In the history of Russian social work a large number of outstanding women has been active in the fight against poverty and exploitation. At the beginning of the 20th century, many of them joined the parties that brought about the Russian revolution. In the period around the revolution of 1917, when civil war and economic crises resulted in an unprecedented famine, these women were often active in providing material help and social assistance to the population. Many of them actively supported revolutionary ideals of the communist movement. Jelena Dmitriewna Stassowa (1873-1966) is a typical representative of this commitment. She belonged to the leaders of the communist party and was one of Lenin’s close comrade-in-arms, her code name was Comrade ‘Absolute’ or Comrade ‘Herta’.

Jelena Stassowa began her social and political activities in the 1880s and she remained active, both in Russian and international work until the second half of the 20th century. Jelena Stassowa played a leading role in the organization of many projects initiated by the International Red Aid. Thus her life story is not only representative of a long period of Russian history, which was closely linked with the history of the international communist movement, in particular in Germany, but also sheds light on a politically inspired form of social work that is not well known in western histories of social work.

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1 This paper about her life is based on research into archives in Moscow, e.g. the Russian National Archives on Socio-Political History, where the personal records of Jelena Stassowa have been archived. It contains 315 files, including personal documents, lectures, articles, official notes, her correspondence etc.
Her development from an intellectual to a representative of the labor movement

Jelena Stassowa, who was born in Petersburg in 1873, was the child of aristocratic, progressive and politically active parents. They knew many progressive intellectuals, and this constant contact influenced her very strongly. She was an avid reader and learned about the history of revolutionary movements through books and conversations at home. Through her father, who was a well-known lawyer, she learned about political trials. Democratic intellectuals frequented the house of her parents, and the well-known critic and art historian Wladimir Stassow, was her uncle.

Her mother and her aunt taught at the social-democratically orientated Sunday schools which offered a general education to young people and adults. Because of the political propaganda made for the labour movement in these schools, many people involved in these schools were persecuted. In addition to these educational activities, there was social assistance for women who lived in poverty through housing, work and childcare facilities. There were also connections to the movement for women’s emancipation: her aunt, Nadeshda Stassowa, headed the association that organized the first courses at universities for women in Russia.

Jelena Stassowa attended a private, privileged high school for girls where she passed her exams with distinction so that she was entitled to work as a private tutoress. Afterwards she took part in a special course at the same school on prehistoric man. In her memoirs she said that she considered those years to be crucially important in her intellectual development. She felt she was “the repentant aristocrat” who owed something to the Russian people.

Beginning in 1893 Jelena Stassowa taught at the Sunday and Evening School for Women and Girls in Petersburg. At that institution all sorts of initiatives were taken to broaden the students’ political horizon. The ‘traveling exhibition of teaching aids’ was an important initiative in this field of work, that resulted from a lack of official teaching materials. It was established by teachers of the Sunday schools who all contributed their own objects to a growing collection: herbariums, minerals, specimen put in alcohol, books or illustrations etc. All the objects of this exhibition could be borrowed like the books in a library. Later one of the supporters of the exhibition had a house built with an observatory, a laboratory and a lecture hall. The earnings of this exhibition were used to buy additional teaching aids.

Through her work at the evening schools and for the ‘traveling exhibition of teaching aids’ Jelena Stassowa got in contact with workers and politically active teachers for the first time. She also became involved in the activities of the Red Cross, which was founded in Russia in 1881 by the party called ‘Narodnaja Wolja’ (Popular Will); after the dissolution of this party

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2 Stassowa, Jelena, Genossin ‘Absolut’, Erinnerungen, Dietz Verlag Berlin 1978, p.15
3 ibid. p. 24