sullivan, who managed to work his way into the most militant corners of the movement: Not only was he a lover of the young “spitfire” Becky Edelson and someone who had withstood a prolonged jail sentence and brutal beatings, but he had been among the most fiery speakers at the funeral of the anarchists whose bomb intended for Rockefeller exploded prematurely in their Lexington Avenue townhouse. Another spy, known as Spivak, spent time at the Ferrer School, a place ostensibly devoted solely to teaching the young and old. When he neglected to put a stamp on the envelope in which he sent his his extensive surveillance report, the words ‘Burns Detective Agency’ on the return address was a dead give-away. Once Alexander Berkman Goldman’s militant comrade, was notified about the spy in their midst, he made it his business that Spivak never returned. Even closer to home, Goldman’s nephew Saxe Commins, who loved his aunt and was even sympathetic to many anarchist ideas, unknownst to her, expressed his pro-war sentiments by taking on the role of informant for the Department of Military Intelligence.

There was proof everywhere that the government was not merely investigating the anarchist movement, but, in some cases, was directly involved in instigating violent activities. I read multiple documents implicating Goldman in what seemed like a fabricated plot by a “committee of five” to blow up public offices and government officials at a designated time and place. I mocked the misspelled government stenographer’s transcripts of Goldman talks, finding the moniker given to Trotsky as “Rotsky” especially entertaining. Although I discredited this material generated by the government, I was also grateful to have even approximate transcriptions of difficult-to-track-down Goldman anti-conscription lectures. I began to realize that in order to truly understand Goldman’s life, historians needed to know the ways in which her ideas and actions were impacted by harassment and surveillance. Reading about the government’s prolonged strategic attempts to nullify her citizenship, in preparation for her eventual deportation, gave me pause for thought about what she was up against from the very beginning. Gradually, I found myself more and more committed to understanding how, and why, Goldman was feared as much as she was revered, and why J. Edgar Hoover considered her “one of the most dangerous anarchists in America.”

* * *
The paper tracings of a life are by definition incomplete. Cherished letters, crumbling into dust in stray boxes, betoken the secret murmurings of relations long gone and nearly forgotten. A public life has more permanent print markers—newspaper clippings of interviews, reports of the give and take of political meetings, possibly even trial transcripts and government surveillance records—but these cannot capture the totality of a person’s lived experience, any more than correspondence or diaries can disclose the complexity of the inner life. When the historian’s subject is a self-proclaimed revolutionary anarchist, who periodically broke the law in the name of a higher cause, the print record may be even more elusive and potentially misleading.

As the Project editors focused on a new combination of primary sources for the selected book edition, an acute awareness of the clandestine inner workings of the anarchist movement that had been shrouded from history became more apparent, as did the existence of the darker dimensions of Goldman’s work, the hidden side of her public political world. Rather than jeopardize her own safety and that of her comrades, rather than betray the trust of those of her liberal friends who subscribed to her vision of harmony and social justice, but had little, or no knowledge, of the extent to which she supported violent tactics in her anarchist circles to hasten that process, she had deliberately created an enigmatic persona.

Collaboratively we unraveled the multifaceted character of our subject, and faced the imperative of directly addressing the question of the violence of her times. As we selected the documents from her early years, we finally located the long-lost German anarchist periodical *Brandfackel* in which Goldman’s first known printed article revealed a much more vituperative voice than the one we had come to know so well in English periodicals and speeches. We translated passages about “lard-dripping monsters”—i.e., the police. We read her incredible harangues about the heartless violence against striking workers, learned that the names of the shot-dead foreign-born among them were never even recorded. It became more and more apparent that our task included reading between the lines of the cultures she traversed. She raised her voice against injustice, but it was not one voice, and not one strategy for change.

As more and more of the documentation of her life became available, we learned, for example that when her comrade Alexander Berkman attempted to assassinate Henry Clay Frick at the Homestead Pennsylvania Steel Plant in retaliation for ordering the shooting of striking workers, it was neither
spontaneous nor an act orchestrated only by the two of them as she had suggested in her autobiography. Letters written years later show that there was a complex and sophisticated web of people involved—including one who was set to finish the job should Berkman miss (as he did) but was foiled by a police spy. When Goldman feigned a collection for Berkman’s legal fees, we found that the fund was in fact a cover for buying the material necessary to dig a tunnel for his release. New documents revealed the extent of Goldman’s own awareness of a range of covert and violent acts committed by fellow anarchists. There was evidence abound to suggest that Goldman and Berkman played different but not exclusive roles. In recounting these days later in her life, Goldman spoke more frankly to the press, explaining that Berkman assumed the task of shooting Frick, in part, because she was better able to explain the reasons for the deed. In her writings on a number of occasions Goldman used the phrase “the psychologic moment.” I had originally interpreted that term as a personal expression for a turning point in one’s realization of political truths about injustice; however, now I am aware that it was actually a code for the moment of readiness to undertake violent action.

* * *

Emma Goldman was an anarchist. Of course, I should have connected the dots between her vision of a harmonious and radiant world with the chaotic dark side, the militant tactics of force against force. But I came of age in the 1970s, a time when her name was associated with dancing in the revolution and a politics borne of passion and a love of beauty. Her spirit captured the imagination of a generation that seemed to extend across time and across the globe. Goldman’s face crowned by her floppy turn-of-the-century hat adorned t-shirts, political posters; her name was given in veneration to children and pets—including my own lovable, unwieldy golden-retriever/Irish setter “Red Emma.”

That she believed violence should be avenged was clear in her autobiography—but I chose not to see it. I always thought it was camp and interesting that in Goldman’s early days she had a scalp and facial massage parlor, only to find upon closer scrutiny that the shop was a front for running guns to Russia. With the perspective of new documents and insights, her image for me now encompasses the light and the dark.

Goldman saw little or no difference between the morality of the violence the American patriot mustered in defense of the country and the violence to
which anarchists resorted in their own fight for justice. Akin to soldiers who sacrificed themselves in a war between nations, she supported those who chose to fight and were willing to die as martyrs for freedom in a social war. Given the stories of Russian revolutionaries that swirled around her youth, including the widespread praise for the noble assassins of the Tsar, it is not surprising that in her adopted land she gravitated toward the ideas of Thomas Jefferson, who believed that “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.” The violence she often claimed to abhor was as natural as the crashing waves on a stormy sea, and as inevitable.

For Goldman and the militants she defended, the underside of the country’s glorious ideal of free expression was the silent but all too real mandate against openly debating, lecturing, speaking, or writing about the ongoing social and economic war in the workplace, on the streets, and in the home. Goldman’s interest in and dedication to the basic right of free speech was motivated first and foremost by a desire to propagate the contested (and often barred) ideas of anarchism as her preferred method of combating injustice and creating social harmony.

Goldman believed that social and political transformation was a long and difficult process requiring persistence and strength of conviction especially at times that might otherwise seem hopeless. She encouraged the public to follow her example—to remain vigilant:

Friends, the American sky looks black and sinister, the sun has hidden in shame, unwilling to witness the growing brutality and despotism on the part of those who have taken upon themselves to outrage every sense of liberty and justice. One cannot afford to be tired these days, when brave souls are needed for the battle. Yes, brave souls and clear heads, who will help to free the earth from the chains of ignorance, brutality, and cowardice. [EG—“En Route” in Mother Earth magazine, April 1908]

And yet as we exposed the range of her tactics to free the earth from its chains so too did we begin to wonder whether she, in fact, could be looked to as ‘the great example.’ Writing the introduction to the second volume in Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years, 1890–1919, 4 volumes—Making Speech Free—was more difficult than I ever imagined. It was written during a time when the world—especially the United States—seemed ever more mired in violence. The task of setting the analytical frame for docu-
ments that cast new light upon the shadow side of the multi-faceted Emma Goldman raised questions and haunting parallels that remained both unsettling and vital. I—and my colleagues at the Emma Goldman Papers Project—began to present new scholarship that took Goldman off the spotlight of a dance floor into the darkness of history’s back room. And, although the life and activities of a public historical figure whose clandestine involvements were integral to her political vision can never be fully revealed, it is now possible to read the silences between the documents as well as the documents themselves with more insight and clarity than ever before.

As documentary editors, historians, and scholars, we take pride in breaking archival codes and unlocking the secret workings of the past. Would that our insights could help to break the cycle of political violence from spiraling into the future!