



Speeches

Speech Against Conscription and War by Emma Goldman

[Delivered at Forward Hall, New York City, June 14, 1917]



Transcript of meeting (from which Goldman's speech is excerpted here) by public shorthand reporter Charles Pickler, employed by the Stenographic Service Company of New York City, contracted by the No-Conscription League. Copy of original transcript housed at the Tamiment Library, New York University. Permission to reproduce or quote in any form must be obtained from the Tamiment Library.

For transcript of court examination of Charles Pickler, see "Goldman & Berkman v. United States: Transcript of Record, 1917 Sept. 25," pp. 163-67, 219-23 (*Emma Goldman Papers* microfilm, reel 59).

THE CHAIRMAN: The next speaker is one who is well known to you. I shall not waste words or time in introducing her but I want to tell you that before she came to the meeting tonight somebody telephoned to her and told her, "If you go to that meeting you will not get home alive." I simply want to introduce a woman who has more courage than half a dozen regiments (tremendous cheering and applause at 9:12 P.M.) I introduce to you--(interrupted by applause and cheers. Some young man said, "Who loves Emma Goldman? We all do." Great cheering and applause.)

EMMA GOLDMAN: This is not the place to applaud or shout Hurrah for Emma Goldman. We have more serious things to talk about and some serious things to do. First of all I wish to say to you, all of you, workers, men and women from the East Side, that I regret deeply that I cannot speak to you in the language I have always spoken from this platform; that I cannot speak to you tonight in Yiddish. I shall speak English because I want those representing the State and Militarism and the Courts and Prisons to understand what I have to say. (Miss Goldman's remarks were so frequently interrupted by cheering and applause that reference to such interruptions will not be made in this report further.) I don't want them to get it secondhand. No language is ever rendered well in translation and I want them to hear what I have to say in the only language they can speak, and speak it poorly.

Friends, tomorrow morning I am sure that you will read the report that a meeting took place on the East Side attended by foreigners, by workmen, and ill-kempt, poorly washed people of the East Side-- foreigners who are being jeered at the present time in this country, foreigners who are being ridiculed because they have an idea. Well, friends, if the Americans are to wait until Americans wake up the country they will have to resurrect the Indians who were killed in America and upon whose bodies this

so-called democracy was established, because every other American, if you scratch him, you will find him to be an Englishman, Dutchman, Frenchman, Spaniard, a Jew and a German and a hundred and one other nationalities who sent their young men and their women to this country in the foolish belief that liberty was awaiting them at the American Harbor, Liberty holding a torch. That torch has been burning dimly in the United States for a very long time. It is because, the Goddess of Liberty is ashamed of the American people and what they have done in the name of liberty to liberty in the United States. And yet, friends, I am not sorry for the things that are happening in America today. I have come to the conclusion that every nation is like an individual, it must have its own experience and it does not accept the experience of other nations any more than you accept the experience of another individual, for if it were possible for a nation to learn by the bitter and tragic experiences of other nations America today could not be in war and America today could not have inaugurated a reign of terror which is sweeping across the country from one end to another. America had Europe before its face as an example, with all the murders and bloodshed and corpses and millions of lives lost. America had the trenches and the battlefields of the last, nearly, three years of Europe before her. America realized that this war is one of the bloodiest and most criminal wars that has ever been fought by civilized people. America had the lesson that the working people and the sons of working women are being sacrificed in the name of Kultur and they want democracy upon the battlefields of Europe, and if America had been a grown man instead of a child it would have learned the lesson that no matter how great the cause it is never great enough to sacrifice millions of people in the trenches and on the battlefield in the name of democracy or liberty.

Evidently, America has to learn a salutary lesson and it is going to pay a terrible price. It is going to shed oceans of blood, it is going to heap mountains of human sacrifices of men of this country who are able to create and produce, to whom the future belongs. They are to be slaughtered in blood and in sacrifice in the name of a thing which has never yet existed in the United States of America, in the name of democracy and liberty.

My friends, there are people who say and tell you that when they prophecy something the prophecy comes true. I am sorry to say that I am one such and I have to say the same. For thirty years we have pointed out to you that this democratic State which is a government supposedly of the people, by the people and for the people has now become one of the most Imperialistic that the world has ever laid its eyes upon. For twenty-five or thirty years we have told you that the United States of America is appropriating more power every day until the time will come when individual men or women will be nothing but cogs in a machine of this centralized, cruel, blood thirsty government known as the United States. We told you that, and you said, you are alarmists. You said, you are too extreme, that will never happen in the United States. And here you are, friends. It has happened in the United States. A Czar was imposed upon you without the consent of the people. The people were never asked whether they wanted war. Indeed, the people of America placed Mr. Wilson in the White House and in the Chair of the Presidency because he told the people that he would keep them out of war, and as one of his political advertisements billposters were posted all over the city with the picture of a working woman and her children saying, "He has kept us out of war." He promised you heaven, he promised you everything if you would only place him in power. What made you place him in power. You expected peace and not war. The moment you placed him in power, however, he forgot his promises and he is giving you hell. War was imposed upon the people without the people getting a chance to say whether they wanted war or not, and war was imposed upon them, I say, because the gentlemen of power and those who back power want war. And because war has been declared upon you we are told, we men and women of the United States who work and sweat and toil to sustain these gentlemen of power, we are told that there is a law and we must go to war. If war is necessary, only the people must decide whether they want war or not, and as long as the people have not given their consent I deny that the President of the United States has any right to declare it; I deny that the President or those who back the President have any right to tell the people that they shall take their sons and husbands and brothers and lovers and shall conscript them in order to

ship them across the seas for the conquest of militarism and the support of wealth and power in the United States. You say that is a law. I deny your law. I don't believe in it.

The only law that I recognize is the law which ministers to the needs of humanity, which makes men and women finer and better and more humane, the kind of law which teaches children that human life is sacred, and that those who arm for the purpose of taking human life are going to be called before the bar of human justice and not before a wretched little court which is called your law of the United States. And so, friends, the people have not yet decided whether they want war and the people are going to say, ultimately, whether they want war or not.

It is not surprising that President Wilson cannot sense the pulse of time. He has been in colleges too long; he has been too long within closed doors; he has been too long at the historical books. He cannot sense the pulse of time. But I tell you, without wishing to be a prophet, that within the next six months--not years but within the next six months--President Wilson will regret deeply that he ever declared war in the United States.

Of course, friends, of course since the war was declared by a country in whose interest it is that the American boy shall be sacrificed it was not to the interest of that country to put the war to a test and therefore conscription had to be imposed upon you. Don't you know that during the Spanish-American War when the people believed in the war there was no need of asking the young men of the country, at the point of the bayonet and gun and club, to put on an American uniform? They flocked to the war because they believed in it. And whether they were American citizens or were residents of America the people of America were all willing to give their lives for something they considered right and just. But because the people of America do not believe in this war, because the people of America have not been asked whether there shall be war, that is why they do not flock to the colors and that is why you in America are doing as the Russians used to do, as the German Kaiser is doing, as all the Imperialistic tyrants are doing. That is why you are going to drag your manhood by force into the uniform. But you are forgetting one thing, gentlemen of the law, you are driving a horse to water but you cannot compel him to drink. You will put the young manhood of America in the uniform, you will drag them to the battlefield and into the trenches, but while they are there there is going to be a bond of anti-militarism among the people of the world (great applause).

No, friends, you cannot compel human beings to take human life, if you give them the chance to reason and to think, to investigate and to analyze. And that is precisely what the authorities of this country don't want. They don't want you to hear anything about conscription; they don't want you to hear anything about the State Military Census. Why don't they want you to hear anything? If their position were correct and logical, if the State Military Census rested upon the need of the people, if conscription rested upon the desire of the people, all the revolutionists and Emma Goldmans and Alexander Berkman might talk their heads off and the people would not listen to them. But because the people know that conscription is a crime and oppression and an outrage upon reason, because the people know that the Military State Census was determined upon by one of the most reactionary men, we find Mr. Whitman who is on your backs, whom you supported, whom you gave the possibility to live. And the Military State Census, as you have been told, is going to turn every man of you here into a militiaman and into something who is fighting the Kaiser, because it is just as if the Kaiser wanted you to do a thing so that if you are a soldier and I tell you to shoot your mother and father and brother and sister you must obey orders. With the President is Mr. Whitman saying anything else? And then telling you that when you will become militiamen and you shall be ordered to shoot your brothers and fathers and sisters and mothers in the name of democracy that you are going to carry to the poor unfortunate people of Germany. And so, friends, we are here to tell you before you decide what you are going to do, think twice, and remember it is easy to make a mistake but it is very difficult to undo the mistake. You workmen of the East Side; you who have lived in Russia, you

who remember the days when you could not meet unless you had detectives and soldiers and police, look about you. See what you have in the United States. See what you have in America.

If the framers of the Declaration of Independence if Jefferson or Henry or the others, if they could look down upon the country and see what their offspring has done to it, how they have outraged it, how they have robbed it, how they have polluted it--why, my friends, they would turn in their graves. They would rise again and they would cleanse this country from its internal enemies, and that is the ruling class of the United States. There is a lesson you are going to learn and terrible as it is for us we nevertheless are glad that you will have to learn that lesson.

And now we come down to the tragedy that was committed in the United States Court in the State of New York yesterday, when two boys were sentenced. It is not only a tragedy because they were sentenced. Such things happen every day, hundreds, thousands of innocent working men are sent to the prison and the penitentiary, thousands of unfortunates throughout the world as well as here in so-called free America and nobody ever hears anything about it. It is an ordinary, commonplace thing to do. But the tragedy of yesterday is in the fact that a Judge, supported as you have been told by your money, protected by public opinion, protected by the President, the tragedy of it is that that Judge had the impudence and audacity to insult Kramer and Becker after he gave them the sentence of such horrible dimensions. Think of a man like that who sits there in judgment on other human beings. Think what must be his character, what must be his mind, what must be his soul, if he can spit human beings in the face, only because he has got the power.

But evidently the Judge knows nothing of history, any more than the ruling class knows. Don't you know there was a time when Marie Antoinette, very much surprised that the people had no bread asked, "Why don't they eat cake"? Don't you know what happened to the fair lady of France, Marie Antoinette? Don't you know what happened to the landowning class of France who said that the people should eat straw? Don't you know what happened to them? The people gave them all the straw they could possibly eat. I consider the action of Judge Mayer an insult and an outrage and I warrant you that he is going to hear about it, not only all over the United States but even from Europe. It may have seemed very insignificant to send two poor workingmen to the penitentiary and to insult them, to send Becker and Kramer, who are both workingmen--that is their crime, they were both honest enough to say they were anarchists. To be condemned in an American Court it is enough that you are an anarchist. The Judge was horrified at the audacity of these people to say it to him, face to face. Don't you know, men, you who are free Americans, the moment you enter an American court you must say, like Dante said, "Ye who enter here leave all hope behind." That is what the American Courts are. And so today you are governed by the bayonet and the police can treat you like dogs. But I say to you, they who live by the sword shall perish by the sword. So I tell you, gentlemen, now is your time. Do whatever you please. But you are forgetting the story and you are forgetting the writing on the wall. You are making a mistake if you think that by sending Kramer and Becker to jail you are going to silence the human voice. You are making a mistake if you believe that by threatening and arresting people you are going to stop the agitation against war. The agitation is in the hearts of the people, the agitation is in the minds of the people, and it only requires the psychological moment to come along, as it did in Russia, and the Judges like Mayer and the other Judges will fly off the bench and into the gutters.

My friends, if we thought for one single minute that the entire agitation is dependent only upon a handful of people we would never bother and endanger your lives, but we know the agitation is in your hearts and souls, we know that the people from the East and West and South and North are opposed to the war, are opposed to conscription, opposed to the Military State Census, and the people will be heard from, I can tell you that. And so, to threaten anyone's life, to say that she will not come back from a meeting alive--how stupid. What is life unless you can live it in freedom and in beauty, and unless you can express

yourself, unless you can be true to yourself what is life? I would rather than live the life of a dog to be compelled to sneak about and slink about, to worry that somebody is looking for you ready to take your life--Rather than that I would die the death of a lion any day. Why, what consequence is it if you tell people, we are going to arrest you, Miss Goldman. Just as if arresting Emma Goldman solves all the problems in the world. Prisons have never solved any problems. Guns and bayonets have never solved any problems. Bloodshed has never solved a problem. Never on earth, men and women, have such methods of violence, concentrated and organized violence, ever solved a single problem. Nothing but the human mind, nothing but human emotions, nothing but an intense passion for a great ideal, nothing but perseverance and devotion and strength of character--nothing else ever solved any problem.

And so, men and women, workmen and workwomen, you of the East Side, you who are sweated and bled to create the wealth of this country, you who are being sneered at because you are foreigners--very well, then, if you are good enough to create the wealth of America, if America had to go to Europe for her Art, if America had to go to Europe for her Literature, if America had to go to Europe for her Music and her ideals, by God you will have to go to the foreigners for liberty.

I wish to say here, and I don't say it with any authority and I don't say it as a prophet, I merely tell you--I merely tell you the more people you lock up, the more will be the idealists who will take their place; the more of the human voice you suppress, the greater and louder and the profounder will be the human voice. At present it is a mere rumbling, but that rumbling is increasing in volume, it is growing in depth, it is spreading all over the country until it will be raised into a thunder and people of America will rise and say, we want to be a democracy, to be sure, but we want the kind of democracy which means liberty and opportunity to every man and woman in America (Great and continued applause).

THE CHAIRMAN: Before we close the meeting I want to call your attention again to the demonstration Saturday, June 23rd, at 2 P.M., in Madison Square. The subject will be Labor and War. Everybody be there. And now, my friends, let the gentlemen of war step out first. They came first; let them leave first, and then you leave the hall gradually, without any disorder. The meeting stands adjourned.

Friends, you will be glad to hear that the collection for Becker and Kramer amounts to \$100 (applause).

Meeting adjourned at 9:42 P.M.