

CLARA ZETKIN

Clara Zetkin was one of Europe's most influential feminist thinkers and political organisers. Born in 1857 in Saxony, she grew up in a modest family and became politically active as a young teacher. From early on, she recognised that gender inequality could not be separated from economic hardship, class structures, and political exclusion.



This perspective shaped her lifelong commitment to linking feminism with broader struggles for workers' rights and democratic participation. Forced into exile during the Anti-Socialist Laws, Zetkin lived in Switzerland and France, where she developed strong networks with European activists. Her writings and speeches positioned her as a leading figure of the socialist women's movement.

Architect of International Women's Day and Pioneer of Social Feminism

Courage in Times of Political Danger

Throughout her life, Zetkin opposed militarism, authoritarianism, and the rise of fascism in Europe. At the age of 75, she opened the Reichstag session in 1932 with a powerful speech warning against Nazism. Her political courage made her a target, and she spent her final years in exile, where she died in 1933.

Her legacy remains a symbol of resistance, democratic responsibility, and unwavering commitment to justice.

Important Dates

- **1857** – Born in Saxony, Germany
- **1880s** – Forced into exile by Anti-Socialist Laws
- **1890s** – Becomes a leading figure in the international socialist women's movement
- **1910** – Proposes International Women's Day at the Copenhagen congress
- **1911** – First International Women's Day celebrated
- **1914–1918** – Active in the anti-war movement during WWI
- **1932** – Delivers a historic anti-fascist speech in the Reichstag
- **1933** – Dies in exile in the Soviet Union

A Dramatist Who Turned Politics Into Public Debate

In 1791, she rewrote the famous Declaration of the Rights of Man to include women – article by article.

It was not simply a critique; it was a proposal for a new social contract, where:

- women could vote,
- inherit property,
- divorce,
- and hold public office.

She showed that equality is not a gift but a responsibility of democracy.

Silenced for Speaking Too Loudly

Her determination to defend human rights – including her public plea against executions during the Terror – was interpreted as treason. She was executed in 1793 for her political activism.

Her death symbolised the danger faced by women who dared to enter political life.

Why Clara Zetkin Matters Today

Clara Zetkin matters today because she understood that equality must address not only gender, but also class, labour conditions, and political freedom – an approach that speaks directly to modern intersectional debates. Her creation of International Women's Day shows how collective action and international solidarity can turn women's rights into a global movement, reminding us that progress depends on organised, cross-border collaboration. Zetkin's lifelong resistance to militarism, fascism, and authoritarianism also feels urgently relevant, highlighting how democracy and equality are fragile and must be actively defended.

Her story illustrates that feminist struggles are inseparable from questions of justice, economic security, and peace. By insisting that women's rights belong at the centre of political life, Zetkin helped shape the foundations of modern European equality movements.

