One night, Emma Goldman was dancing passionately at an anarchist party. A comrade urged her to stop, opining that frivolity hurt The Cause. “If I can’t dance,” Goldman is alleged to have replied, “I’m not coming to your revolution.”

Emma Goldman did not, in fact, utter these precise words that evening, but the tale, as Vivian Gornick implies, captures the emotional force of Goldman’s radicalism. In Emma Goldman: Revolution as a Way of Life, a volume in Yale University Press’s series on “Jewish Lives,” Gornick celebrates, and often romanticizes, her subject. Less a thinker than “an incarnation,” she writes, Goldman struggled “without rest or respite, on behalf of human integrity...dramatizing for others what they could hardly articulate for themselves.”

Born in the imperial Russian city of Kovno in 1869, Goldman began to learn at age 12 “what it meant to be of the class that has no rights” when her father ended her formal education, sending her to work at a glove factory. Four years later, when he declared that it was time for her to marry, Emma threw a fit, threatened suicide, and emigrated to the United States. In the sweatshops of Rochester, New York, according to Gornick, Goldman experienced capitalism “in all its rapacious particularity.” Factory owners paid workers, who labored in filthy and unsafe spaces, four or five dollars for an 80-hour week, and then charged them for needles and thread, the chairs on which they sat and the lockers in which they stored their clothes.

By the 1890s, Goldman had found her radical voice. On the lecture circuit she denounced capitalism and its pillar, the state, berating and beseeching workers to take to the streets immediately. Although Goldman opposed violence, she defended anarchists who used it, contrasting them with “active and passive upholders of cruelty and injustice.”

Accompanying Goldman was her comrade Ben Reitman, who boasted that women should use their emotional force to express their love. The pair created an adolescent language to express their love, referring to Ben’s penis as “W” (Willie) and Emma’s breasts as “M” (Mont Blanc).

When she discovered with him a pick-up, Gornick indicates, with evident disappointment, Goldman did what she said no free agent should do: full of jealousy and self-doubt, she maintained that she could not accept the humiliation, and then caved in. Reitman was the first in a series of infatuations, every one of which followed the same pattern: a “grand passion flared, fizzled, and turned to ash.”

A casualty of the suppression of dissent during World War I, Goldman, convicted of conspiring to obstruct the draft, was deported. She settled in Russia, only to become disillusioned with the Communist Revolution. In an interview he granted with reluctance, Vladimir Lenin told her that free speech was a bourgeois luxury. When the Kronstadt uprising was crushed in 1921, Goldman had had enough. Had she stayed, Gornick guesses, she would have been sent to Siberia.

Goldman wandered through Europe, falling in love with a 30-year-old Swede in Stockholm. In Berlin she wrote a book about “the colossal fraud wrapped in the Red mantle of October.” Published in 1923, it “brought no understanding, much less forgiveness” from former comrades on the Left.

“Constitutionally incapable of falling apart,” Goldman soldiered on, joining anarchists fighting to defend the Republic during the Spanish Civil War. Convinced that the principal problem of Jews was their “retrograde nationalism,” she maintained in 1939 that Francisco Franco, and not Adolf Hitler, was the real enemy. She did not live long enough to eat her words.

She died in 1940, and astonishingly, officials of the United States government did not object to the request she had made to be buried in Chicago. But I doubt, as does Gornick, that anyone believed Goldman loved America, delighting in its “appetite for protest” and the determination of so many of its citizens to “rise up and claim what the democracy had promised but failed to deliver.”

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