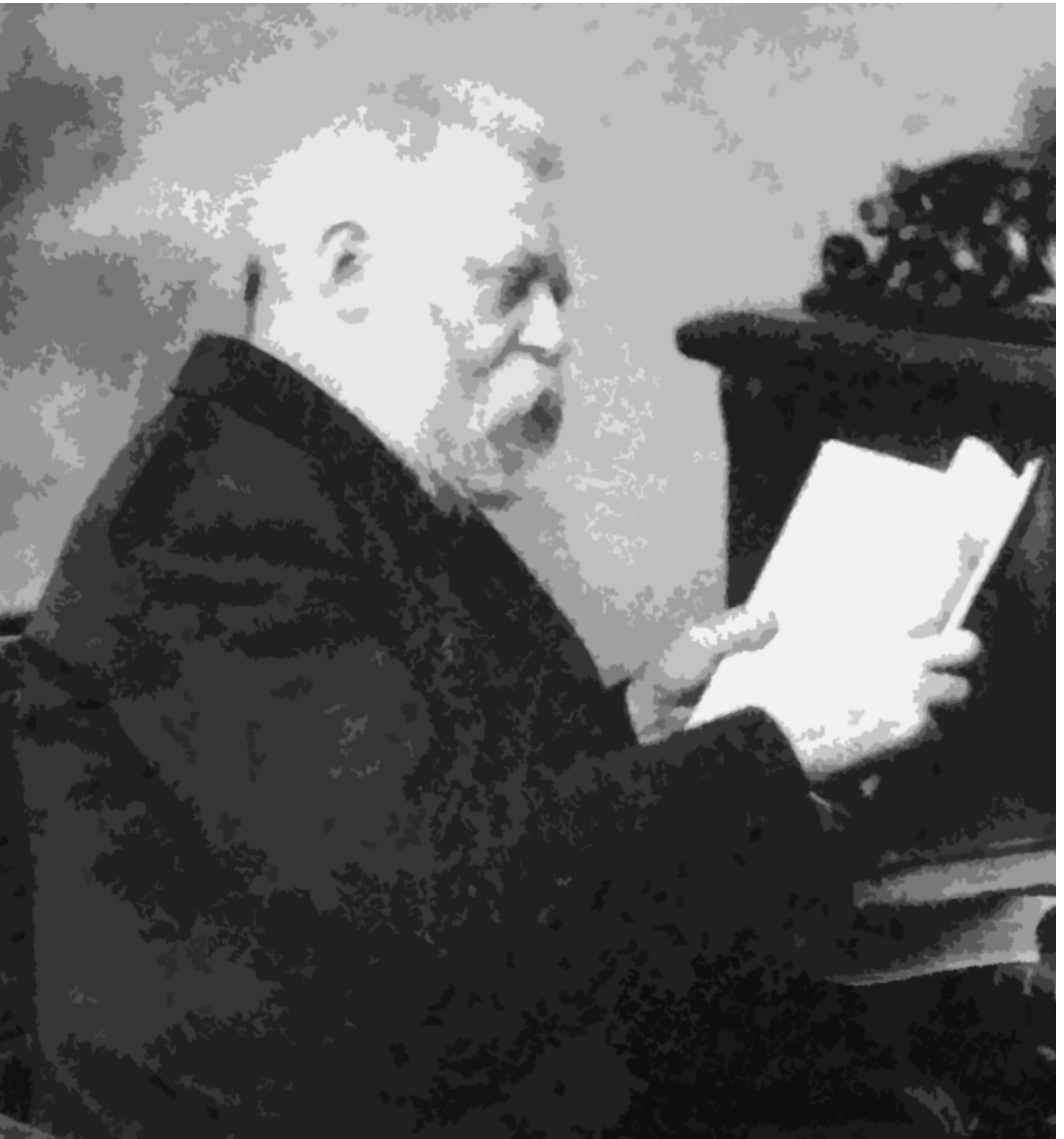


# JOHANN MOST

by Emma Goldman



Johann Most is one of the more misunderstood figures in U.S. anarchist history. His reputation is shaped by a legacy of vilification in the mainstream press, with the foreign-born Most being the target of relentless attacks by the newspapers of his day. In Most, the forces of capitalism and order found the stereotype of the wild-eyed anarchist bent on destruction.

While Most was indeed an advocate of violent revolution, he did far more than just sling violent rhetoric. Most was a tireless anarchist organizer, for years publishing the German language *Freiheit*, touring the United States on the lecture circuit, and contributing to development of the anarchist movement. In the early 1880s when Most arrived in the United States, he immediately set out to build a stronger anarchist movement, launching a successful lecture tour that resulted in the formation of many new groups.

The portrait of Johann Most as an anarchist dedicated to the building of an anarchist movement has largely been lost, as even historians of anarchism have focused on his rhetoric. And while by all accounts he had great rhetorical powers, there is more to Most than just his legacy of fiery speeches.

This zine presents a biographical essay about Most by Emma Goldman, originally published in *The American Mercury*. It is notable for its profoundly human portrayal of Most, providing a biographical sketch and evaluating his role in the movement. The essay is accompanied by a critical introduction that explores how Most has been portrayed over the years.



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# Introduction

Johann Most was one of the most prominent and important figures in the anarchist space in the United States during the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most—who had gained a reputation in Europe as a harsh critic of capitalism and parliamentary socialism—was an ardent revolutionary, delivering speeches and writing articles in his *Freiheit* newspaper advocating the necessity of revolution.

In response to growing repression in Europe, Most immigrated to the United States and inserted himself into the German anarchist movement. From his arrival in the United States in 1882, Most had a notorious reputation in the mainstream press. He was constantly vilified and belittled, becoming a lightning rod for anti-anarchist and nativist attacks. Most became the personification of the wild-eyed, bomb throwing anarchist, being an example of the “anarchist beast” so often portrayed in the media of the day.<sup>1</sup> In Most, the forces of order and capitalism found the perfect enemy: a foreign-born anarchist advocating for violent action. Most was targeted by law enforcement, spending time in both jail and in prison. His son, John Most Jr. recalled his family was regularly harassed as they walked through their poor working-class neighborhood.<sup>2</sup>

Most was without a doubt a fiery orator, and his militancy was no joke. He was after all, the anarchist who wrote the notorious Revolutionary War Science, a pamphlet outlining how to make dynamite bombs. Of Most’s speaking style, Chaim Weinberg recalls:

*“To convey the manner in which Most spoke is impossible. Only those lucky enough to have heard him sometime will really understand the veracity of my claim. To say that Most could inspire an audience is not enough. He electrified, simply enchanted each listener, whether an adversary or a friend”<sup>3</sup>*

and:

*“I don’t exaggerate one bit. Johann Most could so mesmerize his listeners that they would at any time go with him should he call them to man the barricades. He*

*could bring the apathetic person to tears with his hypnotizing power.”<sup>4</sup>*

The majority of portrayals of Johann Most fail to capture this. While they may acknowledge that he had a powerful personality, they don’t delve into the particulars, instead choosing to highlight the ways in Most—and he is almost always assigned exclusive responsibility—brought the anarchist movement into “disrepute.”<sup>5</sup> His propaganda and “explicit incitement... contributed to anarchists’ being held responsible for any violent disturbances.”<sup>6</sup> He is described as “obsessed by revolutionary violence,” discussing it “...with the sinister enthusiasm of a malevolent and utterly irresponsible child.”<sup>7</sup> He was described as “anxiously waiting for some terrorist act to be committed in Germany or Austria to bolster up the enthusiasm of his congregation.”<sup>8</sup> It’s no accident that the one English language biography of Most is titled *The Voice of Terror*.<sup>9</sup> These portrayals persist into the present, with books on terrorism often including at least a cursory mention of Most’s advocacy of violent revolution.<sup>10</sup>

However, beyond the rhetoric, Johann Most had a substantial influence on anarchism in the United States. He was a strong organizer, for years publishing his newspaper *Freiheit*, touring the country on the lecture circuit, and dedicating himself to the pursuit of anarchy. It is telling that one of Most’s first acts when coming to the United States was to hit the lecture circuit, a tour that resulted in the formation of a number of anarchist groups.<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, the legacy of Most as a tireless anarchist dedicated to the revolution is a portrayal that is often ignored. Paul Avrich’s excellent *The Haymarket Tragedy* is one of the best English language sources to delve into this history, discussing Most’s role in facilitating the spread of anarchism, the establishment of the International Working People’s Association (IWWA), and his influence on the anarchists in Chicago who would become forever associated with the Haymarket incident.<sup>12</sup> Still, it retains the view of Most as a rather simplistic thinker—a “polemicist rather than a thinker” who could incite with slogans, but developed little by way of original revolutionary theory.<sup>13</sup> Arguably, Most’s writings have somewhat fallen into obscurity, but they have been consistently circulated over the years, with new generations of anarchist publishing his writings.<sup>14</sup> There has

also been some renewed interest in Most, with Tom Goyen's excellent *Beer and Revolution* presenting a much more complete portrait of both Most and the German anarchist space in the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Most's legacy has also been largely one of personality conflicts, of which his feud with the anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman has been central. Historical assessments of Johann Most tend to portray him as a short-tempered and intolerant person, largely making his personal life into an extension of his fiery media constructed image. For example, Alex Wexler describes Most as "... an autocrat—vain, theatrical, domineering, short-tempered, intolerant of difference, given to fierce rages and smoldering resentments."<sup>16</sup> James Joll similarly highlighted Most's involvement in bitter conflicts.<sup>17</sup>

Of these conflicts, none has received more attention than his feud with Emma Goldman. Goldman and Most were both comrades and lovers in the 1880s. However, they drifted apart over the years, with Goldman aligning with the autonomist faction of German anarchists, a group that was hostile to Most's dominance of the movement and advocating a slightly different tactical orientation in favor of small groups.<sup>18</sup> Most and the autonomist camp were bitter rivals, with Alexander Berkman once stating that the feud between Joseph Peukert of the autonomists and Johann Most was the only thing keeping the two factions alive.<sup>19</sup> Importantly, Goldman criticized Most for his conservative views on gender and the overall male dominance of the German anarchist space.<sup>20</sup> However, the act that made them into bitter enemies—or as the story is often told—was Alexander Berkman's 1892 attempt to assassinate businessman Henry Clay Frick for his role in the Homestead Strike. Goldman was in complete support of the act, helping with its conception and the propaganda in defense of it,<sup>21</sup> while her comrades in the autonomist faction also expressed support.<sup>22</sup> Most was opposed to the act and criticized it after the fact.

Less often discussed is that Most had been moderating his views on violence for some time.<sup>23</sup> Six weeks before Berkman's attentat, Most had published an article in *Freiheit* criticizing violent tactics wherein violence was an end in itself.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, while he did denounce

and ridicule Berkman in speeches, *Freiheit*, and the capitalist press, he did eventually write a piece that more seriously reflected on the failure of attentants to generate public sympathy.<sup>25</sup> Goldman—probably rightly—continued to criticize him, leading to the famous “horsewhipping” incident in which she publicly demanded that Most provide evidence of his charges against Berkman. When he dismissed her as a “hysterical woman” she lashed him across the face with a horsewhip, an incident of which she wrote about in *Living My Life*.<sup>26</sup> Goldman described the act as the culmination of the conflict between Peukert and Most, moving it beyond a personal feud into a debate that “...raised a storm within the entire anarchist movement, splitting it into two inimical camps.”<sup>27</sup>

Historians—even those of anarchism—tend all too often to focus on the “great personalities”—and the conflicts of Goldman and Most fit into that frame. The famous horsewhipping incident functions as a way to avoid investigating the conflicting ideas behind the feud, instead focusing on a clash of personalities. Seemingly having the last word, it is Goldman’s portrayal that often stands out. However, Goldman was no stranger to criticism and her portrayals of Johann Most in *Living My Life* spurred Most’s wife Helene Minkin—herself an anarchist who contributed to the movement by managing *Freiheit* and doing other such projects—to heavily criticize Goldman. Minkin argued that Goldman’s portrayal “...drags [Most] from his heights and through the mud of her story.”<sup>28</sup> While the incident figures prominently in anarchist historical accounts, Goldman had in fact over time come to forgive Most. Later in *Living My Life*, she writes of the “senselessness of that feud” and says that she attempted to reconcile with Most.<sup>29</sup> However, Minkin criticized the entire incident and casts doubt on Goldman’s attempts at reconciliation.<sup>30</sup> Minkin also writes that Goldman’s allegation that Minkin didn’t want Goldman to speak at Most’s memorial was untrue.<sup>31</sup> Contrasting accounts aside, Goldman grew to have misgivings about the incident. Goldman later said that she regretted the act in a letter to the anarchist historian Max Nettlau.<sup>32</sup> She wrote that “I often regretted to have attacked the man who was my teacher, and whom I idealized for many years.”<sup>33</sup> Even Berkman—who was the subject of the harshest attacks—wrote:

“He had been unjust to me; but who is free from moments of weakness? The passage of time has mellowed the bitterness of my resentment, and I think of him, my first teacher of Anarchy, with old-time admiration.”<sup>34</sup>

It is in this context that we present this biographical sketch of Johann Most written by Emma Goldman. It was published in *The American Mercury* in 1926, with Goldman using the money from it to travel to France to visit with the artist Frank Harris.<sup>35</sup> It is notable for its profoundly human portrayal of Most, moving well beyond the focus on personalities and conflict to highlight the contributions Most made to anarchism and his unflinching dedication to “the ideal.”

## Endnotes

1 Nathaniel Hong, “Constructing the Anarchist Best in American Periodical Literature, 1880-1903,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 9, 1992, 110-130

2 “John J. Most, Jr” in Paul Avrich, ed., *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America*, Abridged Edition, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 13.

3 Chaim Leib Weinberg, *Forty Years in the Struggle: Memoirs of a Jewish Anarchist*, (Duluth: Litwin Books, 2001), 7, accessed at <http://www.deadanarchists.org/Weinberg/Forty.pdf>

4 Weinberg, 9.

5 Atindranath Bose, *A History of Anarchism*, (Calcutta: The World Press, 1967), 15.

6 James Joll, *The Anarchists*, (New York: The Universal Library, 1966), 166.

7 George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*, (New York: The World Publishing, 1962), 461.

8 Max Nomad, *Apostles of Revolution*, (New York: Collier Books, 1961). 289.

9 Frederic Trautmann, *The Voice of Terror: A Biography of Johann Most*, (Westport: Green Press, 1980).

10 Isaac Cronin, ed., *Confronting Fear: A History of Terrorism*, (New York: Thunder’s Mountain Press, 2002), 15.

11 Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 64-65.

12 Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, 164-173.

13 Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy*, 63.

14 For example, Sea Sharp Press published a pamphlet containing “The Social Monster” and “The Beast of Property”, distributed as of 2015 by the prominent anarchist distributor AK Press. Zabalaza Books in 2014 published a version of “The God Pestilence.” *The Match!*—an anarchist newspaper in the United States—published “The God Pestilence” as a pamphlet in 1983.

15 Tom Goyens, *Beer and Revolution: The German Anarchist Movement in New York City, 1880-1914*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

16 Alice Wexler, *Emma Goldman: An Intimate Life*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 52.

17 Joll, 143-144.

18 Paul Avrich and Karen Avrich, *Sasha and Emma: The Anarchist Odyssey of Alexander Berkman*

and *Emma Goldman*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 41-45.  
19 Avrigh and Avrigh, 45.  
20 Tom Goyens, "Introduction," in Helene Minkin, *Storm in my Heart: Memories from the Widow of Johann Most*, (Oakland: AK Press, 2015), 11-12.  
21 Emma Goldman, *Living My Life, Vol. 1*, (1930; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 88.  
22 Goldman, 98.  
23 Avrigh and Avrigh, 46.  
24 Avrigh and Avrigh, 89.  
25 Avrigh and Avrigh, 87-88.  
26 Goldman, 105.  
27 Goldman, 106.  
28 Helene Minkin, *Storm in my Heart: Memories from the Widow of Johann Most*, (Oakland: AK Press, 2015), 26.  
29 Goldman, 379.  
30 Minkin, 72-73.  
31 Minkin, 125.  
32 Wexler, 66.  
33 Avrigh and Avrigh, 188.  
34 Avrigh and Avrigh, 188.  
35 Emma Goldman, *Living My Life, Vol. 2*, (1930; reprint, New York: Dover Publications, 1970), 981.



## **“Johann Most” by Emma Goldman**

The name of Johann Most was for many years known throughout the United States. Thanks to the press, it was a name to strike terror into the heart of the ordinary reader. In endless columns the newspapers portrayed the man as the incarnation of Satan, a wild beast run amuck, leaving chaos and destruction behind him. To the American philistine of the time he was the synonym of dynamite and nitroglycerin, and of everything else thin is dangerous, evil and viscous.

He thus became the target of every police department of the land: they pulled him off platforms, drove him handcuffed to stations, tried him on trumped up charges, locked him up, and subjected him to a process of persistent persecution and humiliation. And while the man was gagged and fettered in the penitentiary, brainless reporters and unscrupulous newspapers dragged his ideas through the mire, misrepresented his aims, and wrote blood-curdling stories about his alleged life and practices. The good American citizen shivered in fear and prayed to his Maker that this terrible Johann Most be wiped off the fair American land, hanged, electrocuted, or, still better, lynched. But Most refused to be wiped off. Stormy petrel that he was, every new imprisonment served only to send him back among his fellows more determined than ever to proclaim what he regarded as the truth and to devote himself with new energy to his work. It was this truly extraordinary tenacity, inherent in the man's character, that the defenders of the old order could not forgive. The man-hunt continued (or a period of forty-six years, and in every country where Most lived and worked.

Like many other immigrants of forty years ago, I came to the United States with an exalted idea of American liberties, and with sincere belief in this country as a haven for the oppressed, with her wonderful equality of opportunity. That was in 1886. Then came my own first experience with the crushing industrial machine. I worked ten hours a day in a factory, in Rochester, N. Y., making ulsters for the munificent sum of two dollars and fifty cents a week, and there I gradually learned to see things in a different light. The great strikes in Illinois which led up to the Haymarket riots, the

bomb explosion, the arrest of the Chicago anarchists, their farcical trial and terrible end—these were my early lessons in American liberty. I was perfectly innocent of social ideals at the time, but my native rebelliousness against injustice and wrong, and my innate consciousness of what was real and false in the press of the country, gave me the first impulse towards the vision for which the Chicago men had been done to death by the blind furies of wealth and power.

During this entire time the newspapers of Rochester were filled with hair-raising stories about Johann Most and his evil deeds. They aroused my interest, but in quite a different way from that intended. I determined some day to know the man. So in 1889, after two years close reading of anarchist literature, I went to New York. I knew no one there; I knew only the name of Most and that of a young Russian student. After hours of search on the East Side I finally found the Russian, and he took me to a café frequented by radicals. There I met several persons with whom my life has remained linked until this day—foremost among them, Alexander Berkman. The same day, Berkman invited me to hear Johann Most.

The meeting-place was in a small hall back of a saloon, through which one had to pass. It was filled with stalwart Germans, drinking, smoking and talking. It was there that I first met Most. My first impression of him was surely not prepossessing. He was slightly above medium height, with a large head crowned with bushy greyish hair. But his face almost shocked me: it looked twisted out of all form by a prominent swelling of the left side. Only his eyes soothed me. They were blue and kindly and sympathetic. Then he ascended the platform and began to speak. Suddenly, as if by magic, his disfigurement vanished, and his lack of physical distinction was forgotten. He was transformed into some primitive power, radiating life and strength. The rapid current of his speech, the music of his voice, and his sparkling wit and biting sarcasm combined into something elemental that swept me along and stirred me to the depths. Never before nor in all the years since I first heard him on that hot August evening have I met another such master of the spoken word. It was overwhelming. After the lecture, shaken to my very roots, I was introduced to him.

The next day I visited the office of the *Freiheit*, the paper edited by him, and from that day began my initiation in the radical movement.

## II

I realized at an early stage in my association with the man how cruelly false was the picture of him painted by the American press. I found this “criminal bent on wholesale slaughter and destruction” very human, sometimes, indeed all too human. He was aflame alike with hatred of the institutions that condemned the masses to poverty and ignorance, and passionate devotion to the people out of whose midst he had come and whose misery he knew from early childhood, But his hatred of social wrongs, of ugliness and meanness was the natural offspring of his love of beauty, of color, of all the vital things.

It is impossible to form even an approximately adequate idea of his true personality without some knowledge of his ghastly childhood and adolescence. And it is particularly necessary to understand the effect of the calamity that befell him at a very early age, and which not only profoundly influenced his character but most probably changed the whole course of his life. I first learned of this tragic event at a performance of “The Merchant of Venice” given by Possart, the famous German actor of the period, then visiting New York. Attending the performance with Most, I noticed the unusual effect of Possart’s great art upon him. I knew that my companion was passionately fond of the theatre and that he would of tell deprive himself of necessities in order to indulge his love of a great performance. Still the nervous tension with which he hung on every word and gesture of Possart struck me as very peculiar. After the play, on reaching the street, Most gripped my arm until it hurt and cried: “The cruelty of it, the bitter cruelty! To think that I could have been in Possart’s place, perhaps even greater than he, but for my dreadful face. The blind cruelty of it!”

Later, when he regained possession of himself, he related to me what he considered the deepest tragedy of his life. At the age of seven he had caught a bad cold which settled in his face. There was no competent physician in his native town, and his people were too

poor to afford him proper treatment elsewhere. During five years little Johann was experimented upon by physicians who had better been blacksmiths. They finally succeed in driving the evil into the patient's jaw, whereupon gangrene set in, which would have killed the lad had not a leading surgeon accidentally got hold of the case at the last moment. He performed a difficult operation, as a result of which the boy's life was saved. But his face was entirely disfigured. He became the target of derision and ridicule, exposed to insults and indignities at home, at school and factory, his whole life one long martyrdom of humiliation.

Apparently little things often have the most significant results. Who knows what Most's career would have been but for the neglect and stupidity of the provincial German doctors? Of his great histrionic gifts there can be no doubt. One must have heard him on the platform, or seen his interpretation of old Baumert in Gerhart Hauptmann's "The Weavers," at an amateur performance in New York, to realize what an unusual actor was lost in him through his deplorable facial defect. Worse yet, it poisoned the very soul of the youth, producing what would now be called an inferiority complex. This remained with Most all through his life.

### III

He was born on February 5, 1846, at Augsburg in Germany. His father, after an adventurous life, was compelled to make a miserable livelihood as copyist in the office of a lawyer. His mother, formerly a governess, was an educated and refined woman of liberal ideas. Little Hannes was a love child, "conceived between the door and the sill," as he used to remark jocosely. The fact was that his father, too poor to support a family, could get no licence to marry. The future anarchist and hater of all governments was therefore born contrary to police regulations. Two years later his parents succeeded in making their union respectable. They never dreamed of the rebellious nature that slumbered in their offspring and that would one day mature to a life-long struggle with all respectability. The father's earnings were never enough to keep the family from want, but as long as the mother lived she gave everything to the boy, whom she loved passionately. It was also from her that young Most received his first lessons in reading, writing

and arithmetic. But particularly important was her influence because of her liberal and free-thought ideas, which fixed the atmosphere of the home and laid the cornerstone of Most's love of freedom. It was quite different in the schools of his childhood. There, religion and other subjects were inculcated into the pupils by means of the old-fashioned rod. One teacher, especially, remained indelibly in Most's mind. He had a perfect arsenal of implements of torture. Every time this man would get ready to punish a child, he would stand before his "treasures" lost in contemplation as to what instrument would best fit the particular" crime." The selection made, the flogging would begin, apparently causing the teacher a sadistic delight as great as the agony of the victim. During this process the man would deliver himself of the following speech: "Viciousness is deeply rooted in the heart of the child, but the rod will drive it out," said Solomon the Wise."

As I have said, the first great tragedy in the life of young Most came at the age of seven. The second catastrophe was the loss of his mother, who died suddenly during a cholera epidemic. The father soon married again, and then began a new martyrdom for the boy. His step-mother hated him with a deadly hatred, and slaved, starved and beat him until in agony of body and spirit he would run away from home, beg or steal food, sleep in parks and hallways, do anything to escape her fury.

Most *père* often intervened, trying his best to protect the boy and the little sister who had been born several years before their mother's death. But the father being absent most of the day, copying briefs, the step-mother had the field to herself. She must have ploughed it thoroughly, for Most could never speak about that period of his life without horror and indignation. "My whole childhood was a nightmare," he often told me. "My soul was starved for affection and my whole being was filled with hatred of the woman who had taken the place of my gentle, refined mother." No doubt to this step-mother was due much of the boy's subsequent attitude to tyranny in every form.

Of Most it may be truly said that the tendencies, inclinations and strivings expressed by the man were not the result of theories. They were inherent in the child and were helped to birth by life itself, the

hard and bitter school of life that was his. He was a born leader of men. Already at the age of twelve this trait became manifest: he organized a strike in the trade school he had entered after he passed the public school with honors. The strike was against the teacher of French, a despotic man, cordially disliked by all his pupils. As the ringleader, Most was expelled of course. Thereupon his father decided that it would be best for Hannes to learn a trade. The lad welcomed this as an escape from the purgatory at home. He chose the honorable profession of book-binding, impelled toward it by his love for books and the hope of finding much opportunity to read. He did not know then that his apprenticeship was to be a continuation of his miserable home life. He was sweated from dawn to night, half starved and continually ill-treated. It was at this period that he got his first taste of prison.

In those days the confessional was obligatory in the Catholic parts of Germany. But Most's early childhood was spent in a secular atmosphere, and he paid no attention to the confessional. On one occasion this resulted in a violent encounter with the town priest. The boy was pulled out into the street by his ears and forced to kneel on the sidewalk. This served only to increase his antagonism to the Church, and he stopped attending altogether. Thereupon he was brought before the police and given twenty-four hours' arrest.

But at last the torment of his apprenticeship came to an end, and in 1863 he followed the old usage in vogue in Germany. He took to the road. Equipped with fifteen gulden, a great longing for travel in strange lands, and considerable youthful arrogance, he became a *Wanderbursch*, tramping all through Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Hungary, and earning his living the best he could, mostly very badly. His disfigured face and his delicate physique were against him, often making it impossible for him to get work or to hold a job, much less to make friends. His poverty and bitterness grew and would have thrust him into the abyss, had he not fortunately been drawn at this time into the rising tide of the labor movement, to become immediately intensely and actively interested in it.

## IV

After the reaction which followed the revolutionary wave of 1848 new forces began to assert themselves throughout Europe. In England the trades unions were waging a heroic battle for recognition. In France the labor movement was making itself felt. In Germany Ferdinand Lassalle was leading the workers toward new social ideals. Even in Russia there was a spiritual awakening, which found expression through Tchernishevsky and the *Kolokol*, Alexander Herzen's brilliant publication. It was at that vital period that the First International was born.

To the starved spirit of the young *Wanderbursch* the new Socialist ideas were like manna. "I was caught up by the stream," Most told me, "and carried away out of myself. My own tragedy, my own hard fight for existence, seemed insignificant in the light of the great human struggle. From that moment humanity became my goal, progress my aim, and those who barred the way my enemies."

Most threw himself into the movement with all the intensity of his being. He applied himself to the study of the writings of Lassalle and other Socialist authors, attended labor meetings and participated in discussions. Very soon he became a member of the Zurich Section of the First International. The dominant leader of that group at the time was a man by the name of Hermann Greulich. Most became his ardent pupil and devoted friend. But in later years, when Most outgrew the Marxian State idea, it was Greulich who became his worst enemy and who shrank from no method of attacking him.

Most's first appearance in Zurich labor ranks has been described by Greulich as follows: "a shy, slender youth, with a crooked face, who introduced himself as Johannes Most, bookbinder, and asked permission to recite something." Two years later, this shy youth stood before an Austrian court charged with high treason. His offence consisted in a fiery speech against the Liberal ministry which in its attitude towards the labor movement was anything but liberal. The next day the papers began their campaign of calumny of the bold young agitator. That helped Most to a month's imprisonment.

Shortly after that the Liberal ministry showed its real colors. All labor meetings were suppressed, all political liberties curtailed. The workers replied with an intensive campaign against the growing reaction. Most and others were promptly arrested. In spite of his brilliant defence, he and his comrades were convicted of high treason and sentenced to five years. It was at this time that he composed his first stirring labor song, which was smuggled out of prison and quickly became popular among the workers. To this day it is to be heard at the gatherings of toilers in Germany:

Wer schafft das Gold zu Tage?  
Wer hämmett Erz und Stein?  
Wer webet Tuch und Seide?  
Wer bauet Korn und Wein?  
Wer gibt den Reichen all' ihr Brot –  
Und lebt dabei in bitt'rer Not?  
Das sind die Arbeitsmänner, das Proletariat.

Most's father tried his utmost to get him released. He even succeeded in reaching the brother of the Austrian Empress, who promised to intervene if the young rebel would sign the appeal for clemency. But Johann would have none of it. However, he regained his liberty much sooner than he had anticipated. The old ministry was overthrown and the new one began its reign with a general amnesty. The main effect of his two years' imprisonment was to make Most famous all through Austria. His lecture tours became veritable triumphs, attended by great numbers of workers. At last, unable to silence him, the Austrian government decided to expel him. "Forever," read the sentence. "Forever is a long time," Most remarked sarcastically. "Who knows whether Austria will live that long?"

On his return to Germany, he first went to Bavaria, where he found very little left of the Socialist organizations. Everything had been crushed by the Franco-Prussian War. But the young agitator was undismayed. With tremendous energy he set to work infusing new life into the scattered forces, organizing and stabilizing. His success was



presently apparent in increased persecutions by the authorities. His activities as propagandist and editor of a labor paper resulted within one year—1872—of no less than forty-three court summonses. These experiences served to develop his extraordinary native talents. His wit and sarcasm, his language, robust and original, lashed the enemy with merciless whip and inspired his followers with great enthusiasm. But Most was never allowed to continue his work undisturbed for any length of time. The Winter of the same year found him again in prison, this time under charges of lèse majesté and insult to the Army. But prisons were to Most institutions of learning, of study. He employed his time in writing a popular version of Marx's "Capital" and numerous pamphlets. On his release, he was offered the editorship of the *Süddeutsche Volkszeitung*, an important Socialist publication. This post he held until 1874, when he was elected to the Reichstag.

Unlike most of his political colleagues, the young parliamentarian quickly discovered the hollowness of that Holy of Holies. "The theatre of marionettes," Most called the Reichstag. The only service he could render in that institution, he said, was to gather material for his pen pictures of the political sycophants prominent at the time. These proved masterpieces of penetration and humor. His word caricatures of Treitschke, who was deaf, of Bismarck, who could not string two sentences together without huge gulps of brandy, and of many other pompous individuals met with great success and roused the delight of the workers.

Members of the Reichstag are supposed to be secure from political prosecution. Not so the irrepressible Wild Man, as the bourgeois press called Most. For a speech in Berlin he was arrested and sentenced to the Bastille am Platzensee. Here, for the first time, an attempt was made to treat him as a common prisoner. But the administration reckoned without their guest. Most effectively roused the whole of radical Berlin to establish a political status in that prison. In consequence, he was able to do considerable literary work while incarcerated, among his writings being an account of his experiences in prison, which was smuggled out and appeared under the title of "The Bastille am Platzensee." Most emerged from this incarceration after thirty-six months, as strong and unscathed in spirit as heretofore. The Berlin workers gave him an

enthusiastic reception and offered him the editorship of the *Freie Presse*, which under his influence became the most powerful of the Social Democratic papers. Beside his work as editor, he wrote extensively for other publications and lectured throughout Germany and Switzerland. His great series on “The Social Revolution and Caesarism in Old Rome” aroused attention even in intellectual circles. His bold criticism of Mommsen, the celebrated historian, brought upon him the anathema of philistine Germany, which could not forgive a mere bookbinder for daring to question the accepted authority of the great man.

The growing political reaction in Germany presently produced acts of revolutionary violence which in return led to the *Ausnahmegesetze*, or Exceptional Laws, of Bismarck, involving the complete suppression of all political liberties and the expulsion of prominent Socialists. Though Most was in prison at the time, the order reached him as well as those at liberty. After his release in 1878 he was forced to leave Berlin within twenty-four hours. He went to London, and the first period in his public career was thus closed.

## V

Here a new phase begins, no less intense and even of greater importance, in the process of Most's development, than what had gone before. For it was in England that he eventually broke away completely from the Marxian State idea and from his former political activities. The leading lights in the Social-Democratic ranks never looked very favourably upon Most. He was too independent, too impatient of discipline, too forceful and biting. He could not make peace with shams and compromises. He spared no one in whom he detected either. Therefore, he was never *persona grata* with the Socialist leaders of Germany.

When he came to London and started the publication, *Die Freiheit*, wherein he could give full expression to his ideas, his erstwhile comrades, permitted to remain in Germany on promise of good behavior, sensed danger. He was beginning to unfurl new sails; more and more he was leaning towards anarchism. This situation could not be tolerated. So the old methods employed by Marx and Engels

against Bakunin were set to work against him. Scurrilous stories were circulated, the man and his character were attacked, and everything was done to discredit him with the workers in Germany and the refugees in England. Most went his way, did his work and turned the *Freiheit* into a fighting revolutionary organ. It was original in method as well as in language; for pungency and imagery, for force and humor it had no rival. His enemies hated him for his piercing wit, but they read the *Freiheit*.

In 1881 the Czar Alexander II fell by the hand of Russian revolutionaries. The *Freiheit* appeared with a red border and Most wrote: "Hail to the slayers of the tyrant!" The British Home Office hastened to the support of the Romanoffs. Most was arrested, and tried and sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment in the House of Correction at Clerkenwell. Subsequently the *Freiheit* was suppressed. The time spent in Queen Victoria's prison was put by Most among his blackest days. Little he foresaw that he was to go through a worse hell in democratic America. In December, 1882, he embarked on the steamer *Wisconsin* for the Land of Promise, where he was to drink the bitter cup of persecution to the last dregs.

America was then still the haven of political refugees. German '48-ers, victims of the Bismarckian Exceptional Laws, French Communards who had escaped the butchery of Thiers and Gallifet, Italian and Spanish exiles, Hungarian rebels-all sought her protective shores. Every European land contributed the flower of her rebellious young manhood to the galaxy that turned to the United States as the land of liberty. Yet Most was not altogether unaware of the changing situation in America, manifested in the big strikes in the latter part of the seventies, the struggle of the Molly Maguires, and the police brutality against them. Still he arrived believing that the New World, which kept open doors for so many revolutionists, would also give him a kindly welcome. It did. At least the foreign elements did, for by them he was royally received. He speedily became the most powerful factor in the revolutionary movement in America.

In 1883 the First International Conference was held in Pittsburgh. It was Johann Most who drew up the Magna Charta unanimously accepted

by the delegates. This document played an important part in the early stages of the radical movement in the United States. A certain clause in the declaration voiced the right of the workers to arm themselves, a right guaranteed by the Constitution when that scrap of paper still had meaning. The framers of the demand therefore considered themselves within their legal rights in discussing the subject publicly. With that in view a mass-meeting was arranged for April 25, 1886, at Germania Hall in New York City. Most and other orators elaborated upon the subject at issue. But several days later, the grand jury, after a short deliberation of a garbled report of the speeches, rendered an indictment. On May 1 detectives broke into Most's quarters and put him under arrest. The following day large newspaper headlines proclaimed that he had been "captured in a house of prostitution" and that he "had taken refuge under a bed to escape arrest." He was sent to Blackwell's Island for a year.

He often asserted that nothing that he had endured during his former incarcerations on the Continent, or even in England, could compare with the humiliation, petty cruelty and inhumanity he was subjected to in that prison. Even his most vulnerable feeling was not spared: his beard was shaved, exposing his unfortunate disfigurement which—as in his childhood—made him the butt of cruel jokes and insults by guards and fellow prisoners, and a "show object" to idle curiosity-seekers, to whom the administration pointed the anarchist prisoner out as some wild freak.

While he was in the penitentiary the reactionary forces in Chicago, aided by the entire press of the country, were preparing the black deed of November 11, 1887—the judicial murder of the five Chicago anarchists. The historic Haymarket riots, it is now proved, were staged by the Chicago police and not by the workers who were striking for the eight-hour day. The plutocratic conspiracy against Chicago's leading labor men, the farcical trial, the execution of the innocent victims—all of these things marked the beginning of the present widespread reaction in the United States.

## VI

During the trial at Chicago and the anxious time between the conviction and execution of Parsons, Spies, Fisher, Engel and Lingg, Most was still in prison. Perhaps it was his good fortune that he was not at large, otherwise he too would have undoubtedly fallen a prey to the blood-thirst that gripped the country. Later on, upon his release, he addressed the weekly gathering of the International Workers' Association, dealing with the Chicago tragedy and the heroic last moments of his martyred comrades. He laid the guilt not only at the door of the enemies of labor but to the workers themselves, the great majority of whom had remained so cowardly inert in the face of the calamity. The next day the New York *World* contained a grotesquely garbled account of Most's talk. He immediately wrote to the paper, calling attention to the misrepresentation. But the report had already been copied by other publications, producing the intended effect. Most was arrested. The testimony of the State witnesses at his trial was so obviously false that the case was on the point of breaking down. At that juncture the prosecuting attorney produced a pamphlet, "The Science of Warfare," written by Most some time prior to the Chicago events. On that alleged evidence he was found guilty. Though the case was appealed, the Supreme Court sustained the conviction, and he was again sent to Blackwell's Island.

His tremendous power of endurance enabled Most to emerge from this experience still strong in body; but he was no longer so buoyant in spirit. His faith in the emancipatory possibilities of American labor had become weakened. He began to doubt the efficacy of direct individual revolutionary action. It was partly this, as well as the revolutionary weariness of a man who had been hounded for twenty-five years, that colored his view of the significance of Alexander Berkman's act of July, 1892, when the latter attempted the life of Henry C. Frick, the man responsible for the slaughter of the Homestead steel strikers by Pinkertons. Most repudiated the act.

There had been, even before this, an estrangement between the group of young people to which Berkman and myself belonged and Most—

an estrangement owing to differences of conception, experience and temperament. We were at the height of enthusiasm, of religious zeal, of passionate faith. We had not yet been tried in the crucible and did not know agony of spirit. Most, though still deeply devoted to the cause of humanity, had gone through fierce conflicts. Between us there was thus the abyss which separates youth and latter middle age. We owed much to Most, I more than the others. It was he who had been my teacher, my guide into a new world of social ideas, to new beauty in art and music. Most loved both intensely and helped me to learn to love them. We had been friends for two years and we spent much time together, during which I learned to know the lights as well as the shadows in his character, his childlike faith in people who were kind to him, his susceptibility to subtle flattery, his quick impatience with opposition. "Who is not with me is against me," he would frequently say—and that was the key to his attitude. Most was intense and extreme in his loves as well as in his hates. He gave freely and demanded much in return. Life had struck him many blows, but it had also let him drink deeply from the well of glory, homage and intellectual adulation. He could not content himself with less. And we were young and impatient. Youth is cruelly impatient and critical. Therefore the gradual estrangement. Still Johann Most continued to stand high in our esteem and affection.

But when he turned his back on the act of Alexander Berkman, an act of the "propaganda by deed" that he himself had so often and enthusiastically glorified in others, the blow was staggering to us. I could then neither understand nor forgive what seemed to me a betrayal of all that the man had so eloquently and passionately advocated for years. I became embittered against my former teacher, and I added my stone to the many that were hurled at him. One's own spiritual Calvary makes one understand things, and the complexity of human nature becomes much clearer with the accumulating years.

In 1901, when Leon Czolgosz killed President McKinley, Most again became the target of police persecution. The issue of the *Freiheit*, which appeared on the day of the act, contained an article on the general question of tyrannicide by the old revolutionist, Carl Heinzen, then dead for a number of years. It had no bearing whatever on the

particular act of Czolgosz. Had Most not omitted the signature of the author and the date when the article was originally written, the attempt to send him to prison again could not have been based on that issue of his publication. As it was, he was condemned to Blackwell's Island for the third time. Thus for thirty successive years he was hounded.

## VII

Johann Most was essentially a leader of masses. He had hardly any personal life; his whole being was consumed by his work for humanity. Naturally, there were women in his life. He was married in Germany when quite young and later on there were other emotional experiences. He had much attraction for women and they for him. But his real mistress was his work, and that led him through thorny paths, and over heights and depths which excluded domestic peace or bliss. In his later years, after the tide of his followers receded, the woman who bore him two sons may have been a soothing factor in his life, though even that is doubtful in the case of such a restless, roaming spirit. In the early part of 1906, in poor physical condition as a result of his numerous imprisonments, he saw himself compelled to undertake a lecture tour to maintain his paper. But he did not get very far. In Cincinnati he fell seriously ill, dying on March 17. With him went one of the most picturesque and unique characters of our time.

The pathos of Most's last years is the tragedy of all leaders who are carried away by numbers and intoxicated by applause. He joined the labor movement at the period of its idealistic beginning. Owing to his extraordinary oratorical gifts, his powerful and unique pen, his passionate faith and personal magnetism, he was able to rouse the masses as few before him, but in his onrush toward the heights he took no time to look behind him, to see whether the masses could or would keep pace with him.

Until America became sealed to political refugees, the radical elements forced to flight by the tyranny of their own lands continued to seek asylum in the United States. They furnished fertile soil for what Most so brilliantly brought to them. But the time came when the quality of immigration changed. The revolutionary refugees of Germany,

after the abrogation of the Exceptional Laws, were replaced by green-grocers and butchers, who flocked to America for her gold and not in search of her imaginary freedom. On the other hand, the earlier German immigrants became weary of the struggle, and their children were Americanized. They had nothing of the independent quality of their parents and were quickly absorbed by what is coarse and common in the new land. Gradually Most found himself a general without an army, a prophet without disciples, an alien in his environment. Yet the man's spirit could not be broken. He died a fighter to the end.





