



Karl Marx

GERMAN PHILOSOPHER

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Alternative Title: Karl Heinrich Marx

Karl Marx, in full **Karl Heinrich Marx**, (born May 5, 1818, [Trier](#), Rhine province, [Prussia](#) [Germany]—died March 14, 1883, [London](#), England), revolutionary, sociologist, historian, and economist. He published (with Friedrich Engels) ***Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*** (1848), commonly known as ***The Communist Manifesto***, the most celebrated pamphlet in the [history](#) of the socialist movement. He also was the author of the movement's most important book, ***Das Kapital***. These writings and others by Marx and Engels form the basis of the body of thought and belief known as [Marxism](#). (*See also* [socialism](#); [communism](#).)

TOP QUESTIONS

Who was Karl Marx?



How did Karl Marx die?



What was Karl Marx's family like?



Early Years



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Karl Heinrich Marx was the oldest surviving boy of nine children. His father, Heinrich, a successful lawyer, was a man of the [Enlightenment](#), devoted to [Kant](#) and [Voltaire](#), who took part in agitations for a constitution in Prussia. His mother, born Henrietta Pressburg, was from Holland. Both parents were Jewish and were descended from a long line of rabbis, but, a year or so before Karl was born, his father—probably because his professional career required it—was baptized in the Evangelical Established Church. Karl was baptized when he was six years old. Although as a youth Karl was influenced less by religion than by the critical, sometimes [radical](#) social policies of the Enlightenment, his Jewish background exposed him to [prejudice](#) and [discrimination](#) that may have led him to question the role of religion in society and contributed to his desire for [social change](#).

Marx was educated from 1830 to 1835 at the [high school](#) in Trier. Suspected of harbouring liberal teachers and pupils, the school was under police surveillance. Marx's writings during this period exhibited a spirit of Christian devotion and a longing for self-sacrifice on behalf of humanity. In October 1835 he [matriculated](#) at the University of Bonn. The courses he attended were exclusively in the humanities, in such subjects as Greek and [Roman mythology](#) and the history of art. He participated in customary student activities, fought a duel, and spent a day in jail for being drunk and disorderly. He presided at the Tavern Club, which was at odds with the more aristocratic student associations, and joined a poets' club that included some political activists. A politically rebellious student [culture](#) was, indeed, part of life at [Bonn](#). Many students had been arrested; some were still being expelled in Marx's time, particularly as a result of an effort by students to disrupt a session of the [Federal Diet](#) at Frankfurt. Marx, however, left Bonn after a year and in October 1836 enrolled at the [University of Berlin](#) to study [law](#) and [philosophy](#).

Marx's crucial experience at Berlin was his introduction to Hegel's philosophy, regnant there, and his [adherence](#) to the [Young Hegelians](#). At first he felt a repugnance toward Hegel's doctrines; when Marx fell sick it was partially, as he wrote his father, "from intense vexation at having to study what he detested." The Hegelian pressure in the revolutionary student culture was



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powerful, however, and Marx joined a society called the Doctor Club, whose members were intensely involved in the new literary and philosophical movement. Their chief figure was [Bruno Bauer](#), a young lecturer in theology, who was developing the idea that the Christian Gospels were a record not of history but of human fantasies arising from emotional needs and that Jesus had not been a historical person. Marx enrolled in a course of lectures given by Bauer on the prophet [Isaiah](#). Bauer taught that a new social catastrophe “more tremendous” than that of the advent of Christianity was in the making. The Young Hegelians began moving rapidly toward [atheism](#) and also talked vaguely of political action.

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The Prussian government, fearful of the subversion latent in the Young Hegelians, soon undertook to drive them from the universities. Bauer was dismissed from his post in 1839. Marx’s “most intimate friend” of this period, Adolph Rutenberg, an older journalist who had served a prison sentence for his political radicalism, pressed for a deeper social involvement. By 1841 the Young Hegelians had become left republicans. Marx’s studies, meanwhile, were lagging. Urged by his friends, he submitted a doctoral dissertation to the university at Jena, which was known to be lax in its academic requirements, and received his degree in April 1841. His thesis analyzed in a [Hegelian](#) fashion the difference between the natural philosophies of Democritus and [Epicurus](#). More distinctively, it sounded a note of Promethean defiance:

Philosophy makes no secret of it. Prometheus’ admission: “In sooth all gods I hate,” is its own admission, its own motto against all gods,...Prometheus is the noblest saint and martyr in the calendar of philosophy.

In 1841 Marx, together with other Young Hegelians, was much influenced by the publication of *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841; *The Essence of Christianity*) by [Ludwig Feuerbach](#). Its author, to Marx’s mind, succeeded Hegel as the chief idealist who believed that matter or existence was inferior to and dependent upon

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mind or spirit, from the opposite, or materialist, standpoint, showing how the “Absolute Spirit” was a projection of “the real man standing on the foundation of nature.” Henceforth Marx’s philosophical efforts were toward a combination of Hegel’s [dialectic](#)—the idea that all things are in a continual process of change resulting from the conflicts between their contradictory aspects—with Feuerbach’s [materialism](#), which placed material conditions above ideas.

In January 1842 Marx began contributing to a [newspaper](#) newly founded in [Cologne](#), the *[Rheinische Zeitung](#)*. It was the liberal democratic organ of a group of young merchants, bankers, and industrialists; Cologne was the centre of the most industrially advanced section of Prussia. To this stage of Marx’s life belongs an essay on the freedom of the press. Since he then took for granted the existence of absolute [moral](#) standards and universal principles of [ethics](#), he condemned [censorship](#) as a moral evil that entailed spying into people’s minds and hearts and assigned to weak and malevolent mortals powers that presupposed an omniscient mind. He believed that censorship could have only evil consequences.

On October 15, 1842, Marx became editor of the *[Rheinische Zeitung](#)*. As such, he was obliged to write editorials on a variety of social and economic issues, ranging from the housing of the Berlin poor and the theft by peasants of wood from the forests to the new phenomenon of communism. He found Hegelian [idealism](#) of little use in these matters. At the same time he was becoming estranged from his Hegelian friends for whom shocking the bourgeois was a sufficient mode of social activity. Marx, friendly at this time to the “liberal-minded practical men” who were “struggling step-by-step for freedom within [constitutional](#) limits,” succeeded in trebling his newspaper’s circulation and making it a leading [journal](#) in Prussia. Nevertheless, Prussian authorities suspended it for being too outspoken, and Marx agreed to coedit with the liberal Hegelian [Arnold Ruge](#) a new review, the *[Deutsch-französische Jahrbücher](#)* (“German-French Yearbooks”), which was to be published in Paris.

First, however, in June 1843 Marx, after an engagement with Jenny von Westphalen. Jenny was an attractive, intelligent



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woman, four years older than Karl; she came of a family of military and administrative distinction. Her half-brother later became a highly reactionary Prussian minister of the interior. Her father, a follower of the French socialist Saint-Simon, was fond of Karl, though others in her family opposed the marriage. Marx's father also feared that Jenny was destined to become a sacrifice to the demon that possessed his son.

Four months after their marriage, the young couple moved to Paris, which was then the centre of socialist thought and of the more extreme sects that went under the name of communism. There, Marx first became a revolutionary and a communist and began to associate with communist societies of French and German workingmen. Their ideas were, in his view, "utterly crude and unintelligent," but their character moved him: "The brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies," he wrote in his so-called "Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844" (written in 1844; *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* [1959]). (These manuscripts were not published for some 100 years, but they are influential because they show the humanist background to Marx's later historical and economic theories.)



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Marx, Karl: religion

Learn about Karl Marx's opposition to religion.

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The “German-French Yearbooks” proved short-lived, but through their publication Marx befriended [Friedrich Engels](#), a contributor who was to become his lifelong collaborator, and in their pages appeared Marx’s article “Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie” (“Toward the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right”) with its oft-quoted assertion that religion is the “opium of the people.” It was there, too, that he first raised the call for an “uprising of the conceptions of philosophy.” Once more, however, the



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intervened against Marx. He was expelled from France and left for Brussels—followed by Engels—in February 1845. That year in [Belgium](#) he renounced his Prussian nationality.



Karl Marx

QUICK FACTS



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BORN

May 5, 1818

[Trier, Germany](#)

(Birthday in 6 days)

DIED

March 14, 1883 (aged 64)


[London, England](#)

NOTABLE WORKS

"Das Kapital"

"The Communist Manifesto"

SUBJECTS OF STUDY

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DID YOU KNOW?

- Much of Marx's work was not published during his lifetime.
- Marx spent much of his time reading *The Economist* in the British Museum to study capitalist society.
- Marx's daughter Eleanor helped him with his work and was later important to the British labor movement.

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