

Alexander Berkman

Globe-Trotting Anarchist, Journalist, and Exposer of Bolshevik Tyranny

(1870 - 1936)

Description : He was a well-known anarchist leader in the United States and life-long friend of Emma Goldman, a young Russian immigrant whom he met on her first day in New York City. The two became lovers and moved in together, remaining close friends for the rest of Berkman's life. (From : Anarchy Archives)

Tags : russian, anarcho-communist, jewish, anarchist, emigre, anti-bolshevik, writer, lost generation.

Quotes :

"The state has no soul, no principles. It has but one aim -- to secure power and hold it, at any cost." (From : "The Kronstadt Rebellion," by Alexander Berkman, 1922.)

"But the 'triumph' of the Bolsheviki over Kronstadt held within itself the defeat of Bolshevism. It exposes the true character of the Communist dictatorship. The Communists proved themselves willing to sacrifice Communism, to make almost any compromise with international capitalism, yet refused the just demands of their own people -- demands that voiced the October slogans of the Bolsheviki themselves: Soviets elected by direct and secret ballot, according to the Constitution of the R.S.F.S.R.; and freedom of speech and press for the revolutionary parties." (From : "The Kronstadt Rebellion," by Alexander Berkman, 1922.)

"...partizanship of whatever camp is not an objective judge." (From : "The Russian Tragedy," by Alexander Berkman, The Russian Revolution Series, No.1, section I.)

"It must always be remembered - and remembered well - that revolution does not mean destruction only. It means

destruction plus construction, with the greatest emphasis on the plus." (From : "The Russian Tragedy," by Alexander Berkman, The Russian Revolution Series, No.1, section IV.)

"The present situation in Russia [in 1921] is most anomalous.

Economically it is a combination of State and private capitalism. Politically it remains the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' or, more correctly, the dictatorship of the inner circle of the Communist Party." (From : "The Russian Tragedy," by Alexander Berkman, The Russian Revolution Series, No.1, section V.)

"But when the industries will again begin to function more or less systematically, [Soviet] Russia will face a very difficult and complex labor situation. Labor organizations, trade unions, do not exist in Russia, so far as the legitimate activities of such bodies are concerned. The Bolsheviks abolished them long ago. With developing production and capitalism, governmental as well as private, Russia will see the rise of a new proletariat whose interests must naturally come into conflict with those of the employing class. A bitter struggle is imminent. A struggle of a twofold nature: against the private capitalist, and against the State as an employer of labor." (From : "The Russian Tragedy," by Alexander Berkman, The Russian Revolution Series, No.1, section V.)

"Or will the workers at last learn the great lesson Of the Russian Revolution that every government, whatever its fine name and nice promises is by its inherent nature, as a government, destructive of the very purposes of the social revolution? It is the mission of government to govern, to subject, to strengthen and perpetuate itself. It is high time the workers learn that only their own organized, creative efforts, free from Political and State interference, can make their age-long struggle for emancipation a lasting success." (From : "The Russian Tragedy," by Alexander Berkman, The Russian Revolution Series, No.1, section V.)

Biography :

ALEXANDER BERKMAN was born in Russia in 1870. It was a time of revolutionary upheaval, and Berkman was influenced by his uncle Maxim, later exiled to Siberia for his revolutionary activity. Joining a group of students who read the literature of the Nihilists and other prohibited organizations, Berkman was eventually expelled from school. Finding most professions barred to him, he emigrated to America. On his arrival in 1888, he quickly became involved in the anarchist movement, but, although in some ways strong, it was a divided movement.

The United States at the time was opening its gates to many thousands of new arrivals, many of them from Europe. These people tended to live in the same communities as others from their country, and work in the same places. Shops, bars, and newspapers would cater for each community, usually in their native language. In Europe, the anarchist and revolutionary socialist movements were relatively strong. There was no parallel in North America, and the trade union movement was still finding its feet.

The revolutionary movement, then, tended to be split into many nationalities. These groups were often made up of activists, like Berkman, who had to leave their home countries because of their activities. There were also divisions between anarchists, Marxists, and so on. The relations between these groups were often quite good, and there were large campaigns that brought all groups together, but the language and cultural divisions remained an issue.

The crisis point in Berkman's life came in 1892, when he was only 22. At the time, the steelworkers of Pittsburgh were some of the most highly skilled and best-organized workers in the country. When their contracts came up for review, Henry Clay Frick, the chairman of the Carnegie Company, refused outright to deal with the union. He fired all of the workers, and said they would have to apply individually for their jobs, an open attack on the union. Support meetings for the workers were held all across America, but Frick brought in hundreds of strikebreakers - Pinkerton Detectives (1). Then, in July, two months after the strike started, eleven strikers were shot by the Pinkertons. The die was cast.

Berkman traveled to Pittsburgh to kill Frick, an assassination he hoped would strike against the capitalist class, as well as avenge the deaths of the steelworkers. But his attempt failed, despite his shooting Frick three times, and stabbing him with a

poisoned blade. Nevertheless, he was sentenced to 22 years in prison (more than three times the then maximum for attempted murder). Clearly the same courts that had convicted the Haymarket Eight, had decided that an example was to be made of him. And this, at the age of only 22.

Berkman eventually spent 14 years in prison, many of them in solitary confinement, and was often denied visits for years at a time. His only communication with the outside world was through smuggled letters. When he got out he was almost broken by his experiences, and it took him years to come to himself again. Yet even those years of recovery were filled with activity, editing Mother Earth magazine, and helping found the Ferrer School in New York.

With the publication of 'Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist', he came to terms with his experiences and gained a new lease of life. He was at the heart of the unemployed movement in New York, and one of the driving figures of the anti-war movement in America. For this he was jailed, for another two years, and in 1919 deported, along with Emma Goldman and many other revolutionaries, to the Soviet Union.

He spent two years in Russia, before exile in Germany and France. His book, 'The Bolshevik Myth', shows how at first he had tried to convince himself that the spirit of revolution still lived in Russia, and his anger and horror when the Bolsheviks massacred the sailors of Kronstadt, and with them the last hopes of freedom and socialism.

Although he remained an important figure in Europe, and continued writing, The 'ABC of Anarchism' was published in 1929, his poverty, and continual harassment by the authorities had made him old before his time, and he had less strength now to carry on the struggle. In 1936, seriously ill, he committed suicide, just weeks before the outbreak of the Spanish Revolution.

From a young age, Alexander Berkman was an exile, and he spent almost twenty years in prison, yet when he was free, he was at the heart of every important struggle, and he was a prodigious writer. 'The ABC of Anarchism' is still an essential starting point for any anarchist, and, together with his Memoirs, displays his burning desire for freedom, as well as the wisdom he paid dearly for.

Ray Cunningham

1 The Pinkertons were not detectives as we would imagine them today, but were more like a small mercenary army. Quite often they were hired to infiltrate unions

and pass on information, or simply served as hired muscle.

From : By Ray Cunningham, Published by Workers Solidarity No 56 in March 1999.

Works :

- Author of Deportation, Its Meaning and Menace (November 30, 1919)
- Author of The Bolshevik Myth (November 30, 1924)
- Author of Now and After (November 30, 1928)
- Author of Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist (November 30, 1911)
- Author of The Kronstadt Rebellion (November 30, 1921)
- Author of The Need Of Translating Ideals Into Life (November 30, 1909)
- Author of The Only Hope of Ireland (May 15, 1916)
- Author of Registration (June 01, 1917)
- Author of The Russian Revolution and the Communist Party (November 30, 1921)
- Author of The Russian Tragedy (April 30, 1922)
- Author of War Dictionary (June 01, 1917)
- Author of Why The Blast? (January 15, 1916)
- Author of To The Youth of America (June 01, 1917)
- Author of America and the Soviets (January 31, 1931)
- Author of Page from Prisoner Notebook (December 31, 1969)
- Author of The Anarchist Movement Today (December 31, 1933)
- Author of An Enemy of Society: Autobiography Outline of Alexander Berkman (December 31, 1969)
- Author of The Average American (December 31, 1969)
- Author of The Awakening Starvelings (December 31, 1969)
- Author of The Bolshevik Dictatorship at Work (December 31, 1969)
- Author of Confession of a Convict (December 19, 1913)
- Author of Defense of Rudolf Rocker against "Freie Arbeiter" charges (December 31, 1969)
- Author of The Idea is the Thing (December 31, 1969)
- Author of The Jobless (December 31, 1969)
- Author of Lesson of 11th Nov. 1887 (December 31, 1969)
- Author of Notes on Reviews of Prison Memoirs (December 31, 1969)
- Author of The Paris Commune and Kronstadt (December 31, 1969)
- Author of Prisons and Crime (December 31, 1969)

Author of Some Reminiscences of Kropotkin (December 31, 1969)

Author of Tenth Anniversary of the Russian Revolution (December 31, 1969)

Author of Letter (with A. Berkman) to Fizzie (June 15, 1920)

Chronology :

November 21, 1870 : Alexander Berkman's Birth Day.

June 28, 1936 : Alexander Berkman's Death Day.

November 15, 2016 : Alexander Berkman's Added to
<http://www.RevoltLib.com>.

March 12, 2018 : Alexander Berkman's Last Updated on
<http://www.RevoltLib.com>.

Links :

- **Anarchy Archives: Alexander Berkman Archive**

http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/berkman/berkman.html

- **Anarchist Library: Alexander Berkman**

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/category/author/alexander-berkman>

- **Wikipedia: Alexander Berkman**

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Berkman

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