

[Emma Goldman \(1869–1940\)](#) ^[1]

By: Horwitz, Rainey Keywords: [Reproductive rights](#) ^[2]

Emma Goldman was a traveling public speaker and writer known for her anarchist political views as well as her opinions on [contraception](#) ^[3] and birth limiting in the late nineteenth century in the United States. Goldman identified as an anarchist, which she explained as being part of an ideology in which people use violence to provoke or demand social and political change. Goldman was involved in many anarchist social groups and published the anarchist magazine *Mother Earth*. She spent the majority of her life traveling the US and Europe giving lectures and presentations on her views of the political events of the late nineteenth century. Goldman also worked to spread awareness about [birth control](#) ^[4] in response to the lack of contraceptive options she witnessed while working as a nurse. By advocating for [birth control](#) ^[4] in her travels, Goldman brought international attention to topics like [family planning](#) ^[5] and women's rights during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Goldman was born on 27 June 1869 to Taube Beinowich and Abraham Goldman in Kaunas, Lithuania, which was then a part of the Soviet Union. According to historian Alice Wexler, Goldman's father had wished for a son and believed that the birth of a daughter was a sign of failure. Emma was the Goldmans' eldest child. She had three younger brothers and two older half-sisters, Helena and Lena, from her mother's previous marriage. Goldman was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family and was frequently whipped for acts of rebellion. Goldman's mother slapped her across the face as a punishment for masturbation and for beginning her menstrual period, a common Orthodox Jewish custom at the time.

At a young age, Goldman began working at a corset shop, and she stopped attending school before reaching adolescence. According to Goldman, she wanted to continue attending school and begged her father to let her do so. In response, Goldman claimed her father threw a French textbook into the fire and announced that Jewish girls did not need to learn. Goldman also alleged that her father insisted that women only needed to learn how to cook and provide children. Despite her father's views, Goldman continued to teach herself about the political environment in the Soviet Union. Goldman's father attempted to arrange for her marriage when she was fifteen years old, but Goldman refused and claimed she would only marry for love.

According to Goldman, when she was an adolescent she had several experiences that contributed to her opinions as an adult. She witnessed a servant being whipped in the street, which contributed to her dislike for violent authority. While in primary school in Königsburg, Prussia, Goldman was frequently punished in school for her behavior. In addition, she was molested by one of her teachers. She also stated that she was sexually assaulted during her teen years by a customer at the corset shop, and she claimed the experience contributed to her negative view of men.

On 29 December 1885, Goldman and one of her half-sisters arrived in the Castle Garden center for immigration in New York City, New York, to create a new life for themselves. Upon arrival, they moved into the home of Goldman's other half-sister and her husband and began working as seamstresses. The sisters were later joined by Goldman's parents and other siblings. Two years after moving to New York, Goldman married Jacob Kershner. They divorced that same year, in 1887. Not long after, Goldman's parents made her move out of their home.

Soon after immigrating to New York City, Goldman met self-proclaimed anarchist Alexander Berkman who, according to historian John Chalberg, cultivated her interest in public speaking and the use of violence to provoke change. The two became romantically involved and moved into a communal apartment in Woodstock, Illinois, in the early 1890s. Both Berkman and Goldman participated in protests during the Homestead Strike in 1892, a violent strike in Homestead, Pennsylvania that involved the workers of the Carnegie Steel Company headquartered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The strike on 6 July 1892 resulted in the death of nine armed union workers and seven company-hired guards. Following the strike, Goldman and Berkman planned to assassinate the factory's manager, Henry Clay Frick, to motivate the laid off workers to continue the revolt. Berkman attempted the murder but failed and was sentenced to twenty-two years in prison. Goldman was arrested but not convicted due to the lack of evidence of her involvement.

Goldman's participation in protests during the Homestead Strike was only the beginning of her involvement in social and political conflicts. In 1893, Goldman was arrested and charged for inciting a riot during the Panic of 1893, one of the worst US economic crises that resulted from the failure of national banks. In public speeches, Goldman encouraged the unemployed to demand work and food from the wealthy and not depend on charity and government aid. If the wealthy would not comply, she said, they should take what they needed by force. After being arrested for inciting a riot in 1893, Goldman was bribed by a detective, Charles Jacobs, to serve as an informant on other radicals in the area in return for her charges being dropped. Goldman refused to cooperate and proceeded to throw a glass of ice water in his face. Goldman was sentenced to one year in Blackwell's Island Penitentiary in New York City, New York. She became ill in prison and befriended one of the doctors, who helped her study medicine. Upon her release from prison, she was greeted by a crowd of nearly three thousand fans in front of the Thalia Theater in New York City.

Following her release from Blackwell's Island Penitentiary in 1894, Goldman traveled to Europe to study medicine and train to become a midwife. In Europe, she toured as an anarchist speaker, encouraging people to fight against the government with force and rise up in acts of violence to make change. She also attended a secret meeting of a [birth control](#) ^[4] [organization](#) ^[6], the Neo-Malthusian Congress, in Paris, France. At the time, [birth control](#) ^[4] was illegal and not commonly available. According to Goldman, after witnessing the effects of multiple, unwanted births in her patients, she became interested in learning more about methods of controlling fertility. Goldman returned to the US at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In the early 1900s, Goldman was involved in a scandal where some believed she was partially responsible for the assassination of William McKinley, who was president of the United States at the time. On 6 September 1901, an unemployed factory worker, Leon Czolgosz, fatally shot McKinley during a speech in Buffalo, New York. Czolgosz claimed that his actions were motivated by one of Goldman's speeches. Because of his claims Goldman was arrested. *The New York Times* published a statement from Goldman in which she refused to be accountable for the actions of an unstable man who had misinterpreted her words. Investigators found no evidence that Goldman was involved in McKinley's assassination. They released her after she had been detained for two weeks.

Following her release, in 1906 Goldman started the publication *Mother Earth* to showcase young anarchists' writings from around the world. The publication was staffed by anarchist activists, and Goldman continued touring the US, lecturing, and taking on various private nursing jobs to make money to fund the publication. After fourteen years in prison, Berkman was released and resumed his relationship with Goldman. Berkman also assumed editing responsibilities for *Mother Earth*. According to historian John Chalberg, their relationship was halted when Berkman had an affair with a fifteen-year-old fellow anarchist. Goldman continued touring the US giving speeches that drew crowded audiences. While touring in the US during the early 1900s, Goldman met and started a relationship with Ben Reitman, a doctor from Chicago. Reitman treated homeless individuals and particularly those suffering from sexually transmitted diseases.

In 1914, when women's rights activist Margaret Sanger coined the term [birth control](#) ^[4], Goldman and Reitman began supporting Sanger. Goldman distributed copies of Sanger's publication *Family Limitation*, which explained various methods of [contraception](#) ^[3] and [birth control](#) ^[4]. In 1915, Goldman gave a series of nationwide lectures promoting the use of contraceptives. She was arrested a year later, on 11 February 1916, for violating the Comstock Act. The Comstock Act prohibited the distribution of obscene information, including information on [birth control](#) ^[4] in the United States. Goldman claimed that the act had outgrown its duty and that under American legal principles, laws that were outdated needed to be removed. Goldman also wrote a letter to the press in which she argued that [birth control](#) ^[4] would be an effective solution for those who could not meet the financial demands of many children. In the letter, Goldman also claimed that she would risk being put in prison to stand up for [birth control](#) ^[4] rights. Later that year, Goldman and Sanger were both arrested for giving public lessons on how to use contraceptives. Goldman refused to pay the one-hundred-dollar fine and served two weeks in a prison work facility.

Following her release, Goldman began vocally opposing the US involvement in [World War I](#) ^[7], which had begun in 1914. Goldman spoke out against the mandatory military conscription for men ages twenty-one to thirty. Goldman stated that she opposed the war because she believed it promoted militarist aggression. In 1917, Goldman and Berkman created the No Conscription League of New York in New York City, to protest the draft and resist what they called the capitalist government. Goldman used the term capitalist to describe the US government and the free market system, which she did not agree with and actively protested. In June 1917, Goldman and Berkman were arrested during a police raid of their office. They were both charged with conspiracy to oppose the government and violating the Espionage Act by persuading young men to not register for the draft. During her trial, Goldman defended herself by claiming her First Amendment right to free speech was being violated. Goldman and Berkman were found guilty and sentenced to two years in prison. Goldman served her prison sentence in Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City, Missouri, from 1918 to 1919.

Following her release in the Fall of 1919, John Edgar Hoover, US Department of Justice's General Intelligence Division head at the time, deported Goldman after her release in 1919. Goldman was deported under the 1918 expansion of the Anarchist Exclusion Act, which allowed for the deportation of any non-citizens identified as anarchists. According to a statement from the John Edgar Hoover, Goldman and Berkman were two of the most dangerous anarchists in America, and their presence in the American community would cause national harm. Goldman and Berkman were placed on a ship that took them to Finland. Upon disembarking in Finland, border authorities directed the deportees to the Russian border crossing.

After arriving in Russia with Berkman, Goldman claimed in her autobiography that she formed political ideas regarding the Bolshevik revolution. According to Goldman, during her time in St. Petersburg, Russia, she began to resent the government suppression of citizens under Russian leader Vladimir Lenin, and for a short period of time, she protested about it publicly. After the deaths of over one thousand rebelling soldiers in the Kronstadt Rebellion of 1921, Goldman left Russia and moved to Riga, Latvia.

By September 1924, after migrating to several other European cities, Goldman settled in London, England, while Berkman remained in Berlin, Germany. When she was threatened with deportation again in 1925, she married fellow anarchist James Colton, which granted her British citizenship, and which also enabled her to travel back to the US and Canada. Before returning to the US, Goldman wrote her first autobiography *Living My Life* ^[8], while several American supporters financially sustained her.

Goldman returned to New York City in 1934 to present lectures on her life story, but the US government forbade her from

speaking out publically on her political views. After her visa expired, she moved to Canada and received news that Berkman had committed suicide in France.

In the 1930s, Goldman continued her political activism, speaking out in opposition to the Spanish Civil War. In 1936, she moved to Barcelona, Spain, and lived in an anarchist community. In Spain, Goldman continued giving lectures while also editing for an anarchist publication. Goldman was also a supporter of the free love movement and condemned prejudice against homosexuality. In 1939, Goldman returned to Canada.

On 17 February 1940, Goldman suffered a stroke that paralyzed the right half of her body. She also lost the ability to speak. On 14 May 1940, she died from a second stroke in Toronto, Canada. Her body was buried in the German Waldheim Cemetery in Forest Park, Illinois.

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Emma Goldman was a traveling public speaker and writer known for her anarchist political views as well as her opinions on contraception and birth limiting in the late nineteenth century in the United States. Goldman identified as an anarchist, which she explained as being part of an ideology in which people use violence to provoke or demand social and political change. Goldman was involved in many anarchist social groups and published the anarchist magazine Mother Earth. She spent the majority of her life traveling the US and Europe giving lectures and presentations to spread her views on the political events during her lifetime. Goldman also worked to spread awareness about birth control and contraceptive options in response to the lack of birth control options she witnessed while working as a nurse. By advocating for birth control in her travels, Goldman brought international attention to topics like birth control and women's rights during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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