Great Women Through The Ages
This zine is dedicated to badass women who don't get enough credit. Amassed here are women who worked against the odds and forged their own paths. There are political dissidents, famous firsts, activists, and more. The common thread among these women is a dedication to quieting the patriarchy. They all refuse to be silenced, and they work on what needs to be done. No man is telling them what to do, and in many cases these women explicitly work to subvert patriarchy.

At the end of this zine, I have included Chicago style endnotes and suggested reading so you can read more about the women featured in this zine and beyond. It’s important that women’s stories get told as often as or more often than men’s, and I hope this small contribution to the biography of badass women inspires more work.

Asya Abdullah

In the chaos of the Syrian Civil War, it is surprising to think of a successful leftist movement taking root. The Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, known as Rojava, is a de facto autonomous region in Northern Syria that came to existence when the Syrian army left defense of northern Syria to Kurdish militias. The Kurdish militias merged to form the People’s Protection Unit (YPG) and the Women’s equivalent YPJ. The Kurdish militias and people of northern Syria then formed the Movement for a Democratic Society (TEV-DEM) which pushes an agenda of ethnic, religious, and gender equality. The de facto government of Rojava has quotas for ethno-religious and gendered participation in politics. It also pushes for cooperatives as an economic model, grassroots democracy, and has outlawed forced marriage and marriage of minors.

Asya Abdullah is the co-chair of the Democratic Union Party, the current leaders of Rojava’s TEV-DEM coalition government. She is an outspoken advocate for the people of Rojava and for grassroots democracy as a political model on the international stage. She has spoken in Germany, Norway, and Russia in order to garner support for the Rojavian movement and to gain traction for the Rojavan style of government. Abdullah and other Rojavan leaders believe that a confederation of local democratic councils will be an effective solution for all of Syria. Unlike the Kurdish Autonomous Region in Iraq, Rojava wants to spread its governance style throughout Syria in order to create a progressive, self-sufficient, peaceful government.
Assata Shakur

Labelled a cop killer by New Jersey law enforcement and terrorist by the FBI, Assata Shakur is a black feminist icon. Shakur was a part of the Black Panthers and later the Black Liberation Front. She was born in Queens in 1947, but spent some of her formative years in North Carolina where she experienced life under Jim Crow laws. In the ‘60s, life was not easy for black women, so Shakur decided to join the Black Panthers. Dissatisfied with the Panther’s sexism, she then joined the Black Liberation Army. Between 1971 and 1977 Shakur was indicted for ten crimes and imprisoned. In 1973, Shakur was accused of killing a New Jersey state trooper in a shootout and later convicted. In 1977, some of her comrades from the BLA helped her escape from prison, and she resurfaced in Cuba in the early ‘80s. Since then, Shakur been one of the United States FBI’s most wanted criminals.

Her escape from prison brought a lot of attention to Shakur’s case, and it increasingly became apparent that she was framed in the New Jersey shootout. She could not have fired the gun that killed the state trooper after being shot herself with her hands up. Forensic evidence found no trace of her DNA on the gun and no gun powder residue on her hands. Because of this, Shakur has become somewhat of an icon that represents misuse of the justice system against people of color. Even today, some 40 years after the events that made Assata Shakur famous, she remains a prominent talking point among civil rights activists. Shakur has made US-Cuba relations somewhat tense at times, since Cuba sees her incarceration as a human rights abuse and the US sees Cuba as harboring a fugitive. Shakur is seen as a threat to the US, ostensibly because of her violence, but truly because she represents the oppressed and marginalized in the US who could not be silenced by illegal government operations.
Bessie Coleman

"The Air is the only place free from prejudices"

Bessie Coleman was born 1892 to sharecroppers Susan and George Coleman in Atlanta, Texas. She was the 10th of 13 children. Life in the South has never been easy for black women, so in 1915 she moved to Chicago to seek greener pastures with her brothers. This was during the Great War, and both of her brothers in Chicago served during the War. When they came back to the US, her brothers and other soldiers told stories of heroism and tragedy in Europe. One day her brother told her “I know something that French women do that you’ll never do – Fly!” After that, she decided she would damn well be the first licensed black woman pilot—indeed the first black pilot in the US! But no flight school in the US would dare to teach a woman, let alone a woman of color, to fly. So in 1920, Bessie sailed to France, where women had already been learning to fly.

In France, she learned to fly and she learned some of her flight skills from Anthony Fokker, the man who designed Germany's wildly successful airplanes during WWI. After she returned to the US, she was a sensation, and earned some money doing tricks in planes around the country. The news dubbed her “Queen Bess” due to her amazing flying skills.

Coleman's life was cut tragically short during a rehearsal for a performance in 1926. About 5,000 people showed up to her memorial service in Orlando, and another estimated 15,000 attended her service in Chicago. Today, Bessie Coleman reminds us how underrepresented women and African-Americans are in the aviation industry. More than 90% of pilots are white, and the vast majority are men. Even today, Bessie Coleman’s journey to becoming a pilot as an African American woman is not an exaggerated version of the truth or a reminder of what once was. The challenges she faced still exist.
Policarpa Salvarrieta

Spies often have a certain charm about them, and in today’s society female spies in movies tend to be clad in revealing or tight outfits. But Policarpa “La Pola” Salvarrieta was a spy well before women even wore pants, let alone tight ones. Born in 1795 in coastal New Granada (what is now Colombia), Salvarrieta is something of a folk heroine in Colombia. When she was young, Salvarrieta’s family lived in Bogota. In the first decade of the 19th century, a smallpox epidemic killed her parents and two siblings. After that, two of her siblings joined the Augustinian order and two went to find work on a farm. Her older sister, Catarina, took Policarpa and the other young sibling back to their coastal hometown.

In her 20s, Salvarrieta moved back to Bogota. At this time, people were stirring for independence. She got caught in the Revolutionary mood and would offer her services as seamstress to Royalist women. While pretending to work for them, she would sew uniforms for the revolutionaries, overhear conversations to relay, steal maps, and find out who was considered a revolutionary and might be executed. She had some close calls with Royalists, but they couldn’t get the evidence to try a seamstress.

In the end, Salvarrieta did get caught when the Spanish caught two men with documents implicating Salvarrieta in the independence movement and she was sentenced to death. On the gallows she shouted that Spain would see itself losing the battle for independence and apparently she kept shouting until her last breath. One man in the crowd, a young independence fighter named José Hilario López was inspired by her words and passion, and eventually he became the first president of newly independent Colombia. Or at least that’s how the story goes.

Grace Lee Boggs

Grace Lee Boggs was an extraordinary activist and philosopher who organized for racial, feminist, and environmental justice for more than 7 decades. She was born in Rhode Island, and educated at Barnard College and then Bryn Mawr. After that, she couldn’t find a job—any job—because of her ethnicity. So she moved to the Chicago and started working as a librarian. In Chicago, she made about $10 a week and couldn’t afford housing, so she lived in a rat infested basement. This was when she first got involved in activism: coming home one day she noticed a group protesting low quality living conditions and she joined. In this, she also came into contact with African Americans fighting for civil rights. She worked writing revolutionary newsletters and organizing with other activists for some time then married James Boggs and moved to Detroit in 1953. In Detroit, Grace and James continued their activist work organizing around racial and economic justice.
In addition to her work organizing, Grace Lee Boggs was a philosopher who believed that the average person was much more capable of inciting change than any intellectual just telling people what to do. Actually living through oppression and being aware of it presents a much greater opportunity to create change than a distanced study. Grace Lee Boggs understood that it was only through intergenerational communication and cross-cultural dialogue that meaningful, peaceful revolution could be achieved. For Boggs, "philosophy has to do with how we value ourselves as human beings, and how we look at ourselves, and how we relate to reality."

Dolores Huerta

Dolores Huerta is a Chicana labor activist who co-founded the United Farm Workers Association with César Chavez. She was born in northern New Mexico, and raised mostly in California by her mother after her parents divorced. She grew up seeing the values of hard work and charity from her mother, who worked tirelessly to provide for her children and her community. Huerta worked as a teacher for a while, and she hated seeing children come to class with empty stomachs. She knew she had to do something about economic injustices.

After teaching Huerta was a leader of the Stockton, California Community Service Organization, where she met Chavez. They both wanted to work more with farm workers, though, so they left the CSO and started the United Farm Workers Union. Farm workers at the time worked in abhorrent conditions with no cold water to drink, no toilets, and no breaks. They earned about seventy cents an hour. Huerta saw the change that needed to be made, and in 1965 she organized a grape farm workers’ strike and a nationwide boycott of grapes that saw about 17 million participants at its height.
Dolores Huerta's work led an increase of legislative voice for workers, but much still needs to be done. Today, farm owners often use undocumented migrant workers and coerced to skirt labor laws, and the working conditions remain harsh. In addition, Huerta often did not receive credit due to her as it was given to César Chavez. Huerta continues her work on labor issues and immigrant rights to this day through the Dolores Huerta Foundation.

Born in Kovno, Lithuania while it was still part of the Russian Empire in 1869, Emma Goldman came to the United States seeking freedom that she never found but constantly strove toward. Goldman was born in a Jewish family, and as such saw a lot of discrimination toward herself and her family in Europe. When she moved to Rochester, New York, Goldman hoped to find a more accepting society, but unfortunately she had just as much trouble in the U.S. as she had had in Europe, though now she was forced to work in a factory for $2.50 a day in order to survive. Before immigrating, Goldman was already reading radical texts and had taken an interest in anarchism, but living in the U.S. under abhorrent conditions helped her stay on that path. What really cemented her commitment to anarchism as an ideology were the Haymarket riots in Chicago, which protested the excessive use of police violence against workers on strike for an 8-hour work day. After a bomb went off and killed one police officer, violence ensued and many people were injured. Goldman sympathized with the anarchists and workers.
After the Haymarket affair cemented her beliefs, Goldman moved to New York City from Rochester and began working as a writer and activist. She was pro-birth control, not against violence, anti-draft, and constantly advocated for women to be in the political process. She spoke at rallies around the nation, and Leon Czolgosz (President McKinley's assassin) said he was inspired by her. Though she never personally fired a shot, the government implicated her in many assassination attempts by anarchists. Eventually, she was imprisoned and deported to Soviet Russia for conspiracy against the draft in WWI.

During her exile from the US, she toured around Europe and Canada, advocating for anarchist political tendencies and warning of the dangers of Fascism rising in Germany. She died in Toronto at age 70 and is buried in Chicago near those who died in the Haymarket Riots. Emma Goldman's anti-fascist work should not be relevant 70 years after the end of WWII and the Holocaust, but she remains an inspiration for those of us who see the need to fight the reemergence of fascist attitudes today. Emma Goldman was not only against fascism but against all forms of oppression. She saw all humans as equal and deserving of more than their status under oppressive governments.

If you’re lost on where to get started, check out your local library. In the reference section:


Or just browse the zines or the biography section of your library. Don’t be afraid to ask for help finding something, most librarians are more into subversion than you think.


Martha Solomon, Emma Goldman (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987)

