

A black and white portrait of Alexandra Kollontai, a woman with short, dark, curly hair, looking slightly to the right. She is wearing a dark, high-necked garment and a long, thin necklace. The background is a large, stylized red sunburst or starburst shape with many sharp points, set against a light gray background.

Alexandra Kollontai

March 31st, 1872 – March 9th, 1952

On this day 154 years ago, Alexandra Kollontai was born in Saint Petersburg, Russia.

Although she was the daughter of an Imperial Russian Army general, Kollontai became convinced of the **need for radical social change** after witnessing the grim conditions of factory workers.





Early Political Life

While studying the history of working-class movements, she became interested in Marxism, and in 1899, became a member of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) at the age of 27.

When the RSDLP split into the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks in 1903, Kollontai initially aligned with the former. However, her firm opposition to World War I led her to join the Bolsheviks in 1915.



1917 Revolution

Kollontai was a key figure in the 1917 Russian Revolution, as both an agitator against reformism and a leading revolutionary thinker.

In the lead up to the revolution and during it, she produced groundbreaking theoretical work on the role of working-class women in revolutionary struggle while also advancing a wider critique of liberal feminism, the family and domestic labour under capitalism, calling for women's political and economic empowerment and the socialisation of care.



Constructing Socialism in the USSR

In 1917, Kollontai was elected as the People's Commissar for Social Welfare in the first Soviet government, becoming **the world's first woman to ever hold a cabinet-level ministerial post.**

Two years later, **she co-founded the Zhenotdel**, the women's department of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party.



The Zhenotdel

The Zhenotdel advocated for women's rights in the workplace (e.g. equal pay) and in society more broadly. It organised literacy campaigns and vocational trainings for women and established socialised childcare, public canteens, and laundries.

Zhenotdel's work also contributed to Soviet Russia becoming the first country in the world to legalise abortion in 1920, providing free reproductive care in state hospitals.



Later Life

Starting in October 1922, Alexandra Kollontai was increasingly entrusted with diplomatic appointments abroad, becoming **one of the first women to serve in modern diplomacy.**

Kollontai was among the only members of the Bolsheviks' Central Committee who had led the October Revolution to still be alive in the 1950s. She died in Moscow on 9 March 1952, less than a month before her 80th birthday.



“One must write not only for oneself. But for others. For those far-away, unknown women who will live then.

Let them see that we were not heroines or heroes at all. But we believed passionately and ardently.”

— Alexandra Kollontai