The Struggle for Women's Emancipation Will Always Be Worth It: The Twelfth Newsletter (2024)



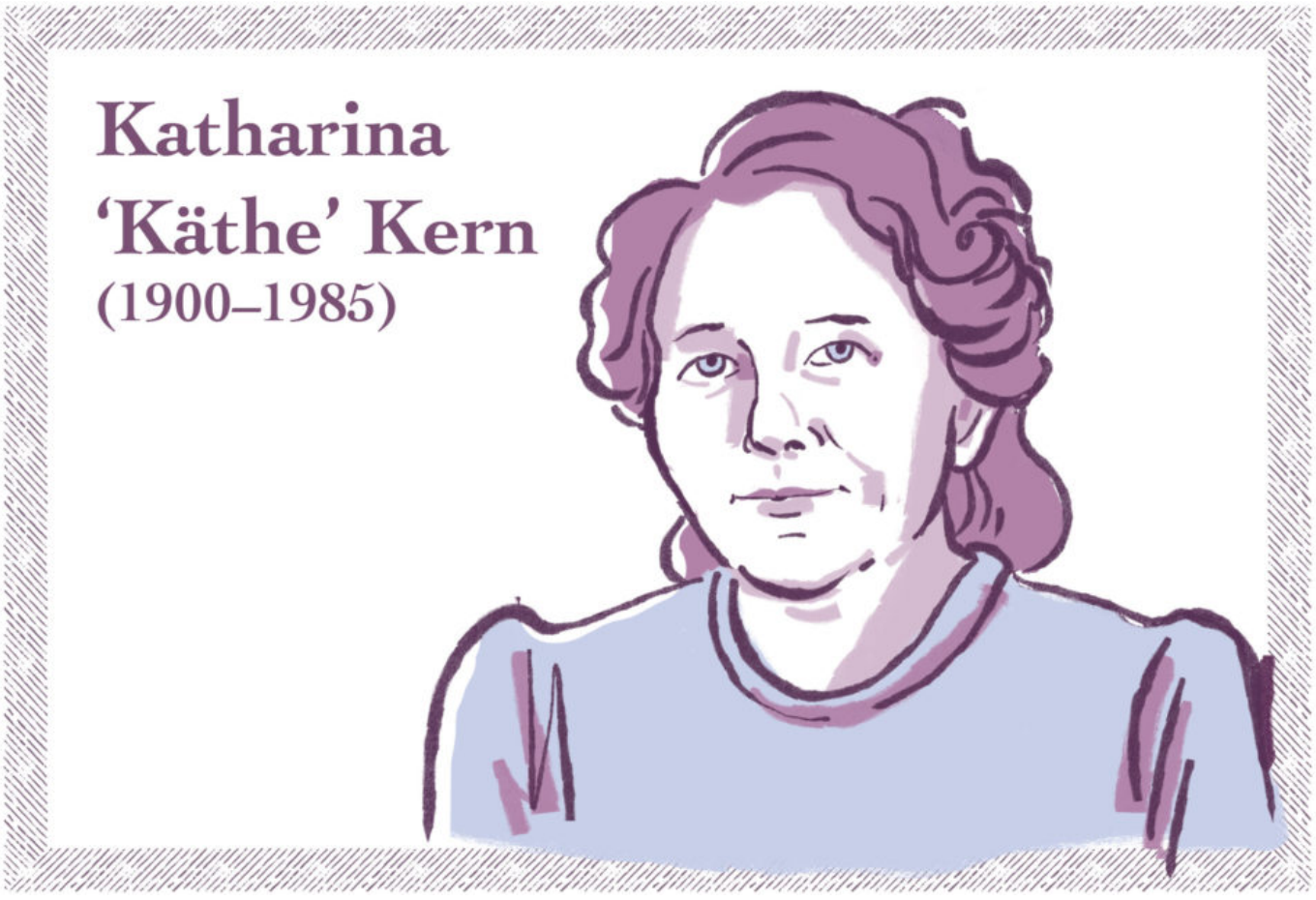
Dear friends,

Greetings from the desk of **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

8 March was not always International Women's Day, nor has there always been any such day at all. The idea emerged from the Socialist International (also known as the Second International), where Clara Zetkin of the German Social Democratic Party and others fought from 1889 to hold a day to celebrate working women's lives and struggles. Zetkin, alongside Alexandra Kollontai of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, sustained a struggle with their comrades to recognise the role of working women and the role of domestic labour in the creation of social wealth. In a context in which women across the North Atlantic states did not have the right to vote, these women intervened in a debate that was taking place among delegates of the

Socialist International over whether men and women workers must be united under the banner of socialism to fight against their shared experience of exploitation or whether women should stay home.

In 1908, the women's section of the Socialist Party of America held a mass rally in Chicago on 3 May to celebrate Woman's Day. The following year, on 28 February 1909, this expanded to National Woman's Day, held across the US. At the Second International Conference of Socialist Women, held in Copenhagen in 1910, a resolution was finally passed for all sections of the Socialist International to organise Women's Day celebrations that would take place the following year. Socialist women organised public events in Austria, Denmark, Germany, and Switzerland on 19 March 1911 to commemorate the March Revolution of 1848 in Germany. In 1912, Europeans celebrated Women's Day on 12 May, and in 1913, Russian women marked the date on 8 March. In 1917, women workers in Russia organised a mass strike and demonstrations for 'bread and peace' on 8 March, which sparked the wider struggles that led to the Russian Revolution. At the Communist Women's Second International Conference in 1921, 8 March was officially chosen as the date for annual celebrations of International Working Women's Day. That is how the date became a fixture on the international calendar of struggles.



In 1945, communist women from around the world formed the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), a body that was **instrumental** in establishing International Women's Day. In 1972, Freda Brown from Australia's WIDF section and the Communist Party of Australia wrote to the United Nations (UN) to **propose** that it hold an International Women's Year and that it advance the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Pushed by WIDF, Helvi Sipilä, a Finnish diplomat and the first woman to hold the position of UN assistant secretary-general (at a time when 97% of

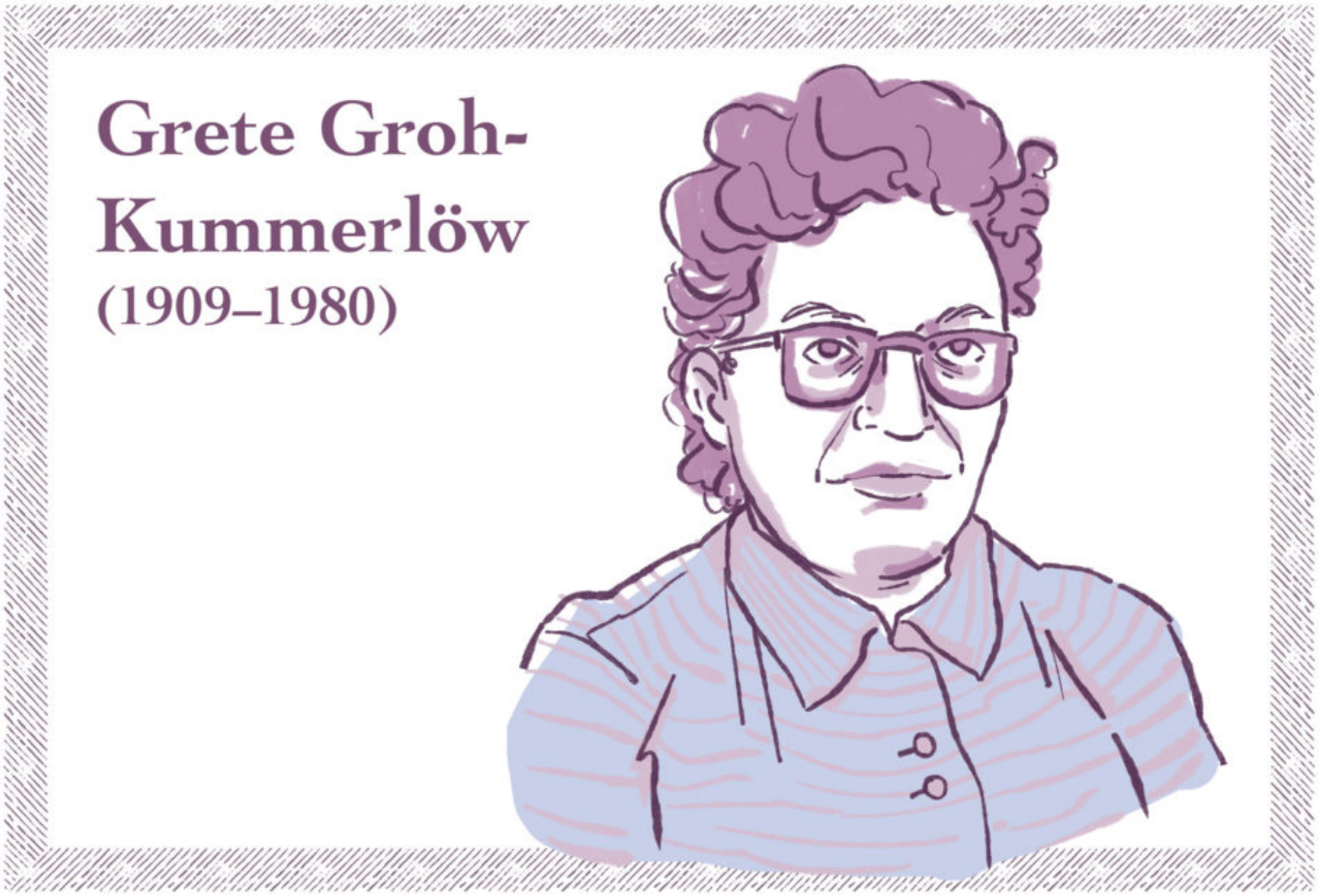
senior positions were held by men) seconded the proposal for the International Women's Year, which was accepted in 1972 and held in 1975. In 1977, the United Nations passed a **resolution** to hold a Day for Women's Rights and International Peace, which is now known as International Women's Day and held on 8 March.



Each March, Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research honours this tradition by publishing a text that highlights an important woman in our struggle, such as **Kanak Mukherjee** (1921–2005) of India, **Nela Martínez Espinosa** (1912–2004) of Ecuador, and **Josie Mpama** (1903–1979) of South Africa. This year, we celebrate International Women's Day (though perhaps International Working Women's Month would be better) with the publication of dossier no. 74, ***Interrupted Emancipation: Women and Work in East Germany***, produced in collaboration with the **Zetkin Forum for Social Research** and **International Research Centre DDR** (IFDDR). We have published two previous studies with IFDDR, one on the **economic history** of the German Democratic Republic (DDR) and the other on **healthcare** in the DDR. The Zetkin Forum is our partner on the European continent, named after both Clara Zetkin (1857–1933), whose work contributed to the creation of International Working Women's Day, and her son Maxim Zetkin (1883–1965), a surgeon who helped build the new healthcare system in the Soviet Union, fought as part of the International Brigades in defence of the Spanish Republic (1931–1939), and became a leading physician in the DDR.

Interrupted Emancipation traces the struggles of socialist women in East Germany in various women's platforms and within the state structures themselves. These women – such as Katharina 'Käthe' Kern, Hilde

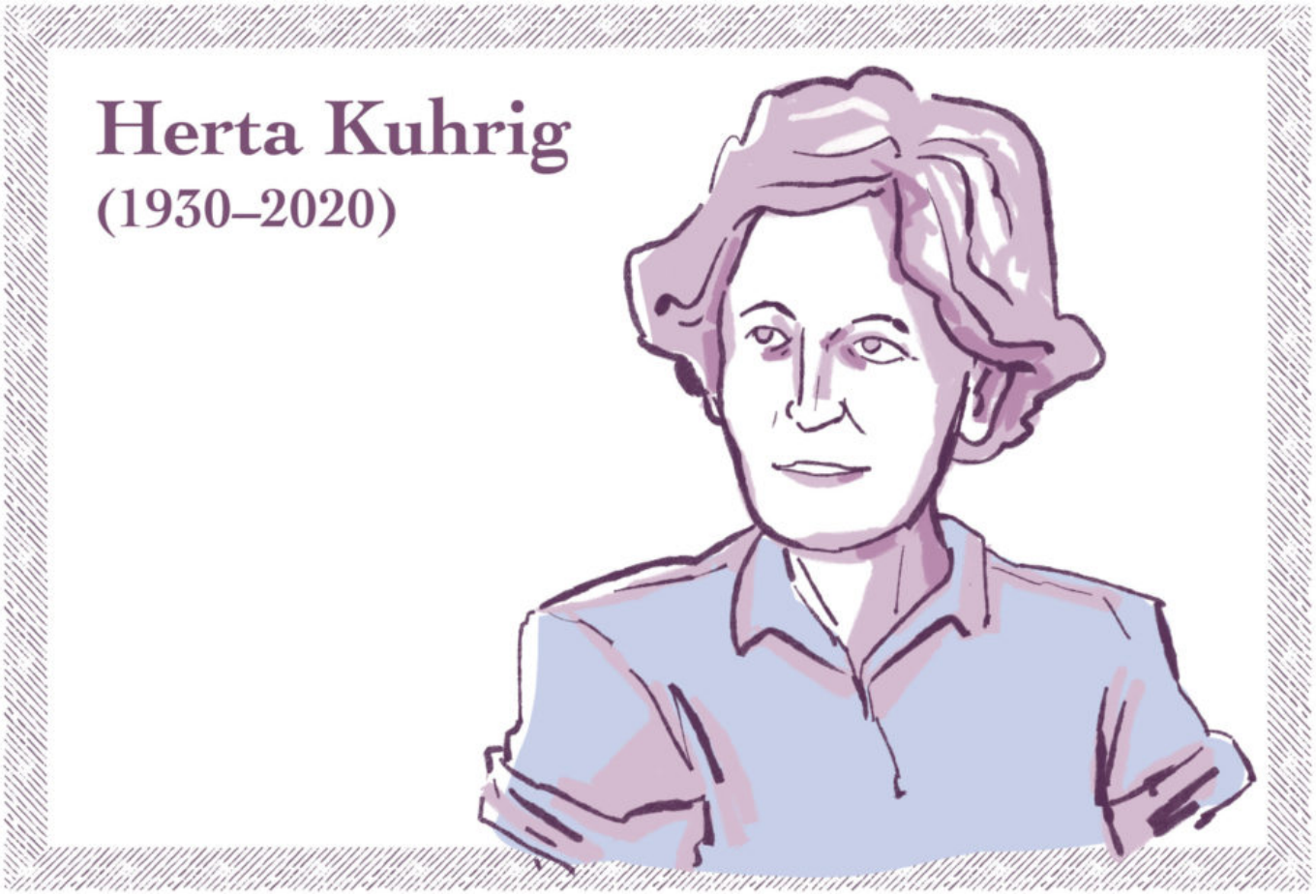
Benjamin, Lykke Aresin, Helga E. Hörz, Grete Groh-Kummerlöw, and Herta Kuhrig – fought to build an egalitarian legal order, develop socialist policies for childcare and eldercare, and bring women into leadership positions in both economic and political institutions. These programmes were not designed merely to improve the welfare and wellbeing of women, but also to transform social life, social hierarchies, and social consciousness. As Hilde Benjamin, the DDR's minister of justice from 1953 to 1967, explained, it was essential that laws not only provide a framework to guarantee and enforce social rights, but that they also 'achieve further progress in the development of socialist consciousness'.



Women entered the workforce in large numbers, fought for better family planning (including abortions), and demanded the dignity that they deserved. *Interrupted Emancipations* teaches us how so much was achieved in such a short time (a mere forty years). Leaders like Helga Hörz argued for women's entry into the workforce not merely to enhance their incomes, but to ensure the possibility of women's participation in public life. However, changes did not take place at the speed required. In December 1961, the politburo of the ruling Socialist Unity Party (SED) condemned the 'fact that a totally insufficient percentage of women and girls exercise middle and managerial functions', blaming, in part, 'the underestimation of the role of women in socialist society that still exists among many – especially men, including leading party, state, economic, and trade union functionaries'. To transform this reality, women set up committees in workplaces as well as housewives' brigades to build mass struggles that fought to win society over to women's emancipation.

The destruction of the DDR in the 1990s and its incorporation into West Germany led to the erosion of the gains socialist women had made. Today, in Germany, these socialist policies no longer remain, nor do mass struggles retain the level of vitality that they achieved in the four decades of the DDR. That is why the dossier

is called *Interrupted Emancipation*, perhaps a reflection of the authors' hope and conviction that this dynamic can be brought back to life.



Gisela Steineckert was one of the women who benefitted from the transformations that took place in the DDR, where she became a celebrated writer and worked to develop the cultural sector. In her poem 'In the Evening', she asks, is the struggle worth it? Without much pause, she answers: 'the heart of the dreamer is always overly full'. The necessity of a better world is a sufficient answer.

> In the evening, our dreams rest their heads against the moon,
> asking with a deep sigh if the struggle is even worth it.
> Everyone knows someone who suffers, suffers more than anyone should.
> Oh, and the heart of the dreamer is always overly full.
>
> In the evening the mockers come, a smile on their lips.
> Belittle our every asset, turn pounds into chips.
> They like to come at us with their lines, no one's spared it.
> Oh, and they advise us: Nothing was worth it.
>
> In the evening, the sceptics come with creased faces,
> leaf through old letters, don't trust our words.

> They stay away from it all, age ahead of their time.
> Oh, and their pain and suffering are sublime.
>
> In the evening, the fighters take off their boots,
> eat dinner with relish, hammer three nails into the roof.
> They want to contend with half a book, fall asleep at the end of a line,
> amid captured weapons, next to red wine.

Warmly,

Vijay