

Bourgeois Mentality and Socialist Ideology as Exemplified by Clara Zetkin's Constructs of Femininity

TÂNIA ÜNLÜDAĞ

SUMMARY: Clara Zetkin (1857–1933) remains one of the most famous figures in the history of the German and international Left. She rose to prominence as a social democrat beginning in 1890 and became a Marxist and, as of 1919, a member of the high-ranking cadre of the KPD; she was an activist of the Second International, starting in 1889, and belonged to the Executive Committee of the Communist International (EKKI) in the 1920s. She is known in history primarily as the leader and chief ideologue of the socialist, and later the international communist, women's movement, but is also a popular figure in the leftist women's movement of the twentieth century. Zetkin, the founder of International Women's Day, is still widely depicted as a heroine. However, in light of recent research conducted in Berlin and Moscow and from the perspective of the history of mentalities, the tendency to mythologize her needs to be questioned. This essay on Clara Zetkin's constructs of femininity is part of a biography oriented toward a history of mentalities, in which the socialist and communist Zetkin is presented in the entire societal context of her times, perceived as a contemporary of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From this perspective, it is precisely Zetkin's comments on the women's issue that mirror the influences of Social Darwinism and biological discussion at the turn of the century in Germany. The ideas held by the leader and theoretician of the international socialist women's movement on the "liberation of women" from "gender slavery" and "class bondage" were not aimed at pursuing an autonomous process of emancipating women for their own sake, but at pursuing a well-structured and directed process of educating them that would end up turning them into a new physically and mentally improved "consummate woman" who would efficiently serve the socialist society.

Clara Zetkin: féministe sans frontières is the title of a Zetkin biography by Gilbert Badia that was published in 1993.¹ In the author's opinion, the life of the theoretician and leader of the socialist, and later the communist, women's international was exemplary, particularly because of the

1. In German the book appears as Gilbert Badia, *Clara Zetkin. Eine neue Biographie* (Berlin, 1994). All quotations used from this and other German sources have been translated into English by the translator.

“historical role” she “played in the struggle for women’s rights, for the liberation of the working-class woman and for freedom”.² Zetkin demonstrated “how the emancipated, autonomous woman, who has achieved her total humanity, enhances the enrichment of a couple, and enables new relationships between both partners”.³ Badia considers Zetkin’s ideas on the political, social, and sexual emancipation of women still to be relevant. He sees Zetkin not only as a socialist, internationalist, and “consistent pacifist”, but also as a feminist in the modern sense of the word.

Badia’s biography reproduces the Zetkin mythology that was created chiefly through historical research done in the former GDR, in which certain facts were often ignored.⁴ However, some depictions of her written by authors in the West reveal that they too have succumbed to the temptation of hoisting Clara Zetkin on to the pedestal of historical greatness and feminist perfection. The heroic image of the founder of International Women’s Day is still widely held. But is it valid?

Ever since the archives in the former East Berlin and Moscow have become accessible, scholars have been given the chance to cast a new light on the personality and life of Zetkin. Furthermore, it has also become necessary to use new methodological approaches for the biographies of prominent persons in international life, and to dare to shift the perspective away from the traditional political biography. In the following, I will outline how Zetkin’s comments on women can be interpreted through the perspective of the history of mentalities.

This essay on Clara Zetkin’s constructs of femininity is part of a biography that is based on a history of mentalities,⁵ in which Zetkin, as a socialist and later a communist, is *not* defined exclusively within the framework of an ideological and organizational history of the German and international Left. Instead, she is portrayed within the entire societal context of her times, depicted as a contemporary of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Unlike classical political biographies that concentrate on the individuality of the person in question, the approach in the history of mentalities is to treat the biography as a case study. The individuals studied are perceived as representatives of their era. Zetkin was a Marxist, a prominent social democrat, and later a high-ranking member of the German Communist Party (KPD). Starting in 1889, she was a well-known activist in the Socialist International and after 1919 a leading

2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

4. A good example of this is the official GDR biography by Luise Dornemann, *Clara Zetkin. Leben und Wirken*, 9th edn (Berlin, 1989).

5. My habilitation thesis, *Clara Zetkin: Bürgerliche Mentalität und sozialistische Ideologie. Eine Fallstudie*, was accepted in December 1999 by the History Faculty at the Ruhr University, Bochum. Its publication is planned in the summer of 2002.

member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (EKKI). She was the ideological opponent of both the Wilhelmine empire and the Weimar Republic and, analyzed from the perspective of a history of ideas and ideology, shared nothing with the authority-respecting subjects of imperial Germany or later the citizens of the Weimar Republic. However, from the perspective of a history of mentalities, it becomes clear that Zetkin, despite all her ideological differences, did indeed have much in common with these people: she propagated the widespread authoritarian antidemocratic mentality found among her German contemporaries. Zetkin's personality was strongly influenced by the thinking and character of the nineteenth-century educated bourgeoisie; her Marxism was imbued with the voluntarism and irrationality of turn-of-the-century Germany. Her written works on and for women reflect the influences of the debates on Social Darwinism and biology. Therefore, Zetkin's constructs of femininity are exemplary of her bourgeois mentality.

BOURGEOIS MENTALITY AND SOCIALIST IDEOLOGY

The term "mentality", introduced by Theodor Geiger in 1932, refers to the pattern of unconscious attitudes and interpretations that individuals need in order to cope with the world in which they live. This consists of a system of behavioral rules, values, and norms. Everyday reality is defined by automatic acts of interpretation. Mentality is the "direct conditioning of a person by his social environment and the knowledge emanating from and acquired through it".⁶ Mentality is a collective phenomenon and does not reflect individual character, but is shared by each of us with our social group, our class, and our contemporaries. These fundamental certainties are imparted to us in the process of our upbringing and socialization and enable each of us to move about self-assuredly in our environment and to communicate with others.

In the upbringing and early socialization of Clara Zetkin, born Clara Josephine Eissner in 1857 in Saxony, two major influences are evident that had a lasting effect on her mentality and particularly on her image of women. The first is linked to her mother, the other to her father.

Zetkin's mother, Josephine Eissner, came from a bourgeois family in Leipzig, maintained connections to liberal circles during the *Vormärz* and the 1848–1849 Revolution, and was a friend of the founder of the first German women's movement, Luise Otto-Peters. She made sure that her oldest daughter, Clara, received training to be a teacher and governess at one of the most progressive women's institutes of the time in Leipzig. The seminar was headed by Auguste Schmidt, a very important figure in the

6. Theodor Geiger, *Die soziale Schichtung des deutschen Volkes. Soziographischer Versuch auf statistischer Grundlage* (Stuttgart, 1932; repr. Stuttgart, 1967), p. 77.

first feminist movement. During her training, the young Clara Eissner was influenced deeply and permanently by bourgeois-liberal thought. Education, knowledge, diligence, and ambition were values that continued to guide her, also later as a Marxist. Although Zetkin then tried to distance herself from positions of the bourgeois women's movement and its perception of women, the socialist-feminist theoretician could never free herself from this maternal upbringing, even though she attempted ideologically to overcome these common interests.

The second early influence on Zetkin's socialization was that exerted on her by her father, Gottfried Eissner, a pious Lutheran who spent a major portion of his life in rural Saxony as a church organist and village schoolteacher. Gottfried Eissner was Clara's first teacher and his religious-idealistic influence later became obvious in her Marxism. During her education in Leipzig, Clara Eissner also came into contact about 1878 with a group of exiled Russian Narodniks. It was in this peer group of young "nihilists" that she finally met her later partner Ossip Zetkin. Clara Zetkin's Marxism was also shaped by the teachings of the Narodniks and by Ferdinand Lassalle. She perceived Marxism as a political religion and served as a priestess of a modern theology. In 1911, she said at a women's conference in Jena: "We can make the Catholic proletarian women understand that the secular ideology of socialism is able to achieve what the religious ideology of Christianity should achieve."⁷

These religious-idealistic influences on her socialization not only shaped her Marxism but also her image of women. Unlike the simply experienced, non-reflected mentality, ideologies are selected interpretations of life and the world. They are articulated as doctrines or theories. Such ideological systems are communicable, through them "teachings can be preached and disseminated".⁸ Ideologies are "objective", reflexive (although not necessarily critical). Mentalities are instilled in people during their upbringing and socialization as "self-evident" interpretations of the world, whereas ideologies can be chosen and must be acquired, learned.

Until 1908, Zetkin was the uncontested leader of the social democratic women's movement and, beginning in 1907, Secretary-General of the Socialist Women's International. In 1920 she became the Chairwoman of the Communist Women's International. She first defined the program of the social-democratic women's movement in 1896, the rudiments of which were incorporated into the women's platform of the Communist International. On the ideological level, Zetkin's theory on the socialist women's movement and its platform are impeccably antibourgeois and emancipatory in a socialist sense. There is no doubt that she worked

7. *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des Parteitags der SPD, Jena 10.–16.9.1911* (Berlin, 1911), p. 452.

8. *Ibid.*



Figure 1. Clara Zetkin in her garden at Sillenbuch near Stuttgart, after 1903.
Courtesy of the Bundesarchiv, Berlin

diligently at national and international levels to push for factory laws protecting working-class women, for the eight-hour day, against child labor, and for the full political and legal equality of proletarian women.

Read through the lenses of the history of mentalities, Zetkin's writings reveal other dimensions. Only then does it become clear, *first*, that Zetkin based the content and aims of her feminist activities on a theoretical *construct*, particularly on a construct of the proletarian woman that had little in common with the social and economic situation of the actually existing proletarian woman in imperial Germany and the Weimar Republic. Just how great the gap was between the leader of social-democratic women and her constituency of working-class women is illustrated glaringly by the comment of a woman attending an event at which Zetkin spoke on 29 August 1913, in Berlin. This woman said: "Comrad Zetkin hasn't really looked closely at the situation of the poor."⁹

Second, it becomes clear that Zetkin's construct of women was influenced by the philosophical, literary, and scientific currents of thought circulating at the end of the century in Germany. Initiated by the bourgeois women's movement, a debate emerged at national and international level about what it meant to be a "woman as such". As a Marxist,

9. *Vorwärts*, 31 August 1913.

by about 1899 Zetkin had clearly distanced herself from the image of women propagated by the bourgeois women's movement and had defined women fundamentally as beings determined by social class. She considered the "woman as such" to be a bourgeois construct; proletarian and bourgeois women had nothing in common in her view. But even Zetkin could not avoid the debate on the "new woman", the "new ethic", and the "individuality of gender". She too read the avant-garde writers, Ellen Key and Laura Marholm. Zetkin, however, tried to give the new catchwords a socialist, that is class-specific, meaning. This process took place in Zetkin while she was obviously still under the general influence of bourgeois intellectual debate and of the philosophy of life and views of biology accepted by the mainstream. After 1900, the leader of the socialist women's movement incorporated into her construct of femininity elements of a popular, vulgar form of Darwinism, of Nietzschean philosophy, and of the then new ideas on racial hygiene, or more specifically, eugenics.¹⁰ An excerpt from an article that Zetkin wrote in September 1918 illustrates this well:

The socialist society will dramatically increase the efficiency of the woman as a mother. In so far as it creates the favorable social conditions for the development of a woman into the female version of a consummate human being, it increases and strengthens the forces that make it possible for a woman to commit herself to the sacred service of motherhood.¹¹

Efficiency, sacred service of motherhood, female version of a consummate human being – these are hardly salient terms of a Marxist theory on women, but those typical of the philosophical-irrational bourgeois *weltanschauung* prevalent at the turn of the century. Except for the mention of "the socialist society", this excerpt offers little proof of the political and ideological radicalization that had occurred in Zetkin by 1918, under the influence of Luxemburg and Pannekoek. Beginning in 1890, she had been gradually moving away from Kautsky's economic

10. See Hedwig Conrad-Martius, *Utopien der Menschenzüchtung. Der Sozialdarwinismus und seine Folgen* (Munich, 1955); Michael Schwartz, *Sozialistische Eugenik. Eugenische Sozialtechnologien in Debatten und Politik der deutschen Sozialdemokratie 1890–1933* (Bonn, 1995); Michael Schwartz, "Sozialismus und Eugenik. Zur fälligen Revision eines Geschichtsbildes", *Internationale wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, 25 (1989), pp. 465–489; Michael Schwartz, "Erbgesundheit und Sozialpolitik. Henriette Fürths Vorstellungen von einer 'sozialistischen Eugenik'", *Tribüne. Zeitschrift zum Verständnis des Judentums*, 118 (1991), pp. 199–203; Michael Schwartz, "'Proletarier' und 'Lumpen'. Sozialistische Ursprünge eugenischen Denkens", *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 42 (1994), pp. 437–470; Diane Paul, "Eugenics and the Left", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 45 (1984), pp. 567–590; Michael Freedon, "Eugenics and Progressive Thought: A Study in Ideological Affinity", *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), pp. 645–671; Alfons Labisch, "Die gesundheitspolitischen Vorstellungen der deutschen Sozialdemokratie von ihrer Gründung bis zur Parteispaltung", *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 16 (1976), pp. 325–370.

11. *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, Women's section (*Frauenbeilage*), 20 September 1918.

determinism and replacing it with her version of a voluntarist theory of the masses. The result was the vision of the proletarian revolution as a chiliastic turning point in world history. In this pseudo-religious Armageddon, the morally, ethically, and physically superior proletarian masses would be victorious. As a “consummate person”, the proletarian woman would be a significant component of these ideal, revolutionary masses.

ZETKIN'S CONSTRUCTS OF FEMININITY

The deficiencies of the proletarian woman

In two major presentations, one held at the founding congress of the Second International in 1889 in Paris, and the other at the SPD party conference in 1896 in Gotha, Zetkin laid the theoretical foundations for a socialist women's movement. She broached the issue of women's emancipation with analogies to the central conflict between the classes. The proletarian women's movement was and would remain an integrated part of the socialist workers' movement as a whole; actions taken by the women were to be incorporated into the movement of the men. Far into the era of communism, Zetkin's doctrine was based on the principle that the proletarian women's movement was not to be at all independent. This was the factor that distinguished it from the bourgeois women's movement, in which the central conflict ran along gender differences and not class ones. According to Zetkin's theory, bourgeois women had to view the men of their own class as their opponents. Her credo continued to be that the bourgeois and socialist women's movements shared nothing in common. She continued to hold to what she had stated in Paris in 1889: “We do not acknowledge the existence of a specific women's issue – we do not acknowledge the existence of a working-class women's issue [...]. The emancipation of women, like that of all of humanity, will be exclusively the work of the *emancipation of labor from capital*.”¹² Special rules had to be established in the SPD party statute for social-democratic women because the 1851 Law on Association and Assembly (*Vereins- und Versammlungsgesetze*) in Germany prohibited the membership of women in political organizations and their participation at political events. Once the legal restrictions were partially revoked, the party leadership incorporated the social-democratic women's movement into the general party organization in 1908, without any protest from Zetkin. In 1920, Lenin gave her the task of writing the guidelines for the communist women's movement under strict instructions to set up “no special

12. *Protokoll des Internationalen Arbeiter-Congresses, Paris vom 14.–20.7.1889* (Nuremberg, 1890), p. 84; published as a separate pamphlet under the title *Die Arbeiterinnen- und Frauenfrage der Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1889) (= Berliner Arbeiterbibliothek, 1 Serie, no. 3, ed. Max Schippel).

organizations for women communists. A woman communist is a member of the Party just as a male communist is.”¹³ Zetkin did as instructed.

According to Zetkin’s feminist strategy, the manner in which social-democratic and communist women exhibited their political consciousness and action was always to be measured against that of their male counterparts. She wrote in 1891 that the “masses of working-class women” needed “to transform themselves into an emancipatory element of the proletariat that was just as important and conscious as male workers now are”.¹⁴ In reality, proletarian women were therefore not the creators but the objects of socialist feminist theory and policy, because the female half of the proletariat was automatically considered backward compared to the male half, even though this female backwardness was attributed to historical and societal determinants. Women were placed in a position of permanent debt to the revolutionary movement of the men and became the focus of a fundamental re-educational campaign. Zetkin’s demands on women to change and improve themselves were considered standing demands, a permanent challenge. In 1928, she stated during a lecture in Moscow that women would only be able to participate in the revolutionary reconstruction of society “if they have created new people of themselves, if they help to create new people”. She continued:

A woman may no longer remain a primarily passive creature, one that faces the world as something strange, puzzling, and incomprehensible [...]. A woman must transform herself into a fully active, creative being, who asks herself the question: Have I done enough to understand, cherish, and esteem my fellow travelers, have I contributed enough to the common cause?¹⁵

In 1889 in Paris, Zetkin limited the role of motherhood for the proletarian woman to childbirth and nursing. Thereafter, every other child-rearing task was to be handed over to professional educators, because centuries of oppression had turned the working-class woman “out of necessity” into “an incomplete and unevenly developed creature”.¹⁶ The proletarian woman as she really existed was not in a position to raise her children to become “human beings in the full sense of the word” because “whoever wants to educate must be educated himself”.¹⁷ Furthermore, the moral competency of the proletarian woman *per se* was not sufficiently

13. Clara Zetkin, *Erinnerungen an Lenin* (Berlin, 1957), p. 79. “Richtlinien der Kommunistischen Frauenbewegung”, *Die Kommunistin*, 22 (1920); see also the entire text in *Die Kommunistische Internationale*, 15 (1920/21), pp. 530–555, esp. Karin Bauer, *Clara Zetkin und die proletarische Frauenbewegung* (Berlin, 1978), pp. 237–266. See Silvia Kontos, *Die Partei kämpft wie ein Mann. Frauenpolitik der KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (Basel [etc.], 1979).

14. *Die Arbeiterin*, 28 March 1891.

15. “Ein Vortrag Clara Zetkins an der Kommunistischen Akademie Moskau (29.3.1928)”, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung*, 2 (1982), pp. 211–224, 223.

16. *Arbeiterinnen- und Frauenfrage*, p. 34.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 31.



Figure 2. Clara Zetkin in 1889.
International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

developed. Zetkin diagnosed “her societal virtues” as being negative ones through and through. Characteristic of the proletarian woman, Zetkin argued, was her “pettiness, meanness, even cruelty toward everything outside of the sphere of her personal affection”.¹⁸ Her “parochial attitudes”, a “reflex from yesterday’s social conditions”,¹⁹ have turned the proletarian woman into a “crippling factor” for the workers’ movement.²⁰

The working-class woman therefore needed to become the object of “energetic, enlightened agitation”.²¹ Most importantly, she needed to be subjected to a fundamental process of re-education in view of the political and trade union mobilization of workers. Such a process would change women’s value-orientation and behavioral maxims and adapt these to the

18. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

20. *Berliner Volks-Tribüne*, 13 July 1889.

21. *Ibid.*

needs of the revolutionary era. “The politically enlightened proletarian woman”, Zetkin wrote in 1893, “is no longer a spineless, capitalist-fearing object to be exploited, she is part of the struggle of her class, she is an archenemy of the bourgeoisie”.²²

Despite all of her deficiencies, the proletarian woman *per se* possessed considerable developmental potential, which could be positively enhanced if exposed to the right educational influences. Among these were the female interest in education and the characteristic attributes of malleability, obligingness, willingness to sacrifice, and enthusiasm.²³ Zetkin wanted this thoroughly conventional, if not conservative, and very bourgeois profile of characteristics to serve the purposes of the revolutionary movement. She recognized that the energies women invested in *religious* or *reactionary* movements – Zetkin specified these as being early Christianity, nationalist movements in France, and the Catholic Center Party milieu in Germany²⁴ – could be useful resources for the revolutionary cause. In general, the working class demonstrated “the highest moral development, relatively-speaking, in a modern sense”;²⁵ therefore, the female half of the working class was, objectively seen, particularly suited to transform its egoistic faults into solidarity, class consciousness, and a sense of community. For the time being, however, women had not yet “fully become human beings”; they had not yet “awoken their consciousness to their new duties and rights”; they did not stand at the “pinnacle of thought and theory”;²⁶ they were therefore inadequate socialist activists and not “consummate women”. The “masses of womankind”, Zetkin maintained, “are generally more backward”.²⁷

Educational program

Zetkin’s propagandistic and agitational work on behalf of women within the SPD, and later the KPD or KI, was basically educational work. The “ignorance of the masses”, especially the female half, needed to be eliminated through a form of agitation that was not specifically (feminist) women’s agitation, but socialist agitation for women. From 1890 to 1917, Zetkin was the chief editor of the social democratic women’s magazine *Die Gleichheit* (equality), which she also used as a political platform. Her essays on the women’s issue read, on the whole, like a complete educational program for proletarian women. The topics in this program

22. *Gleichheit*, 26 July 1893.

23. See *Arbeiterinnen- und Frauenfrage*, pp. 22, 36, and *passim*.

24. *Berliner Volks-Tribüne*, 15 June 1889.

25. *Arbeiterinnen- und Frauenfrage*, p. 36.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

27. *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des Parteitags der SPD, Frankfurt/M. 21.–27.10.1894* (Berlin, 1894) p. 174.

offered a political, economic, and literary education that ranged from advice on hygiene, child-rearing, and running a household to tips on achieving a harmonious working-class family and making warm, sturdy, and inexpensive clothing. Zetkin set her sights on scientific advancements, modernity, effectiveness, and progress. Her entire program was a project to bring civilization to proletarian women.

Zetkin credited proletarian women with only limited intellectual capabilities. In 1896, she expressed the opinion that political pamphlets for proletarian women had to be made to resemble the religious tracts of the English missionary societies.²⁸ It was important to create the most attractive layout possible and to make the didactic content of the texts appealing to women who were attracted by appearances and accustomed to light reading. Zetkin wrote to Rosa Luxemburg in 1918 that the masses, and particularly women, could not handle more than one idea at a time.²⁹ Three years later, in June 1921, one could read in the *Kommunistische Fraueninternationale* that “most of the masses of women belonging to the working class are political illiterates. It is up to the communist women’s movement to teach them how to spell and read as true revolutionaries”.³⁰

Zetkin deeply distrusted the ideologically undeveloped, streetwise knowledge of the proletarian woman; she saw no political relevance or inherent emancipatory potential in it. Proletarian women were not to be left to raise their self-awareness by themselves through any “spontaneous”, autonomous process that had grown out of the context of their own lives and experiences.³¹ Left to their own devices, they would develop petty bourgeois attitudes. The fact that Zetkin joined the KPD in 1919 and later had little to say against its Stalinization is due in great part to her view of the party as an institution performing the function of an educated dictatorship, particularly vis-à-vis women.

The childbearing proletarian woman

Around 1900, Zetkin corrected her view of women “out of consideration to the family and material duties”³² of the working-class woman. In 1896, she maintained that it was not the task of the social democratic women’s agitation “to alienate” the proletarian woman from her duties as “wife and

28. *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des Parteitags der SPD, Gotha 11.–16.10.1896* (Berlin, 1896), p. 166.

29. Zetkin to Rosa Luxemburg, 17 November 1918, *Vorwärts*, 1 May 1969 (ed. Hermann Weber).

30. *Kommunistische Fraueninternationale*, 1–3 (May–June 1921), p. 64.

31. On this, see Kontos, *Die Partei kämpft*, p. 244.

32. Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis [hereafter, IISG], *Kleine Korrespondenz*, Zetkin to Richard Fischer, 16 November 1900. Still, Zetkin continued to hold a basically positive view of the employment of women; see her rhetorical exchange with Edmund Fischer in 1905.

mother". On the contrary, it was indeed the goal of social-democratic feminist policy to "better qualify" the working-class woman for these duties, so that she could "fulfil them thoroughly".³³ To do this, the proletarian woman first had to bring healthy children into the world. In 1899, work regulations protecting working-class women were defended on the grounds that the proletariat needed "physically, mentally, and morally healthy, strong fighters [...]. And to ensure that multitudes of such fighters are raised, we must have proletarian mothers who impart their health and strength, their knowledge and willpower to their children."³⁴ The proletarian woman required such protective measures so that she could "bear and raise a race of fighters".³⁵ Throughout her writings on protective labor laws for women, Zetkin refers to the female body as a gynecological object and a physiological problem.³⁶

Zetkin opposed birth control and abortion, especially for proletarian women.³⁷ In 1902, she wrote Luise Kautsky that she considered the prevention of pregnancies and abortion to be in principle a neo-Malthusian, that is, a bourgeois option, a "downright unaesthetic and crude" means, which could be used in only a few cases, such as to stem the danger of "hereditary illness". "But it can never be a means to resolve the social issue."³⁸ In 1913, she participated in the debate on the childbearing strike (see below). At a meeting in Berlin, she reminded the working-class women present that "when you stop producing soldiers [for the imperial army, TÜ], then you also stop producing soldiers for the revolution".³⁹

The proletarian woman no longer derived her legitimation in the revolutionary working class solely from her work (employed labor or housework), but increasingly from her role and efficiency as a bearer of children. Zetkin interpreted the drop in the birthrate among the German working class prior to the First World War as the negative consequence of social conditions, not as the free choice of working-class women. According to the *Gleichheit*, one of the causes for the drop in the birthrate across all social classes was alcoholism, which greatly reduced the "procreational power and fitness of the race". This could also be found among the working classes, particularly in families not involved in the

33. *Gleichheit*, 28 October 1896; see also Gothaer Referat 1896, pp. 160–168.

34. *Gleichheit*, 8 November 1899.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Sabine Schmitt, *Der Arbeiterinnenschutz im deutschen Kaiserreich. Zur Konstruktion der schutzbedürftigen Arbeiterin* (Stuttgart, 1995), p. 33.

37. See Annette Mühlberg, "Arbeiterbewegung und Sexualität im deutschen Kaiserreich", *Mitteilungen aus der kulturwissenschaftlichen Forschung*, 31 (1992), pp. 119–173.

38. IISG, Kautsky Family Archive, Zetkin to Luise Kautsky, 25 March 1902. On this point Zetkin differed from her social-democratic opponent, Henriette Fürth and from Helene Stöcker, who also advocated the use of contraceptives. See Richard J. Evans, *The Feminist Movement in Germany 1894–1933* (London [etc.], 1976), p. 132.

39. *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 26 August 1913.

social-democratic movement. What these families lacked was participation in the organized class struggle that would give them “new hope for life” and “strong, moral values, high ideals”. The declining fertility of the ruling classes, however, was attributed primarily to the moral degeneration and venereal diseases caused by male contact with prostitutes. Zetkin believed that the male “members of high society” would have to pay the price of dwindling potency for their social and political power. The decadence of bourgeois women was demonstrated by their avoidance of pregnancy out of their fear of bodily discomfort and waning attractiveness, and their aversion to being responsible for their offspring.⁴⁰

The debate on the childbearing strike

Zetkin closely followed the discussion within the bourgeois women's movement on the individuality of each woman. Yet in her opinion, the female need for an unencumbered development of her personality had to be expressed within the “world of proletarian women” in other forms, it “ha[d] to set itself other goals as the means to an end, by contrast to women in the bourgeois classes”. The proletarian woman's desire to develop her own individuality could only be obtained through the betterment of her class, and the struggle of this class alone was “the highest form” in “which the working-class woman cried out fervently to participate fully in the give and take of cultural life according to her own particular individuality”.⁴¹ Within the working class, female identity was only possible within the collective and therefore could not be geared toward the individualistic concepts of the bourgeois women's movement.

When Zetkin took part in rallies on the “childbearing strike” in August 1913, together with Rosa Luxemburg, Luise Zietz, Julius Moses, and others,⁴² she recognized what she thought to be this very “egoistic bourgeois individualism” embedded in the concept of limiting the number

40. *Gleichheit*, 10 June 1914.

41. Book review by Clara Zetkin of Oda Olberg, “Das Weib und der Intellektualismus, Berlin-Bern 1902”, *Die Neue Zeit*, 2 (1903), pp. 52–59, and 86–91; citations on pp. 56f.

42. For more on the debate surrounding the childbearing strike, see Ulrich Linse, “Arbeitschaft und Geburtenentwicklung im Deutschen Kaiserreich von 1871”, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 7 (1972), pp. 205–271 and 238ff.; Heinz Niggemann, *Emanzipation zwischen Sozialismus und Feminismus. Die sozialdemokratische Frauenbewegung im Kaiserreich* (Wuppertal, 1981), pp. 247ff.; Richard J. Evans, *Sozialdemokratie und Frauenemanzipation im deutschen Kaiserreich*, (Berlin [etc.], 1979); Karl Heinz Roth, “Kontroversen um die Geburtenkontrolle am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkriegs. Eine Dokumentation zur Berliner ‘Gebärstreikdebatte’ von 1913”, *Autonomie*, 12 (1978), pp. 78–103; Robert P. Neumann, “The Sexual Question and Social Democracy in Imperial Germany”, *Journal of Social History*, 3 (1974), pp. 271–286. See as well the series of articles written by Heinrich Vogel in the *Gleichheit* in August 1913, and the series “Gebärzwang und Gebärstreik” that also appeared in this magazine, beginning in April 1914.

of births; therefore, she opposed vehemently its implementation for the proletariat. A “childbearing strike” was “quackery”,⁴³ a “bourgeois, individualistic approach that toyed with anarchy”. In her eyes, the propagandists of a proletarian limitation on births were concentrating not on “the proletariat as a class, but on the individual family”; “instead of mass action”, they were propagating “a certain individual way of living”. A woman could do her part to provide a “legitimation for a free humankind [...] only by proving that, if necessary, she would give her last breath for her children”, and would assume “the responsibility for them in the eyes of society”.⁴⁴ At these rallies, Zetkin severely reprimanded the women attending with her emphasis on two main points, namely the “natural occupation” of a woman and her “willingness to sacrifice herself”. Any limitation in the number of children they bore would be “nothing less than avoiding the struggle with life”. Naturally, Zetkin would say during her speech, there was no deliberate intent “to have the proletarian woman endure a great deal of pain and sorrow”. Yet then she strongly qualified this concession by adding: “Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that, where the greatest sacrifice is demanded from us, there our strength unfurls most fully.”⁴⁵

In Zetkin’s pronatalist argumentation, she incorporated elements from Social Darwinism, racial hygiene, and a conservative, Christian image of women, combined with bourgeois virtues: working-class women were not permitted to be cowardly, petty, or lazy⁴⁶ – yet that is what they were if they systematically refused to perform their birth-giving function. Minna Güldner, a member of the Women Workers’ Commission of the German Metal Workers’ Association, criticized an article written in August 1913 by a friend of Zetkin’s, Mathilde Wurm, in which Wurm presented Zetkin’s position on the issue of children. Güldner argued that the economic and social position of the proletarian woman would improve if the number of her children was limited. The trade unionist accused Mathilde Wurm of having little insight into the realities of proletarian life.⁴⁷ Zetkin defended Wurm’s position. Whereas she did not contest the point that a large number of children did indeed complicate the situation of working-class women, she vehemently contested the assumption that this

43. *Vorwärts*, 24 August 1913.

44. *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 26 August 1913.

45. *Vorwärts*, 24 August 1913.

46. See also *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 26 August 1913.

47. Mathilde Wurm, in *Gleichheit*, 23 July 1913; Minna Güldner, in *Gleichheit*, 20 August 1913. For a view of how this was practiced, see Robert P. Neumann, “Geburtenkontrolle der Arbeiterklasse im Wilhelminischen Deutschland”, in Dieter Langewiesche and Klaus Schönhoven (eds), *Arbeiter in Deutschland. Studien zur Lebensweise der Arbeiterschaft im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung* (Paderborn, 1981); Max Marcus, *Der eheliche Präventivverkehr, seine Verbreitung, Verursachung und Methodik. Dargestellt und beleuchtet an 300 Ehen* (Berlin, 1917).

was the cause for the “distress and destitution within working-class families”. The greater blame lay with “exploiting capitalism”, which turned the blessing of many children into a torturous burden.⁴⁸ To counter Güldner’s argument that the women workers who were “blessed” with many children were very difficult to mobilize for political and trade-union causes, Zetkin praised the essential, personal characteristics of the ideal proletarian woman. The political engagement of proletarian women had less to do with numbers of children they had “than with insight, idealism, and strength of character”. Many women workers who only had two children to care for showed little interest in the socialist movement. Others were among “the most industrious and self-sacrificing activists despite their six, eight, and ten children. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”⁴⁹ While at the Berlin rally the social democrat, Luise Zietz, acknowledged that women workers had the right to decide for themselves how many children they wanted.⁵⁰ Zetkin’s Social-Darwinist-moralizing arguments put proletarian women under a great deal of pressure to bear children. The childbearing strike, so stated Zetkin in summing up her criticism of Güldner, was not a new “‘revolutionary weapon’ of the proletariat”, but could be used “on the contrary as a ‘preventative means’ [...] against the proletariat’s rise to power and its liberation”.⁵¹

Many contemporaries on the Left noticed at the time how closely Zetkin’s positions – as well as those of Kautsky and Luxemburg – in the debate on the childbearing strike approximated conservative-Christian views of motherhood.⁵² In the minds of many proletarian women, the debate also proved how vast the gulf was between the worlds of the leader of the proletarian women’s movement and the women themselves.⁵³ The differences in opinion that can be found in the reports on the rallies held throughout 1913 document the enormous distance that existed between the life of the functionary Zetkin and the experiences of working-class women. Moreover, the abstract quality of Zetkin’s image of women became evident. Zetkin said in the introductory remarks of her Berlin speech that she found it “humiliating” to even have to address such an absurd issue as the “childbearing strike”.⁵⁴ The reactions of the grassroots movement to her position on the issue of limiting births could have given Zetkin pause for thought and could have prompted her to change her

48. *Gleichheit*, 20 August 1913.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Vorwärts*, 24 August 1913.

51. *Gleichheit*, 20 August 1913.

52. See Franz Pfemfert, “Der Zeugungsstreik”, *Die Aktion*, 15 November 1913; a similar description is found in the memoirs of the sexual researcher Magnus Herzfeld. (See Manfred Herzer, *Magnus Hirschfeld. Leben und Werk eines jüdischen, schwulen und sozialistischen Sexologen* (Frankfurt [etc.], 1992), pp. 41ff.)

53. See the report printed in *Berliner Volkszeitung*, 16 October 1913.

54. *Vorwärts*, 24 August 1913.

opinions commensurate with the realities of proletarian life. But this didn't happen. Zetkin refused to reconsider her ideas based on the actual experiences of proletarian women. Instead, she came to the conclusion that the process of re-educating women had not been completed, that the proletarian woman could *theoretically* become the ideal "new woman", but that *in practice* she fell far short of this goal. This conviction, which was applied after 1914 to the construction of the ideal revolutionary "masses", contributed significantly to the development of Zetkin's pedagogical socialism with dictatorial traits.

Socialist class hygiene

The prevention of pregnancy was acceptable in Zetkin's eyes only if there was genetic evidence to justify it, including the possibility of mental handicap and physical impairment, as well as character weaknesses ("criminal mind") considered to be hereditary.⁵⁵ Basically, each legal regulation put into place to protect women workers was implemented to aid the *breeding* of a revolutionary class that would consist of a "beautiful and strong people", the proletariat. Zetkin defended her demands for factory laws for women workers with arguments based on racial hygiene. It could be said that she adopted a "class-hygienic" standpoint, featuring ideas on proletarian eugenics that were permeated with the influence of Social Darwinism.⁵⁶

Zetkin, who often quoted Richard Wagner or Friedrich Nietzsche in this context, reevaluated the social classes in a biological-genetic sense: she envisioned the proletariat as becoming a class of new, ethically, morally, and physically superior people. The proletarian woman would become the creator of a "physically, mentally, and morally healthy proletarian youth". In order to raise such a race, mothers were needed who "carry, give birth, and nourish children of strong body, and raise offspring of bright, courageous spirit and strong, true hearts".⁵⁷ The proletariat needed to remain fit in the class struggle for survival. Therefore, it was imperative to create favorable conditions to help the procreative willingness and ability of the proletariat. Work that was detrimental to health, undernourishment, and poor housing were among the causes "of the decreasing *fertility of the race*"⁵⁸ – meaning explicitly the fertility of the *proletarian* woman. The "maternal drive" of women workers was weakened by unfavorable living

55. *Gleichheit*, 10 June 1914.

56. Zetkin's positions were based primarily on the socialist concepts of social Lamarckism popular particularly with Kautsky. This was a theory on the influence of milieus in which *attained* or *learned* characteristics could become inherited, i.e. genetically determined ones (see Schwartz, *Sozialistische Eugenik*, passim).

57. *Gleichheit*, 21 November 1910.

58. *Ibid.*, 1 April 1914.



Figure 3. Clara Zetkin at the end of the 1920s.
Courtesy of the Bundesarchiv, Berlin

and working conditions, this was true for the entire female body, “particularly, however, the abdominal organs” of women.⁵⁹

Such statements were not at all unique to Zetkin.⁶⁰ Käthe Duncker, who temporarily worked as the second editor of the *Gleichheit* and belonged to the left-wing of the SPD like Zetkin,⁶¹ also held similar views. Duncker expanded on the visions of a proletarian “superman”. In her book *Sozialistische Erziehung im Hause*, published in 1914, she discussed

59. *Ibid.*

60. See Mühlberg, “Arbeiterbewegung und Sexualität”, *passim*.

61. Duncker was later one of the founders of the *Spartakusbund* and a member of the KPD.

extensively the controversy over the relationship between hereditary disposition and environment in connection with the debate going on at the time over racial and social hygiene. Duncker did not consider the “begetting of children” to be an “absolutely private matter of the parents”, since “we know: The society ranks above the individual”. Therefore, the parents were “responsible to society for the quality of their offspring”. It was considered “unreasonable” not to base the selection of a partner on the physical and psychological health of each candidate. Alcohol abuse and venereal disease, epilepsy and tuberculosis, liver diseases and psychiatric disorders should discourage class-conscious socialist men and women from having children. That was the “new morality”.⁶²

Duncker elaborated on what Zetkin had meant by the “beautiful and strong people” of the proletariat; they were masses consisting of a certain biological quality. The idea of “class hygiene” was based on biological theories of the time, and Zetkin remained infected with the concept even in the 1920s. She did, however, vote in favor of a resolution against punishing abortion at the first national conference of women communists in 1920. Zetkin always opposed the §§218–220 of the Criminal Code because she considered this an ineffective and criminalizing interdiction by the bourgeois class state. At the same time, she reported on the social facilities existing in the Soviet Union and explained that “very extensive, well-organized social welfare for mother and child” in that country made abortion unnecessary. In the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR), Zetkin added, there was a comprehensive educational campaign informing women on the medical risks involved in abortion and promoting the benefits of a “multitude of offspring for society”. Soviet Russia, as a worker and peasant state, had “the greatest interest [...] in the raising of a large but also physically, mentally, and morally capable race”.⁶³

The consummate woman

Zetkin understood well the difference between “gender slavery” and “class bondage”. In her essays on socialist-feminist theory, she placed greater historical and political importance from the start on the class identity of women and concentrated on the societal and economic conditions influencing women’s lives. However, as the debate emerged at the turn of the century on the “woman *per se*” and on the “gender individuality” of women beyond the divisions of social class, the Marxist Zetkin felt obliged

62. Käthe Duncker, *Sozialistische Erziehung im Hause* (Berlin, 1914), quoted in Clara Zetkin, Käthe Duncker, Julian Borchardt, *Die Erziehung der Kinder in der proletarischen Familie*, ed. by Gerd Hohendorf (Berlin, 1960), pp. 58–95, 64 and 65.

63. *Bericht über die Verhandlungen des Vereinigungsparteitages des USPD (Linke) und der KPD (Spartakusbund), Berlin vom 04.–07.12.1920* (Berlin, 1921), p. 214.

to formulate a socialist position on the issue of femininity.⁶⁴ In 1899, Zetkin first went beyond acknowledging the existence of a purely biological essence of women and now sought the consequences of the “ethical-psychic” characteristics of women as well. Somewhere between Laura Marholm’s “woman-self” and the reduction to the asexual “masculinized woman”, between “gender individuality” and standard claims for equality, there had to be found⁶⁵ the “consummate woman”.⁶⁶ Zetkin defined the proletarian version of the modern “consummate woman”.

Ideally, the modern, consummate woman would originate in the proletariat, and her aspirations would be defined by the religious utopia of the future socialist society. Therefore, the perfect woman was first a social democrat, later a communist. The “fervent prayer” of such a woman was: “Thy kingdom come! And she [the woman] not only longs for this kingdom, she fights for this kingdom.”⁶⁷

In her work for the socialist society, the woman would fulfil every need that was classified as generally “human” – ranging from employment to strictly charitable social work and finally to political involvement. As a “consummate woman”, the proletarian woman would also have to be a mother and a wife. Zetkin thought that to be single or childless or both would equate to “female suppression”.⁶⁸ The Swedish bourgeois suffragette Ellen Key, to whom Zetkin often referred, took a rather neutral stance on the new turn-of-the-century type of partnerless, childless woman. But in her fundamental definition of the “new woman”, the radical socialist Zetkin could not forego reference to either the husband or the child. She wrote:

Barring exceptions, the strongest and most efficient woman in the world, given the same constitutional make-up and energy as others, is the one who enjoys love’s bliss, has felt the joys of motherhood, marches forward hand-in-hand with a beloved husband, surrounded by healthy, talented children in whom the best qualities of their parents are maturing. In general, such a woman possesses a greater reserve of strength and enthusiasm, of clarity and understanding to tackle the tasks in society than does the haggard, aging girl, the misunderstood and even mistreated wife, the inadequate masculinized woman.⁶⁹

Employment, political involvement for the revolutionary cause, motherhood, child-rearing, and partnership: the multitude of functions assigned

64. See, in particular, her pamphlets *Geistiges Proletariat*, *Frauenfrage und Sozialismus* (1899) (Berlin, 1902) and *Der Student und das Weib* (1899) (Berlin, 1900).

65. Zetkin, *Geistiges Proletariat*, pp. 7ff.

66. See Zetkin’s article “Nicht Haussklavin, nicht Mannweib, weiblicher Vollmensch”, *Gleichheit*, 19 January 1898.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

68. *Idem*, *Geistiges Proletariat*, p. 24.

69. *Idem*, *Nicht Haussklavin*.

to this wonder woman were not for the purpose of her own self-fulfillment. The massive pressure to perform effectively for the advancement of society that Zetkin placed on women was geared to the tasks of women as a collective body. Only such a proletarian “consummate woman” could be a “wife in the highest sense of the word”, the “bearer and guardian” of the husband’s ideals, the “comrade in his strides and setbacks, the partner in his struggles”.⁷⁰ Only such a mother was filled with the “Promethean spirit”⁷¹ and capable to give birth and raise a “race of visionaries and fighters”. The revolution needed “physically, mentally, and morally healthy, strong fighters”, so as “to fight victoriously the battles of class struggle”. In order to ensure that “multitudes of such fighters are raised, we must have proletarian mothers who impart their health and strength, their knowledge and willpower to their children”.⁷²

What was the socialist position on the issue of women’s sexuality and the relationship between the sexes, a topic also debated at the turn of the century? From 1880 to 1889, Zetkin lived together with Ossip Zetkin in a common-law marriage. This relationship produced her two sons, Maxim and Konstantin. By entering this *mésalliance*, she broke formally with the norms of her bourgeois background. The relationship of Ossip and Clara Zetkin, as they called themselves starting in 1880, was typical for the Narodnik milieu, in which bourgeois conjugality and its hypocritical double standards were rejected.

Zetkin condemned the bourgeois marriage of convenience as a “contract marriage”, as a “lewd living arrangement between a man and a woman”.⁷³ In its place she set the “moral marriage”, defined by references to Marx, Engels and Bebel, but also with her own notable accents. Engels had given the monogamous relationship the greatest chance of succeeding in a socialist society, but otherwise left it to the people themselves to gather “their own experience and their consequent opinion thereof”.⁷⁴ He thus created the possibility for a degree of freedom that definitely exceeded the horizons of Zetkin’s values.

In 1908, Zetkin wrote that the “crude, blind, sexual drive” needed to be “mentally and morally” harnessed, needed to be “imbued [...] with the content of our culture, [...] spiritualized”.⁷⁵ In place of the coercion and

70. *Idem*, *Geistiges Proletariat*, p. 24.

71. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

72. *Idem*, *Gleichheit*, 8 November 1899.

73. *Idem*, *Gleichheit*, 19 July 1899; see also the series of article on “Ehe und Sittlichkeit” in *Gleichheit* (April through August, 1906).

74. See Friedrich Engels, *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staates*, in MEW 21, pp. 27–172; citation on p. 83.

75. *Protokoll der Verhandlungen des Parteitag der SPD, Nürnberg 13.–19.9.1908, Frauenkonferenz* (Berlin, 1908), p. 529.

hypocrisy she associated with the private sphere of the bourgeoisie, her socialist marital and sexual ethics were to establish a “freely embraced and exercised self-control”⁷⁶ that would help overcome “many a temptation”, such as when the socialist youth of both sexes would discover in their political and athletic activities a feeling of common camaraderie. The “moral marriage” was to be based on affection and not entered upon out of economic considerations; it needed no state and certainly no ecclesiastic legitimation. Theoretically it could be dissolved at any time, although it is significant that Zetkin rarely mentioned this possibility. However, the “moral marriage” was strictly monogamous, required self-discipline and erotic asceticism, and was based above all on a mutually shared socialist ideal. When the “reformist” social democrat Wally Zepler maintained in 1896 that the proletarian woman had long been pursuing the “ideal of a free morality” in her sexual practices and that this reality needed to be positively taken into account by the socialist feminist movement,⁷⁷ Zetkin reprimanded her comrade that the aim of the proletarian feminist movement was not to be found in “free sexual morality” but in the “ennoblement” of objective proletarian virtues: solidarity, class consciousness, sense of community.⁷⁸

In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx predicts the coming of a “higher form” of both the family and gender relations. Zetkin rounded out this prophecy with norms and values that guaranteed the perfection of the once revolutionary bourgeois concept of gender relations. What the bourgeois marriage was lacking and what had nevertheless remained its counterfactual ideal was to be incorporated into the proletarian “moral” marriage, namely *morality*. The virtue of chastity was to be reinstated among proletarian women in a pure and spiritualized, freely chosen form. This level of morality could not be achieved by the bourgeois woman, it was said, because her body represented material goods. The chastity of the bourgeois woman was alienating, because it served only to maintain her market value. The chastity of the proletarian woman, however, was the expression of her self-confident and self-chosen sexual abstinence.

This was not the only point of Zetkin's that resembled those of the conservative bourgeois suffragette Helene Lange, with whom the Marxist Zetkin shared nothing in common ideologically. Both the conservative bourgeois lady and her socialist opponent condemned the “hurrah-eroticism” of the “new moralists” centered around Helene Stöcker. Lange thought that the modern sexual morale propagated an irresponsible cult of individuality and severed “love rather radically from the tie of social

76. Clara Zetkin, *Der Student und das Weib* (1899) (Berlin, 1900), p. 7.

77. Wally Zepler, “Der internationale Frauenkongress”, *Der Sozialistische Akademiker*, 10 (1896), pp. 601–608; citation on pp. 607f.

78. “Sozialistische Stimmen über die Frauenfrage”, *Die Neue Zeit*, 1(1895/96), pp. 783–789.

commitments”.⁷⁹ Zetkin emphasized that what a socialist sexual morality basically boiled down to was the “maintenance” and “perfecting” of the species, meaning the proletariat. Zetkin also completely agreed with Lenin, who complained in a rather long discussion held in the autumn of 1920 on common sexual practices in post-revolutionary Soviet Russia. This “licentiousness of sexual life”, said the Bolshevik leader to Zetkin’s enthusiastic applause, was “bourgeois”, and “a sign of degeneracy”. The two revolutionaries were also of the same opinion in condemning “erotic friendship”, as described by the Russian social revolutionary Aleksandra Kollontaj. In their eyes, the “frenzy of sexual exaggeration” was not appropriate for the proletariat as the social class on the rise to power. Sexual permissiveness constituted a “weakness, squander, and devastation of energy”;⁸⁰ it was detrimental to the revolution and the socialist cause.

The Russian revolutionary ethics, ranging from the Narodniks to the Bolsheviks, possessed a puritanical-ascetic nature that is also clearly evident in western European socialism. Richard Sites concludes that the restrictive maxim of sexual practices and partnership among the Russian intelligentsia of the revolutionary generation reflected that of a “good home”. “It did not permit [...] in short any of the conventional immoralities recognized as such in the bourgeois moral code.”⁸¹ In Zetkin’s words, “The proletarian marriage towers above the heights of the bourgeois marriage.”⁸² Her own typical Narodnik-relationship to Ossip Zetkin may have been condemned by conventional contemporaries as being libertine, yet it was anything but this. Basically, this relationship was subject to a moral code stricter than that of any bourgeois marriage of convenience. In view of the “mutuality of ideals”⁸³ on which it was based, the “free” marriage of the Narodniks was virtually indissoluble; it constituted a perfect union of convictions. Compared with alternative ideals of sexual relationships at the time, such as those of the bourgeois Helene Stöcker or Maria Lischnewska,⁸⁴ Zetkin’s socialist ideas on sexual relations and marriage are exceedingly conservative and Protestant.

79. Helene Lange, “Feministische Gedankenarchie” (1909), in Marielouise Janssen-Jurreit, *Frauen und Sexualmoral* (Frankfurt/Main, 1986), pp. 147ff., 149 and 152.

80. Clara Zetkin, *Erinnerungen an Lenin* (Berlin, 1957), pp. 75–77.

81. Richard Sites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism 1860–1930* (Princeton, NJ, 1978), p. 112. On Kollontai, see Judith Stora-Sandor, *Alexandra Kollontai: marxisme et révolution sexuelle* (Paris, 1975); see also Françoise Navailh, “Das sowjetische Modell”, in Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot (eds), *Geschichte der Frauen*, vol. 2: 20. *Jahrhundert* (ed. Françoise Thébaud) (German edn: Frankfurt/M. 1994, and 1995), pp. 257–283.

82. *Vorwärts*, 30 May 1909.

83. *Gleichheit*, 20 June 1898 (an article on the socialist Anna Kuleševa and her “freie Verbindung” with Filippo Turati).

84. One example is Maria Lischnewska, “Zur Ehe-Reform. An die Frauen!” (1909), in Janssen-Jurreit, *Frauen und Sexualmoral*, pp. 129–131.



Figure 4. Double portrait of Clara Zetkin and Nadezda Krupskaja, ca. 1928.
International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

Two of the virtues of the consummate woman in Zetkin's vision were the tolerance of suffering and the willingness to sacrifice. On the occasion of the major mineworkers' strike in Great Britain in 1926, Zetkin celebrated the English mineworkers' wives as "patient saints and martyrs",⁸⁵ who did not wear down the "courage" of their striking husbands "through complaining or scolding".⁸⁶ Despite the gravest material concerns, the working-class woman was expected to create a

85. Zetkin's preface to Katherine Cant, *Die Bergarbeiterfrauen Englands im Kampf* (Hamburg/Berlin, 1927), pp. 5–15; citation on p. 7.

86. *Gleichheit*, 25 January 1905. Here Zetkin was reprimanding the wives of the striking miners in the Ruhr region.

home for her spouse, a “place where the fighting husband received refreshment and comfort”.⁸⁷ As outstanding examples of such wives, Zetkin pointed to the wife of August Bebel⁸⁸ and later Nadezda Krupskaja, Lenin’s wife.

Another of the sacrifices asked of every proletarian woman on behalf of the revolution was that she be willing to sacrifice the lives of her children for the “cause”. The famous antiwar-speech that Zetkin gave in Basel in 1912, which prompted Louis Aragon to enthusiastically declare Zetkin to be the epitome of the “new woman”,⁸⁹ was not at all pacifist in tenor, but bellicose. While Zetkin, as the Secretary of the Women’s International, appealed to mothers, on the one hand, to “instill [in their children] a profound aversion to war”, she also asserted, on the other, that the women had “found the strength to endure sacrifices that were much harder than that of spilling [...] one’s own blood [...]. Therefore, we can witness the fighting and dying of our own if it is for the cause of liberty.”⁹⁰

In the “struggle”, the consummate woman could hold her own in equal measure with her male class comrades. Zetkin’s socialist adaptation of the Darwinist “struggle for survival” was the “scorching heat”⁹¹ of proletarian class struggle. In this extreme situation, this existential moment of truth, she maintained, the proletarian man would “call on the combat-ready, consummate female citizen to join him as his comrade in arms”.⁹² When women learned the skills and virtues of combat, then what would emerge “at a higher level [would be] the ancient kinship between the sexes bound together by survival and combat, a kinship told to us by the legendary migration and wars of the Germanic tribes”.⁹³ In 1927, Zetkin proposed to the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) that female recruits be used to defend the Soviet Union in case of war. This was to include the recruitment of working-class women to work in all areas of production in the armament industry, as well as the deployment of women to serve the GPU, the later NKWD, in protecting against “backstabbing” behind the front lines.⁹⁴

87. *Gleichheit*, 16 October 1914.

88. See also *ibid.*

89. Louis Aragon, *Les Cloches de Bâle* (reprinted Paris, 1965), pp. 357ff.; citation on p. 374.

90. *Außerordentlicher Sozialisten-Kongreß zu Basel am 24. und 25. November 1912* (Berlin, 1912), p. 35.

91. *Gleichheit*, 19 March 1911.

92. *Ibid.*

93. *Ibid.*

94. The GPU was the name of the Russian secret service from 1922–1934. After 1934 it was called the NKVD. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI – Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History), former Rossiiskii tsentr khraneniia i izucheniia dokumentov noveishei istorii (RtsKhIDNI – Russian Center for Preservation and Study of Records of Modern History), 528/2/308, Zetkin to the Politburo of the CPSU, 21 June 1927.

ZETKIN: A LEFT-WING FEMINIST?

In 1913 in Berlin, Zetkin had ranted at the proletarian women who wanted to strike against bearing more children that an artificial limitation of the number of children was “nothing less than avoiding the struggle of life”.⁹⁵ In 1927, by proposing the mobilization of Russian women to defend the socialist fatherland, she was merely drawing the logical conclusions of her ideal of the consummate proletarian woman. *Ideologically*, this socialist consummate female was conceived as breaking completely with the ideals and realities of bourgeois womanhood. From the perspective of a *history of mentalities*, however, Zetkin’s proletarian female idol clearly demonstrates a certain continuity: the old virtues attributed to the bourgeois Christian female individual were not only well preserved during the era of socialist revolution in the female version of the new socialist person. They only now came to full fruition. The proletarian consummate woman became the highest level of societal efficiency for womankind and as such liberated herself as an individual. The ideal proletarian female was the product of a socialist educational program that consciously and deliberately did not try to make this correspond with the realities of the lives and experiences of women workers and the wives of working-class men. Zetkin rejected the idea that women should go through an autonomous political process of educating themselves and gaining their own experiences.

Her demands for political and legal equality and her initiatives to institute unhampered educational and training opportunities, employment, and protection at the workplace for women corresponded – with the exception of the legal status of women household servants – for the most part with the aims of the (radical) bourgeois feminist movement.

Little or no evidence can be found in connection with Zetkin for any demands on behalf of individual autonomy, personal independence, an individually determined way of life, and sexual self-determination. In this regard, the radical wing of the German bourgeois feminist movement even went significantly further than the socialist Zetkin. She could not bring herself to approve of a “new ethic” because it emphasized too greatly the intrinsic value of female individuality and sexuality. With regard to sexuality, partner relationships, and motherhood, the aims of the radical bourgeois feminist movement were based on the assumption that women possessed a set of individual rights. Women would have had to assert these rights to her class, possibly even against the interests of the community, i.e. against the interests of the collective. From the outset, Zetkin’s collectivism excluded an autonomous development of lifestyles for women.

Her concepts regarding the proletarian family, on the socially expanded motherliness of the working-class woman, and on the ability and

95. *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 26 August 1913.

willingness of proletarian women to shoulder hardship and sacrifice, parallel positions of the “moderate”, conservative, and Christian fractions within the bourgeois women’s movement. The well-known bourgeois “holy trinity of husband, wife and child”⁹⁶ constituted the heart even of a socialist societal order. The concepts of the socialist Clara Zetkin on the “liberation of women” from “gender slavery” and “class bondage” were not designed to emancipate women, but to make them functional in a future socialist society.

96. “Vo Menschentum entgegen (1904)”, in *Maifeier 1904* (Berlin, 1904), quoted in Richard Klucsarits and Friedrich G. Kürbisch (eds), *Arbeiterinnen kämpfen um ihr Recht*, 2nd edn (Wuppertal, 1981), pp. 273–277; citation on p. 277.