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# Karl Marx Biography

**Born: May 5, 1818**

**Trier, Germany (formerly in Rhenish Prussia)**

**Died: March 14, 1883**

**London, England**

*German philosopher and political leader*

The German philosopher, revolutionary economist (one who studies the use of money and other material funds), and leader Karl Marx founded modern "scientific" socialism (a system of society in which no property is held as private). His basic ideas—known as Marxism—form the foundation of Socialist and Communist (an economic and government system characterized by citizens holding all property and goods in common) movements throughout the world.

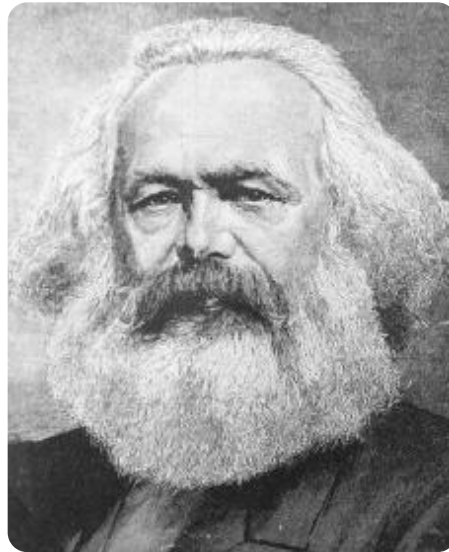
## (Early life

Karl Heinrich Marx was born in Trier, Rhenish Prussia (present-day Germany), on May 5, 1818, the son of Heinrich Marx, a lawyer, and Henriette Presburg Marx, a Dutchwoman. Both Heinrich and Henriette were descendants of a long line of rabbis (masters or teachers of Jewish religion). Barred from the practice of law because he was Jewish, Heinrich Marx converted to Lutheranism about 1817. Karl was baptized in the same church in 1824 at the age of six. Karl attended a Lutheran elementary school but later became an atheist (one who does not believe in the existence of God) and a materialist (one who believes that physical matter is all that is real), rejecting both the Christian and Jewish religions. It was he who coined the saying "Religion is the opium [drug that deadens pain, is today illegal, and comes from the poppy flower] of the people," a basic principle in modern communism.

Karl attended the Friedrich Wilhelm Gymnasium in Trier for five years, graduating in 1835 at the age of seventeen. The gymnasium's program was the usual classical one—history, mathematics, literature, and languages, particularly Greek and Latin. Karl became very skillful in French and Latin, both of which he learned to read and write fluently. In later years he taught himself other languages, so that as a mature scholar he could also read Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Scandinavian, Russian, and English. As his articles in the *New York Daily Tribune* show, he came to handle the English language masterfully (he loved Shakespeare [1564–1616], whose works he knew by heart), although he never lost his heavy German accent when speaking.

## (Young adult years

In October 1835 Marx enrolled in Bonn University in Bonn, Germany, where he attended courses primarily in law, as it was his father's desire that he become a lawyer. Marx, however, was more interested in philosophy (the study of knowledge) and literature than in law. He wanted to be a poet and dramatist (one who writes plays). In his student days he wrote a great deal of poetry—most of it preserved—that in his mature years he rightly recognized as imitative and



*Karl Marx.*  
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unremarkable. He spent a year at Bonn, studying little but partying and drinking a lot. He also piled up heavy debts.

Marx's dismayed father took him out of Bonn and had him enter the University of Berlin, then a center of intellectual discussion. In Berlin a circle of brilliant thinkers was challenging existing institutions and ideas, including religion, philosophy, ethics (the study of good and bad involving morals), and politics. Marx joined this group of radical (extreme in opinion) thinkers wholeheartedly. He spent more than four years in Berlin, completing his studies with a doctoral degree in March 1841.

### **( Forced to move on**

Marx then turned to writing and journalism to support himself. In 1842 he became editor of the liberal (open to new ideas) Cologne newspaper *Rheinische Zeitung*, but the Berlin government prohibited it from being published the following year. In January 1845 Marx was expelled from France "at the instigation [order] of the Prussian government," as he said. He moved to Brussels, Belgium, where he founded the German Workers' Party and was active in the Communist League. Here he wrote the famous *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (known as the *Communist Manifesto* ). Expelled (forced out) by the Belgian government, Marx moved back to Cologne, where he became editor of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* in June 1848. Less than a year later, the Prussian government stopped the paper, and Marx himself was exiled (forced to leave). He went to Paris, but in September the French government expelled him again. Marx finally settled in London, England, where he lived as a stateless exile (Britain denied him citizenship and Prussia refused to take him back as a citizen) for the rest of his life.

In London Marx's sole means of support was journalism. He wrote for both German-and English-language publications. From August 1852 to March 1862 he was correspondent for the *New York Daily Tribune*, contributing a total of about 355 articles. Journalism, however, paid very poorly; Marx was literally saved from starvation by the financial support of friend and fellow writer, Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). In London in 1864 Marx helped to found the International Workingmen's Association (known as

the First International), for which he wrote the inaugural (opening) address. Thereafter Marx's political activities were limited mainly to exchanging letters with radicals in Europe and America, offering advice, and helping to shape the socialist and labor movements.

## ( *Personal life*

Marx was married to his childhood sweetheart, Jenny von Westphalen, who was known as the "most beautiful girl in Trier," on June 19, 1843. She was totally devoted to him. She died of cancer on December 2, 1881, at the age of sixty-seven. For Marx it was a blow from which he never recovered.

The Marxes had seven children, four of whom died in infancy or childhood. He deeply loved his daughters, who, in turn, adored him. Of the three surviving daughters—Jenny, Laura, and Eleanor—two married Frenchmen. Both of Marx's sons-in-law became prominent French socialists and members of Parliament. Eleanor was active as a British labor organizer.

Marx spent most of his working time in the British Museum, doing research both for his newspaper articles and his books. In preparation for *Das Kapital*, he read every available work in economic and financial theory and practice.

Marx's excessive smoking, wine drinking, and love of heavily spiced foods may have been contributing causes to his illnesses. In the final dozen years of his life, he could no longer do any continuous intellectual work. He died in his armchair in London on March 14, 1883, about two months before his sixty-fifth birthday. He lies buried in London's Highgate Cemetery, where his grave is marked by a bust (sculpture of a person's head and shoulders) of him.

## ( *His works*

Marxism achieved its first great triumph in the Russian Revolution (1917–21; when the lower class overthrew three hundred years of czar rule), when its successful leader, Vladimir Ilich Lenin (1870–1924), a lifelong follower of Marx, organized the Soviet Union as a proletarian dictatorship (country ruled by the lower class). Lenin based the new government on Marx's philosophy as Lenin interpreted it. Thus, Marx became a world figure and his theories became a subject of universal attention and controversy (open to dispute). Marx wrote hundreds of articles, brochures, and reports, but only five books.

## ( *His ideas*

Marx's universal appeal lies in his moral approach to socio-economic problems, in his insights into the relationships between institutions and values, and in his ideas about the salvation (to save from destruction) of mankind. Hence Marx is best understood if one studies not only his economics, but also his theory of history and politics. The central idea in Marx's thought involves two basic notions: that the economic system at any given time determines the current ideas; and that history is an ongoing process keeping up with the economic institutions that change in regular stages.

To Marx, capitalism (an economic system characterized by private or corporate ownership of goods) was the last stage of historical development before communism. The lowest social or economic class of a community, when produced by capitalism, is the last historical class. The two are fated to be in conflict—the class struggle, which Marx wrote of in the *Communist Manifesto*—until the lower class inevitably

wins. The proletarian dictatorship, in turn, develops into communism, in which there are no classes and no inequalities. The logical suggestion is that with the final establishment of communism, history comes to a sudden end. This Marxist interpretation has been criticized in the noncommunist world as historically inaccurate, scientifically weak, and logically ridiculous. Nevertheless, Marx's message of an earthly paradise (a classless society) has provided millions with hope and a new meaning of life. From this point of view, one may agree with the Austrian economist Joseph A. Schumpeter that "Marxism is a religion" and Marx is its "prophet."

### ( For More Information

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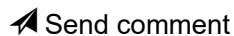
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