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“PRISON CANNOT CRUSH THEIR SPIRIT”: THE IDEOLOGICAL IMPACT OF
INCARCERATION ON EMMA GOLDMAN, ALEXANDER BERKMAN,
AND EUGENE V. DEBS

by

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ABSTRACT

“PRISON CANNOT CRUSH THEIR SPIRIT”: THE IDEOLOGICAL IMPACT OF INCARCERATION ON EMMA GOLDMAN, ALEXANDER BERKMAN, AND EUGENE V. DEBS

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University of Houston-Clear Lake, 2020

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Committee Member: Barbara Hales, Ph.D.

This thesis revolves around the prison experiences of Eugene V. Debs, Emma Goldman, and Alexander Berkman. These working-class revolutionary intellectuals were each imprisoned multiple times between 1892 and 1921. By using their memoirs and prison letters, I explore and analyze how prison affected the ideology of these revolutionaries, how it changed their personal lives, and how these individuals influenced their contemporaries as well as future radicals. By examining their relationships with other inmates while incarcerated, I reveal aspects of their personal character to better illuminate their revolutionary ideals.

All three experienced profound ideological change during their first long-term imprisonment. Prison also served to reinforce their commitment to revolution. For all three, their commitment to revolutionary activism and organizing forced them back into

prison cells, and all three emerged from their second long-term prison sentences yet more committed to their ideals.

For Eugene Debs, this thesis focuses on his time at the Woodstock prison in Illinois as a result of his role in the 1894 Pullman Strike, as well as his time at the federal penitentiary at Atlanta for violating the Espionage Act in 1918. For Emma Goldman, this thesis looks at her time at Blackwell's Island in 1893 after she was convicted on charges of inciting to riot, as well as her imprisonment in 1917 at the Missouri State Penitentiary for violating the Espionage Act. For Alexander Berkman, this thesis explores his fourteen years at the Western Penitentiary from 1892 - 1906 for his attempted assassination of Henry Clay Frick, as well as his imprisonment at the federal penitentiary at Atlanta for violating the Espionage Act in 1917.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In an article that Eugene Debs published in *Century Magazine* in 1922 and later reproduced in his book *Walls and Bars* (1927), he stated: “Personally, I feel amply rewarded for the opportunity that was given me to see and know the prison as it is, for while I was a prisoner at Atlanta I learned more of a vital nature to me than could have been taught me in any similar period in the classroom of any university.” For Debs, his imprisonment provided an opportunity to study “human nature in the abstract,” but it also was a place “above all others, where one comprehends the measureless extent of man’s inhumanity to man.” Debs hated the prison system; he thought it was “the most loathsome and debasing of human institutions.”¹ Nearly thirty years before that article was published, Debs discovered one of the many reasons why he hated the prison: “From the hour of my first imprisonment in a filthy county jail I recognized the fact that the prison was essentially an institution for the punishment of the poor.” Beginning from his time at the Cook County Jail in 1894 and lasting for the rest of his life, he believed “it to be my duty to do all in my power to humanize it as far as possible while it exists, and at the same time to put forth all my efforts to abolish the social system which makes the prison necessary by creating the victims who rot behind its ghastly walls.”²

This thesis revolves around the prison experiences of working-class revolutionary intellectuals. By using their memoirs, letters, and oral histories, I attempt to explore and analyze how prison affected the ideology of these revolutionaries, how it changed their personal lives, and how these individuals influenced their contemporaries as well as future radicals. By examining their relationships with other inmates while incarcerated, I

¹ Eugene V. Debs, *Walls and Bars* (Chicago: Press of John F. Higgins, 1927), 218-19.

² *Ibid*, 185-86.

aim to reveal aspects of their personal character which better helps to illuminate their revolutionary ideals.

My focus is on three individuals imprisoned multiple times between 1892 and 1921: Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, and Eugene V. Debs. This time period is significant for numerous reasons. In the United States, the support for socialism was gaining major steam. On the local and state level, socialist candidates were elected throughout the U.S., and, nationally, Debs's presidential campaigns received more and more votes.³ The relationship between the state and capital resulted in violent repression of the labor movement, and World War I induced more state repression on dissent and free speech, culminating in the Red Scare, resulting in the imprisonment of all three and the deportation of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman.⁴

I have chosen only three individuals, though an extraordinary number of radicals were imprisoned during this time. I have selected the most important intellectually transformative imprisoned radicals who left extensive writing from prison. While all three were devoted anti-capitalists, their views on revolution, violence, politics, and the state differed. Debs saw the ballot box as the vehicle for revolution. Democracy was paramount and the state would be used to establish a socialist society. As anarchists, Berkman and Goldman saw the state as the ultimate tool of oppression. In order to establish a socialist society, the state had to be abolished. And while their revolutionary tactics differed, all three were dedicated revolutionaries and shared other similarities as well.

³ Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, The Great War, and the Right to Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 7-23; Howard Zinn, *A People's History of The United States: 1492 – Present* (New York: First Perennial Classics, 2001), 340-41.

⁴ Richard Schneirov, Shelton Stromquist, and Nick Salvatore, eds., *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 4-5; Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 48-60.

First, they all were imprisoned at relatively the same time, beginning with Berkman in 1892, Goldman in 1893, and Debs in 1894. Later, during the crackdown on dissent and anti-war agitation, Berkman and Goldman were arrested and imprisoned in 1917, followed by Debs in 1919. During this period, all three were convicted under the newly created Espionage Act as a result of their anti-war agitation, with Berkman and Debs briefly imprisoned together at the federal penitentiary in Atlanta. Also, all three experienced profound ideological evolutions during and after their first imprisonment. Most importantly, prison failed to crush their revolutionary fervor; in fact, imprisonment strengthened and reinforced their radicalism. All three shared similar views regarding the prison as an institution. All three blamed the capitalist system for creating an environment that forced individuals into crime in order to feed themselves and their families, and they all agreed that by abolishing capitalism, the penitentiary as it existed would no longer be necessary.

While Debs was a revolutionary socialist, and Berkman and Goldman were revolutionary anarchists, they shared a mutual respect and admiration for one another.⁵ In 1892, after Berkman's failed assassination of Henry Clay Frick, Debs responded to the attack in his union's periodical, *Locomotive Firemen's Magazine*. He began his article condemning the "crime of assassination" and then proceeded to briefly compare the two men. He concluded his article by stating:

In the foregoing we have *Frick* the man responsible for the Homestead murders of workingmen, and Berkman the imported assassin, side by side, and it is possible someone can draw the line and show where there is a preponderance of depravity. If it is found on the side of the outcast Berkman, it will be in order to give the

⁵ Paul Avrich and Karen Avrich, *Sasha and Emma: The Anarchist Odyssey of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 284.

reasons for such a conclusion. But judged by their acts and motives Berkman stands a fair chance of coming out on top.⁶

At the time, Debs did not identify as a revolutionary, or even as a socialist. Many years later, after Debs was released from Atlanta, Berkman stated: “If there ever was a martyr to liberty, Debs is that man. How stupid it is of the Government to jail men of his type! Prison cannot crush their spirit, nor iron bars and brutality change their conscience. Their love of humanity transcends the fear of punishment of death.”⁷ Later, in 1926, in a letter to Debs, Goldman wrote: “I cannot tell you how much your high opinion of me and your splendid comradeship for both Alexander Berkman and myself mean to me. So very few people realize the true meaning of comradeship...But you, dear Comrade, show by your broadmindedness and your generous spirit that you realise one may differ from you and yet be honest and beyond reproach. I thank you for it.”⁸

By placing the prison experiences of these revolutionary intellectuals at the center of my study, I aim to address the problem of prison, and the experiences therein remaining on the margins of the existing historical literature. Prison altered and influenced ideology and changed the direction of activism, while also producing thousands of pages of influential writing. Yet in many biographies on these individuals, it receives a brief chapter at most. Their lives, ideology, activism, the crimes they committed, and their trials are covered extensively, but their actual time in prison is glossed or skimmed over.⁹ In each of the main four chapter introductions, I address in detail the historiographical problems for each individual.

⁶ Eugene V. Debs, “H.C. Frick and Alexander Berkman.”

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1892/920900-debs-frickandberkman.pdf>

⁷ Avrigh and Avrigh, 284.

⁸ Emma Goldman to EVD, March 18, 1926, London, England, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, ed. J. Robert Constantine, vol. 3, 1919 – 1926 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 558.

⁹ For example, Emma Goldman’s first imprisonment: Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Paul Avrigh and Karen Avrigh, *Sasha and Emma*; Marian J. Morton, *Emma Goldman and the American Left: “Nowhere at Home”* (New York:

By concentrating on these intellectual revolutionaries' prison experiences, I aim to address the lack of focus on it in the existing scholarship. Scholars have, in some cases, written extensively on their lives, ideology, political theory, trials, and works, while neglecting their time in prison.¹⁰ Prison drastically affected their ideology, how they viewed the state, their views on capitalism, and for Debs, his activism. A detailed analysis of those experiences, I believe, is paramount for a full understanding of these major revolutionaries. There is also a developing trend with historians and social scientists writing on "the carceral state." These scholars are engaging with the history of mass incarceration in the United States, looking for answers to why the United States has the world's largest prison population.¹¹

In a 2019 article in *Catalyst*, Professor John Clegg and sociologist Adaner Usmani state that "over the last five decades, the incarceration rate in the United States has exploded." They argue against "the standard story... that mass incarceration is a system of racialized social control, fashioned by a handful of Republican elites in defense of a racial order that was being challenged by the Civil Rights Movement." Clegg and

Twayne Publishers, 1992); Candace Falk, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984); Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984. Alexander Berkman's second imprisonment: Linnea Goodwin Burwood, "Alexander Berkman: Russian-American Anarchist," PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 2001. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing; William Gerard Nowlin, Jr., "The Political Thought of Alexander Berkman," (PhD diss., Tufts University, 1980). ProQuest Dissertations Publishing; John William Zalenski, "The Practice of Resistance: Eugene V. Debs, Alexander Berkman, and the Cultural Psychology of the Prisoner of Conscience," (PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 1992). ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

¹⁰ In the case of Eugene Debs, his imprisonment at Atlanta and the lack of focus on his prison memoir is most notably in Nick Salvatore's, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); and similar to Salvatore in regards to attention paid to *Walls and Bars* are Bernard J. Brommel, *Eugene V. Debs: Spokesman for Labor and Socialism* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1978); and H. Wayne Morgan, *Eugene V. Debs: Socialist for President* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1962); in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Y. Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), there are four excerpts from *Walls and Bars* as well as a brief and concise explanation of the text; More attention is paid to both Debs's imprisonment at Atlanta and his prison memoir in Ernest Freeberg's, *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

¹¹ The June 2015 issue of the *Journal of American History* featured 14 articles by scholars focused on the history of mass incarceration in the U.S. <https://jah.oah.org/projects/special-issues/carceral/>

Usmani state that this argument was popularized by Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, but they argue "this conventional account has some fatal flaws. Numerically, mass incarceration has not been characterized by rising racial disparities in punishment, but rising *class* disparity."¹² "The story of American mass incarceration," they argue, "is the story of the underdevelopment of American social democracy." If they are right "that the overdevelopment of the American penal state is a symptom of the underdevelopment of the American social policy, meaningful reform is in large part the task of winning redistribution from ruling elites."¹³

I focus on primary sources written by three revolutionaries, beginning with Debs's prison memoir, *Walls and Bars*. Published in 1927, *Walls and Bars* is a scathing and fiery examination of the American prison system, capitalism, and detailed Debs's time inside. I also use the three-volume collection of *The Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, edited by J. Robert Constantine. This collection includes over a thousand pages of letters sent by, to, and about Debs. I also draw heavily from a number of articles from the Debs collection found on the Marxists.org website. Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist* receives considerable attention, as does his *What is Communist Anarchism?* I also use two collections with works by Berkman, *Prison Blossoms: Anarchist Voices from the American Past* and *Life of an Anarchist: The Alexander Berkman Reader*. For Goldman, I obtained three separate collections of her writings and speeches and rely heavily on her autobiography, *Living My Life*.

This thesis contains six chapters, with the first and the last being the introduction and conclusion. Chapter II examines Debs's evolving ideology prior to his imprisonment

¹² John Clegg and Adaner Usmani, "The Economic Origins of Mass Incarceration," *Catalyst* 3, no.3 (Fall 2019). <https://catalyst-journal.com/vol3/no3/the-economic-origins-of-mass-incarceration#po-fn>. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, rev. ed (New York: New Press, 2012).

¹³ John Clegg and Adaner Usmani, "The Economic Origins of Mass Incarceration."

at Woodstock in 1895, the conditions at Woodstock, and finally the socialist literature that had a profound impact on Debs prior to, during, and immediately after his imprisonment. It also focuses on the visits from prominent socialists to Woodstock and their attempts to bring Debs into the socialist fold. Chapter III focuses on Emma Goldman's multiple prison experiences in 1893-94. Beginning with a brief look into her Union Square speech that led to imprisonment, it examines her time in Moyamensing Prison in Philadelphia while awaiting extradition and at the New York City jail before trial, and it then explores her ten-month incarceration at Blackwell's Island. It also focuses on Berkman's fourteen years at the Western Penitentiary in Allegheny, Pennsylvania (1892-1906). It explores how prison affected their ideologies, revolutionary activism, and how they viewed the prison system. Chapter IV explores Debs's experiences at the Moundsville prison as well as at the federal penitentiary at Atlanta (1919-1921). It looks at his relationships with other inmates as well as his supporters outside of prison, and it examines the effects prison life had on Debs. There is examination of *Walls and Bars*, and an exploration of its origins and discusses its main arguments. Finally, it explores Debs's critique of the prison system, the jailing of drug addicts, the problems of cash bail, and the interconnectedness of capitalism and the penitentiary system. Chapter V briefly explores the buildup to Berkman and Goldman's imprisonment in 1917. It looks at the formation of the No-Conscription League and their arrest. It focuses on Berkman's imprisonment at the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta, exploring prison conditions for Berkman as well as for other political prisoners, and it focuses on Goldman's imprisonment at the State Prison in Jefferson City, Missouri, looking at labor conditions within the state penitentiary as well as her relationships with prison officials and other inmates.

CHAPTER II:

“HOW I BECAME A SOCIALIST”: EUGENE V. DEBS, WOODSTOCK PRISON, AND HIS PATH TO SOCIALISM

In an article in the April 1902 issue of *The Comrade*, Eugene V. Debs described his path towards socialism. In 1894, the year after he founded the American Railway Union (ARU) to organize all workers in the industry, Debs wrote that he knew very little about socialism, and the little he did know did not impress him very much.¹⁴ Debs described himself as being completely devoted to organizing all railroad men and “ultimately the whole working class.” But it was through “the roar of conflict,” Debs proclaimed, that he was “baptized in socialism.” After Debs and some of his ARU associates were arrested for violating injunctions issued during the 1894 Pullman Strike, they served time at the McHenry County Jail at Woodstock, Illinois, arriving in June 1895. During his time at Woodstock, Debs wrote that “socialism gradually laid hold of me in its own irresistible fashion.” Almost every day, socialists sent him books, letters, and pamphlets. He was already familiar with the socialist writings of Edward Bellamy and Lawrence Gronlund, “but the writings of [Karl] Kautsky were so clear and conclusive that I readily grasped not merely his argument, but also caught the spirit of his socialist utterance.”¹⁵ While Debs did not leave Woodstock a devout socialist, by the end of 1896, a year after his release, he publicly announced his devotion to the socialist movement.¹⁶

¹⁴ For more on the ARU, see Philip Dray, *There is Power in a Union: The Epic Story of Labor in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 2010); Richard Schneirov, Shelton Stromquist, and Nick Salvatore, eds., *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

¹⁵ Eugene V. Debs, “How I Became a Socialist,” in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Y. Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 43-49.

¹⁶ “Debs Hails Socialism: Thinks It Is the Only Cure [Dec. 31, 1896], published in *Chicago Record*, Jan 1, 1897. Copy preserved in Papers of Eugene V. Debs microfilm edition, scrapbook 2, pg. 80, ed. Tim Davenport. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1896/961231-chirecord-debshailssocialism.pdf>

For Debs, his transformation from labor organizer to revolutionary socialist lasted a lifetime. This chapter seeks to examine how Debs's time as a prisoner at Woodstock altered his already evolving ideology and the role it played in his transformation to a revolutionary socialist. Historian and Debs biographer Nick Salvatore argued that "the Woodstock experience emerged as the central mythic event of Deb's life." And as time went on, the "legend grew of a dramatic conversion: that, in a flash of overwhelming insight, Debs understood the systematic problems with capitalism and the promise of Socialism and emerged from jail a changed and charged man."¹⁷ But Debs did not leave jail an expert in orthodox socialist theory, and he avoided labeling himself a socialist, briefly keeping his distance from the socialist movement.¹⁸ Nonetheless, his time at Woodstock marked Debs's public embrace of socialism as an ideology, claiming that "socialism is the only remedy...and I subscribe to it without reservation."¹⁹

It is well-documented that Debs studied socialist literature and met with prominent socialists during his time at Woodstock. On the one hand, some scholars attribute Marx's *Capital* as the main force for Debs's gradually embrace of socialism.²⁰ On the other, some scholars downplay the influence of Marx, acknowledging the important influence that Karl Kautsky, a German Marxist and revolutionary socialist in

¹⁷ Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 149-150. For more historians who dismiss the conversion myth, see Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A biography of Eugene Victor Debs* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1949); Howard H. Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953), 281; James P. Cannon's introduction to *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Y. Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 13.

¹⁸ Salvatore, 151-153.

¹⁹ "Socialism is the Only Remedy": An Interview with Eugene V. Debs, Woodstock Jail—June 26, 1895," published in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 29, 1895. Reprinted as "Eugene V. Debs in 1895," in *Appeal to Reason* (Girard, KS), whole no. 246 (Aug. 18, 1900).

²⁰ Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, The Great War, and the Right to Dissent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 13; James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America, 1912-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 6.

his own right, had on Debs.²¹ In overemphasizing Debs's "Americanism," Salvatore dismisses the influence of both Marx and Kautsky, arguing that "the Pullman and Woodstock experiences do indicate a growing radicalization, but Debs took his inspiration from Jefferson and Lincoln and not from orthodox Socialist writers."²² The "Americanist" argument remained prevalent until a 2008 article by historian Dave Burns, historian Adam Hodges argued. "Burns persuasively demonstrated that Debs rejected nationalism, citizenship, and the American Revolution as inadequate ideological means toward global socialism," Hodges wrote.²³ Burns argued that religion was the driving force for Debs: "the doctrines of socialism played a major role in Deb's movement from the particular to the universal, but his conversion to the political philosophy was an outgrowth of his radical religious views."²⁴ According to Burns, Debs "combined [Victor] Hugo's Christian humanism with Marx's radical socialism to create a dynamic revolutionary creed to combat the capitalist system that moved well beyond the parameters of Americanism."²⁵ While the emphasis on the influence of Marx is accurate, Burns failed to highlight the indirectness of that influence, ignoring the impact and major influence of the Marxist popularizer Karl Kautsky.

Throughout the scholarship on him, Debs's reading list while imprisoned at Woodstock appears. The authors are known and the works are listed, but the ideas found within those works, ideas that drastically changed and influenced Debs, are not. Historian and Debs biographer Ray Ginger provides adequate descriptions on the works of

²¹ Ginger, 173; Cannon, 13; Bernard J. Brommel, *Eugene V. Debs: Spokesman for Labor and Socialism* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1978), 38. For Kautsky, see Jukka Gronow, *On the Formation of Marxism: Karl Kautsky's Theory of Capitalism, the Marxism of the Second International and Karl Marx's Critique of Political Economy* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2016).

²² Salvatore, 153.

²³ Adam J. Hodges, "Red Scare," in *A Companion to Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Ross A. Kennedy (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 538.

²⁴ Dave Burns, "The Soul of Socialism: Christianity, Civilization, and Citizenship in the Thought of Eugene Debs," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 5, no. 2 (July 2008): 89.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

Gronlund and Bellamy, two authors already affecting Debs's ideology years before his imprisonment, but Ginger omits any analysis regarding the writings of Kautsky. To better understand the evolution of Debs's ideology leading up to Woodstock and the radicalization of his ideology while imprisoned, I argue that a more detailed examination of the ideas found within the works of Kautsky, Bellamy, and Gronlund, and the impact they had on his ideology and activism, is required.

This chapter is broken into two sections. The first section examines Debs's evolving ideology prior to his imprisonment at Woodstock, then the conditions at Woodstock, and finally the socialist literature that had a profound impact on Debs prior to, during, and immediately after his imprisonment. The second section focuses on the visits from prominent socialists to Woodstock and their attempts to bring Debs into the socialist fold.

Becoming a Socialist

During the mid-1880s, Debs's ideology was evolving in two important ways. First, Debs began to stress the notion that the working class created all the wealth for society and were entitled to fair compensation for their labor.²⁶ Second, as a result of the failed Burlington Strike of 1888-89 due to the lack of railway worker solidarity, Debs became convinced that a federation of all railway workers was essential.²⁷ These ideas became the foundational principles for the founding of the American Railway Union in 1893.²⁸ In 1894, Debs testified before the U.S. Strike Commission. Established by President Grover Cleveland in July 1894, the commission was tasked with investigating "the [Pullman] strike's causes and also recommend means for adjusting labor disputes."²⁹

²⁶ Salvatore, 59-60.

²⁷ Ibid, 77-81.

²⁸ Ibid, 115-116.

²⁹ Richard Schneirov, "Labor and the New Liberalism in the Wake of the Pullman Strike," in *The Pullman Strike and the Crisis of the 1890s: Essays on Labor and Politics*, eds. Richard Schneirov, Shelton Stromquist, and Nick Salvatore (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 210.

After stating that he believed that the government should own all railroads, the committee then asked Debs if the government should own all trades and property. Debs replied by saying, “I believe in a cooperative commonwealth as a substitute for the wage system.” “Another name for state socialism?” the committee replied. “No sir; I do not call myself a socialist,” said Debs. “There is a wide difference in the interpretation of definition of the term. I believe in the cooperative commonwealth upon the principles laid down by Lawrence Gronlund.” Debs continued by saying that he was studying the question of state socialism, “and I want much more light than I have got; I am in need of much more, and I speak for nobody but myself—but I am impressed with the conviction that the social and industrial conditions will grow worse instead of better, so long as the wage system remains in vogue.”³⁰ With his ideology evolving, Debs’s time at Woodstock provided him the opportunity to more closely examine socialist literature and visits from prominent socialists allowed him to discuss socialist ideals. While not immediate, his devotion to socialism and to class struggle strengthened.

Conditions at the McHenry County Jail were comparatively good. Believing that Debs and the ARU leaders were not criminals, Sheriff Eckert granted them a tremendous amount of freedom. At one point, a group of farmers gathered at the jail, threatened to lynch the prisoners, and demanded that the sheriff treat them roughly, but Eckert was unwilling to do so. The prisoners ate with the sheriff’s family, played soccer in the street behind the jail, and were not required to wear uniforms. From the time they awoke at six o’clock a.m. to the time they retired to bed around ten o’clock p.m., the group remained active. Before they ate breakfast, they practiced military drills for an hour and Eckert even allowed the inmates to use his rifle. Breakfast usually consisted of steak or chops,

³⁰ Salvatore, 151; “Testimony to the United States Strike Commission of Eugene V. Debs, Chicago – Aug. 20 & 25, 1894, ed. Tim Davenport. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1894/940825-debs-testimonytostrikecommission.pdf>

with fried potatoes and coffee. After breakfast, the group spent the next four or so hours studying. At noon, the inmates exercised for an hour before a lunch usually consisting of a beef roast. It was then back to studying until 6:00 p.m., then another military drill before a dinner of cold meat, bread, and milk. After two hours of debate after dinner, the group retired to bed and repeated their schedule the next day.³¹

Debs's devotion to study was well documented in the press. In June 1895, the *Chicago Chronicle* published an article describing his busy life in jail, outlining the hours Debs and his associates dedicated to study. Debs also used the interview to state his life's mission: "I intend to use all my influence, and it is very little, toward the cooperative commonwealth and against monopolistic ownership. I have given my liberty for my convictions and I am ready to give my life for them."³² A.C. Cantley of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* interviewed him and wrote that "Debs and his six associates organized themselves into a Cooperative Colony, and they named their present abode 'Liberty Jail.' They have taken up the study of political economy, their dream of cooperation, mutualism, Socialism."³³ For Debs, among the key works he studied were Gronlund's *Cooperative Commonwealth*, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, and, most importantly, the writings of Karl Kautsky.

While Debs was already familiar with Gronlund—his influence on Debs traces back to the late 1880s—his time at Woodstock allowed him the opportunity to take a more detailed look at his writings.³⁴ Born in Denmark in 1846, Gronlund emigrated to the

³¹ Ginger, 168-169.

³² Debs' Busy Life in Jail: Imprisoned Labor Leader Devotes His Time to Study: Economic Questions Debated By His Associates in Turn," published in *Chicago Chronicle*, June 19, 1895. Copy in *Papers of Eugene V. Debs* microfilm collection, reel 9, pg. 205, ed. Tim Davenport. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1895/950618-chichronicle-debsbusylifeinjail.pdf>

³³ A.C. Cantley, "A Day With Debs in Jail at Woodstock: How the Imprisoned Labor Leader and His Associates Lived in Confinement..." Published in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, July 7, 1895. Reprinted in *St. Louis Labor*, vol. 6, whole no. 404 (Oct. 31, 1908), pg. 5-6, ed. Tim Davenport. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1895/0706-cantley-daywithdebsatwoodstock.pdf>

³⁴ Ginger, 71.

United States in 1867. In 1884, Gronlund produced his most important work, *The Cooperative Commonwealth*.³⁵ Gronlund writes that

you may see that the social and political phenomena in all progressive countries, and particularly [the United States] and Great Britain, are, in a perfectly natural manner, evolving a New Social Order, a Social Democratic Order, which we have called *The Cooperative Commonwealth*; in other words, – to speak pointedly, – that Socialism is no importation, but a *home-growth*, wherever found.³⁶

The impending socialist revolution, Gronlund argues, “is strictly an evolution.”³⁷ In his work, Gronlund aims to present his interpretation of modern socialism, an extension of German socialism, by providing a concise explanation of its leading tenets. According to Gronlund, such a work in the English language did not yet exist. Historian Howard Quint stated that Gronlund was “the first to attempt...to write in English a comprehensive yet simplified analysis of Marxism for the man in the street.”³⁸ “Whenever anyone now wishes to inform himself on the subject he has to wade through innumerable books and pamphlets, mostly German,” Gronlund stated.³⁹ Throughout his text, Gronlund skillfully explicates socialist ideology, resulting in an effective explanation for Americans interested in the subject matter, but who have not yet studied the ideas in detail.

Like Marx before him, Gronlund strives to provide a realistic outlook for socialism. He aims to “determine whether the Socialist system is to be, like Thomas More’s imaginary island, a ‘Utopia:’ an *un-reality*, or not.”⁴⁰ Gronlund described the cooperative commonwealth as the “future Social Order—the natural heir of the present

³⁵ Solomon Gemorah, “Laurence Gronlund’s Ideas and Influence, 1877 – 1899” (PhD diss., New York University, 1965) 1-2, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

³⁶ Lawrence Gronlund, *The Cooperative Commonwealth in its Outlines: An Exposition of Modern Socialism* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1884), 7.
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015068648222&view=1up&seq=7>

³⁷ Ibid, 8.

³⁸ Howard H. Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953), 28.

³⁹ Ibid, 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 100.

one—in which all important instruments of production have been taken under collective control; in which the citizens are consciously public functionaries, and in which their labors are rewarded according to results.”⁴¹ Gronlund believed that society should organize itself around cooperation, not competition. To achieve this, Gronlund advocated for “the gradual extension of state activity.”⁴² For someone like Debs, Gronlund’s work provided an excellent introduction to socialism, and Debs regarded him “as one of the brainiest men of [their] times.”⁴³

Immediately upon his release from prison, Debs started “calling on all workers to use their ballots to establish the co-operative commonwealth.” He also joined the Brotherhood of the Cooperative Commonwealth, formed in January 1897, that planned “to build a socialist America by combining the techniques of colonization and voting.”⁴⁴ In a letter to the editor of the *New York Journal*, Debs claimed that “the country is ripe for such a movement, and I believe the coming convention of the [ARU] will launch it.”⁴⁵ Debs wished that during the ARU’s upcoming convention, in mid-June 1897, the organization would “declare in favor of the cooperative commonwealth.”⁴⁶ Not only did the ARU indeed do so, but the organization now called itself the Social Democracy of America (SDA) and changed the name of their newspaper, the *Railway Times*, to the *Social Democrat*.⁴⁷ Despite the colonization scheme creating major divisions within the

⁴¹ Ibid, 102.

⁴² Ginger, 71.

⁴³ EVD to Frank X. Holl, March 24, 1896, Terre Haute, Indiana, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, ed. J. Robert Constantine, vol. 1, 1874 – 1912 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 118.

⁴⁴ Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement: 1897 – 1912* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2004), 48.

⁴⁵ Eugene V. Debs, “The New Commonwealth: Letter to the Editor of the *New York Journal* (April 16, 1897), published in the *New York Journal*, unspecified date.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1897/970416-debs-anewcommonwealth.pdf>

⁴⁶ Eugene V. Debs, “The Cooperative Commonwealth,” (June 1, 1897), written for the Scripps-McRae League. As published in the *Cincinnati Post*, June 3, 1897, unspecified page.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1897/18970601-debs-thecooperativecommonwealth.pdf>

⁴⁷ Bernard J. Brommel, “Debs’s Cooperative Commonwealth Plan for Workers,” *Labor History* 12, no. 4 (Fall 1971): 562.

SDA, Debs spent the next year advocating for it.⁴⁸ Debs wanted to settle “the unemployed in some Western State...and to secure lands and establish industries upon a cooperative basis, in which they shall find employment and gradually build up their institutions, and thus prepare the way for the fraternal commonwealth.”⁴⁹ To usher in a new social order, one where the means of production were collectively owned, Debs believed the colonization scheme and political action were the correct path. The plan would eventually be one of the main reasons the SDA spilt into two factions, and despite Debs’s initial support, the *Chicago Chronicle* reported that “in one year’s experience he had determined that the colonization scheme which he had fathered was chimerical.”⁵⁰ In *The Cooperative Commonwealth*, Gronlund did not describe such a plan, but was in favor of it, stating that the plan was admirable and “emphasized that collectivism can be aided by such experimental methods.”⁵¹ After he passed away in October 1899, Debs said Gronlund’s life “was a ceaseless sacrifice to a cause to which he gave his ripest thought and unrelaxing energy...Though dead he lives in his works. His books are his eternal monuments. He lived gloriously in advance of his time. Laurence Gronlund...loved his fellowmen.”⁵²

Initially after its publication, *The Cooperative Commonwealth* failed to reach many people outside of the socialist circle, but its importance can be traced to another author who, like Gronlund, Debs was already familiar with.⁵³ According to Howard Quint, Gronlund’s work “made a deep and lasting impression on the mind of Edward

⁴⁸ Ibid, 562-569.

⁴⁹ Debs, “The Cooperative Commonwealth.”

⁵⁰ “Debs Goes Out: Social Democracy is Split into Two Factions,” published in *Chicago Chronicle*, June 12, 1898, unspecified page. Copy preserved in *The Papers of Eugene V. Debs, 1834 – 1945* microfilm collection, reel 9. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1898/980612-chicagochronicle-twoconventions.pdf>

⁵¹ Gemorah, 261-262.

⁵² Ibid, 9.

⁵³ Salvatore, *Citizen and Socialist*, 101-103.

Bellamy,” another major influence on Debs.⁵⁴ The success of Bellamy’s novel, *Looking Backward, 2000 – 1887*, brought greater exposure to Gronlund’s work, “in spite of the fact that Gronlund ordered its sale halted in order to push the sale of Bellamy’s book.”⁵⁵ In Quint’s study examining the growth of the socialist movement during the last decades of the nineteenth century, he stated that the movement “owed more for its inspiration to Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* than it did to Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*.”⁵⁶ Historian Paul Buhle refers to Bellamy as the “most important radical writer of the nineteenth century.”⁵⁷

According to J.A. Wayland (1854-1912), socialist newspaper editor, Bellamy’s work “popularized socialism, made it interesting, and started millions to thinking along lines entirely new to them.”⁵⁸ In 1898, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) praised Bellamy’s work and stated “that no more effective work had been done for socialism in the United States than that by Bellamy.”⁵⁹ After Debs learned of Bellamy’s passing in May 1898, he published an article praising him and his work: “Rarely has a book created such a profound impression on the popular mind...*Looking Backward* was the first popular exposition of socialism in this country. Thousands read it with keen delight without being aware that it undermined the existing social order and paved the way for the social commonwealth.”⁶⁰ *Looking Backward* tells the story of a young, middle-class man from Boston “who awakens in a utopian future where all the social problems have

⁵⁴ Quint, 30. https://mises.org/sites/default/files/The%20Forging%20of%20American%20Socialism_3.pdf

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid, vii.

⁵⁷ Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London: Verso, 1991), 70.

⁵⁸ Quint, 73; J.A. Wayland started the widely popular socialist paper *Appeal to Reason* in 1895, see Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement*, 44-46.

⁵⁹ Quint, 73.

⁶⁰ Eugene Debs, “Edward Bellamy was a Friend of Mine,” published as “Mr. Debs on Bellamy” in *Terre Haute Express*, May 29, 1898, unspecified page.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1898/980528-debs-edwardbellamy.pdf>

been resolved through a cooperative partnership.”⁶¹ Evolving out of the capitalistic system, the state had nonviolently seized control of the means of production, “consolidated it into one huge trust,” and it was “operated by the nation in the interest of citizens.” *Looking Backward* “portrayed an era of unlimited human happiness, of intellectual achievement, of scientific achievement... The wastes and social blunders of the past were gone.”⁶²

Quint states that Bellamy had not read anything by Marx, Engels, or any other well-known socialist theorists before writing *Looking Backward*. For Bellamy, like Debs, it was Gronlund who introduced him to the theories of “scientific socialism.”⁶³ But what was lacking from both Gronlund’s and Bellamy’s writings were proper explanations regarding class struggle, Gronlund even “refused to accept the class-struggle thesis.”⁶⁴ For an introduction to class struggle theory, Debs was drawn to the writings of another European Marxist popularizer.

According to Debs, the writings of Karl Kautsky impacted him the most. Sometimes referred to as “vulgar Marxism” because of its simplified interpretations of Marx’s work, Kautsky played a significant role in bringing this doctrine to the “leaders of the working-class movement and the activists who followed them.”⁶⁵ First published in 1892, Kautsky’s *The Class Struggle* outlined the Congress of the German Social Democratic Party’s new program. Like *Cooperative Commonwealth*, its purpose was to explain socialist thought, and it was designed “to be available for the average person’s use” and to “fill the gap between propaganda pamphlets on the one side and special

⁶¹ Buhle, 70.

⁶² Quint, 76-77.

⁶³ Ibid, 78.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 28, 78.

⁶⁵ Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 5.

monographs on the other.”⁶⁶ Kautsky stated that only the working class can socially transform society and it is the job of a socialist party to organize and unify them:

This social transformation means the liberation, not only of the proletariat, but of the whole human race. Only the working-class, however, can bring it about. All other classes, despite their conflicting interests, maintain their existence on the basis of the private ownership of the means of production, and therefore have a common motive for supporting the principles of the existing social order. The struggle of the working-class against capitalist exploitation is necessarily a political struggle. The working-class cannot develop its economic organization and wage its economic battles without political rights. It cannot accomplish the transfer of the means of production to the community as a whole without first having come into possession of political power. To make this struggle of the workers conscious and unified, to keep its one great object in view, --this is the purpose of the Socialist Party.⁶⁷

Throughout his life, Debs believed in the power of political action. In the mid-1880s, he saw political action as a way to achieve labor’s modest demands.⁶⁸ The Pullman strike proved to Debs “that the time has come for a new [political] party to take the reins of government.”⁶⁹ Debs made it clear that the SDA was defined by political action: “The Social Democracy is not a colonization scheme. It is a political movement. Were the colonization plan to prove a failure, it would not stop the Social Democracy movement.”⁷⁰ While the colonization scheme created internal conflict in the SDA, so too did political action and a faction of the group, including Debs, left the SDA and formed the Social Democratic Party of America (SDP) in June 1898. In an address to the members of the SDA detailing the reasons for the split, the SDP stated its motto and intentions: “The motto of the Social Democratic Party is pure socialism and no

⁶⁶ Karl Kautsky, *The Class Struggle (Erfurt Program)*, trans. William E. Bohn (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1910), 3.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 159.

⁶⁸ Salvatore, *Citizen and Socialist*, 60.

⁶⁹ Eugene V. Debs, “Political Lessons of the Pullman Strike,” published as “Political Lessons” in *Railway Times*, vol. 2, no. 5 (March 1, 1895), pg. 1, ed. Tim Davenport.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1895/950301-debs-politicallessons.pdf>

⁷⁰ Eugene V. Debs, “A Political Movement: Statement to the *Milwaukee Daily News*,” (circa July 7, 1897). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1897/970707c-debs-oncolonizationmilwaukee.pdf>

compromise. The party stands for united political action...Comrades, we feel that the Social Democratic Party is the party of the American socialist movement. It stands for international socialism and appeals for support on its merits as a class-conscious, revolutionary social organization.”⁷¹

Kautsky’s *The Class Struggle* and his elucidation of the Social Democratic Party of Germany’s new program provided Debs a concise introduction to socialist ideology. It also provided the SDP of America a revolutionary platform to build upon. In *The Class Struggle*, Kautsky expounds on the difference between social reform and social revolution:

For the last hundred years thinkers and statesmen among the possessing classes have been trying to prevent the threatened downfall of the system of private property in the instruments of production, that is to say, to prevent revolution. Social reform is the name they give to their perpetual tinkering with the industrial mechanism for the sake of removing this or that ill effect of private property in the means of production, at least of softening its edge, without touching private property itself.⁷²

Kautsky believed that the social revolution, “the abolition of private property in the means of production,” was the “irresistible, inevitable course of evolution.” And while the social revolution was inevitable,” Kautsky stated, “we do not mean that some good fairy has brought about the revolution.”⁷³ The working class, the exploited masses, must seize political power from the ruling, capitalist class. It was the job of socialists to educate and organize them.

Describing the purpose of the SDP, Debs echoed Kautsky’s words: “The Social Democratic Party is not a reform party, but a revolutionary party. It does not propose to

⁷¹ “To Members of the Social Democracy of America (June 16, 1898),” typeset and printed circular letter mailed to party members. Copy on the *Papers of Eugene V. Debs* microfilm edition, reel 6, frames 1064-1065. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1898/X-980616-sdpa-tomembersofthesda.pdf>

⁷² Kautsky, *The Class Struggle*, 89.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 89-90.

modify the competitive system, but abolish it. An examination of its platform shows that it stands unequivocally for the collective ownership and control of all the means of wealth production and distribution—in a word socialism.”⁷⁴ Debs declared that the SDP was organizing to democratically seize control of the government. Securing political power would facilitate the replacement of the competitive system with a cooperative one, paving the way for the collective ownership of industry.⁷⁵ To achieve this, Debs believed that the number one objective of the SDP was to organize “the working class into a political party to conquer the public powers now controlled by capitalists.”⁷⁶

Beginning during his time at Woodstock and lasting for the rest of his life, Debs considered himself a faithful friend and comrade of Kautsky. Nearly ten months before Debs passed away, after he received a kindly birthday greeting from Kautsky, Debs wrote to him to express his appreciation and gratitude:

It was from you, dear comrade, that I learned some of my earliest and most precious lessons in socialism, and I have always felt myself in debt...to your gifted pen for having opened my eyes to the light which guided me into the socialist movement. I was in jail, one of the innumerable victims of capitalism, sitting in darkness as it were, when your pamphlets first came into my hands and your influence first made itself felt in my life, and I have since wondered often how any one [sic], however feeble and benighted mentally, could read your crystal-clear Marxian expositions and interpretations without becoming and remaining a socialist.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Eugene V. Debs, “The Social Democratic Party: Revolutionary Not Reform (March 6, 1900),” published in *New York Journal*, March 7, 1900, unspecified page. Copy preserved on Papers of Eugene V. Debs microfilm edition reel 9. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1900/000306-debs-lettertonyjourn.pdf>

⁷⁵ Eugene V. Debs, “Competition vs. Cooperation,” speech delivered at Central Music Hall, Chicago, IL, Sept. 29, 1900, ed. Tim Davenport. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1900/0929-debs-competitionvcooperation.pdf>

⁷⁶ Eugene V. Debs, “The Social Democratic Party (August 23, 1900),” published in *The Independent* [New York], vol. 52, whole no. 2699 (Aug 23, 1900), pp. 2018-2021. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1900/000823-debs-thesocialdemocraticparty.pdf>

⁷⁷ EVD to Karl Kautsky, December 4, 1925, Terre Haute, Indiana in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, ed. J. Robert Constantine, vol. 3, 1919-1926 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 523; Salvatore, 150.

Converting Debs

While studying socialism in prison impacted Debs's ideology, so too did visits from prominent people already established within the socialist movement. Immediately upon arrival at Woodstock, Debs and his fellow ARU officers were inundated with visitors and mail.⁷⁸ As a well-known labor leader, Debs became a conversion target for "the heaviest guns in the socialist battery."⁷⁹ Among those visitors were Thomas J. Morgan, Chicago labor activist, socialist, and lawyer, and J. Keir Hardie, trade unionist and British socialist, who visited Debs at Woodstock.⁸⁰

During their visit in September 1895, Debs, Morgan, and Hardie spent hours discussing socialism and the "need for an international organization to stimulate friendship among the workers."⁸¹ As a result of their discussions, they drafted a plan for the creation of the International Bureau of Correspondence and Agitation. Its objective was "to bring into active and harmonious relation all organizations and persons favorable to the establishment of the Industrial Commonwealth founded upon collective ownership of the means of production and distribution." Debs signed the document as president, but historian and Debs biographer Ray Ginger notes that Debs "was still not convinced; three months later he refused to permit Morgan to publicize it."⁸² In a letter to Morgan, Debs claimed that he was unwilling to participate in the Bureau due to an overwhelming work schedule. If Debs joined the Bureau, he felt there would be an "endless train of inquiry," so he suggested that Morgan find someone else who could dedicate more time to the organization.⁸³ Upon release, Debs was mainly concerned about rebuilding the ARU,

⁷⁸ EVD to Theodore Debs, June 16, 1895, Woodstock, IL, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 1, 87.

⁷⁹ Ginger, 173.

⁸⁰ Salvatore, 152.

⁸¹ Ginger, 173-174.

⁸² *Ibid*, 174.

⁸³ EVD to Thomas J. Morgan, November 5, 1895, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 1, 111-112.

raising money to pay creditors, and assisting strikers blacklisted as a result of their participation in the Pullman Strike.⁸⁴

The interactions with Hardie and Morgan reveal that Debs was beginning to test the waters of officially joining forces with the socialist movement, but was still unwilling to publicly announce his alignment with a socialist party or organization. Paradoxically, he was, however, willing to publicly announce his acceptance of socialism as an ideology. Three months before their visit, Debs was already declaring his acceptance of socialism as a philosophy: “Socialism is the only remedy. The philosophy of cooperation is rational, humane, and all-embracing, and I subscribe to it without reservation.”⁸⁵ And his unwillingness to participate in the Bureau was not the only socialist organization Debs declined to participate in while at Woodstock. Debs ignored an offer from the socialist members of Chicago’s trade unions to assume a leadership role in a proposed socialist industrial union. Debs also refused to “head an avowedly socialist movement committed to a revolutionary transformation of America.” Instead, Debs wanted “to unify all classes and schools of reformers to win at the polls and usher in the better day,” throwing his support behind the Populist movement.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, socialists were determined to convince Debs to align with their movement. But it was another visitor who claimed responsibility for “converting” Debs to socialism.⁸⁷

Describing his path to socialism and his time at Woodstock, Debs wrote that “when the first glimmerings of socialism were beginning to penetrate,” Victor L. Berger visited him in prison and “delivered the first impassioned message of socialism I had ever

⁸⁴ Salvatore, 156.

⁸⁵ “Socialism is the Only Remedy”: An Interview with Eugene V. Debs, Woodstock Jail—June 26, 1895,” published in *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 29, 1895. Reprinted as “Eugene V. Debs in 1895,” in *Appeal to Reason* (Girard, KS), whole no. 246 (Aug. 18, 1900), ed. Tim Davenport. <http://www.marxisthistory.org/history/usa/unions/aru/1895/0626-debs-socialismonlyremedy.pdf>

⁸⁶ Salvatore, 152, 156.

⁸⁷ Edward John Muzik, “Victor L. Berger, A Biography” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1960), 52, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

heard—the very first to set the ‘wires humming in my system.’”⁸⁸ During the Pullman Strike, Debs began publishing articles in *Vorwärts*, the Wisconsin socialist newspaper edited and published by Berger, who had been born in Austria-Hungary in 1860 and immigrated to the U.S. in 1878.⁸⁹ He took over publication of the newspaper in December 1892 and Berger biographer Edward Muzik wrote that “Berger’s assumption of the editorship marked a change in the socialism of Milwaukee. Although he had broken with the Socialist Labor Party in 1889 over the issue of independent political action, the dominant type of socialism in Milwaukee continued to be the rigid, doctrinaire socialism of that party.” After Berger took over publication, he began to espouse a “practical, evolutionary, relatively non-doctrinaire, comparatively non-rigid socialism.” This type of socialism “came to dominate in Milwaukee and eventually throughout the United States.”⁹⁰ *Vorwärts* not only allowed Berger to broadcast his socialist ideals, the paper also provided support for the working class and for the labor movement.⁹¹

Berger and his paper so strongly supported Debs and the ARU strike against the Pullman Palace Car Company that Berger became an honorary member of the ARU in 1894. Debs began writing articles for *Vorwärts* and he spoke in Milwaukee in January 1895, which may have been his first meeting with Berger. In November 1895, Berger visited Debs at Woodstock, spending the day with him discussing the economic and political issues of the day. Berger passionately argued for socialism and left the interview thinking that Debs “was still trying to decide between capitalism and socialism.” Many times, throughout his life, “when it suited his convenience,” Muzik noted, Berger claimed

⁸⁸ Eugene V. Debs, “How I Became a Socialist,” in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Y. Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 43-49.

⁸⁹ Muzik, 17, 19.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 27.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 32.

he had “made a socialist of Gene Debs.”⁹² Despite Berger’s hyperbole, Debs did credit Berger with a role in his eventual alignment with the socialist movement.

After Debs left Woodstock, however, it would take him another year to do so. Even still, historian H. Wayne Morgan argues that while Debs wasn’t ready for “full socialism,” lending “his prestige for a time to utopian comrades in the Social Democracy,”⁹³ he was, nonetheless, aligned with the movement and publicly arguing for socialism to replace capitalism beginning in January 1897. While his time at Woodstock does not reveal some dramatic conversion, as some scholars have argued, it does reveal a transformative moment in Debs’s life where his already evolving ideology, one that was gradually moving towards socialism, began to dominate his thought. This gradual transition was heavily influenced by the works of Bellamy and Gronlund in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Before his arrest, Debs was calling for the wage system to be replaced by a system of cooperation, but he made sure to not label himself a socialist. Two weeks into his imprisonment at Woodstock, Debs publicly stated that socialism was the only remedy for labor going forward, but avoided publicly aligning with the socialist movement.

And while the influence of Bellamy and Gronlund, along with his evolving ideology prior to his imprisonment, dispel the conversion myth, the influence of Gronlund and Karl Kautsky served to greatly expand Debs’s thought past the “classic American example.”⁹⁴ While Gronlund began his career as a Marxist popularizer in the U.S., he was not writing from a U.S. perspective. Gronlund’s task was to present German socialism to the average U.S. worker, and his writings had a profound and lasting effect

⁹² Ibid, 50-52.

⁹³ H. Wayne Morgan, ed., *American Socialism, 1900-1960* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 3.

⁹⁴ Salvatore, 152.

on Debs. Introduced to the works of Kautsky while imprisoned at Woodstock, the writings of the German Marxist popularizer influenced Debs in significant ways. Kautsky served to reinforce Debs's commitment to the ballot box, showing that the role of socialists was to organize the working class in order to wrestle political power away from the capitalist class. Throughout his career as a socialist agitator, Debs often stressed the notion that one of the roles of the Socialist Party of America was to educate the working class, a task that Kautsky extolls in *The Class Struggle*. In public and in private correspondence, Debs remained forever grateful to Kautsky, thanking him for his influence. Likewise, all three of the socialists who visited Debs at Woodstock were Europeans. Although Debs's relationship with Berger soured over the years, he acknowledged Berger as a positive influence on him and his eventual alignment with the Socialist movement. His time at Woodstock reveals a moment in Debs's life when his ideas and beliefs deeply rooted in American traditions converged with a more radical, class-conscious, and revolutionary brand of German socialism. Gronlund and Bellamy had laid the foundation, and his time at Woodstock all but finalized it.

CHAPTER III:

“I AM MORE OF AN ANARCHIST THAN EVER”: THE PRISON EXPERIENCES OF EMMA GOLDMAN AND ALEXANDER BERKMAN, 1892 - 1906

In October 1893, Emma Goldman was found guilty of inciting to riot and sentenced to a year’s imprisonment as a result of a speech she delivered on August 21 at Union Square in New York City.⁹⁵ In her speech, Goldman challenged the audience: “Demand work. If they do not give you work, demand bread. If they deny you both, take bread. It is your sacred right!”⁹⁶ Serving her time at Blackwell’s Island Penitentiary in New York, Goldman wrote to her friend Claus Timmermann portraying herself as doing well despite the fact that “the circumstances until now were suitable to bend and break me.” Try as they might, “the various representatives of ‘order’ have not yet succeeded and they no longer stand a chance of ‘converting’ me; all that they have brought about is a deepening of my hatred for any kind of tyranny and oppression.” After serving her sentence, Goldman vowed to rejoin her comrades in the fight “for our beloved freedom.”⁹⁷ Reflecting back on her experience at Blackwell’s years later, Goldman defined her time in prison as a source of strength. She found the strength to “stand alone” and “to live my life and fight for my ideals.” “The State of New York,” Goldman cried, “could have rendered me no greater service than by sending me to Blackwell’s Island Penitentiary!”⁹⁸

Unlike Eugene Debs, who entered Woodstock in the midst of a profound ideological evolution, Goldman began her first imprisonment a committed anarchist. And

⁹⁵ Paul Avrich and Karen Avrich, *Sasha and Emma: The Anarchist Odyssey of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012), 116.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

⁹⁷ Emma Goldman to Clause Timmermann, Blackwell’s Island Penitentiary, New York, May 25, 1894, in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, ed. Candace Falk, vol. 1, *Made for America, 1890-1901* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 193.

⁹⁸ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* (New York: AMS Press, 1970), 148.

during her time in prison, Goldman's ideology, for the most part, remained steadfast. Therein lies the importance of her time at Blackwell's Island; her time in prison strengthened her commitment to anarchism and to revolution, and served as proof to her beliefs regarding the relationship between poverty, crime, criminals, and the state. Her time working in the prison hospital allowed her to obtain work as a practical nurse after her release, traveling to Europe shortly after to study midwifery, childhood diseases, and obstetrics, where she received diplomas in midwifery and nursing.⁹⁹ Lastly, her time in prison, while not nearly as long or as brutal, helped bring a deeper connection and understanding with her imprisoned comrade, Alexander Berkman. Yet the scholarship on Emma Goldman does not emphasize this important time in her life and its influence on her development as a revolutionary. In the key biographies on Goldman, her time at Blackwell's Island, as well as her brief imprisonment at Moyamensing Prison in Philadelphia and in the New York City jail leading up to Blackwell's, does not receive adequate attention.¹⁰⁰ And while prison served to reinforce her commitment to anarchism and revolution, political theorist Nolan Bennett argues an important shift in her ideology did in fact occur during her time at Blackwell's Island, although much of her prison experiences are absent in his work. By emphasizing the importance of her autobiography *Living My Life* and her time at Blackwell's, Bennett argues that through narratives of prison and nursing, Goldman transitioned from an approach of adversarial politics to an approach of empathetic politics.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 64; Avrich and Avrich, 121-122.

¹⁰⁰ See Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise*; Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*; Marian J. Morton, *Emma Goldman and the American Left: "Nowhere at Home"* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992); Candace Falk, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1984); Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

¹⁰¹ Bennet states that "although both approaches seek the people's emancipation from the state, each offers different analyses of authority and plans of action." Nolan Bennett, "Emma Goldman and the Autobiography of the People," *American Political Thought: A Journal of Ideas, Institutions, and Culture* 6 (Winter 2017), 55-56.

In general, scholarship on Alexander Berkman is rather limited. In her 2001 dissertation, Linnea Goodwin Burwood points out that no one had published a biography of Berkman or seriously examined his contributions to anarchism.¹⁰² Aside from Paul and Karen Avrich's *Sasha and Emma*, her statement still holds true. With the publication of *Prison Blossoms: Anarchist Voices from the American Past* in 2011, Berkman's underground prison magazine was reproduced for the first time. This publication provides scholars with a valuable resource to examine both Berkman's political ideology as well as another resource to explore what life was like inside the Western Penitentiary of Pennsylvania. Yet since its publication, no new scholarship centered on Berkman and his prison experience has been produced. Along with Berkman's *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, *Prison Blossoms* reveal the brutalities of prison and provides an exceptional story of an imprisoned radical's efforts to survive. This chapter aims to address that issue. By placing their prison experiences at the center, I argue that the prison experiences of Alexander Berkman (1892-1906) and Emma Goldman (1893-1894) played a pivotal and substantial role in shaping their political ideology and served to strengthen and reinforce their revolutionary activism.

This chapter consists of three sections. The first section focuses on Emma Goldman's multiple prison experiences in 1893-94. Beginning with a brief look into her Union Square speech, it examines her imprisonment at Moyamensing Prison in Philadelphia while awaiting extradition and at the New York City jail before trial. Lastly, it explores her ten-month incarceration at Blackwell's Island. The second section focuses

¹⁰² Linnea Goodwin Burwood, "Alexander Berkman: Russian-American Anarchist," PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 2001, iv. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. Previous to her dissertation, two others examined Berkman's political thought and Berkman through the lens of cultural psychology of the prisoner of conscience. See William Gerard Nowlin, Jr., "The Political Thought of Alexander Berkman," (PhD diss., Tufts University, 1980), 37-8, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing; John William Zalenski, "The Practice of Resistance: Eugene V. Debs, Alexander Berkman, and the Cultural Psychology of the Prisoner of Conscience," (PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 1992). ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

on Berkman's fourteen years at the Western Penitentiary in Allegheny, Pennsylvania. By concentrating on their memoirs and political writings, the third section explores how prison affected their ideologies, revolutionary activism, and how they viewed the prison system.

Moyamensing, The Tombs, and Blackwell's Island

On August 21, 1893, Emma Goldman prepared to address a large crowd at Union Square in New York City. She had already prepared her speech in writing "and it seemed to me inspiring, but when I reached Union Square and saw the huge mass of humanity, my notes appeared cold and meaningless." In her speech, Goldman railed against the state, calling it the "machine that crushes you in order to sustain the ruling class, your masters." Do not expect the state, "the pillar of capitalism," to offer any help. She pleaded with her audience to "wake up" and to "demand your rights." "Demonstrate before the palaces of the rich," she told the unemployed workers in attendance. If they deny you work, if they deny you bread, then "take bread. It is your sacred right!" After receiving "uproarious applause," she was off to Philadelphia, where she hoped for the same.¹⁰³

Goldman's speech received widespread coverage in the New York press.¹⁰⁴ In one such article, a reporter for the *New-Yorker Staats-Zeitung* poorly summarized parts of her speech, noting that "the wording of the incendiary speech is only worth mentioning because presumably the police will be concerned with its author."¹⁰⁵ The reporter was correct. In a police affidavit issued four days after her speech, police officer Charles R. Young stated that

¹⁰³ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 122-23.

¹⁰⁴ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 113-14.

¹⁰⁵ Article in the *New-Yorker Staats-Zeitung*, New York, 22 August 1893, in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, ed. Candace Falk, vol. 1, *Made for America, 1890-1901*, 145-46.

one Emma Goldman being an evil disposed and pernicious person and of turbulent disposition...unlawfully, wickedly and maliciously intending and contriving to disturb the public peace, and to excite the citizens of this State to hatred and contempt of its government and laws, and to raise and make riots, routs and unlawful assemblies within this State and to commit crimes against the laws of this state, with force and arms...the said Emma Goldman...did then and there unlawfully wickedly and maliciously threaten to raise insurrections, routs and riots in the said City of New York, and did threaten to take steal and carry away the goods, chattels and personal property of the good citizens of the State of New York, and did make other wicked, malicious and unlawful threats.¹⁰⁶

While in Philadelphia, Goldman continued her organizing efforts for the unemployed there. On August 31, she arrived at Buffalo Hall prepared to address a crowd of around three hundred people, but New York City detectives were there to arrest her. Goldman was held for roughly ten days at Moyamensing Prison in Philadelphia before she was extradited to New York on charges of inciting to riot.¹⁰⁷

Although her stay at Moyamensing Prison was brief, Goldman “discovered in a very short time...that they would try to demoralize me with refined tortures and vile requests.”¹⁰⁸ She was kept in a “fairly large cell,” which “contained a sanitary toilet, running water, a tin cup, a wooden table, a bench, and an iron cot.” For the first few days, the only interruption of the prevailing silence was when “a voice would call for the cup and it would be passed back to me filled with tepid water or soup and a slice of bread.” “After the second day,” Goldman noted, “the stillness became oppressive and the hours crept on endlessly. I grew weary from constant pacing between the window and the door. My nerves were tense with the strain for some human sound.” After getting the attention of the matron, Goldman asked for her mail and for some books to read. She was told that there was no mail for her, Goldman “knew” she was lying, but the matron did agree to

¹⁰⁶ Police Affidavit, New York, 25 August 1893, in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, ed. Candace Falk, vol. 1, *Made for America, 1890-1901*, 148.

¹⁰⁷ Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise*, 57; Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 114.

¹⁰⁸ Emma Goldman, “The Right of Free Speech in America,” in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, ed. Candace Falk, vol. 1, *Made for America, 1890-1901*, 153.

bring her a book. As promised, the matron returned with a book: “It was the bible and it recalled to my mind the cruel face of my religious instructor in school. Indignantly I flung the volume at the matron’s feet. I had no need of religious lies; I wanted some human book,” Goldman told her. Later that evening, afflicted with a violent headache, “caused by the electric light scorching my eyes,” Goldman demanded to see the doctor. The prison physician came to see her, gave her some medicine, and Goldman again asked for something to read, “or at least some sewing.” The next day she was given some towels to hem. As she stitched, she thought of her imprisoned comrade, Sasha (Alexander Berkman): “With crushing clarity I saw what Sasha’s life in prison meant. Twenty-two years! I would go mad in a year!”¹⁰⁹

Back in New York after her extradition, Goldman was held at the city jail, also known as the Tombs, while awaiting her trial.¹¹⁰ She described the three weeks she spent there as “ample proof that the revolutionary contention that crime is the result of poverty is based on fact.” Of the seventy inmates Goldman encountered, most “came from the lowest strata of society, men and women without friends, often without a home.”¹¹¹ Nellie Bly, journalist for the *New York World*, visited Goldman in the Tombs hoping to interview the imprisoned anarchist. Goldman, hesitant at first, agreed. “Everything wrong, crime and sickness and all that, is the result of the system under which we live,” Goldman told Bly. “Were there no money and, as a result, no capitalists, people would not be over-worked, starved and illy [sic] housed, all of which makes them old before their time, diseases them and makes them criminals.” After Bly asked her to explain why there are criminals, Goldman responded: “The subject takes a lifetime, but we believe that we would not have a criminal. Why are there criminals to-day. Because some have

¹⁰⁹ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 124-25.

¹¹⁰ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 114.

¹¹¹ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 136.

everything, others nothing. Under our system it would be every man equal.” If everything was free, there would be nothing to steal, Goldman asserted.¹¹²

Officially indicted for unlawful assembly, Goldman, on the other hand, viewed her upcoming trial as an assault against free speech. While awaiting trial in the Tombs, she penned an essay titled “The Right of Free Speech in America” for the German-language anarchist-communist paper *Die Brandfackel*, claiming that “the right of free speech has been trampled upon for a long time.” Throughout the U.S., Goldman observed, more and more people were jailed as a result of union organizing, labor protests, or for simply speaking out against injustice; or, as Goldman put it, “people who dared to speak up for their inalienable rights.”¹¹³ During her trial, Goldman’s defense team argued that her intention at Union Square was not to incite a riot, but to solely “tell the unemployed the real reason for their starvation.”¹¹⁴ Judge Randolph B. Martine did not see it that way: “Your language was such as to incite disorder, to incite to riot, and the language as interpreted by those who heard it was such that a riot might have ensued.” At her sentencing Judge Martine told Goldman, “I have no hope of doing any good for you. I am satisfied that you are depraved, and have no respect for law. The sentence of the Court is that you be confined for the full term allowed by law, which is one year in the penitentiary.” Brought back to the Tombs after the sentencing, Goldman awaited transfer to the penitentiary on Blackwell’s Island.¹¹⁵

¹¹² Nellie Bly interviews Emma Goldman, in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, ed. Candace Falk, vol. 1, *Made for America, 1890-1901*, 155-58.

¹¹³ Emma Goldman, “The Right of Free Speech in America,” in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, ed. Candace Falk, vol. 1, *Made for America, 1890-1901*, 151.

¹¹⁴ Excerpt from Trial Transcript, “The People vs. Emma Goldman,” in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, ed. Candace Falk, vol. 1, *Made for America, 1890-1901*, 172.

¹¹⁵ “The Law’s Limit: Emma Goldman is Sentenced to a Year’s Imprisonment,” in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, ed. Candace Falk, vol. 1, *Made for America, 1890-1901*, 177-79.

After being confined in the Tombs, the trip to Blackwell's Island was a welcomed, albeit short, respite for Goldman. She described the island as being "beautifully situated, surrounded by water. Its grounds are lovely. It seems more like a place of enjoyment than of suffering, but one look at the gray, gloomy building is sufficient to chill the new prisoner." During her time there, Goldman had no complaints regarding the treatment she received, claiming she was treated much better than the other inmates. "It is not, therefore, any special spite I wish to vent that prompts me to place my experience before the public," Goldman noted in an article for the *New York World*, "but an earnest desire to call the attention of thinking people to the miserable conditions of the inmates there."¹¹⁶

Once inside, Goldman was called before the head matron, a "tall and very stout" woman "with a cruel, hard face and a sensual mouth."¹¹⁷ The matron's first question for her pertained to her religion. Goldman, an atheist, was told that "atheism is prohibited here. You will have to go to church." Goldman adamantly told the matron that she refused to go, "besides," Goldman replied, "I came from Jewish people. Was there a synagogue?" As the only Jewish female prisoner, the matron would not allow her to "go among so many men" to the Saturday afternoon services.¹¹⁸ She never did attend any services, but, ironically, "of the friends I made on Blackwell's Island," Goldman explains, "the priest was the most interesting."¹¹⁹

Much to her surprise, the priest at Blackwell's never pressed her to attend service or even discussed religion with her. Instead the priest only wanted to discuss books, proposing they exchange various works they had in their collection. Expecting the priest

¹¹⁶ Emma Goldman, "My Year in Stripes," in *Emma Goldman: A Documentary History of the American Years*, ed. Candace Falk, vol. 1, *Made for America, 1890-1901*, 196-97.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 197.

¹¹⁸ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 133.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, 146.

to bring her religious texts, she was pleasantly surprised when he brought her works of poetry and music. They discussed their favorite composers, poetry, and social ideas. On one occasion, she asked the priest why he never brought her a bible to read: "Because," the priest replied, "no one can understand or love it if he is forced to read it." Impressed by his response, Goldman asked the priest for one and its "simplicity of language and legendry fascinated" her. What impressed her most about the priest was his sincerity and his devotion to his ideals: "My own ideal, my faith, was at the opposite pole from his, but I knew he was as ardently sincere as I. Our fervor was our meeting-ground," Goldman noted.¹²⁰

For her work assignment, Goldman was put in charge of the sewing shop. Her responsibilities included cutting cloth, preparing work for the imprisoned women employed there, and keeping inventory of incoming material and outgoing bundles. She welcomed the work because "it helped me to forget the dreary existence within the prison." And while work helped her pass the days, "the evenings were torturous." One day the head matron told Goldman that not enough work in the shop was getting done and that it was her responsibility to get better results from the women. "I resented the suggestion that I become a slave-driver," Goldman thought. She told the matron that she preferred punishment rather than obeying the head matron's orders, since she felt herself as "one of the inmates, not above them." Prepared to accept the consequences of her actions, she would not have to. Goldman went unpunished for her disobedience. According to Goldman, within twenty-four hours, her fellow inmates learned of her actions. Initially, because the inmates were told that Goldman was a "terrible anarchist" and an atheist, they considered her a "freak." When they learned that she "had refused to play boss over them, their reserve broke down." They now considered her a friend and

¹²⁰ Ibid.

“they would do anything” for her. Goldman was “deeply moved” by the new-found admiration. “These poor creatures so hungered for kindness that the least sign of it loomed high on their horizons,” she noted. By remaining true to her ideals, Goldman earned the respect and admiration of her fellow inmates.¹²¹ Soon, she would be caring for them as well.

Two months into her sentence, Goldman was sent to the prison hospital due to an attack of rheumatism, although it took a few days to convince the head matron. During her recovery, the prison doctor asked if she would like to remain in the hospital to take care of the sick. Although she knew nothing about nursing, Goldman gladly accepted the offer. There, she learned the basics of nursing and eventually took charge of the entire prison ward. The “hours were long and strenuous, the groans of the patients nerve-racking; but I loved my job. It gave me the opportunity to come close to the sick women and bring a little cheer into their lives.”¹²²

As her release day approached, “the more unbearable life in prison became.” Her thoughts were with Alexander Berkman: “How insignificant was my own prison experienced compared with what Sasha was suffering in the Allegheny purgatory!” Goldman could now understand the reality of imprisonment, but compared to what Berkman was going through, she “now felt ashamed that, even for a moment I could have found my incarceration hard.”¹²³ She did not regret her time there, viewing it as “a school of experience.” “It was my privilege,” she boasted, “to make the lives of some of the poor, helpless ones more endurable.” She left Blackwell’s Island more determined than ever: “Yes, I am more of an Anarchist than ever. I am more than ever determined to use every means in my power to spread my doctrines among the people.”¹²⁴ And while

¹²¹ Ibid, 134-36.

¹²² Ibid, 137.

¹²³ Ibid, 147-148.

¹²⁴ Goldman, “My Year in Stripes,” 200.

Goldman was now free, her imprisoned comrade was still more than a decade away from joining her.

“I Must Die”: Alexander Berkman, the Western Penitentiary, and the Will to Live

On July 23, 1892, Alexander Berkman burst into the office of Henry Clay Frick, chairman of the board at Carnegie Steel, to assassinate the steel magnate. In the midst of the chaos, Berkman managed to shoot Frick twice and stab him several times, but Frick survived the assassination and Berkman was apprehended.¹²⁵ Placed under arrest and booked at the central police station, where police searched him and his personal belongings. Among his possessions, officers found a small dynamite capsule. During a physical examination conducted by Irwin J. Moyer, the Police Surgeon, he noticed Berkman chewing and discovered that he had concealed another dynamite capsule in the lining of his jacket.¹²⁶ Tried and convicted of six different charges, Berkman received a twenty-two-year sentence. During his trial, Berkman unsuccessfully argued that he should have been charged only with the attack on Frick, which carried a maximum seven-year sentence, but the judge overruled his objection. In September 1892, Berkman was transferred to the Western Penitentiary of Pennsylvania and was booked as Prisoner A7.¹²⁷

During his first night at the Western Penitentiary of Pennsylvania, Berkman tortuously questioned his ability to survive his twenty-two-year sentence: “What a terrible place this must be! This agony—I cannot support it. Twenty-two years! Oh, it is hopeless, hopeless. I must die. I’ll die to-night....” It wasn’t just the nauseating odors of his cell, the darkness, the silence, and the “damp, musty walls” that were driving him mad, it was also the overwhelming sense of failure that drove his desire to take his own

¹²⁵ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 66-7.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 69-71.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 95-7.

life. He had failed at his *attentat*: “Frick is now well, and I must die.” Desperate to end his own life, that night, Berkman noticed something in the corner of his cell: “It is a spoon. For a moment I hold it indifferently; then a great joy overwhelms me. Now I can die!”¹²⁸ He began to sharpen the spoon on a stone, sharpening the edge enough to cut his finger. Before he could jab the crude object into his chest, a prison guard caught him and he was thrown in the hole for three days.¹²⁹

Thoughts of suicide dominated Berkman’s thoughts until he received a glimmer of hope: the idea of escape. Hidden in a towel, he received a crudely-written note that implied some of his fellow prisoners were going to break out of the prison and that he could join them. Unaware of who sent the note, he wondered if it was a trap or if it was even possible, “yet the suggestion of escape has germinated hope,” he thought. “The will to live is beginning to assert itself, growing more imperative as the days go by. I wonder that my mind dwells upon suicide more and more rarely, ever more cursorily. The thought of self-destruction fills me with dismay.” He now vowed to exhaust every possibility of escape before he would take his own life.¹³⁰

After what seemed like an eternity to Berkman, though it was just two weeks after he arrived, he was “at last” assigned to work in the mat shop, where “the air is heavy with dust; the rattling of the looms is deafening. An atmosphere of noisy gloom pervades the place.” Another prisoner working in the mat shop described it to Berkman as the “crank shop.” Berkman suggested that it couldn’t be that bad. “It ain’t, eh? Wat d’*you* know ‘bout it?” the prisoner responded. “I’ve got the con bad, spittin’ blood every night. Dis dust’s killin’ me. Kill you, too, damn quick.” Almost immediately, Berkman felt the effects of working in the shop. Because of the dust, Berkman experienced pain in his

¹²⁸ Berkman, *Prison Memoirs of an Anarchist*, 96-97.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 100-103.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 111, 113.

throat and his eyes, and he was unable to keep pace with his production quota. Berkman was told that if he did not pick up the pace, then he would be thrown in the hole.¹³¹

After a prisoner fainted while working, a doctor arrived to examine him. While Berkman explained to the doctor what happened, the doctor asked him what was wrong with his eyes and if they were always so inflamed. Berkman responded by saying that his eyes were fine until he started working in the shop. As a result, he received an examination and was removed from the mat shop and placed in the hosiery department. Not only were working conditions more favorable there, so too were the chances of escape. Working in the hosiery department, the days and weeks tediously passed by. To steer his thoughts away from his friends, revolutionary work, “the terrible injustice of my excessive sentence,” escape, and suicide, Berkman forced himself to concentrate on his work.¹³²

Three months into his sentence, Berkman, having difficulty fulfilling his own work obligations, witnessed an injustice against one of his fellow inmates in the hosiery department, a recent arrival, Johnny Davis. Jack Bradford, another recent arrival, was stealing Johnny’s work, causing Johnny repeated punishment for falling short of his quota. After repeated trips to the hole, Davis finally snapped and attacked Bradford. Before the attack, Berkman witnessed Bradford stealing the socks, and despite the fact that “to protest against injustice is unavailing and dangerous” inside the Western Penitentiary, Berkman decided that “it is my duty as a revolutionist to take the part of the persecuted.” Davis received ten days in the hole because he admitted to starting the fight. Having doubts about whether to intervene or not, Berkman started to “feel ashamed of my weakness.” Berkman filed his complaint with the prison deputy, but it made no

¹³¹ Ibid, 128-131.

¹³² Ibid, 132-35

difference.¹³³ Davis continued to fall short of his quota and was placed in solitary confinement. It was not long before Berkman himself was placed there as well.

While in solitary, Berkman learned the “sad” story of Johnny Davis’s life. Davis, nineteen years old, was serving a five-year sentence. His father, a brakeman, was killed in a railroad collision and the family struggled as the suit for damages “was dragged through years of litigation.” Since the age of fourteen, Davis was forced to support his whole family. He found employment as a driver for a delivery wagon but began “associating with a rough element that gradually drew him into gambling. One day a shortage of twelve dollars was discovered in the boy’s accounts: the mills of justice began to grind, and Johnny was speedily clad in stripes.” In his cell, Berkman hopelessly attempted to distract himself from his reality by reading, but “the cries and moans” from Johnny in the cell above him forced him to endure “the terrible tragedy of reality.” Through Johnny Davis’s unfortunate life, Berkman described the “hypocrisy of organized society”:

What a monstrous thing it is that the whole power of the commonwealth, all the machinery of government, is concentrated to crush this unfortunate atom! Innocently guilty, too, the poor boy is ensnared by the gaming spirit of the time, the feeble creature of vitiating environment, his fate is sealed by a moment of weakness. Yet his deviation from the path of established ethics is but a faint reflection of the lives of the men that decreed his doom. The hypocrisy of organized society! The very foundation of its existence rests upon the negation and defiance of every professed principle of right and justice. Every feature of its face is a caricature, a travesty upon the semblance of truth; the whole life of humanity a mockery of the very name.

To Berkman, the “nightmare” that was prison “is but an intensified replica of the world beyond, the larger prison locked with the levers of greed, guarded by the spawn of Hunger.”¹³⁴ And while reading failed to distract Berkman from his unfortunate reality at

¹³³ Ibid, 153-58.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 223-25.

that particular moment, reading, studying, and writing did provide a welcomed distraction during his imprisonment.¹³⁵

As Berkman traveled to Pennsylvania in July 1892 to carry out his *attentat* on Frick, he had with him the addresses of two German anarchists, Henry Bauer and Carl Nold, and he hoped that they would assist him with his plan. Both Bauer and Nold had been active during the Homestead Strike, and they both welcomed Berkman. While preparing for his attack, Berkman stayed at Nold's home for a week, and they both sometimes joined Berkman as he scouted out Frick's offices.¹³⁶ After the failed assassination, both Bauer and Nold were arrested and charged with complicity in the attack on Frick.¹³⁷ In February 1893, they were tried, convicted and sentenced to five years' imprisonment at the Western Penitentiary. Not only did their arrival lift Berkman's spirits, the trio began to exchange notes and their correspondence evolved into the three creating an underground magazine, *Prison Blossoms*.¹³⁸

According to Miriam Brody and Bonnie Buettner, editors of the *Prison Blossoms* collection, Nold, Bauer, and Berkman "intended that the documents would form the basis of a larger work on anarchism and prison life in America."¹³⁹ Most of the writings for *Prison Blossoms* were created from 1893 to 1897. The three inmates communicated with each other by speaking through empty water pipes or by smuggled notes to one another.¹⁴⁰ The underground magazine offered the three imprisoned comrades an escape from the boredom and suffering of penitentiary life as well as a forum for political

¹³⁵ Ibid, 283.

¹³⁶ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 61-64.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 81.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 101-102.

¹³⁹ Miriam Brody and Bonnie Buettner, eds., *Prison Blossoms: Anarchist Voices from the American Past* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2011), x.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, xvi-xvii.

debate.¹⁴¹ Perhaps most importantly, *Prison Blossoms* provides vivid and comprehensive descriptions of life inside the Western Penitentiary of Pennsylvania.

One such article entitled “Penitentiary Administration and Treatment of Prisoners,” authored by Henry Bauer, begins by citing George Kennan’s work on Siberian prisons and the cruel treatment of prisoners there.¹⁴² Kennan first travelled to Siberia to survey a proposed route for the American Telegraph Company in 1864. In order to silence czarist critics, Kennan proposed in 1884 to study the Siberian exile system. Kennan began his work as a supporter of the czarist regime, but during a long trip from May 1885 to August 1886, he drastically changed his opinion. Upon his return to the U.S., he toured the country outlining the horrors he saw within the Siberian penal system. Historian Julia Mickenberg called his book *Siberia and the Exile System* the “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of the Russian penal system.”¹⁴³

Bauer stated that “whoever has read it and has been in an American prison cannot avoid thinking that American prisons, their administration, and the treatment of prisoners would make a good companion piece to the Russian system.” According to Bauer, the warden was a “power-hungry” man who liked “to command and to invent rules,” which resulted in the “most ridiculous” and “witless orders.” He claimed that “some guards are horrible addicted to schnapps, and not infrequently start work half drunk. For others, the prison is like a pantry; what they need, they haul home.” All food preparation was done by prisoners, and “it is as if the Warden downright intentionally seeks out only those prisoners to work in the kitchen who chew tobacco and don’t much care whether they spit in the saucepan, on the floor, or in the spittoon.” The food was awful, the water dirty, and

¹⁴¹ Ibid, xlvii.

¹⁴² Henry Bauer, “Penitentiary Administration and Treatment of Prisoners,” in *Prison Blossoms: Anarchist Voices from the American Past*, eds., Miriam Brody and Bonnie Buettner, 108.

¹⁴³ Julia L. Mickenberg, *American Girls in Red Russia: Chasing the Soviet Dream* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 43-44.

the good meat that was delivered to the prison was either stolen by guards or sold by prisoners working in the kitchen to other prisoners who can afford it. They served food to the prisoners “in dirty, rusty, unappetizing tin bowls, from which no one can eat without disgust,” Bauer noted. He detailed the lack of education within the prison and provided detailed descriptions of prison labor. He described the brutal beating of a prisoner who “was undoubtedly mentally disturbed” and another prisoner who “was literally driven to suicide.” Another prisoner, called the prison Chaplain a liar, and was thrown into the hole for seventeen days where he was given “insufficient water and two ounces of bread per day.” Numerous other instances of excessive abuse and punishment are described as well. Punishment consisted of either being thrown in “the dungeon” [the hole], where they were expected to live on two ounces of bread and two drinks of water a day, or in the “basket,” where they received the “Pennsylvania diet,” which consisted of “bread and water-coffee and once or twice a week a little soup without meat.” Prisoners were kept on this “diet” for weeks or months at a time. Prisoners were also subjected to the “straitjacket” or “chaining-up” forms of punishment. “Several hours spent in a straitjacket are enough to make the prisoner numb all over,” Bauer noted. While in the hole, prisoners were sometimes subjected to the punishment of “chaining-up.” The prisoner was “chained high on the bars of his cell by his wrists, his feet on the ground, his arms pulled up high, in which position his blood circulation is made difficult. The prisoner is held in this position from six a.m. to four p.m. daily, sometimes for eight or nine days, on two ounces of bread and a drink of dirty water twice daily.” In other cases, prisoners were kept in their cells for up to three years. According to Bauer, prisoners were hesitant to report such atrocities after their release out of fear that if they end up back in prison, their treatment would be even worse.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Bauer, “Penitentiary Administration and Treatment of Prisoners,” 108-130.

During his time at the Western Penitentiary, Berkman endured years of brutal treatment. Time after time, prison authorities sent him to the hole for minor offenses, forced to survive on bread and water. He was often placed in solitary confinement, with one stint lasting sixteen months.¹⁴⁵ Historian Paul Avrich writes that “Berkman’s survival of prison, with its long stretches of solitary confinement, bears witness to his indomitable spirit.”¹⁴⁶ After trumped up charges of “disturbing the peace” along with the ridiculous charge of “making demands,” Berkman was placed in the “basket” cell and was forced to endure the “Pennsylvania diet.” After weeks of the diet, he was “reduced...almost to a skeleton.” For Berkman

The torture of the “basket” is maddening; the constant dusk is driving me blind. Almost no light or air reaches me through the close wire netting covering the barred door. The foul odor is stifling; it grips my throat with deathly hold. The walls hem me in; daily they press closer upon me, till the cell seems to contract, and I feel crushed in the coffin of stone. From every point the whitewashed sides glare at me, unyielding, inexorable, in confident assurance of their prey.¹⁴⁷

Another time, Berkman was placed on the “diet” for a week for simply insulting an officer.¹⁴⁸ Echoing his imprisoned comrade in a letter to Goldman, Berkman stated that if George Kennan could see the truth of American penal institutions, he would have to change his opinion on U.S. prisons the same way he changed his opinion on Russia.¹⁴⁹

True to his word, after all attempts of prison escape were exhausted, including an underground tunnel discovered by authorities before Berkman could crawl his way to freedom, he once again attempted to end his own life. “Bereft of the last hope of freedom, I grow indifferent to life...The world will not miss me. An atom of matter, I shall return

¹⁴⁵ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 107.

¹⁴⁶ Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 203.

¹⁴⁷ Berkman, *Prison Memoirs*, 217-19.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 336.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 299.

to endless space. Everything will pursue its wonted course, but I shall know no more of the bitter struggle and strife. My friends will sorrow, and yet be glad my pain is over, and continue on their way.”¹⁵⁰ In July 1901, he tried to hang himself using a strip from his blanket. Prison guards discovered him hanging from the top of his cell and were able to cut him down and managed to get him to the prison hospital. Close to death upon arrival, doctors were able to revive him.¹⁵¹

Berkman managed to recover, both mentally and physically.¹⁵² Thanks to a 1901 Pennsylvania state law, Berkman’s sentenced was reduced and he now had four more years left in the penitentiary and one year in a workhouse. The law was passed for the benefit of two wealthy Philadelphia tobacco manufacturers who were convicted of defrauding the federal government. Ironically, the law did not help the tobacco manufacturers since they committed a federal offence, and efforts were made to rescind the law but were unsuccessful. In May 1906, Alexander Berkman left the workhouse a free man. Despite years of solitary confinement, weeks in the hole or in the “basket” cell, and having to witness the death of friends inside prison, Berkman survived. Most importantly for Berkman, his commitment to anarchism survived as well.¹⁵³

Crime, Prison, and Evolving Ideology

According to historian and sociologist Dan Colson, Berkman was unique among pre-World War II anarchists because he was the only one who wrote about violence and then followed through with it. While Berkman left Western Penitentiary still committed to anarchism, he now rejected violence as an anarchist tactic.¹⁵⁴ In Berkman’s political text *What is Communist Anarchism*, Berkman posed the question: “Is anarchism

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 399.

¹⁵¹ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 133.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Burwood, “Alexander Berkman: Russian-American Anarchist,” 118-119.

¹⁵⁴ Dan Colson, “Propaganda and the Deed: Anarchism, Violence and the Representational Impulse.” *American Studies* 56, no. 1 (2017), 171.

violence?” In his response, Berkman stated that the reader can take his word on the subject since he is one of the anarchists that should know. He explained that “many anarchists who at one time believed in violence as a means of propaganda have changed their opinion about it and do not favor such methods anymore.” While violence may have been effective in earlier times and in certain locations, “modern conditions of life make them unnecessary and even harmful to the spread of their ideas.” He now felt that “violence is the method of ignorance, the weapon of the weak. The strong of heart and brain need no violence.” To Berkman, the ideal society, anarchy, is a society “without force and compulsion, where all men shall be equals, and live in freedom, peace, and harmony.”¹⁵⁵

While Berkman’s adherence to violence had evolved during and after his time in prison, historian William Nowlin argues that his time in prison affected another aspect of his political thought as well. Nowlin saw Berkman’s imprisonment as a time when “he came to know and appreciate ‘the People’ as real human beings and not simply as he conceived they should be, nor exclusively in terms of their utility to ‘the Cause.’” It was also a time in which Berkman became familiar with the culture of America as well as Americans. Berkman arrived in the U.S. a “romantic Russian nihilist, youthful and impetuous, trying to spark revolution in a new and unfamiliar land,” but his political act of violence “was quite misunderstood by those whom he had hoped to inspire.”¹⁵⁶

Through *Prison Blossoms*, Berkman was able to articulate his views towards the U.S. penal system. In one such article, Berkman wrote that, “Doubtless there exists no other institution among the diversified ‘achievements’ of modern society, which, while assuming to wield a most potent factor in the destinies of mankind, has proven a more

¹⁵⁵ Alexander Berkman, *What is Communist Anarchism* (New York: The Vanguard Press, 1929), 173-181.

¹⁵⁶ William Gerard Nowlin, Jr., “The Political Thought of Alexander Berkman,” (PhD diss., Tufts University, 1980), 37-8, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

reprehensible failure in its attainment, than the Penal Institutions.” Despite millions of dollars of funding, prisons continued to fail at both punishment and reform. Through personal experience and observation, Berkman firmly concluded “that prisons are a curse to society. The millions of dollars annually expended for the maintenance of penal institutions could be invested, with as much profit and less injury, in government bonds of the planet Mars, or sunk in the Atlantic. No amount of punishment can obviate crime so long as existing social conditions drive man to it.”¹⁵⁷ Like Berkman, Emma Goldman thought the same.

“With all our boasted reforms, our great social changes, and our far-reaching discoveries, human beings continue to be sent to the worst of hells,” Goldman charged, “wherein they are outrages, degraded, and tortured, that society may be ‘protected’ from the phantoms of its own making.” With huge sums of money being spent to maintain and expand prison institutions, crime has not been subdued, rather, crime increases, Goldman asserted.¹⁵⁸ According to Goldman, crime stemmed from conditions “in our cruel social and economic arrangement.” And just as increased spending has not deterred crime, neither has “punishment.” “What is the real basis of punishment?”

The notion of a free will, the idea that man is at all times a free agent for good or evil; if he chooses the latter, he must be made to pay the price. Although this theory has long been exploded, and thrown upon the dustheap, it continues to be applied daily by the entire machinery of government, turning it into the most cruel and brutal tormentor of human life.

She claimed that “there is not a single penal institution or reformatory in the United States where men are not tortured ‘to be made good,’ by means of the blackjack, the club,

¹⁵⁷ Alexander Berkman, “Prisons and Crime: Punishment—Its Nature and Effects,” in *Prison Blossoms: Anarchist Voices from the American Past*, eds., Miriam Brody and Bonnie Buettner, 155, 163.

¹⁵⁸ Emma Goldman, “Prisons: A Social Crime and Failure,” in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1969), 115-118.

the straightjacket, the water-cure, the ‘hummingbird’ (an electrical contrivance run along the human body), the solitary, the bullring, and starvation diet.” Yet, crime persisted. After being subjected to those brutalities, prisoners leave prison “with nothing but hunger and inhumanity to greet them, these victims soon sink back into crime as the only possibility of existence.” To break this vicious cycle, Goldman asserted that the “most important step is to demand for the prisoner to work while in prison, with some monetary recompense that would enable him to lay aside a little for the day of his release, the beginning of a new life.”¹⁵⁹

Also, like Berkman, Goldman experienced some shift in her ideology while in prison. Prior to her imprisonment, Nolan Bennet argued that Goldman’s antiauthoritarian politics fell under the rubric of adversity politics. “The adversarial approach,” Bennet stated, “understands authority as invested in individual agents of the state, market, or patriarchy, these agents responsible for injustice. By denying these actors their authority through resistance, abandonment, or violence, radicals can create a new space for the masses to rise.” Her time in prison influenced “her views on authority and action,” resulting in a transition from an adversarial approach to an empathic one. “The empathetic approach,” Bennet argued, “analyzes not the authority of individuals, but how institutions and ideologies separate and hide the masses.” The empathetic approach seeks to build “the solidarity missing between radicals and the masses.” “By spending time with the most vulnerable,” Bennet wrote, “Goldman sees how institutions turn individuals inward and away from each others’ experiences, preventing the solidarity necessary for emancipation.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 121- 128.

¹⁶⁰ Bennet, “Emma Goldman and the Autobiography of the People,” 55-56.

Both Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman exited prison committed to anarchism; in fact, prison only strengthened their commitment. While prison only served to strengthen their devotion to anarchism, prison did affect other aspects of their thinking. For Berkman, he disavowed his commitment to revolutionary violence. For the rest of his life, he condemned the use of violence and sought to distance anarchy from it. Prison also served to better introduce him to American culture. He realized that people in the United States could not grasp the idea of political violence and that different tactics were necessary. Both Goldman and Berkman realized that “the people” were not simply instruments for “the cause.” They both believed that solidarity was necessary between radicals and the masses to realize social change.

Their time in prison also cemented their views toward the prison system and their views on capitalist society being the driving force behind crime and criminals. They witnessed prisons packed with people mired in poverty. They witnessed or heard stories of people in and out of prison for crimes necessitated by survival. They saw, or experienced, tortuous punishments intended to detour crime, astutely observing that barbaric punishments had no effect on decreasing crime. And they both viewed prisons as a social curse, a monumental failure. They both were given maximum sentences for their crimes, yet their punishment failed to crush their spirit. They remained true to their ideals and continued their activism. As a result, they both would yet again spend time behind bars.

CHAPTER IV:

“A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY”: PRISON, CAPITALISM, AND CONVICT NO.

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In the last chapter of his posthumously published, revolutionary text *Walls and Bars* (1927), Eugene Debs described his vision of life under socialism: “Socialism means freedom and when the people are free they will not be under the necessity of committing crime and going to prison.” “Socialism,” he continued, “will abolish the prison by removing its cause and putting an end to the vicious conditions which make such a hideous thing as the prison a necessity in the community life.” He envisioned a world where people, “all the people,” worked in industries that were “cooperatively operated and democratically managed,” thus controlling all the wealth they created, and, as a result, “What incentive would there be for a man to steal when he could acquire a happy living so much more easily and reputably by doing his share of the community work?”¹⁶¹ During his time at the Federal Penitentiary at Atlanta, he spent his nights imagining that new society, which “sustained me in every hour of my imprisonment.” And it was in prison where he “saw in a way I never had before the blighting, disfiguring, destroying effects of capitalism. I saw here accentuated and made more hideous and revolting than is manifest in the outer world the effects of the oppression and cruelty inflicted upon the victims of this iniquitous system.”¹⁶²

In September 1918, Eugene Debs received a ten-year sentence for violating the Espionage Act as a result of an antiwar speech he had made in Canton, Ohio in June 1918.¹⁶³ Imprisoned from April 1919 to December 1921, first at the West Virginia State Penitentiary at Moundsville and then at the Federal Penitentiary at Atlanta, his time in

¹⁶¹ Eugene V. Debs, *Walls and Bars* (Chicago: Press of John F. Higgins, 1927), 187-89.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 191-92.

¹⁶³ David Karsner, *Debs Goes to Prison* (New York: Irving Kaye Davis & Company, 1919), 5.

prison convinced him that by abolishing capitalism, the penitentiary system would become superfluous. His time in prison also gave him the opportunity to examine prisons and prisoners in a way most criminologists cannot: as a convict. After his release from Atlanta, Bell Syndicate, a national press syndicate, commissioned him to write a series of articles covering his time as a political prisoner. Journalist David Karsner, his friend and biographer, agreed to help Debs with the articles. The articles published by Bell were heavily censored, however, omitting Debs's blistering attacks on capitalism and its relation to the prison system.¹⁶⁴ It was not until the publication of *Walls and Bars* that Debs's revolutionary ideology was published in full.

Although he was a prolific orator and writer, *Walls and Bars* is the only book length work Debs produced. It represents the culmination of his prison experiences as well as his over two-decade struggle for socialism. Yet, the existing historical scholarship on Debs fails to adequately examine his most revolutionary work. Until Nick Salvatore's *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (1982), the most important work on Debs was Ray Ginger's *The Bending Cross* (1949). While Ginger cites *Walls and Bars* a small number of times throughout the text, the title of the work does not appear. It is not until the "Selected Chapter Sources" that we see it and, even then, the description is brief: "The best source for this period is the series of newspaper columns by Eugene Debs, published after his death as *Walls and Bars*."¹⁶⁵ Like Ginger's work, Salvatore's *Citizen and Socialist* makes no reference to Debs's book and lacks even a brief description of it.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 309.

¹⁶⁵ Ray Ginger, *The Bending Cross: A Biographer of Eugene V. Debs* (1947; repr., Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2007), 482.

¹⁶⁶ Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); similar to Ginger and Salvatore in regards to attention paid to *Walls and Bars* are Bernard J. Brommel, *Eugene V. Debs: Spokesman for Labor and Socialism* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Company, 1978); and H. Wayne Morgan, *Eugene V. Debs: Socialist for President* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1962); in *Eugene V. Debs Speaks*, ed. Jean Y. Tussey (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), there are four excerpts from *Walls and Bars* as well as a brief and concise explanation of the text.

Walls and Bars receives more attention in Ernest Freeberg's *Democracy's Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, the Great War, and the Right to Dissent*, but Freeberg is more concerned "about the limits of free speech in times of war" than with Debs's revolutionary ideology.¹⁶⁷ While *Walls and Bars* has largely been ignored by historians, criminologists Kenneth Tunnell and Edward Green argued that Debs's work has also been omitted "from the criminological canon," and that "Debs's life and written and spoken word remain central to social justice."¹⁶⁸ Their work provides some much needed analysis on Debs, and with the exception of Freeberg, analysis that has been lacking within the historical scholarship on Debs's revolutionary character. In this chapter, I will argue that in order to fully appreciate Debs's revolutionary ideology, a detailed examination of *Walls and Bars* is absolutely necessary.

This chapter contains two sections. The first section explores his experiences at the Moundsville prison as well as at the federal penitentiary at Atlanta. It looks at his relationships with other inmates as well as his supporters outside of prison, and it examines the effects prison life had on Debs. The second section is a detailed examination of *Walls and Bars*. It explores its origins and discusses its main arguments. It looks at Debs's critique of the prison system, the jailing of drug addicts, the problems of cash bail, and the interconnectedness of capitalism and the penitentiary system.

From Moundsville to Atlanta

Debs arrived at the West Virginia State Penitentiary at Moundsville on April 13, 1919. He did not make the trip alone. Joining him on the trip were his brother-in-law, Arthur Baur, as well as David Karsner, Alfred Wagenknecht, and Louis Engdahl.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner*, 327.

¹⁶⁸ Edward L.W. Green and Kenneth D. Tunnell, "Critical Criminology in the Life and Work of Eugene Victor Debs," *Critical Criminology* 23, no. 1 (March 2015): 39.

¹⁶⁹ EVD to Theodore Debs, April 16, 1919, Moundsville, West Virginia, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, ed. J. Robert Constantine, vol. 2, *1913-1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 508.

Waiting for Debs and his associates were Warden Joseph Z. Terrel and the prison physician. His travelling companions waited in the warden's office as he was processed. Upon the warden's return, Wagenknecht, Karsner, and Engdahl began questioning the warden regarding the type of treatment Debs would receive at the prison. "He will be allowed to write all the letters he pleases," said Warden Terrell, "subject of course to limitations and to the prison censorship. He may receive visitors twice a month, but the understanding seems to be that visitors coming from some distance would be allowed to see Debs at almost any time." There would be no restrictions on papers, magazines and books sent to Debs, but he would not be allowed to pass anything out to other inmates. "I am just going to use common sense in my treatment of Debs," the warden told them.¹⁷⁰ Because of Debs's advanced age, he would not be required to do any prison labor.¹⁷¹ He would end up having to perform "light duties" in the prison hospital, "where he could 'lend a hand when he felt like it.'" ¹⁷² Terrell would later go on to say that Debs "was a man of character, courage, integrity, and intelligence."¹⁷³ The respect Terrell afforded Debs was returned in kind.

The living conditions Debs experienced at Moundsville were similar to his experiences at Woodstock. Writing to his parents in 1895, Debs described the McHenry County Jail at Woodstock as "the best jail in the state." The beds were clean and comfortable, they ate with the sheriff's family, they had lots of room, and he described Sheriff Eckert as being "a noble man."¹⁷⁴ Detailing his living conditions at Moundsville in a letter to his brother, Debs felt "lucky" to be in the prison he was in: "Since I had to

¹⁷⁰ J. Louis Engdahl, *Debs and O'Hare in Prison* (Chicago: National Office, Socialist Party, 1919?), 18. [https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:2581050\\$3i](https://iif.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:2581050$3i)

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁷² Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner*, 149.

¹⁷³ J. Robert Constantine, ed., *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 2, 509.

¹⁷⁴ EVD to Jean Daniel Debs and Marguerite Betrich Debs, January 8, 1895, Woodstock, Illinois, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, ed. J. Robert Constantine, vol. 1, 1874-1912 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 81-82.

be imprisoned I congratulate myself upon being here for it is in all regards the best [prison] I have ever seen. The Warden, Mr. Terrell, is a gentleman in the true sense of that term and everyone here without exception respects & loves him. He maintains discipline mainly through kindness and the prisoners with rare exceptions behave themselves accordingly.” Debs described his room as “delightful,” the meals were “excellent,” and that “everything is scrupulously clean.”¹⁷⁵ Unfortunately for Debs, his stay at Moundsville lasted only two months. On the morning of June 13, 1919, the warden approached Debs and told him that he was being transferred to the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta immediately.¹⁷⁶

At the time, it was not exactly clear why Debs had been transferred. Debs felt that his transfer was related to his proximity to the coal fields in West Virginia: “I had previously spent considerable time organizing the miners...At one mass meeting at Charleston, which was attended by several thousand miners and other citizens, resolutions were passed threatening a march on Moundsville if I was not released.”¹⁷⁷ According to historian Ernest Freeberg, the transfer was most likely caused by “a mundane bureaucratic wrangle over money.” Due to the influx of wartime prisoners, Debs was sent to Moundsville. Housing Debs cost the state of West Virginia an extra five hundred dollars a month, and since the Atlanta prison had just opened a new cell block, Debs was transferred there.¹⁷⁸

Debs’s imprisonment at Atlanta differed drastically from his time at both Woodstock and Moundsville. He was only allowed to send one letter a week, was barred from receiving radical literature, and was only allowed a limited number of visitors.¹⁷⁹ In

¹⁷⁵ EVD to Theodore Debs, April 16, 1919, Moundsville, West Virginia, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 2, 508.

¹⁷⁶ David Karsner, *Debs: His Authorized Life and Letters*, 101.

¹⁷⁷ Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 53.

¹⁷⁸ Freeberg, *Democracy’s Prisoner*, 172.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 175.

a letter to his brother, Debs claimed that he was locked in his cell day and night for the first five days. He was then assigned to light clerical work in the prison clothing room, working from eight a.m. to around four p.m. From five p.m. to seven a.m., they were locked in their cells. He told his brother to not allow anyone to send him anything because he would not receive it. He also asked Theodore to “tell the comrades I can not [sic] write to them...I am treated exactly the same as the common run of prisoners and have no complaint on that score.”¹⁸⁰ After work, the prisoners were allowed half an hour for exercise before dinner. “I was not eager about mealtime,” Debs explained. “I was in Atlanta prison nearly two weeks and pretty well starved before nature forced me to become receptive to the food and the manner in which it was served.”¹⁸¹ According to Debs, “prison food was on the great unending source of complaint” by the prisoners.¹⁸²

The prison food at Atlanta “was the cheapest and stalest conglomeration of stuff that the market afforded. Coupled with this was the fact that the food was never properly cooked, but steamed and stewed.” It was “served in a manner to cause revulsion to all alike, and that item in the prison life aroused more ill-feeling and resentment than all other causes combined.” Debs found it difficult to decide on whether prisoners were “ruined more quickly physically by the rotten food served to them, or morally and spiritually by the harsh and bitter treatment they received.” He felt that if prisoners were fed in a more civilized manner that it “would do more to humanize the prison and to make it reformatory, rather than a deformatory [sic], than any other one this that could be suggested in the prevailing social system.”¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ EVD to Theodore Debs, July 3, 1919, Atlanta, Georgia in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, ed. J. Robert Constantine, vol. 3, 1919-1926 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 20.

¹⁸¹ Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 61.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 71.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 72-73.

Prison life at Atlanta began taking a toll on Debs rather quickly. “After spending two months in his cell during the blazing hot summer of 1919, and starved rather than nourished by the food, I was reduced to almost a skeleton,” Debs recalled. There were reports to the outside world that Debs was in critical condition, and some even reported Debs had died. Upon hearing these alarming reports, Marguerite Prevey, Socialist Party lecturer, organizer and close companion of Debs, travelled to Atlanta to see for herself, and was “greatly shocked” when she saw Debs.¹⁸⁴ At the time, Debs weighed only 160 pounds, around twenty-five pounds below his normal weight. After speaking with Debs, Prevey went to the warden and Debs was transferred to the prison hospital later that night. During his time in the hospital, Debs witnessed “a number of particularly tragic and heartbreaking instances.”¹⁸⁵ He “watched a friend die from a botched operation and many men suffer lonely deaths, ending in paupers’ graves on the prison grounds.”¹⁸⁶ He saw hundreds of drug addicts suffering through their withdrawals. He had trouble sleeping; either from the screams of his fellow hospital inmates, or from his own health problems. His heart troubles made it difficult for him to breath, preventing him from sleeping lying down.¹⁸⁷

While Debs saw so much ugliness and brutality during his imprisonment at the Atlanta penitentiary, he also witnessed and experienced moments of great beauty. Drawing back to his first arrest and the time he spent in the Cook County Jail, the kinship he felt with all prisoners strengthened during his time in Atlanta. “The men here are my brothers,” Debs told his brother, “and if you could but see how kind and loving these imprisoned souls are to me, you’d be touched to tears.”¹⁸⁸ In *Walls and Bars*, Debs writes

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 78-79; J. Robert Constantine, ed., *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 1, 525.

¹⁸⁵ Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 79-80.

¹⁸⁶ Freeberg, *Democracy’s Prisoner*, 258.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ EVD to Theodore Debs, July 5, 1920, Atlanta, Georgia, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 3, 108.

extensively about the kinship and comradeship he felt with his fellow prisoners, regardless of what crimes the felons had committed. One event in particular provides a stunning example: Christmas Eve, 1920.

The events on Christmas Eve occurred almost two months after the 1920 presidential election. It was the fifth time Debs campaigned for the White House. Of the previous four, “he had spoken to adoring crowds across the country, but this time he spent his days tending to his fellow inmates at the prison hospital,” Ernest Freeberg noted.¹⁸⁹ On election day, Freeberg wrote that “inmates prayed for a Debs victory, some believing that his first act as president would be to throw open the prison gates.”¹⁹⁰ He lost the election, but received almost one million votes, but, after the election, he fell “into a deep malaise.”¹⁹¹

Debs wrote that “there are certain occasions in my prison experience that are vividly preserved as beautiful pictures. One of these was the celebration of Christmas Eve, 1920, in the basement of the prison hospital.” Without Debs knowing, the inmates of the hospital managed to secure permission from prison officials to host a Christmas Eve dinner. Every hospital inmate who received a gift from their friends or family “contributed them to the common lot.” They decorated the basement and the dinner table with flowers and colored ribbons. When all of the inmates were situated at the table, they had to decide who would have the honor of escorting Debs to the dinner. Unable to decide, since every prisoner wanted the job, “they decided to hold nominations and elect an escorting committee of two.” When Debs reached the basement, he was “beheld with astonishment and delight an extended table spread with a banquet of delicious dishes that

¹⁸⁹ Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner*, 1.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 255-57.

was equally tempting to the eye and palate.” Seeing all the inmates seated at the table, Debs felt a new kind of human happiness:

In every eye there was an expression of delight and kindness, and if I had never before understood the meaning of human happiness and the radiant heights to which it may ascend, I perceived it that night before me in the faces of my fellow prisoners who had in this loving and simple way translated the thought of ‘good will among men’ into kindly deed.

The inmates placed Debs at the head of the table, and named him their guest of honor. For a brief moment that night, for the first time, Debs felt as though he was a free man.¹⁹²

Just like his fellow prisoners, people outside of jail showered Debs with support. Letters to Debs poured into the Atlanta jail from people from all walks of life, young and old. There was Hattie Norris, a young schoolgirl from West Monroe, Louisiana. Norris frequently wrote to Debs and was extremely devoted to him. George Sylvester Viereck, a German-born author and newspaper editor, wrote Debs to tell him how much he admired him, despite their political differences. Mae Bishop, a stenographer and boarder from Salt Lake City, Utah, and a member of the Communist Labor Party, reminisced about a time she met Debs in 1908 and hoped that her letter would simply “help to brighten a few moments of your time.” Writing from a government hospital, Irving L. Spencer, a U.S. soldier who “fought in France and was wounded and gassed...believe[d] in every word you said in that speech for which you were convicted. I have seen war in all its horror. I have seen men kill one another and I know it’s wrong.” J.W. Nishida, an Industrial Workers of the World member and a self-described “yellow man from the Far East,” wrote to Debs from his jail cell in Los Angeles to express his solidarity. Writing from Washington, D.C., Father Martin O’Donoghue, a socialist Catholic priest, sent Debs some reading material as well as his love and well wishes. Boyd Sloan, a lawyer,

¹⁹² Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 110-112.

politician, and judge from Georgia, told Debs that he was not a socialist, “yet I firmly believe that we should erase this blot that stains our reputation for freedom [political prisoners], and should immediately release you and the others who have been imprisoned for like reasons.” There was Gertrude Laitinen, a young schoolgirl from Fitchburg, Massachusetts. She wrote to Debs because she “thought it would make you feel happy for awhile [sic], If I send these few words.” And there was Isabel Solomon, an eight-year-old girl from Brooklyn. Her father was one of the five socialists expelled from the New York state legislature in 1919. She told Debs that she was “so sorry because you are not our next president, if you were president our country would be the greatest in the world,” and signed her letter: “Yours for socialism.”¹⁹³

When Debs left Atlanta on December 25, 1921, he walked out of prison for the second time. After reading a report from Attorney General Harry Daughtry which recommended a pardon for Debs, one that was “based on mercy rather than justice,” and facing pressure from “hundreds of thousands of citizens” petitioning for the release of Debs and other political prisoners, President Harding decided he would free Debs and two dozen of his fellow political prisoners.¹⁹⁴ After his release from the jail at Woodstock in 1895, a joyous celebration had occurred as Debs’s train arrived in Chicago where thousands of people gathered to celebrate his release.¹⁹⁵ This time, the celebration emanated from within the prison walls, and once again, he was profoundly moved by his fellow prisoners.

¹⁹³ Hattie Norris to EVD, [1919-1921], West Monroe, Louisiana, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 3, 16; George Sylvester Viereck to EVD, November 10, 1919, New York City, *ibid*, 30-31; Mae Bishop to EVD, January 8, 1920, Salt Lake City, Utah, *ibid*, 46-48; Irving L. Spencer to EVD, February 4, 1920, St. Louis, Missouri, *ibid*, 52; J.W. Nishida to EVD, March 10, 1920, Los Angeles, California, *ibid*, 59-60; Father Martin O’Donoghue to EVD, April 20, 1920, Washington, D.C., *ibid*, 74; Boyd Sloan to EVD, October 11, 1920, Gainesville, Georgia, *ibid*, 132-133; Gertrude Laitinen to EVD, January 20, 1921, Fitchburg, Massachusetts, *ibid*, 183; Isabel Solomon to EVD, November 16, 1920, Brooklyn, New York, *ibid*, 159.

¹⁹⁴ Freeberg, *Democracy’s Prisoner*, 292-293.

¹⁹⁵ David Karsner, *Debs: His Authorized Life and Letters* (New York: Boni & Liveright Publishers, 1919), 162-63.

Debs had spent nearly three years inside the Atlanta penitentiary. After it was announced that he would finally be released, “the prison was tense with excitement.” His fellow prisoners loved Debs, and he loved them back:

For nearly three years I had been the daily associate and companion of these tortured souls—these imprisoned victims of a cruel and relentless fate. I had shared with them on equal terms in all things and they knew it and loved me as I loved them. They were my friends not only, but my brothers and realized and rejoiced in our mutual and intimate relations. In a thousand ways, by stealth when necessary, and by other means when possible, they made manifest their confidence and their loyalty, and coming from that pathetic source, from hearts that once beat high with hope but many of which had long been dead to the thrill of enthusiasm and the joy of life, this tender, loving tribute touched me to the heart and had for me a meaning too deep and overmastering to be expressed in words.

His brother Theodore arrived at the prison to accompany Debs on his journey home. Outside of the prison, there was a car waiting to take Debs and his brother to the depot. As they made their way to the car, they “were halted by what seemed a rumbling of the earth as if shaken by some violent explosion. It was a roar of voices—the hoarse voices of a caged human host that had forgotten to cheer and gave vent to their long pent-up emotions in thunder volleys I never heard before and never shall again...” Debs felt “overwhelmed with painful and saddening emotions.” As the prisoners cheered, stricken with guilt, Debs thought to himself that he had no right to leave. “Those tearful, haunting faces, pressing against the barred prison windows—how they appealed to me—and accused me!” Another “mighty shout was heard” as Debs waved a final goodbye and he could still hear the prisoners cheering as they drove away.¹⁹⁶ That moment, Debs later wrote, was “the most deeply touching and impressive moment and the most profoundly dramatic incident in my life.”¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 122-126.

¹⁹⁷ Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner*, 296.

Back in 1895 when Debs was a prisoner at Woodstock, he told Nellie Bly of the *New York World* that if he ever got the time, he wanted “to devote some study to prisoners.” During his eight days spent in the Cook County Jail, he witnessed “more fellowship among [the prisoners] than I have ever seen elsewhere in my life. Poor fellows! They are confined four to a small cell, and they are in that cell 22 of the 24 hours. It is horrible.”¹⁹⁸ More than twenty years later, Debs finally had the time to devote some study to prisoners, but perhaps not the way he intended. The time he spent at the federal penitentiary at Atlanta gave him the opportunity to examine prisons and prisoners in a way most criminologists cannot: as a convict. As a result, Debs produced his one and only major written work, *Walls and Bars*. The revolutionary ideas espoused in *Walls and Bars* were forged through a lifetime of struggle, incarceration, and through his leadership within the socialist movement. Debs spent most of his adult life tirelessly trying to organize the working class of America to fight against the U.S. capitalist system, one that Debs was convinced was rooted in exploitation and repression. His time at Atlanta helped him realize the role that prison played in both propping up the capitalist system as well as oppressing both the working class and the revolutionaries battling against it. *Walls and Bars* was his attempt to expose the evils of the penitentiary system, a system that society had allowed itself to ignore: “Not until the average man finds himself behind steel bars does he realize how indifferent he has been to a problem in which he should have felt himself vitally concerned.”¹⁹⁹

Walls and Bars

During the last few days of Debs’s incarceration at Atlanta, Bell Syndicate of New York wrote to him requesting a series of articles describing his prison

¹⁹⁸ Nellie Bly, “Interview with Eugene V. Debs at Woodstock Jail, January 19, 1895.” Published as “Nellie Bly in Jail: Chat with Eugene Victor Debs, the Imprisoned Labor Leader” in *New York World*, Jan. 20, 1895. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1895/950119-bly-debsatwoodstock.pdf>

¹⁹⁹ Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 128.

experiences.²⁰⁰ Upon completion of the articles, plans were already underway for them to be compiled into a book.²⁰¹ Debs “saw an opportunity to give the general public certain information in regard to the prison, based upon my personal observation and experience, that I hoped might result in some beneficial changes in the management of prisons and in the treatment of their inmates.” During his time at Atlanta, Debs witnessed so much that offended him. He saw cruelty and abuse. He witnessed prison mismanagement and the effects it had on its victims. “I resolved upon my release,” Debs explained, “to espouse the cause of these unfortunates and do what was in my power to put an end to the wrongs and abuses of which they were the victims under the present system.”²⁰² For Debs, his fellow prisoners were not the “irretrievably vicious and depraved element they are commonly believed to be, but upon the average they are like ourselves, and it is more often their misfortune than their crime that is responsible for their plight.” Debs felt that if prisoners were treated appropriately, “instead of being diseased, crazed and wrecked morally and physically under a cruel and degrading prison system,” they “would be reclaimed and restored to society, the better, not the worse, for their experience.”²⁰³ For political prisoners like himself, he felt guilty that he received his release while others remained locked away. “If the officials told the truth,” Debs wrote in *Appeal to Reason*, the widely popular socialist newspaper, “I was more guilty than they, and if any one should have been held he is myself.”²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ David Karsner, *Talks With Debs in Terre Haute (and letters from Lindlahr)* (New York: The New York Call, 1922), 9. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015026886203&view=1up&seq=13>

²⁰¹ EVD to David Karsner, January 18, 1922, Terre Haute, Indiana, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 3, 288.

²⁰² Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 18.

²⁰³ *Ibid*, 19.

²⁰⁴ Eugene Debs, “These things We Must Do,” *Appeal to Reason*, April 15, 1922.

<https://www.newspapers.com/image/612855974>; Howard H. Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953), 197.

Bell Syndicate negotiated to publish Debs's prison articles, although they had to be void of any "propaganda." According to Debs, the reason for this was obvious:

The reason for this precaution on the part of the capitalist press is perfectly obvious and self-evident. Any intelligent understanding of the prison system as it now exists, based upon a true knowledge of the graft and corruption which prevail in its management, and of the appalling vice and immorality, cruelty and crime for which the prison is responsible and of which the inmates are the helpless victims, would inevitable mean the impeachment of our smug and self-complacent capitalist society at the bar of civilization, and the utter condemnation of the capitalist system of which the prison is a necessary adjunct, and of which these rich and powerful papers are the official organs and mouthpieces.²⁰⁵

The capitalist press did not want the truth, Debs proclaimed. If people heard the truth about the "corrupt, brutalizing and criminal-breeding prison system," it would both "shock and scandalize the country" and "expose and condemn the impoverishing, enslaving and crime-inciting social system of which they are the organs and beneficiaries."²⁰⁶ What the capitalist press considered "political propaganda," Debs simply intended to describe the "naked truth about our foul prison system," and that truth "would be the deadliest kind of 'political propaganda' against the capitalist system which created and is responsible for that festering evil, and against the equally foul political parties which uphold capitalism and perpetuate its corrupt and criminal misrule."²⁰⁷

David Karsner travelled to Terre Haute, Indiana, in March 1922 to help Debs with the series of articles.²⁰⁸ After the publication of Debs's first article, Bell Syndicate received a number of complaints claiming that they contained propaganda. Entire paragraphs were removed and the closing articles of the series were never published. The parts omitted were deemed "'too radical,' thus withholding from their readers the very

²⁰⁵ Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 20.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 20-21.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 21.

²⁰⁸ EVD to Otto Branstetter, March 25, 1922, Terre Haute, Indiana, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 3, 298-299.

points of information and the very vital passages to which the writer was most anxious to give publicity for the end he had in view.” *Walls and Bars* contains all twelve of the original articles (nine of which were published after heavy censorship), reprinted in original form, along with three added chapters “for the purpose not only of amplifying the treatment of the subject, but that the writer might discuss more critically and fundamentally the vital phases of the prison question, including especially the cause of and the responsibility for this crying evil, than was possible in the newspaper articles.”²⁰⁹ But Debs would not live long enough to see it published. In March 1926, seven months before he passed away, he was still making final revisions to his “prison book.”²¹⁰ For the remainder of his life, he was unable to secure funds for the publication of *Walls and Bars*. After his death, the Socialist Party in Chicago published his book thanks to the efforts of his brother Theodore.²¹¹

Walls and Bars is the culmination of a lifetime of struggle. From Debs’s days as a union organizer to his antiwar speech in Canton, Ohio, which once again forced him into a prison cell, Debs’s steady ascent to revolutionary socialist had reached its peak. It is a work that could only be written by someone that had experienced the cruelty and the repression of a prison cell. It could only have been written by someone who experienced that cruelty solely for their beliefs and for exercising their right to free speech. *Walls and Bars* was Debs’s opportunity to

show that the prison in our modern life is essentially a capitalistic institution, an inherent and inseparable part of the social and economic system under which the mass of mankind are ruthlessly exploited and kept in an impoverished state, as a result of which the struggle for existence, cruel and relentless at best, drives thousands of its victims into the commission of offenses which they are forced to expiate in the dungeons provided for them by their masters. *The prison as a rule,*

²⁰⁹ Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 22.

²¹⁰ EVD to Theodore Debs, March 31, 1926, in *Letters of Eugene V. Debs*, vol. 3, 562.

²¹¹ Brommel, *Eugene V. Debs: Spokesman for Labor and Socialism*, 184.

to which there are few exceptions, is for the poor. The owning and ruling class hold the keys of the prison the same as they do of the mill and mine. They are the keepers of both and their exploited slaves are the inmates and victims of both.
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For Debs, prison reform was only the beginning. He hoped that, eventually, “the time will come when the prison as we now know it will disappear, and the hospital and asylums and farm will take its place. In that day we shall have succeeded in taking the jail out of man as well as taking man out of jail.”²¹³ He viewed prison as “a monumental evil and a burning shame to society. It ought not merely to be reformed but abolished as an institution for the punishment and degradation of unfortunate human beings.”²¹⁴ *Walls and Bars* not only addresses the evils of the prison system, but also passionately critiques the society that created and allowed that evil to persist.

Before his first arrest, Debs saw the prison system as a “rather sad affair,” one that could not be fixed. It was not until he became a prisoner himself that he realized how problematic the prison system was and how it was the responsibility of society to correct it. “The prison problem,” Debs states, “is directly co-related with poverty, and poverty as we see it today is essentially a social disease.” Hard-working people should not be forced to live in poverty: “Those who produce should have, but we know that those who produce the most—that is, those who work hardest, and at the most difficult and most menial tasks, have the least.” Debs viewed the prison problem “as one of the most vital concerns of present day [sic] society,” one in which any person could go to at any time:

Some of us go to prison for breaking the law, and some of use for upholding and abiding by the Constitution to which the law is supposed to adhere. Some go to prison for killing their fellowmen, and others for believing that murder is a violation of one of the Commandments. Some go to prison for stealing, and others

²¹² Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 23.

²¹³ *Ibid*, 35.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, 23-24.

for believing that a better system can be provided and maintained than one that makes it necessary for a man to steal in order to live.²¹⁵

The only society that “constructs a cage for his neighbor and puts him in it” is human society, Debs explained. Man is the only animal that constructs cages to punish, even torture, by imprisonment. He described punishment by imprisonment as “a most tragic phase in the annals of mankind.” In ancient times, the certainty of reformation supposedly depended on the severity of the punishment. “We now know that brutality begets brutality, and we know that through the centuries there has been a steady modification of discipline and method in the treatment of prisoners.” Debs conceded that over the years the penal system had undergone some reform, “but there is yet room for vast improvement.”²¹⁶ In his study on American prisons, historian Blake McKelvey highlights that during the years 1915 – 1930 a number of reforms were implemented to the U.S. prison system, but that prison wardens knew that “more meaningful jobs, more constructive training, and a more scientific classification were needed to develop effective penal programs.”²¹⁷ For Debs, improvements had to start at the local level: communities had to start paying closer attention to every aspect of their jails.

Debs viewed county jails as an integral part of the community, and as such, communities should have as much concern about the jails as they “pretend to have in its schoolhouse, and as it certainly has in its center of amusement and entertainment.” “The abuses of the prison system,” writes Debs, “and the crimes against criminals in the perverted name of law and order, are as constantly visited upon the community responsible for them as a devastating plague follows in the wake of disease and death-dealing germs.” According to Debs, communities ought to examine who is in their jail,

²¹⁵ Ibid, 31.

²¹⁶ Ibid, 32.

²¹⁷ Blake McKelvey, *American Prisons: A History of Good Intentions* (Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, 1977), 267-96.

why they are in there, and how they are being fed. Are they being held there “for purposes of graft that finds its way into the pockets of the petty politicians, the chief of whom in this case is the sheriff of the county?” They should “insist that the men held in its jail be either tried or released, for every hour that a man is held in jail he is a liability, not an asset, to the community which pays the tax that is levied against it to feed and shelter its erring members.”²¹⁸ One type of prisoner that was of great concern to Debs was the drug addict.

One of the most egregious forms of punishment, according to Debs, was the jailing of drug addicts. During his time in the prison hospital at Atlanta, he described “one of the most harrowing aspects... is the drug addict whom I learned to know there in a way to compel the most vivid and shocking remembrance of him to the last of my days.” He writes

It is incredible that a human being mentally and physically afflicted should be consigned by a so-called court of justice in a civilized and Christian nation to a penitentiary as a felon, there to expiate his weakness; and yet, hundreds of these unfortunates were sent to Atlanta prison while I was there, and oftentimes I had to bear witness to the horror of their torture when they were summarily separated from the drug they craved.²¹⁹

Debs witnessed numerous prisoners as they suffered through their horrific withdrawals, and he describes many sleepless nights as a result of their suffering. You may blame the addict, Debs noted, but “how is it possible to punish them for their awful affliction with a prison sentence as if they were common felons.” To Debs, drug addicts were not criminals: “They are sick people who require special treatment, and not vicious ones to be sent to the torture chamber of a prison, and it is nothing less than a reproach to society

²¹⁸ Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 45-46.

²¹⁹ *Ibid*, 84.

and a disgrace to our civilization that this malady is branded as a crime instead of being ministered to as an affliction, which it most assuredly is.”²²⁰

In an article in *The New Age* published six months after his release, Debs described a “huge scandal...uncovered at the United States penitentiary at Atlanta.” It was discovered that a “dope ring” had been operating at the prison, overseen by a prison physician and several guards. The operation was “making dope fiends of young prisoners and supplying all who could pay for it at robber rates with the poisonous drug that would ruin them for life,” wrote Debs. “And this is the benevolent United States government institution,” he stated ironically, “where drug addicts are sent to be reformed.”²²¹ Almost one hundred years later, his words still ring true. In relation to contemporary strategies for drug addiction, Kenneth Tunnell and Edward Green stated that Debs’s comments “are enlightened, humanistic and progressive.”²²² The same can be said in regards to Debs’s stance towards another critical component of contemporary prison reform: cash bail.

Time and time again, Debs witnessed people in jail “not because they had committed a crime, but because they could not furnish bail for their release until the charge of crime lodged against them was proven at their trial. They were not guilty, but were presumed to be innocent...Yet, they were in jail and their poverty was therefore their crime.” During his time at Atlanta, many of his fellow prisoners told him that this was how their life as a criminal began.²²³ How could someone who was presumed innocent until proven guilty be thrown in jail while they await their trial? “No man and no women [sic], more especially no boy and no girl should ever be put in jail for being unable to furnish bail,” Debs proclaimed. To Debs, the real crime, “a crime of cruel and

²²⁰ Ibid, 85.

²²¹ Eugene V. Debs, “From Atlanta Prison: A Letter from a Prisoner with a Warning,” ed. Tim Davenport. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/debs/works/1922/0706-debs-letterfromatlanta.pdf>

²²² Edward L.W. Green and Kenneth D. Tunnell, “Critical Criminology in the Life and Work of Eugene Victor Debs,” *Critical Criminology* 23, no. 1 (March 2015): 50.

²²³ Debs, *Walls and Bars*, 150-151.

tragic consequences,” is the jailing of persons who are awaiting their trial but unable to produce a cash bail and the criminal is “society itself.”²²⁴ The hypocrisy of the idea that “all men stands equal before the law” was obvious to Debs:

The man with money is never the victim of such a crime. His money and not necessarily his innocence keeps him out of jail. He can furnish bail though he may be guilty, while the poor man must go to jail though he may be innocent. Yet we proudly boast that all men stand equal before the law. If this were true one of two things would follow, either men would no longer be sentenced to prison and the prison would cease to exist, or so many would be sentenced to prison that innumerable additional bastiles [sic] would have to be built to confine them.²²⁵

For Debs, it was clear that society created the criminal. It was also clear that a majority of people in prison had lived in poverty. All too often, Debs explained, prison punished poverty, not crime. Once society became “intelligent enough to realize the responsibility for poverty it will also be humane enough to refrain from punishing its victims by consigning them to felons’ cells.”²²⁶ To produce an “intelligent study of the prison,” Debs wrote, the connection between poverty and the prison population demanded close examination.²²⁷

For someone living in poverty, the ability to defend one’s self against criminal charges was extremely difficult, Debs explained. For that reason, the majority of people in prison “are there not so much because of the particular crime they are alleged to have committed, but for the reason that they are poor and either lacked the money to engage the services of first class and influential lawyers, or because they lacked the means through which they might have been able to put off the day of final conviction and sentence.” A wealthy individual, on the other hand, can afford to post bail and hire a lawyer who can handle “all the myriad technicalities his purse will permit him to take

²²⁴ Ibid, 153.

²²⁵ Ibid, 153-154.

²²⁶ Ibid, 143.

²²⁷ Ibid, 138.

advantage of.”²²⁸ While the ways in which the wealthy could avoid serving time in prison angered Debs, it did not mean that he wanted the wealthy to be imprisoned: “I do not believe that a prison is a fit place for any human being, rich or poor, and I would not confine my worst enemy in its cruel cages.”²²⁹

While Debs was imprisoned at Atlanta, one of his goals was to talk with prisoners and “to ascertain to what extent their poverty, their lack of pecuniary means, was responsible for their imprisonment.” He concluded that “an overwhelming majority were sent to prison only because they did not have money to take full advantage of the means afforded to those who possess it of escaping the penalties of the law in the prevailing system of its administration.”²³⁰ Debs was convinced that “when the scourge of poverty” was eliminated, the prison would be as well.²³¹ Until then, Debs described a number of reforms that he would institute if he were in charge of the penitentiary system.

Debs called for a complete overhaul of the prison labor system: “Plans could be formulated upon a nation-wide scale for the development of the country’s resources, for the opening of highways, the reclaiming of swamp and desert wastes, and the construction of public works of all kinds to absorb the labor of every prison inmate.” Thus, prison labor would be reconstituted in a useful and constructive way with inmates receiving a decent wage allowing them to send adequate funds to their families. Debs would also completely eliminate prison governance by politicians. He would “place it under the absolute control of a board or commission consisting of resident men and women of the highest character, the humanest [sic] impulses, and the most efficient qualifications for their task.” They would have complete authority over the prison, including full power of pardon, parole, and commutation. Debs witnessed many offences

²²⁸ Ibid, 138-139.

²²⁹ Ibid, 142.

²³⁰ Ibid, 142-143.

²³¹ Ibid, 142.

inflicted by prison guards, so he would eliminate them and “have the prison population organized upon a basis of mutuality of interest and self-government.” Recalling the most consistent complaint among prisoners, food would be “served in a clean, decent and appetizing manner.”²³²

Debs was so confident that his ideas on prison management were so “fundamentally sound and practical,” he challenged “the powers that control our prisons to give me the opportunity to put it to the test in any prison in this country.” He guaranteed that within a week the conditions inside the prison would be greatly improved. “I should expect no remuneration for my service,” he wrote, “but should regard it as a contribution to society in return for my education in and graduation from one of its chief penal institutions.”²³³

While *Walls and Bars* aimed to expose the evils of the prison system, Debs also used it as a platform to passionately condemn what he viewed as “a crime against humanity”: capitalism. He wrote that

Crime in all of its varied forms and manifestations is of such a common nature under the capitalist system that capitalism and crime have become almost synonymous terms. Private appropriation of the earth’s surface, the natural resources, and the means of life is nothing less than a crime against humanity, but the comparative few who are the beneficiaries of this iniquitous social arrangement, far from being viewed as criminals meriting punishment, are the exalted rulers of society and the people they exploit gladly render them homage and obeisance.²³⁴

Channeling Marx, Debs quickly traced the evolution of legal bondage to the private ownership of the means of production. With the capitalist class in control of industry, the economic exploitation of the masses continued. “To buttress and safeguard this exploiting system, private property of the capitalist has been made a fetish, a sacred thing, and

²³² Ibid, 165-168.

²³³ Ibid, 169-170.

²³⁴ Ibid, 172.

thousands of laws have been enacted and more thousands supplemented by court decisions to punish so-called crimes against the holy institution of private property.” Most crimes for which people are sent to prison “are committed directly or indirectly against property.” The capitalist system cares far more for property than for human life, Debs cried. Yet, at the same time, “Multiplied thousands of men, women and children are killed and maimed in American industry by absolutely preventable accidents every year, yet no one ever dreams of indicting the capitalist masters who are guilty of the crime.” As Debs explained it, “the economic-owning class is always the political ruling class.” It is under a system based upon private ownership that

The exploitation that follows impoverishes the masses, and their precarious economic condition, their bitter struggle for existence, drives increasing numbers of them to despair and desperation, to crime and destruction. The inmates of an average county jail consist mainly of such victims. They also constitute the great majority in the state prisons and federal penitentiaries. The inmates of prisons are proverbially the poorer people recruited from what we know as the “lower class.

It is on this basis, that “capitalism needs and must have the prison to protect itself from the criminals it has created.”²³⁵

Without question, Eugene Victor Debs is one of the most praised and celebrated historical figures of the American left, yet his most radical and revolutionary work has largely been ignored. *Walls and Bars* is first and foremost a blistering attack on capitalism, one that would not have been possible without Debs experiencing the life of a prisoner firsthand. His time as an inmate allowed him to speak with other prisoners, something that Debs passionately did. He learned that most prisoners had suffered from a life of poverty, forcing them to commit crimes to survive and then languish in jail unable to pay their bail. He witnessed people incarcerated because of their addiction, or develop

²³⁵ Ibid, 171-174.

their addiction while incarcerated. Through *Walls and Bars*, Debs passionately argued that after abolishing capitalism, the penitentiary would follow. Through socialism, he argued, people would no longer be forced to steal to survive, and more humane institutions would arise to care for society's sick. *Walls and Bars*, Debs's most revolutionary work, remains as important today as when it was published almost one hundred years ago.

When Debs arrived at Atlanta to serve his time for violating the Espionage Act as a result of speaking out against America's participation in World War I, he would not be the only revolutionary trapped behind its steel doors. Already there, and jailed for essentially the same reason, was Alexander Berkman. And like Berkman, Emma Goldman too was serving her sentence nearly 700 miles away at the State Prison at Jefferson City, Missouri.

CHAPTER V:

“BEING MADE TO SUFFER MORE THAN I”: THE PRISON EXPERIENCES OF EMMA GOLDMAN AND ALEXANDER BERKMAN, 1917 - 1919

In the Foreword of *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman*, Berkman described how society use to view people who were thought to be insane: society “looked upon an insane person as one possessed of the devil or of some other evil spirit. They sought to drive the ‘evil one’ out by beating and torturing the insane, and often even by drowning, hanging, and burning.” Fortunately, Berkman wrote, society has “passed that stage of stupid brutality.” But while “even the most ignorant man knows that insanity is a disease,” he claimed that “in regard to crime and criminals we are still in the stage of dark-age superstition. We look upon the criminal today as we did upon the insane fifty or seventy-five years ago. Most men still believe that by beating and punishing the criminal, by hanging and electrocution, we can drive the ‘evil spirit’ out of him. This process is called reforming the criminal.”²³⁶

Berkman wrote these words after his release from the Federal Penitentiary at Atlanta in 1919, approximately twenty-seven years from the beginning of his imprisonment at the Western Penitentiary. He claimed that in spite of advances made in modern criminology, the prison system was unchanged: “Brutality is rampant; discipline is synonymous with the absolute suppression of individuality and the crushing of the prisoner’s spirit and will.”²³⁷ But like his time at the Western Penitentiary, his brutal imprisonment at the Federal Penitentiary at Atlanta failed to crush his revolutionary spirit. His life-long comrade, Emma Goldman, also emerged from her imprisonment at

²³⁶ Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman: In the State Prison at Jefferson City, MO., and the U.S. Penitentiary at Atlanta, GA., February, 1918 – October, 1919* (New York: Order from Stella Comyn, [1919?]), 3.

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t4mk6bp54&view=1up&seq=1>

²³⁷ Ibid, 4.

the State Penitentiary in Jefferson City, Missouri, dedicated as ever to her revolutionary activism.

As discussed in Chapter III, scholarship on Berkman is rather limited, but, even more so, there is a lack of focus on his time at the Federal Penitentiary at Atlanta. In three major dissertations on Berkman, his time in Atlanta receives a page or two, at best.²³⁸ In Paul and Karen Avrich's *Sasha and Emma: The Anarchist Odyssey of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman*, more attention is paid to his Atlanta imprisonment, and one of the aims of this chapter is to build upon their much needed work.²³⁹ This includes a stronger focus on Berkman's analysis of political prisoners as well as his public feud with the warden at Atlanta, Fred Zerbst. Perhaps the lack of focus on his time in Atlanta has stemmed from the lack of sources provided by Berkman. He addressed his time in *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences*, but he never followed through with his threat to publish a book discussing his time at Atlanta.²⁴⁰ Nonetheless, there are ample sources to explore this pivotal time in his life. And, also like Chapter III, this chapter will argue that, once again, the prison experiences of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman in 1917-1919 played a pivotal and substantial role in shaping their political ideology and served to strengthen and reinforce their revolutionary activism. Their prison experiences also help illuminate their personal character, broadcasting their unwavering dedication to uplifting humanity, no matter where.

²³⁸ Linnea Goodwin Burwood, "Alexander Berkman: Russian-American Anarchist," PhD diss., State University of New York at Binghamton, 2001. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing; William Gerard Nowlin, Jr., "The Political Thought of Alexander Berkman," (PhD diss., Tufts University, 1980). ProQuest Dissertations Publishing; John William Zalenski, "The Practice of Resistance: Eugene V. Debs, Alexander Berkman, and the Cultural Psychology of the Prisoner of Conscience," (PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 1992). ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

²³⁹ Paul Avrich and Karen Avrich, *Sasha and Emma: The Anarchist Odyssey of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2012), 281-286.

²⁴⁰ Goldman and Berkman, *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences*, 4.

This chapter is broken into three sections. The first section briefly explores the buildup to Berkman and Goldman’s imprisonment. It looks at the formation of the No-Conscription League and their arrest. The second section focuses on Berkman’s imprisonment at the Federal Penitentiary at Atlanta, exploring the brutal prison conditions for Berkman as well as for other political prisoners. It also explores his revolutionary commitment after his release. Finally, the third section explores Goldman’s imprisonment at the State Prison in Jefferson City, Missouri, looking at labor conditions within the state penitentiary as well as her relationships with prison officials and other inmates. Like the previous section, it tracks her revolutionary commitment after her release.

Resisting Conscription

In May 1917, Berkman, Goldman, and a few friends formed the No-Conscription League.²⁴¹ According to Goldman biographer Richard Drinnon, “as a woman not subject to the draft and further as an anarchist who believed that everyone should follow the dictates of his own conscience, she did not feel that she could advise individuals to refuse service.” Nevertheless, Goldman wanted to use The League to stand for and support individuals who refused to be drafted.²⁴² The League’s manifesto stated that “The No Conscription League is to be the voice of protests against the coercion of conscientious objectors to participate in the war.” They opposed conscription “because we are internationalists, anti-militarists, and opposed to all wars waged by capitalistic governments.” They were determined to “resist conscription by every means in our power, and we will sustain those who, for similar reasons, refuse to be conscripted.”²⁴³

²⁴¹ Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), 230.

²⁴² Richard Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise: A Biography of Emma Goldman* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), 186.

²⁴³ “No Conscription! [Statement of the No Conscription League],” in *Life of an Anarchist: The Alexander Berkman Reader*, ed., Gene Fellner (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 151-152.

Roughly two weeks after The League formed, the United States passed the Selective Services Act, which required men between the ages of twenty and thirty to register for military service. The cover of the June 1917 issue of Goldman's magazine, *Mother Earth*, responded to the passage of the act with the epitaph: "In Memoriam: American Democracy."²⁴⁴ The League was short lived, however, lasting only about six weeks, but during its time they, according to Goldman biographer Alice Wexler, "organized three mass meetings to protest conscription, printed and distributed thousands of leaflets protesting the draft, and advised hundreds of young men about their options."²⁴⁵

At one meeting on June 14, 1917, which turned out to be their last, police arrived and demanded that every young man in attendance show his draft cards. If they failed to do so, they were subject to arrest. Goldman concluded that federal authorities were going to use their meetings as a trap, so The League decided to stop all public meetings and focus on written propaganda. The next day, President Wilson signed the Espionage Act. If convicted, people faced up to twenty years' imprisonment and fines up to \$10,000. That same day, June 15, 1917, authorities arrived at Goldman and Berkman's headquarters and the pair were arrested and charged with violating the Espionage Act and "conspiracy to interfere with the draft." Goldman and Berkman were taken to a place Goldman knew well: the New York City Jail, also known as the "Tombs."²⁴⁶

The pair spent ten days in the Tombs and were released on bail on June 25, with their trial scheduled to begin two days later.²⁴⁷ At first, they planned to ignore the indictment, but the judge warned that they would be defended by a court-appointed

²⁴⁴ Marian J. Morton, *Emma Goldman and the American Left: "Nowhere at Home"* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 85-86.

²⁴⁵ Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, 230.

²⁴⁶ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 271-72.

²⁴⁷ Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, 232.

lawyer. In hopes of using their trial to showcase their political views, they decided to defend themselves.²⁴⁸ The state's case revolved around two issues: first, they attempted to show that Berkman and Goldman persuaded men not to register for the draft; second, they charged that at The League's May 18 meeting, both Goldman and Berkman advocated violence. After arguments and closing statements, the jury found them both guilty, taking only thirty-nine minutes to make their decision. They both received the maximum sentence of two years in prison and a \$10,000 fine. Judge Julius Mayer also recommended that the pair be deported: "We have no place in this country for those who express the view that the law may be disobeyed in accordance with the choice of an individual."²⁴⁹

After the trial, Goldman and Berkman were immediately brought to the state penitentiary in Jefferson City, Missouri and the federal penitentiary in Atlanta, respectively.²⁵⁰ Goldman described her cell at Jefferson City as a "decided improvement over Blackwell's Island," even though her "cell faced a wall that shut off the air and light." Goldman quickly learned the prison routine at Jefferson City and saw a number of progressive features the prison instituted. These included: "more frequent visits, the opportunity to order foodstuffs, the privilege of writing letters three times a week...recreation in the yard daily and twice on Sunday, a bucketful of hot water every evening, and permission to receive packages and printed matter." And like her cell, these features "were great advantages over conditions in Blackwell's Island."²⁵¹

Goldman and Berkman did not stay in prison for long, however. Approximately two weeks into their sentences, their lawyer, Harry Weinberger, successfully appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court on the grounds of testing the constitutionality of the Selective

²⁴⁸ Morton, *Emma Goldman and the American Left*, 87.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 87-89.

²⁵⁰ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 278.

²⁵¹ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, 626-627.

Service Act. Their trial began in early December 1917, and they returned to New York City and the Tombs before they were released on bail. A month later, Weinberger lost his appeal. The Supreme Court affirmed their guilt and declared the Selective Service Act constitutional. Berkman and Goldman would have to return to prison to serve out their sentences.²⁵²

Surviving the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary

Alexander Berkman arrived at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary on February 15, 1918, imprisoned there until October 1, 1919.²⁵³ While his imprisonment at Atlanta was nearly twelve years shorter than his time at the Western Penitentiary, it was just as brutal, perhaps even more so. Initially, Berkman was assigned garment work, “working all the time on a Singer sewing machine.”²⁵⁴ His lawyer, Harry Weinberger, tried to ask Warden Fred G. Zerbst for special privileges on Berkman’s behalf, but all his requests were denied. Weinberger spoke with the prison physician and asked if it would be possible for Berkman to receive fruit from the outside to “relieve his digestive troubles,” but the warden said he was in “fairly good health” and denied the request.²⁵⁵ Despite his stomach problems, Berkman “assured his comrades that he could serve his time easily, because he lived ‘above the stomach.’”²⁵⁶ Warden Zerbst also denied Weinberger’s request for extra writing privileges and writing supplies; like the rest of the inmates, he would get one letter a week.²⁵⁷ He also was denied any radical papers or books.²⁵⁸ Berkman would have to follow the same rules as the rest of his fellow inmates. And like his fellow inmates, he had to endure brutal punishment and abuse.

²⁵² Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 279-280.

²⁵³ Linnea Goodwin Burwood, “Alexander Berkman: Russian-American Anarchist” (PhD diss., Binghamton University, 2010), 243, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

²⁵⁴ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 281.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 282.

²⁵⁶ Falk, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman*, 284-285.

²⁵⁷ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 282.

²⁵⁸ Falk, *Love, Anarchy, and Emma Goldman*, 284.

From the time of his release from the Western Penitentiary in Pennsylvania to his time at Atlanta, Berkman noticed “very few essential changes have taken place in the administration of our prisons within the last 25 years. The same system of brutalizing and degrading the prisoners still prevails. Only the forms differ slightly.” On the day of his release, Berkman described the brutal forms of punishment he observed and experienced during his time in Atlanta. There was the dungeon, also known as “the hole,” where he witnessed prisoners chained up by the wrists. He witnessed prisoners beaten with clubs, and sometimes even shot. “Men are chained to the doors for eight and ten hours consecutively, without even the opportunity of answering the most pressing demands of nature,” he described. He witnessed men kept in “the hole,” described as “a filthy, dark kennel, not fit for a respectable dog,” for twenty-one to thirty days, forced to survive on two small slices of bread twice a day. He saw men brutally beaten for the smallest infraction, and on one occasion, he witnessed a young, African-American prisoner, “Kid” Smith, “shot dead for not walking fast enough while being taken to ‘the hole.’”²⁵⁹

For Berkman, the prison guards, especially Deputy Warden Girardeau, were responsible for a majority of the abuses inflicted upon the inmates. He described the average prison guard as “far below that of the average prisoner, both mentally and morally,” and “excepting a few decent officers, of a humane spirit, the majority of the guards are vulgar, brutal and dissipated men.” In charge was Deputy Warden Girardeau. He viewed Girardeau as “a man of very low mentality who believes in the old-time methods of brutality and suppression. His tactics look towards the breaking of the prisoner’s spirit and to the degradation of the inmates.” The deputy warden, Berkman believed, was responsible for much of the injustices inside the prison. Girardeau often

²⁵⁹ Alexander Berkman, “The Atlanta Federal Penitentiary,” in *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman*, 14.

protested and nullified “the Warden’s more humane attitude” and encouraged prison guards to mistreat and abuse inmates. On Sundays, the deputy warden traveled to the dungeon after reading Sunday service, where he would “tantalize the hungry victims in ‘the hole’ with the recital of the fine breakfast he had enjoyed that morning, and in various ways seek to provoke them into some unguarded remark in order to increase their punishment,” Berkman asserted.²⁶⁰ He not only witnessed the brutality inflicted upon his fellow inmates, but experienced it firsthand.

In February 1919, a year into Berkman’s sentence, a prison guard shot and killed inmate “Kid” Smith.²⁶¹ Just like he had done in the Western Penitentiary, Berkman could not remain quiet about the abuses he witnessed.²⁶² While he worked in the tailor shop, he began to circulate a petition protesting “the murderous clubbing and shooting of defenseless prisoners.” He wanted “to call the attention of the Warden to the terrible situation,” but, instead, he received the attention of Deputy Warden Girardeau. After Girardeau questioned him about his intentions, Berkman stated:

I explained to him the general indignation regarding the abuse of the prisoners, whereupon he asked me my opinion of his methods. I told him frankly that his actions did not square with his religious professions. I said that he was cruel to the men, that he lacked all sense of justice and fair play, and that I thought—as well as the majority of the prisoners—that he was a hypocrite.

Because of his protests, Berkman was thrown in “the hole,” forced to survive on bread and water, and, after, placed in solitary confinement. He spent the last seven and a half months of his sentence in solitary.²⁶³

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 284.

²⁶² Ibid, 285-86.

²⁶³ Berkman, “The Atlanta Federal Penitentiary,” in *Fragments*, 15.

On the day of his release, Berkman publicly stated his allegations in the *Atlanta Constitution*, and the next day, Warden Zerbst responded to the attacks in a letter to the editor. Zerbst stated that he normally ignored “ridiculous statements or attacks,” but since he felt that Berkman’s allegations were “somewhat along personal lines,” he decided to defend himself and his subordinates. The warden claimed that “Deputy Warden Charles H. Girardeau is a Christian gentleman of high character, clean habits and high ideals, who performs his duties conscientiously with a view no less for the welfare of those confined here than for the government under which we live.” Girardeau, the warden claimed, had spent “a great many years” building up Atlanta’s institutions and citizens, “always having in view the public welfare.” Berkman, on the other hand, “came to this country an anarchist disguised by the pretense of seeking the benefits of American freedom....Mr. Berkman served a sentence of 22 years in the Pennsylvania State prison, after which he made the same kind of an attack on that institution as he has on this one.” According to Zerbst, the prison guards were “good loyal Americans, who perform their duties with painstaking care.” If anyone wished to see for themselves, the prison was open six days a week, the warden stated.²⁶⁴ The exchange did not end there. Berkman replied to Zerbst’s response in his own letter to the editor.

Berkman started his letter by stating that Warden Zerbst failed to discredit any of his charges. According to Berkman, all the warden managed to do was claim that “all’s well, and there is nothing more to be said about it.” Berkman acknowledged that the warden “is more humane and intelligent than the Deputy Warden,” but that his loyalty was misplaced. According to Berkman, it was the public—and the fifteen hundred inmates—that Zerbst owed his loyalty to, not his subordinates. As to the charge that

²⁶⁴ Fred G. Zerbst, “Reply of Fred G. Zerbst,” in *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman*, 16-17.

Berkman made similar claims about the Western Penitentiary of Pennsylvania, he pointed out that the warden failed to mention “that as a result of my indictment of the brutalities practiced in that prison, investigations took place, my charges sustained, and practically the whole administration of the Western Penitentiary radically changed.”²⁶⁵

In his letter, Berkman stated that he “did not yet tell one-hundredth part of the terrible things that happen in the daily routine of the Atlanta Federal Prison.” In his article on the Atlanta Penitentiary, he stated that he did not mention the awful food, the abuse of political prisoners, the trafficking of drugs, “nor the new 400-loom duck mill, the product of which is about to come in competition with free labor.” Despite his claim that “I have not started yet, Mr. Zerst, but I *will*, and that very soon,” Berkman never followed up on his threat.²⁶⁶ He did, however, in *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences*, briefly address the excessive treatment of political prisoners at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary.

Berkman stated that besides Eugene Debs, all other political prisoners at Atlanta were “the victim[s] of special discrimination and persecution.” Debs, Berkman claimed, and as demonstrated in Chapter IV, received better treatment because “the authorities considered it best, owing to his great popularity, to assign him to the hospital, where he enjoys better food and treatment, without any particular work to do.”²⁶⁷ Other political prisoners were not so fortunate. Ammon A. Hennacy, a socialist and pacifist from Ohio, later converted to anarchism and became heavily involved with the Catholic Worker Movement. He arrived a few days after Berkman, and Berkman advised him on how to

²⁶⁵ Alexander Berkman, “Reply to Warden Fred G. Zerst,” in *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman*, 18-20.

²⁶⁶ Ibid, 20; Rebecca Jeanne Wesley, “The Triumph of the System: Alexander Berkman, Anarchism, and America” (PhD diss., Saint Louis University, 1981), 174, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

²⁶⁷ Berkman, “Persecution of Politicals,” *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman*, 21.

survive his imprisonment.²⁶⁸ For the “crime” of “conversing in a suspicious manner with another prisoner in the yard [Louis Kramer],” Hennacy lost all mail privileges, and was denied books, work, exercise, “or any other privileges usually accorded the average prisoner.” Berkman claimed that Hennacy’s “crime” occurred while employed in the prison shops “and permitted, like the other inmates, to be out in the yard every Saturday and Sunday afternoon, privileged to speak to anyone.”²⁶⁹

Walter Hershberger, a conscientious objector, received a twenty-year sentence, reduced to four years, “for refusing to don a military uniform.” He was kept in solitary confinement beginning in the early part of December, 1918, with frequent visits to the dungeon, where he had to endure the bread-and-water diet. He was still in isolation at the time of Berkman’s release. Political prisoners, according to Berkman, had to complete labor they were physically unable to perform and thrown in “the hole” or put in solitary when they failed to finish their work. Berkman argued that the lot of the average prisoner is hard enough, but the politicals [sic] are particularly discriminated against in the matter of work, of general treatment, and specifically in relation to their mail privileges.²⁷⁰ Berkman never addressed his time in greater detail, or the lasting effects it had on him, after his immediate statements after his release. Yet, he emerged from Atlanta still committed to revolution. Emma Goldman, however, did write about some of the psychological and physical effects his time at Atlanta had on him in her autobiography, *Living My Life*.

After Berkman’s release, Goldman wrote that “he looked haggard and pale, but otherwise apparently his usual stoical and humorous self.” But after her initial excitement over his freedom wore off, she soon realized that Berkman was not well. “Uncle Sam’s

²⁶⁸ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 283.

²⁶⁹ Berkman, “Persecution of Politicals,” 21.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 21-23.

prison had succeeded in accomplishing in twenty-one months what the Western Penitentiary of Pennsylvania had failed to do in fourteen years,” Goldman expressed, “Atlanta had broken his health and had sent him back a physical wreck, with the horrors of his experience burned into his soul.” Berkman would “wake up in a cold sweat, tortured by the nightmare of his recent experience,” she wrote. It is not known what exactly Berkman suffered from, but his condition worsened, and their friend, Dr. Wovschin, determined that Berkman required an operation. But Berkman refused to follow the doctor’s advice. They decided that they would have to “take our patient by surprise.” After a struggle, they managed to sedate him and the doctor performed the operation successfully. He awoke in terror, screaming, “The goddam Deputy!” Goldman had to gently persuade him that he was no longer in Atlanta, and that he was with friends: “If you say so, it must be true, and I believe you...but how strange is the human mind!”²⁷¹

In his writings, Berkman never returned to his experiences at Atlanta. In 1922, he published two pamphlets, *The Kronstadt Rebellion* and *The Russian Tragedy*.²⁷² Later, in 1925 while living in France, he helped edit *Letters from Russian Prisons*, which detailed political persecution under the Bolshevik regime. In addition, he became secretary and treasurer of a committee to help anarchist prisoners in Russia. Also, in 1925, he published his Russian diary, *The Bolshevik Myth*. Historian Paul Avrich described Berkman’s work as “one of the earliest and most penetrating accounts of emerging Soviet totalitarianism.” Finally, in 1929, Berkman’s *Now and After: The ABC of Communist Anarchism* was published. Drawing heavily from communist-anarchist Peter Kropotkin, Berkman’s *Now and After* provided a clear and accessible exposition of communist anarchism.²⁷³ His

²⁷¹ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 698-700.

²⁷² Gene Fellner, ed., *Life of an Anarchist: The Alexander Berkman Reader*, 216.

²⁷³ Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 205-206.

comrade, however, recounted her imprisonment in great detail in her autobiography, *Living My Life*.

Jefferson City

The Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City was the largest prison in the United States. The prison had roughly twenty-three hundred inmates, and about one hundred of those were women.²⁷⁴ The few weeks that Goldman had spent there before her appeal showed her that, at the very least, living conditions were better than at Blackwell's Island and prisoners were granted more privileges. She also realized right away the most striking similarity between the two prisons: the inmates. "The inmates in the Missouri penitentiary," wrote Goldman, "like those at Blackwell's Island, were recruited from the lowest social strata...the ninety-odd prisoners were poor wretches of the world of poverty and drabness. Coloured or white, most of them had been driven to crime by conditions that had greeted them at birth." While they all had been convicted of crimes, she "found no criminals among them, but only unfortunates, broken, hapless, and hopeless human beings."²⁷⁵

Just like during her time at Blackwell's, Goldman was assigned to sewing work in the prison shop. Prisoners were required to work nine-hour shifts six days a week, and there was practically no ventilation in the shop which added on to the inmate's misery.²⁷⁶ The lack of ventilation was a constant throughout the whole prison, in fact. "Air is the most tabooed article in the Missouri prison," wrote Goldman, "except in extremely warm weather, the windows are rarely opened, healthy women are forced to breathe the putrid air of consumptives and syphiletics [sic]."²⁷⁷

²⁷⁴ Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, 247-248.

²⁷⁵ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 652-653.

²⁷⁶ Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, 248.

²⁷⁷ Emma Goldman, "The State Prison at Jefferson City, MO," in *A Fragment of the Prison Experiences of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman*, 5-6.

When Goldman began her work in the shop, she was under the impression that “the contract system of prison labor [had] been abolished ‘officially’—the State is now the employer,” she wrote, but she would soon find out that that was not the case.²⁷⁸ Inmates were given two months to “learn the trade, which consisted in sewing jackets, overalls, auto coats, and suspenders.” To make their quota, prisoners had to sew anywhere from forty-five to a hundred jackets, or from nine to eighteen suspenders. Inmates that did not have any experience in sewing found it extremely difficult to make their quota and there were no considerations for illness or physical limitations. “The shop was dreaded by all the inmates,” she described. Completing their work assignment was difficult enough, but the shop foreman compounded their troubles.²⁷⁹

The foreman, just twenty-one years old, had been in charge of the shop since the age of sixteen. To make sure inmates completed their quota, he hurled insults at them, and if that tactic did not work, “the threat of punishment brought results.” Terrified of the foreman, inmates rarely protested. “If anyone did,” wrote Goldman, “she became his special target for persecution.” Goldman also stated that the foreman sometimes stole a part of their work to increase their punishment.²⁸⁰ On more than one occasion, she witnessed him steal jackets and suspenders from African-American women or from “illiterate white girls.” If prisoners insisted that they had completed all of their work, “they are punished for ‘impudence,’ in addition to being punished for ‘short’ work,” explained Goldman.²⁸¹ But “the foreman was of course but a cog in the prison machine, the centre of which was the State of Missouri,” she explained.

It was doing business with private firms, drawing its customers from every part of the United States, as I soon discovered by the labels we had to sew on the things

²⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 6.

²⁷⁹ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 653.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 653-654.

²⁸¹ Emma Goldman, “The State Prison at Jefferson City, MO,” 6-7.

we manufactured. Even poor old Abe had been turned into a sweater of convict labour: the Lincoln Jobbing House of Milwaukee had the picture of the Liberator on its label, bearing the legend: "True to his country, true to our trade." The firms bought our labour for a song and they were therefore in a position to undersell those employing union labour. In other words, the State of Missouri was slave-driving and tormenting us, and in addition also acting as scab on the organized workers.

And while the foreman terrorized inmates working in the shop, so too did the acting warden, Captain Gilvan.²⁸²

No longer allowed to administer floggings as punishment, Captain Gilvan still had other barbaric methods to rely on. One of those methods was throwing inmates into the "blind" cell. The "blind" cell was four feet by eight, and it was completely dark. Inmates were allowed a single blanket and were forced to survive on two slices of bread and two cups of water a day. They were held in the cell from three to twenty-two days, and sometimes Gilvan would "hang them up by their wrists." There was also the "bullring." Goldman did not describe it, but she did state that this form of punishment was not used on white women. One day in shop, after one of the acting warden's more brutal outbreaks, Goldman approached Gilvan: "I must tell you that the task is sheer torture, especially for the older women. The insufficient food and constant punishment make things even worse." Gilvan accused Goldman of promoting mischief and told her that the inmates never had any problem completing their work before she arrived and warned her to stop her agitation or he would "punish [her] like the rest." "That's all right, Captain," Goldman replied, "but I repeat that the task is barbarous and no one can make it regularly without breaking down." After the confrontation, she returned to her machine to finish her work.²⁸³

²⁸² Goldman, *Living My Life*, 654.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 654-655.

Adding to the miseries of the shop and the tortuous work assignment was the prison dining hall. Goldman biographer Alice Wexler described the hall as a “large, gloomy, cockroach-infested room.” The food was usually served cold, “often rancid or spoiled, and full of bugs.” Prisoners were served the same rotten food each day, and the days that meals had some variety, such as oatmeal twice a week and the occasional stewed fruit, the food was filled with worms. Many prisoners did not have access to another source of food, so many suffered from severe malnutrition. To make matters worse, prisoners were forced to eat their meals in total silence, allowed to converse with each other only in “strictly limited recreation periods.”²⁸⁴

For Goldman, mail from friends brought both anxieties and comfort. She learned of raids on her friend’s apartments and troubles with both her magazine, *Mother Earth*, and also the *Mother Earth* book-shop. The mail also brought news about how Berkman was doing in Atlanta. She was told that conditions in Atlanta “were nothing short of feudal.” “After fourteen years in the Pennsylvania purgatory,” wrote Goldman, “Sasha was again being made to suffer more than I.” Friends sent her large amounts of food, which Goldman shared with the other inmates, providing some much-needed comfort. Her St. Louis comrades “even ordered a spring mattress for my cot and arranged with a Jefferson City grocer to send me anything I ordered. It was this helpful solidarity that enabled me to share with my prison companions.” Since there was no library in the female wing, and they were not allowed to take out books from the library in the men’s wing, her comrades sent her scores of books and other reading materials to help pass the time.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ Wexler, *Emma Goldman in America*, 248-249.

²⁸⁵ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 657-660.

Just about everything Goldman received from her friends on the outside she shared with her fellow-prisoners. Perhaps the most striking example of this was the Christmas she spent behind bars. As Christmas approached, gifts from the outside poured in for her. “Soon my cell began to look like a department store,” she wrote. Her friends, family, and comrades sent scores of presents to her and she asked one friend to send her various trinkets for her fellow inmates and they did so. With the help of three of her neighbors, they sorted all the presents in order to “give what she might like best, without arousing envy or suspicion of preference and favouritism.” On Christmas Eve, while everyone was distracted attending the movies, Goldman and her neighbors delivered presents to every cell. All the inmates returned to their cells to find them filled with gifts. “My Christmas in the Missouri penitentiary brought me greater joy than many previous ones outside,” she wrote, “I was thankful to the friends who had enabled me to bring a gleam of sunshine into the dark lives of my fellow-sufferers.”²⁸⁶

Of all her friends in prison, the most well-known was socialist Kate Richards O’Hare. O’Hare, imprisoned for violating the Espionage Act, arrived at Jefferson City approximately a year into Goldman’s sentence.²⁸⁷ Familiar with O’Hare’s work, Goldman “considered her socialism a colourful brand. Had we met on the outside, we should have probably argued furiously and have remained strangers for the rest of our lives. In prison we soon found common ground and human interest in our daily association, which proved more vital than our theoretical differences.” A friendship developed between the two, and the more Goldman learned of her personality, the more her fondness for O’Hare increased.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ Ibid, 672-673.

²⁸⁷ Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise*, 201.

²⁸⁸ Goldman, *Living My Life*, 677.

During O'Hare's sentence, she too became infatuated with Goldman. In numerous letters to her family, O'Hare often brought up Goldman's ability to uplift her and her fellow-inmates. In one letter, she wrote

Thwarted in physical motherhood she poured out her whole soul in vicarious motherhood of all the sad and sorrowful, the wronged and oppressed, the bitter and rebellious children of men. Warden Gilvin was right when he said the women here worshipped her with an idolatrous worship. They did. And largely it was because the women here are mostly the weak and inefficient, the arrested and infantile who have never achieved adulthood and still sorely need the sheltering mother love. The girls love me too, but never as they loved Emma Goldman. To them I am the dispenser of chewing gum and peppermint drops, a perambulating spelling book, dictionary and compendium of all known wisdom, I am lawyer, priest and physician, I am an authority on everything from crochet stitches to the meaning of dreams; but I do not and never can fill Emma's place in their hearts.
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In another, she stated that, "The Emma Goldman that I know is not the Propagandist. It is Emma Goldman, the tender, cosmic mother, the wise, understanding woman, the faithful sister, the loyal comrade.... Emma don't believe in Jesus, yet she is one who makes it possible for me to grasp the spirit of Jesus...."²⁹⁰ After Goldman's release, O'Hare truly missed her company and the two remained in contact with one another.²⁹¹ However, their lives after prison differed drastically.

Goldman spent her fiftieth birthday behind bars: "What more fitting place for the rebel to celebrate such an occasion," she asked.²⁹² Soon after, she prepared to leave prison. As her release day approached, she thought: "Release from the hateful shop, the control, the surveillance, the thousand humiliations prison involves. Back to life and work again—with Sasha. Back to my family, comrades, and friends." On Saturday,

²⁸⁹ Kate Richards O'Hare, "Letters from Prison," January 31, 1920, in *Kate Richards O'Hare: Selected Writings and Speeches*, eds., Philip S. Foner and Sally M. Miller (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 268.

²⁹⁰ Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise*, 202.

²⁹¹ Sally M. Miller, *From Prairie to Prison: The Life of Social Activist Kate Richards O'Hare* (Columbia, MO, University of Missouri Press, 1993), 166.

²⁹² Goldman, *Living My Life*, 686.

September 28, 1919, Emma Goldman walked out of the Missouri State Penitentiary.²⁹³ And like Berkman, Goldman was determined as ever to her revolutionary ideals.

In late December 1919, Berkman and Goldman boarded the S.S. *Buford*, along with 247 other radicals apprehended during the postwar Red Scare.²⁹⁴ Judge Mayer's suggestion during their trial that the pair be deported became a reality. Deported under the Immigration Act of 1918, with Berkman and Goldman on board, the *Buford* set its sails for the Soviet Union.²⁹⁵ As the ship prepared to leave, Goldman made one final statement to the press: "I consider it an honor to be the first political agitator to be deported from the United States."²⁹⁶

Like Berkman, Goldman continued writing. She wrote about her Russian experiences in her book *My Disillusionment in Russia* (1923, 1924), and published her memoir, *Living My Life*, in 1931. Writer Alix Kates Shulman stated that, after Berkman committed suicide in 1936 "Goldman might have succumbed to despondency and old age but for the sudden outbreak of revolution and civil war in Spain." Despite her advanced age—she was sixty-seven—Goldman eagerly joined the movement, "directing the Spanish anarchists' press and propaganda effort in England, with the energy and spirit of youth." She even traveled to Canada to try and raise money for the war effort in Spain. In Canada, Goldman suffered a series of strokes and passed away in May 1940, at the age of seventy.²⁹⁷ She was buried in Chicago near the graves of the Haymarket Martyrs.²⁹⁸

²⁹³ Ibid, 691-693.

²⁹⁴ Avrich and Avrich, *Sasha and Emma*, 296-297.

²⁹⁵ Alix Kates Shulman, ed., *Red Emma Speaks: An Emma Goldman Reader*, 3rd ed. (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 31.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 33-35.

²⁹⁸ Drinnon, *Rebel in Paradise*, 313.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION

During their first long-term imprisonment, Eugene Debs, Alexander Berkman, and Emma Goldman each experienced profound ideological change. As Chapter II explores, Debs began his imprisonment at the McHenry County Jail at Woodstock, Illinois, in 1895 already experiencing ideological changes. Years before his first imprisonment, he began to understand that the working class created all the wealth for society and were entitled to fair compensation for their labor. The ideas of Marx were starting to influence his thinking through the writings of Lawrence Gronlund. In the early 1890s he was convinced that worker solidarity was the key to winning concessions from railroad corporations so he founded the ARU to organize all railway workers. By 1894, he believed that a cooperative commonwealth should replace the wage system, again influenced by the ideas he read about in Gronlund's work. Still, he did not consider himself a socialist. While at Woodstock, he became the target of socialists eager to convert him to the socialist cause, where they met with him in jail and provided him with socialist literature. It was in jail where he first read the writings of Karl Kautsky, where he met with Thomas Morgan, J. Keir Hardie, and Victor Berger, and where he first declared he was in favor of socialism. While he hesitated to officially align with the socialist movement publicly immediately after his release, focusing instead on rebuilding the ARU and helping ARU members blacklisted for their involvement in the Pullman Strike, he did so approximately a year after his release. It was in prison where his already evolving ideology coalesced into what would become his revolutionary socialist agitation and organizing.

As Chapter III explores, Alexander Berkman emerged from his fourteen years at the Western Penitentiary no longer committed to violence as a revolutionary tactic. While

still fully committed to anarchism, he now believed that violence harmed the spread of anarchist ideas, and he thought it showed weakness and was the method of ignorance. Most importantly, Berkman emerged from his imprisonment as dedicated as ever to his revolutionary ideals. In the same chapter, it is clear that Goldman's time at Blackwell's Island impacted her ideology as well. As political theorist Nolan Bennet has argued, Goldman's views on authority and action evolved during her time in prison.²⁹⁹ She now believed that solidarity between the masses and radicals was absolutely necessary. After her time working in the prison hospital, she went on to work as a practical nurse and also studied midwifery, childhood diseases, and obstetrics. Like her comrade, she emerged from Blackwell's Island more determined and committed to her revolutionary ideals.

For all three, their commitment to revolutionary activism and organizing forced them back into prison cells, and, as is evident in the next two chapters, all three emerged from their second long-term prison sentences committed as ever to their revolutionary ideals. Of course, they are not the only revolutionaries who emerged from long-term, brutal prison sentences still dedicated to revolution. Legendary anarchist Michael Bakunin was first arrested during the Dresden insurrection of 1849. Historian Paul Avrich has stated that "he spent the next eight years in prison, six of them in the dungeons of tsarist Russia. When he finally emerged, his sentence commuted to a life term in Siberian exile, he was toothless from scurvy and his health had been seriously impaired." Remarkably, he escaped and "embarked on a sensational odyssey that circled the globe and made his name a legend an object of worship in radical groups all over Europe."³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ Nolan Bennett, "Emma Goldman and the Autobiography of the People," *American Political Thought: A Journal of Ideas, Institutions, and Culture* 6 (Winter 2017), 55-56.

³⁰⁰ Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 5.

Another legendary anarchist, Peter Kropotkin, also spent numerous years behind bars. Like Bakunin, Kropotkin escaped his first imprisonment. Imprisoned in Russia in 1874, he escaped two years later, fleeing to Western Europe. Later, in 1882, he was arrested in France on “trumped-up charges of sedition,” Avrich claimed, and spent three years in a Clairvaux prison.³⁰¹ Rudolf Rocker, leading anarcho-syndicalist theorist and dear comrade of both Berkman and Goldman, spent years interned as an enemy alien in England after he publicly opposed both sides in the First World War. He would later write *Behind Barbed Wire and Bars*, detailing his internment.³⁰² And Victor Serge, revolutionary anarchist, spent five years imprisoned in a French maximum security prison for refusing to testify against some of his comrades.³⁰³ His first novel, *Men in Prison*, was “an effort to free myself from this inward nightmare, as well as performing a duty towards all those who will never so free themselves.”³⁰⁴ Like the subjects of this thesis, these revolutionaries remained revolutionaries in spite of drastic state repression.

Of course, not all radicals emerged from prison still dedicated to revolution, and not all radicals who went to prison were revolutionaries. For example, Emma Goldman’s fellow prisoner at Jefferson City, Kate Richards O’Hare. O’Hare joined the Socialist Labor Party in 1899, and the Socialist Party in 1901.³⁰⁵ Although she received the nickname “Red Kate,” she was not a revolutionary socialist. O’Hare biographer Sally Miller described her as “a revisionist, or reformist, Socialist who believed that the increasing exploitation of the proletariat would help undermine the existing capitalist

³⁰¹ Ibid, 55-6.

³⁰² Nicolas Walter, introduction to *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*, 6th ed., by Rudolf Rocker (Edinburgh, AK Press, 2004), v-vi.

³⁰³ Adam Hochschild, foreword to *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, by Victor Serge (New York: New York Review of Books, 2012), viii.

³⁰⁴ Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 53.

³⁰⁵ James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895 – 1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 49.

structure and that socialism could be built in the system through reforms.”³⁰⁶ Beginning in 1902, O’Hare constantly toured the United States agitating and organizing for the Socialist Party.³⁰⁷

When World War I erupted in Europe in the summer of 1914, O’Hare shifted the focus of her writings and speeches. In the fall of 1914, she “focused her readers’ attention on the bloodletting in Europe...those already killed in the war, she insisted, were murdered by capitalism,” Miller and historian Philip Foner noted.³⁰⁸ In the spring of 1917, she toured the U.S. speaking out against the war, delivering the same speech at each stop, presenting “the standard socialist argument on the economic causes of the war,” and according to Foner and Miller, “nowhere in her speech did she advise young men not to register for the draft or to violate the law in any way.” Nevertheless, O’Hare was arrested and charged with violating the Espionage Act.³⁰⁹ Convicted in December 1917 and sentenced to five years in the state penitentiary at Jefferson City, O’Hare spent the next year and a half appealing her conviction. All appeals failed and she entered the Missouri State Penitentiary in April 1919.³¹⁰

Like Berkman, Goldman, and Debs, O’Hare wrote extensively about her imprisonment in her prison memoir, *In Prison*. She began her memoir discussing the role of political prisoners in the United States: “If only the prisoner himself can interpret the very heart of the prison problem,” O’Hare explained, “then the political prisoner is a valuable social asset.”³¹¹ So went on to say:

³⁰⁶ Sally M. Miller, *From Prairie to Prison: The Life of Social Activist Kate Richards O’Hare* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 30.

³⁰⁷ Philip S. Foner and Sally M. Miller, eds., *Kate Richards O’Hare: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 13.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 18-20.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

³¹¹ Kate Richards O’Hare, *In Prison* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923), 14.

When the political prisoners went to prison they took with them education, culture, scientific knowledge of human psychology, a clear understanding of the economic forces that so largely shape human life, and a saving sense of humour. So, for the first time in the history of our country, our penal system has been studied by convicts enduring it who had intellectual background, sympathetic understanding, scientific training, and actual experience which to base conclusions.³¹²

She argued that the ruling classes were sending “the very people...to prison who were best fitted to investigate, criticize, and analyze the prison system of the United States, which is after all the epitome of our economic and social development.”³¹³ Like Debs, she viewed the fourteen months she spent in prison as a “necessary and valuable part of my education.” O’Hare believed that only by experiencing life behind bars was she able to intelligently study the prison system. She discovered that: “only in prisons are the crudities, stupidities, barbarities, and brutalities of slavery, feudalism, and capitalism concentrated into the narrow confines of four walls where one may see and feel and suffer them all to the *n*th degree. Such an experience is well worth the price.”³¹⁴

Imprisoned with Emma Goldman, O’Hare found that political differences dissolved behind prison walls. While she was a socialist and Goldman an anarchist, O’Hare found that “theories don’t seem very important here. The brutal, naked tragedies of life crush them out. When one lives with wrecked lives, broken hearts and sick souls, abstract theories somehow lose force.” Instead of arguing political theories, they spent their time and energy “feeding hungry stomachs and supporting faltering spirits.”³¹⁵

O’Hare also spent many hours reading. She read whatever socialist newspapers she could acquire, as well as many books on psychology and penology. Even before her imprisonment, she planned on conducting investigative studies of inmates and the

³¹² Ibid, 15.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ Ibid, 18-9.

³¹⁵ Kate Richards O’Hare, “Letters from Prison,” June 15, 1919, in *Kate Richards O’Hare: Selected Writings and Speeches*, eds., Philip S. Foner and Sally M. Miller (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 221-22.

penitentiary system.³¹⁶ Her prison memoir served as an outlet for her critiques and assessments of the prison system.³¹⁷ She concluded that

the ultimate goal is not to reform prisons, but to develop to develop a better adjusted social machinery. But criminal laws, criminal courts, and penal institutions are very important parts of our social machinery, and we must patch up what we have so that it will operate with as little friction and waste of human life as possible, while we are building the machinery of the new order.³¹⁸

After President Wilson commuted her sentence in May 1920, she devoted her time to campaigning for modernizing the prison system.³¹⁹

Along with her devotion to prison reform, she also attempted to resume her work with the Socialist Party as well as leading the amnesty campaign for World War I political prisoners, most notably, Eugene Debs. But by the end of the 1920s, according to Foner and Miller, “she had clearly distanced herself from left-wing politics, having become a staunch foe of communism, and approached the liberal center.” In 1938, now in her sixties, Governor Culbert L. Olson of California appointed O’Hare assistant director of the Department of Penology. She only occupied the position for one year, but Foner and Miller stated that during that time, “civil service status for prison administrators was initiated, young offenders segregated from mature and hardened inmates, and the first American minimum-security prison was established at Chino, California.” And while she was not a revolutionary, “her lifelong activism had helped promote and realize a great number of reforms for the benefit of the masses of Americans,” Foner and Miller suggested.³²⁰ While O’Hare moved away from agitating for socialism after her time in prison, Debs, Berkman, and Goldman never ceased their revolutionary activism. For all

³¹⁶ Miller, *From Prairie to Prison*, 172-74.

³¹⁷ Philip S. Foner and Sally M. Miller, eds., *Kate Richards O’Hare: Selected Writings and Speeches*, 27.

³¹⁸ O’Hare, *In Prison*, 165.

³¹⁹ Philip S. Foner and Sally M. Miller, eds., *Kate Richards O’Hare: Selected Writings and Speeches*, 28-29.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 29-31.

three, prison had an enormous impact on their ideology and it also provided concrete proof to their accusations against capitalism and the penitentiary system. And while this thesis attempts to understand the connection between incarceration and its impact on the ideology of revolutionaries, the subject is complex and important and demands further study.

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