

The 2 Elizabeth Gurley Flynnns: A new biography of the “Rebel Girl”

Tom Mackaman
21 October 2026

Mary Anne Trasciatti. *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: The Rebel Girl, Democracy, and Revolution*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2025. ISBN 978-1-9788-1757-9.

There were, so to speak, two Elizabeth Gurley Flynnns. The first was the young Flynn of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW): the charismatic and beautiful “Rebel Girl” who became a celebrated organizer and soapbox orator in the IWW’s strikes and heroic free-speech fights before the First World War.

The second was the older Flynn who spent decades in the Communist Party USA and eventually became its national chair. By then the fiercely independent young Wobbly had become a highly visible—and unfailingly obedient—public defender of a party whose political line followed dictates passed down from the Kremlin to CP party headquarters in New York.

The evident distance between these two Flynnns presents an obvious problem for the biographer. Was there a fundamental political break between the libertarian radicalism of the IWW years and Flynn’s later Stalinist loyalties? Or can an inner connection be found between the two?

Mary Anne Trasciatti’s *Elizabeth Gurley Flynn: The Rebel Girl, Democracy, and Revolution* addresses that question by placing civil liberties as the center of Flynn’s political life. The defense of democratic rights, Trasciatti suggests, formed a thread running from the IWW free-speech fights through Flynn’s work with the American Civil Liberties Union and ultimately to her own prosecution and imprisonment under the Smith Act during the Cold War.

Except when it did not. Flynn did nothing to oppose the Stalinist celebration of the 1941 Smith Act persecutions of the leaders of the Socialist Workers Party, including her old friend and comrade from their Wobbly days, James P. Cannon. To her credit, and unlike some biographies of the leaders of American Stalinism, Trasciatti does not deny Flynn’s lack of “consistency” when the democratic rights under attack were the opponents of Stalinism within the labor movement. But neither does she seek to explain.

Flynn never bothered either. She published a partial autobiography, *I Speak My Own Piece: Autobiography of “The Rebel Girl”* in 1955, after two decades in the CPUSA and while she was being prosecuted under the same Smith Act that she had earlier supported when it was aimed at the Trotskyists. Flynn prudently ended the account of her own life in 1926, thus preserving the image of the young IWW militant and defender of free speech while avoiding the period in which deference to the party’s Stalinist line required her to justify the persecution of political opponents.

Trasciatti, a labor historian at Hofstra University, has nonetheless written a valuable and honest study. The book is not an exploration of Flynn’s personal life and eschews pigeonholing her, in the style of identity politics, as a feminist icon or a “woman in history.” It is free of the trendy postmodernist jargon that weighs down many scholarly books.

An early chapter follows the IWW free speech fights in Missoula, Montana, and Spokane, Washington, in 1909 and 1910. In the western towns, IWW organizers challenged restrictions on street speaking imposed

by authorities sympathetic to employers, mobilizing waves of soapbox orators whose arrests overwhelmed local jails. These were high profile struggles that won Flynn her fame. Trasciatti cites a local Montana newspaper that complained that Flynn was “the arch disturber, organizer and leader of the Industrial Workers of the World, a woman of considerable power as a speaker and of unquestioned courage.”

Flynn played a prominent role in other major struggles of the period: the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile strike of 1912, the Paterson, New Jersey, silk strike of 1913, and the Mesabi iron miners strike of 1916 in Minnesota. Readers encounter some of the colorful figures of the IWW: the Irish revolutionary James Connolly later executed after the Easter Rising; union leader and western miner “Big Bill” Haywood; the *Little Red Songbook* troubadour Joe Hill, who first dubbed Flynn “the Rebel Girl”; and the Italian syndicalist Carlo Tresca, who became Flynn’s lover (Tresca later served on the Dewey Commission that exonerated Leon Trotsky). Among many others.

Flynn retreated from the revolutionary unionism of the IWW during the repression of radicals during World War I. Trasciatti uncovers from federal archives a letter sent by Flynn to President Woodrow Wilson. With “obsequiousness and humility” in the author’s terms, Flynn pleaded to the White House for mercy against charges leveled against her under the Espionage Act. Flynn disassociated herself from her Wobbly comrades charged under the same reactionary legislation—comrades for whom the word “solidarity” meant everything—and even rejected the idea that she was a labor agitator at all. Rather, she had only acted as a devoted mother, Flynn wrote to Wilson.

As Trasciatti observes, nationalist “rhetoric of the era linked motherhood to patriotism and support for the war, and Flynn exploited this connection to argue that she could not possibly be an antiwar radical because she was devoted to her child.” Her clemency deal required her to cease criticism of the war. Flynn obeyed.

Pretty damning, especially when compared to the heroic defense Eugene Debs mounted against his own prosecution under the Espionage Act. But, in fairness to Flynn, in one way or another the entire IWW was shattered by the experience of “the Great War” and the October Revolution. As Cannon, himself a former Wobbly, later observed, “Then ‘politics,’ which the IWW had disavowed and cast out, came back and broke down the door.” The organization confronted the power of a state it had imagined it could ignore: “The ‘political action’ of the capitalist state broke the back of the IWW as a union.”

The middle chapters trace Flynn’s passage from civil liberties icon to “Communist menace” across the first and second Red Scares. Flynn was involved in the groups that eventually coalesced into the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), along with the pacifist Roger Baldwin and the socialist lawyer and suffragist Crystal Eastman. In this capacity, Flynn played an important role in the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti, two Italian immigrant anarchists framed up for murder.

By the mid-1920s, she first moved into the orbit of the Communist

Party, through the efforts of Cannon, who brought her into a leadership position in the International Labor Defense (ILD). There Flynn deepened her role in defense of Sacco and Vanzetti, who were executed in 1927, as well as jailed workers from the Passaic, New Jersey textile strike of 1926–1927.

But Flynn did not formally join the CP until 1937, only after the great purges of the Moscow Show Trials were underway and the Popular Front appeal for unity with the “democratic” imperialist powers had been adopted. Trasciatti recounts that Flynn was especially persuaded by the 1935 speech from Georgi Dimitrov, general secretary of the Comintern, in which “he maintained that a bourgeois democratic regime was substantially different from a bourgeois fascist one.”

It stands as an indictment of Flynn, then in her mid-40s, that she finally joined the CP only *after* Stalin began the purge of revolutionists in the Soviet Union. Trasciatti, over the next few pages, does not shrink from exposing “the Rebel Girl” for her silence on the Moscow Trials that purged “nearly every participant of the 1917 revolution,” or for her enthusiastic backing for the Hitler-Stalin pact that temporarily scrapped the Popular Front, in spite of her “anti-fascism.”

Thereafter, Flynn remained fiercely loyal to Stalinism. When Hitler and Stalin concluded the pact dividing the Baltic states, Flynn benched her anti-fascism. When, as Trotsky predicted, Nazi Germany double-crossed Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union, Flynn became anti-fascist once more. Within the CPUSA, she sided first with Earl Browder then with William Z. Foster, depending on which was favored by Moscow. She later justified the crushing of the workers’ revolution in Hungary in 1956. Trasciatti does not obscure these events, though one suspects that given Flynn’s prominent public role in the CP as a speaker and a columnist for the *Daily Worker*, a lot more damning material could be turned up.

But Flynn also suffered for her membership in the CP. In 1940 the ACLU, which Flynn had helped found, removed her from its executive board in an anti-communist witch hunt. Trasciatti treats the expulsion as a betrayal by the organization’s liberals, as indeed it was. But it came in the same year that Flynn’s party cheered the first use of the Smith Act against the Trotskyists.

That irony hangs over the book’s extended treatment of the Smith Act prosecutions of Communist Party leaders in New York. Flynn was arrested in 1951 in the second wave of indictments, convicted at Foley Square, and, once her appeals were exhausted, sent to the federal women’s reformatory at Alderson, West Virginia, where she served 28 months. Trasciatti provides a detailed account of the trials.

A closing chapter, “The Struggle Continues,” follows Flynn after her release in 1957. It covers her fight against the denial of her passport under the McCarran Act, which she argued violated the freedom of movement needed to exercise First Amendment rights, and her elevation in 1961 to national chair, the first woman to hold the post.

Flynn died in Moscow in September 1964 and was given a state funeral in Red Square by the bureaucracy that had murdered the generation of 1917. The Rebel Girl who once filled the jails of Spokane in defense of free speech ended her life honored by the regime whose crimes against socialists and workers she had spent nearly three decades excusing. Trasciatti’s civil liberties thread records that trajectory but does not explain it.

But is an explanation possible?

As an important passage of *The World Economic-Political Crisis and the Death Agony of US Imperialism*, published by the Workers League in 1979, notes, Stalinism did not have to invent its personnel in America:

[I]t would be mistaken to see the Communist Party only as an entity that has been artificially grafted onto the American labor movement by the Soviet bureaucracy. In the United States,

Stalinism found a national base of support for policies that originated in the needs of the Soviet bureaucracy. Like the medieval plagues that originated in the East but flourished in the unsanitary conditions of life in Western Europe, Stalinism quite naturally hooked itself into the milieu of the trade union bureaucracy and middle class radicalism. Similarly, Stalinism found that the traditions of pragmatism and even populism provided a very hospitable political climate. In other words, the Stalinists have been able to utilize all that was backward in the political development of the American labor movement.

The key word is “backward,” in the sense of underdeveloped and unclarified. There is nothing in Trasciatti’s biography to suggest that the young Flynn, in spite of her courage and self-sacrifice, ever developed a worked-out understanding of capitalism or the state.

The syndicalism of the IWW, with its rejection of political struggle and its faith in industrial action, left the question of state power unresolved. By renouncing independent working-class politics, syndicalism left room for reliance on the very political forces it claimed to repudiate. Flynn’s labor militancy could thus coexist with the pragmatism and illusions of middle-class radicalism, her cooperation with liberals resting on no clear distinction between their outlook and the independent interests of the working class. This was indeed Flynn’s unique role in the IWW, as Trasciatti portrays it—to serve as a bridge between the liberals and the radical workers they inconsistently defended. Before the First World War, this weakness went untested. The war and the repression that followed exposed it. Flynn’s plea to Wilson, invoking patriotism and motherhood, showed how readily her militancy could give way to an appeal to the very state that was persecuting her comrades.

These weaknesses did not lead inevitably to Stalinism. Cannon and others drew the lessons of the war and the Russian Revolution and moved from syndicalism to Bolshevism, and later to the struggle against its Stalinist degeneration. Trotsky assessed both the revolutionary promise and the political limitations of syndicalism in his 1929 essay “Communism and Syndicalism.” Describing revolutionary syndicalism as “an embryo of a revolutionary party as against opportunism ... a remarkable draft outline of revolutionary Communism,” he nevertheless identified its weaknesses as “a wrong understanding of the nature of the state and its role in the class struggle” and an inadequate conception of the revolutionary party. After the war, he wrote, syndicalism found its “refutation, its development and its completion” in communism.

Flynn’s eventual embrace of Stalinism represented a break with the revolutionary traditions of the IWW, but not with the political limitations that had accompanied her earlier militancy. When the Popular Front offered militancy in style and the defense of bourgeois democracy in program, Flynn found a political home, not in spite of Stalinism’s accommodation to liberalism but because of it.

This is not a happy story. There is something tragic in the life of a woman who devoted herself so completely to the struggles of the working class, only to end her days defending a bureaucracy hostile to the revolutionary aspirations that had animated her youth.

Trasciatti has written a serious and carefully researched biography of this challenging subject. Her accounts of the free speech fights and the Smith Act trials are valuable, and, to her credit, she does not avoid the episodes that challenge her civil liberties thesis: Flynn’s letter to Wilson, her silence on the Moscow Trials, her support for the Smith Act prosecution of the Trotskyists.

Readers interested in the history of the American left will find much of value here, as well as an unstated lesson: courage and militancy, however genuine, cannot substitute for political understanding, without which even a devoted fighter for the working class can come to serve forces hostile to

its interests.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact