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# Zetkin, Clara

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Zetkin, *Clara* Josephine

German social democratic politician, feminist, journalist, writer

Born 05 July 1857 in Wiederau, Germany

Died 20 June 1933 in Arkhangelskoye, Russia

**Referred to as the “grandmother of German communism” at the time of her death in 1933 by the *Manchester Guardian*, Clara Zetkin was a prominent feminist leader within the German social democratic movement and the Socialist International in the turbulent decades between the rise of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) in the 1880s and the seizure of power by Lenin’s Bolshevik Party at the end of World War I.**

## Table of Contents

[1 Early Career](#)

[2 Wartime Activities and Imprisonment](#)

[3 Post-war Career and Death](#)

[Notes](#)

[Selected Bibliography](#)

[Citation](#)

## Early Career

Clara Josephine Zetkin (1857-1933), neé Eißner, was born in Saxony, the eldest daughter of a modest bourgeois family. Her parents adhered as much to Lutheran religiosity as to a liberal-humanist worldview and provided their children with the best possible education. They moved to Leipzig in 1872 where Clara trained and began working as a private teacher. Having joined the Socialist Workers’ Party (SAP) in 1878, she left Germany as a consequence of Bismarck’s anti-socialist legislation and moved to Paris in 1882. There she met and fell in love with the Russian

revolutionary [Ossip Zetkin \(1850-1889\)](#) and gave birth to her sons [Maxim Zetkin \(1883-1965\)](#) and [Kostja Zetkin \(1885-1980\)](#), caring for them during the day and working as a writer and translator at night. In 1890, they moved back to Germany, where she found work in the social democratic [press](#).

As a close companion of [Rosa Luxemburg \(1871-1919\)](#), [Karl Liebknecht \(1871-1919\)](#), and [Franz Mehring \(1846-1919\)](#), Zetkin was a staunch proponent of revolutionary Marxism, internationalism, and anti-imperialism. She believed that the emancipation of women would follow naturally from the liberation of the international proletariat in a socialist revolution. In her view, gender inequality was a consequence of economic exploitation. As editor-in-chief of the [SPD](#)-affiliated *Die Gleichheit* (1891-1917), she advocated her feminist-internationalist version of Marxism. Her commitment was shaped by a protestant work ethic, a quasi-religious belief in the righteousness of her worldview, and a longing for discipline and leadership – qualities she found realized in [Vladimir Il'ich Lenin \(1870-1924\)](#) from 1917 onwards, whom she hailed as the messiah of socialism.

## Wartime Activities and Imprisonment

The outbreak of the war in 1914 radically disillusioned Zetkin. She became sick and depressed and grew hostile towards what she considered a failing “proletariat”. Estranged from the SPD, she convened a women’s international conference in Bern in 1915, holding up the ideal of internationalism amidst the bloodshed facilitated by the nationalist “opportunism” of the Second International. She was arrested in 1915 for her anti-war stance and indicted for “treason”; due to her poor health she was released from prison after four months. She participated in the founding of the *Spartakusbund*, joining the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands, USPD) in 1917 and the Communist Party of Germany (Die Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands, KPD) in 1918. With Lenin’s seizure of power during the [Russian Revolution](#) she became a fervent supporter of the Bolsheviks and unequivocally justified their brutal regime as necessary “self-defense against the forces of counterrevolution.”<sup>[1]</sup> In the nascent Soviet state, [Karl Marx’s \(1818-1883\)](#) philosophy was being realized by “hammer and sword.”

## Post-war Career and Death

As member of the [German parliament](#) between 1920 and 1933 she represented the KPD’s radical left and became a leading Comintern advocate and president of the *Rote Hilfe*. In 1932, as senior *Reichstag* president, Zetkin called for the (re)unification of the German proletariat and pointed to the Soviet Union as the “world historical proof” of capitalism’s doom. At the same time, she lamented the failure of the delusional “masses” to recognize [National Socialism](#)’s true intentions. Shortly before [Adolf Hitler \(1889-1945\)](#) came to power she had travelled to [Russia](#) where she died in June 1933.

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## Notes

1. † [Zetkin, Clara: Ein Jahr proletarischer Revolution in Russland \(November 1918\). Frauen-Beilage der "Leipziger Volkszeitung" vom 13. November 1918, in: Zetkin, Clara: Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften, Berlin 1957, pp. 43-54](#)

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