

Jenny Marx's Life of Love and Revolution

This Valentine's Day, we remember the revolutionary life of Jenny Marx – a socialist and feminist whose own activity, no less than her relationship with Karl, helped to shape the struggles of her time.



Jenny Marx, the wife of Karl Marx, was first and foremost a woman with a steadfast commitment to revolutionary socialism. Not a mere cipher for her husband's views, she genuinely believed in the struggle for working-class emancipation from capital. Jenny was an active force throughout her difficult life, tirelessly devoting her energies to organizing communist meetings, providing shelter and relief for refugees, and helping her husband produce his philosophical and economic works. She gave up her privileged position as a baroness and made wrenching sacrifices to achieve her vision of a better world.

Born in 1814 to Prussian aristocracy, Jenny von Westphalen was well known in Trier's social circles. She was expected to fulfil class expectations by grooming herself for marriage to a Prussian officer or a man of high birth. Instead, Jenny pursued her interests in French socialism and German romanticism, a path encouraged

by her father, Baron Ludwig von Westphalen, Trier's government counsellor. Though the leading Prussian authority in a town of twelve thousand, Ludwig von Westphalen harboured a deep fascination with French liberalism and socialism.

Jenny's studies taught her to value ideals for their own sake. Commitment to a progressive cause and the dedication to fight for it, regardless of the failures endured, was the highest undertaking. From a young age, she latched onto early feminist views on women's equality.

Karl Marx — the son of Ludwig's colleague, Heinrich Marx — also found Ludwig's progressive ideas attractive. In young Karl, Mary Gabriel writes in [Love and Capital](#), Jenny saw the features of the romantic characters she admired: he was 'Goethe's Wilhelm Meister and Schiller's Karl von Moor, and he would be Shelley's Prometheus, chained to a precipice because he dared to challenge a tyrannical god.' Six years after Karl met the von Westphalens, he and Jenny were secretly engaged. Marrying a Jewish radical was outside the cultural norms for an aristocratic woman from Trier, but Jenny and Karl's parents encouraged the union nonetheless. They wedded in 1843, when Karl was twenty-five and Jenny was twenty-nine.

Neither Jenny's nor Karl's father lived to see the wedding. Without their financial assistance, the young couple was left largely to fend for themselves, save for a few gestures of support from other relatives throughout the years.

After the wedding Jenny and Karl moved to Paris, where they began mingling and debating in radical circles. In August 1844, Karl started collaborating with Friedrich Engels, who would become his lifelong comrade.

The projects that they embarked on came with risks. Jenny was a staunch defender of her husband's work and politics, even when he faced exile and incarceration for his views. When the French authorities kicked the Marxes out of Paris, their life on the run had begun. Jenny sold all the furniture, but was also in debt for past rent.

The two set off with their newborn, Jennychen, to Brussels (where Marx would eventually write the *Communist Manifesto*). Soon after, Marx and Engels went to London to explore the industrial slums of Manchester, while Jenny, six months pregnant, and their housekeeper, Helene Demuth ("Lenchen"), returned to Trier.

There, Jenny wrote to Marx about the plight of women in society, and how even in socialist circles the rights of men were emphasised while the rights and needs of women were treated as secondary at best.

Back in Brussels, Jenny looked forward to the publication of his [German Ideology](#) — for which she served as an intellectual interlocutor — and was concerned that the cries of their second child would distract her husband. Karl's writing had stalled — a fact he withheld from Jenny because she was counting on him to finish, not least because the work's publication could alleviate some of their financial woes.

In 1846, Marx and Engels began organising the Communist Correspondence Committee. Jenny took up secretarial duties, deciphering Marx's almost illegible handwriting and participating in discussions. She was also the first member of the League of the Just (Communist League), and when Marx and Engels formed the German Workers' Union shortly after, Jenny was an active participant, giving recitations and organising events.

‘Throughout her life, she took the most intense interest in everything that concerned and occupied her husband,’ the German typesetter Stephen Born said of Jenny. ‘Marx loved his wife and she shared his passion.’

Karl and Jenny laboured to finish the [*Communist Manifesto*](#) in early January of that year, with Jenny, ‘patiently copying out and making legible her Marx’s blistering indictment of the bourgeoisie, and his belief that revolution was right, inevitable, and imminent.’

As a condition for his asylum in Belgium, Marx had sworn to refrain from political activity. But with the onset of continental rebellion in 1848, Marx and Jenny broke that promise and gathered weapons for German revolutionaries. They were found out, arrested, and kicked out of Belgium.

Eventually they returned to Germany, where they started the radical newspaper *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* after Prussian censorship subsided. Even in perpetual exile, Jenny told a friend, ‘All the pressures we now feel are only the sign of an imminent and even more complete victory of our views.’

After the defeat of the 1848 revolutions, the Marxes picked up and moved to England. During the transition Jenny thought of the people who had made the same journey and found hope in their struggles: the men ‘who fought with sword and pen for the reign of the poor and oppressed were glad to be able to earn their bread abroad,’ she wrote. On reaching London, Karl, Jenny, and Friedrich Engels established a political review (*Revue*) and desperately fought to keep their enterprise alive by soliciting funds. This proved difficult: they were appealing for financial contributions from the same impoverished refugees they wanted to help.

With Karl busy theorising, Jenny bore the brunt of the family’s illnesses and poverty. Her baby boy Fawsky, then six months old, slept no more than two hours at a time and suffered terrible convulsions. On the verge of death, the child sucked so hard on Jenny’s breast that blood spurted from her open sore into the baby’s mouth.

Meanwhile, she faced harassment from her landlady and two bailiffs for overdue rent. When Jenny did not have the money, they stripped her home of all its possessions, leaving the baby without a cradle and the children shivering on bare boards.

Jenny travelled to Holland to beg her relatives for money with little success. While she was away, Karl impregnated Lenchen, the family’s housekeeper. Jenny was also pregnant, meaning both women would give birth in the spring of 1851. She had asked him for nothing but love and loyalty, and given him everything in return.

Karl knew that if Jenny learned of his adultery, she would leave with the children and their marriage would be ruined. He knew that without the anchor that Jenny and the children provided, he wouldn’t be able to work. Desperate, he turned to Engels, who offered to take responsibility for Lenchen’s child as his own.

Whenever Karl left London, Jenny had to fend off creditors and care for the family by herself. As she told him during these hard times, ‘Meanwhile I sit and go to pieces. Karl, it is now at its worst pitch... I sit here and almost weep my eyes out and can find no help. My head is disintegrating. For a week I have kept my strength up and now I can no more.’ Karl’s replies were curt, subordinating any sympathy to business.

By the autumn of 1852, the couple’s Soho apartment became a command centre for

exiles. It was then that Jenny and Ernst Dronke copied out Marx and Engels' hundred-page critique of émigré politics, [*The Great Men of the Exile*](#), as Karl stood by dictating.

The next spring, tragedy struck again. Jenny's eight-year-old son Edgar died while asleep in his father's arms — the third child the couple lost. Jenny confessed that 'the day of his passing was the most dreadful in her life, worse than all her previous pain and suffering combined.'

With his mother's inheritance, Karl improved the family's living situation by moving to Grafton Terrace. Jenny described the change in circumstance:

We were sailing with all sails set into bourgeois life. And yet there were still the same petty pressures, the same struggles, the same old misery, the same intimate relationship with the three balls of the pawnshop — what was gone was the humour. Jenny continued to copy and recopy Karl's handwriting, including his manuscript on Karl Vogt. In late November, she was stricken with smallpox and left disfigured, 'her lovely face covered in a reddish purple mask of coarse flesh.' When it was finally safe for her children to return home after Jenny's recovery, her daughters were mortified by the changes her illness had wrought and burst into tears.

In 1867, *Capital* — the book Karl had been working on for some fifteen years, and his greatest achievement to date — was published in London. His family was hoping its success would not only buy food and pay off debt, but ignite the masses. When the book went unrecognised they were crushed. The sacrifices the work required had left Karl's body struggling to function and Jenny embittered:

You can believe me when I tell you that can be few books that have been written in more difficult circumstances, and I could write a secret history of it which would tell many, extreme many, unspoken troubles and anxieties and torments. If the workers had an inkling of the sacrifices that were necessary for this work, which was written only for them and for their sakes to be completed they would perhaps show a little more interest.

Jenny began to lose the faith and courage that had sustained her strength and resilience; she was beaten down and miserable, often lashing out at her family. For the first time, Jenny craved distance and independence from Marx's 'burdensome shadow.'

Following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, Parisians rose up against their government and formed the Paris Commune. In the summer of 1871, the Marx and Engels households 'worked furiously... soliciting money, arranging shelter, schools, and jobs for Commune refugees.'

The Marxes housed several of the emigrants, and since Jennychen and Eleanor had not returned from France, it was left to Jenny and Lenchen to welcome and care for them. Paul Lafargue remarked that for Jenny, 'social distinctions did not exist; she entertained working people in her home and at her table as if they were earls or princes.'

In the aftermath of the Commune, Jenny reflected on the role of women in these political circumstances:

In all these struggles we women have the harder part to bear because it is the lesser

one. A man draws strength from his struggle with the world outside, and is invigorated by the sight of the enemy, be their number legion. We remain sitting at home, darning socks. This does not banish the worries and the daily small miseries gnaw slowly but steadily on one's courage to face life. I speak out of thirty years experience.

Jenny lost four children as a result of poverty and illness. More than anything, she wanted her surviving daughters to have better lives — to never experience the deprivations she suffered.

But it was not to be: her daughters did go on to have revolutionary lives, but they suffered the same pains and heartaches as their mother. When the child of Jenny's eldest daughter passed away, Jenny gave her perspective on coping with life's losses: I know only too well how difficult it is and how long it takes to regain one's own balance after losses of this sort; it is then that life comes to our aid, with its little joys and big worries, with all its little, day-to-day drudgeries and petty vexations, and the greater sorrow is deadened by lesser, hourly ills and, without our noticing it, the violence of the pain abates; not that the wound has ever healed, and this is especially so of the mother's heart, but little by little there awakens in one's breast a fresh sensibility, a fresh sensitivity even, to new sorrows and new joys, and thus one goes on and on living, with a sore if ever hopeful heart, until at last it ceases to beat and gives way to eternal peace.

Jenny was diagnosed with liver cancer in 1881. By June, her health had deteriorated to the point where she struggled to dress herself. Before she died, Jenny did experience one glimmer of hope. On November 30 Karl sat at her bedside and read the first positive review in English of *Capital*.

Jenny died two days later on December 2, at the age of sixty-seven. She was buried at Highgate Cemetery. Engels stood in for Marx, who was too sick to attend the funeral, and read the eulogy:

The contribution made by this woman, with such a sharp critical intelligence, with such political tact, a character of such energy and passion, with such dedication to her comrades in the struggle — her contribution to the movement over almost forty years has not become public knowledge; it is not inscribed in the annals of the contemporary press. It is something one must have experienced at first hand.

But of one thing I am sure: just as the wives of the Commune refugees will often remember her — so to, with the rest of us have occasion enough to miss her bold and wise advice, bold without ostentation, wise without ever compromising her honor to even the smallest degree. I need not speak of her personal qualities, her friends know them and will not forget them. If there ever was a woman whose greatest happiness was to make others happy it was this woman.

None of Karl Marx's major political works would have been possible without Jenny. She believed in her husband, but, more importantly, she believed in the ideas of revolutionary socialism. Her sacrifices were not made in vain. Jenny Marx may not have lived to see the influence she had on the world, but her contributions live on in today's struggles for a world without exploitation.