

## Revolutionary women: Ludmila Stal

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Our series on the lives and struggles of great revolutionary women continues with Marija Cubalevska's look at the life of Russian underground militant Ludmila Stal

Ludmila Stal was born in 1872 in Yekaterinoslaw in the Russian Empire, which today is Dnipropetrovsk in Ukraine.

Although her family were well-off, she was a rebel from her early days, when she was involved in an underground Marxist circle at her school, handing out illegal leaflets and pamphlets calling for the overthrow of the Tsar. She was expelled, but this did not deter her from pursuing revolutionary activity. At 23, she moved to Omsk, then capital of southwest Siberia and the Steppes, to work for a Marxist paper called Stepnoi Krai (?Steppe Land?). The next year she moved to Moscow to take part in a range of underground socialist circles and student organisations. The revolutionary youth were constantly debating the way to get rid of the Tsar. Ludmila strongly opposed the most widespread view at that time - populism ? which wanted to unite ?the people? against the Tsar, with the peasantry as the leading force. Instead she argued for the Marxist view that a mass workers? party should be built to bring the working class to the head of the revolution.

In 1899 her house was raided by police and, on the advice of her comrades, she emigrated to Paris where she came across the newspaper Iskra (?The Spark?), which was at that time edited by Russian revolutionaries, including Plekhanov, Lenin and Martov. She returned to Russia, smuggling in banned issues of Iskra, but was arrested and sent to prison.

After she organised a protest against the mistreatment of a fellow prisoner, the authorities labelled her a ?dangerous revolutionary? and she was in and out of prison for a whole decade, making numerous daring escapes. Back in Paris in 1912, she and Inessa Armand launched the newspaper Rabotnica (?Woman Worker?) ? the first ever paper aimed at working class women in Russia.

In August 1914 the First World War began and the Social Democratic parties in Germany and France backed the war. The Bolsheviks were the only mass party that stood firm against imperialism; Ludmila helped to organise an illegal Fighting Group for Peace and against Chauvinism from within the French Socialist Party. Here Ludmila's experience with illegal work was invaluable, as the French socialists had little such experience.

And at the end of 1914, Ludmila, working again with Inessa and also with Russian revolutionary Nadezhda Krupskaya, launched the Initiative for the International Women's Conference in Bern, Switzerland, which spoke out clearly against the war.

In February 1917, after the biggest general strike in history, the Russian working class overthrew the Tsar. Revolutionaries hurried back to Russia from exile. In April the Bolsheviks debated the way forward for the revolution ? Lenin argued that the Bolsheviks should not support the provisional government of populists

and Mensheviks because it was still a capitalist government. He demanded that the new government pull Russia out of the war, and said the Bolsheviks should call for all power to be transferred into the hands of the workers' council or soviets, which were councils of recallable delegates from workplaces, estates and soldiers' battalions. Ludmila backed this revolutionary approach against those such as Kamenev, Muranov and Stalin who wanted the Bolsheviks to back the regime.

This programme won out within the Bolsheviks and led to the victory of October 1917 when the soviets seized power in an armed uprising, setting up the world's first workers' state. Ludmila worked closely with fellow revolutionaries, Alexandra Kollontai, Klaudia Nikolajevna and Konkordia Samoilova, in convening the First Petrograd Conference of Working Class Women. When the capitalists launched their war against the young workers' regime in 1918, Ludmila edited newspapers for Red Army soldiers, making sure they combined illegal work were fully aware of the political cause they were fighting for.

Ludmila remained active after the civil war, but sadly never challenged the degeneration of the revolution into a bureaucratic dictatorship under Stalin after 1924. But her revolutionary work in the early years gives us not just a sense of the great events of her day and of her personal skill, determination and heroism, but of the necessity for a revolutionary party of being able to combine mass open work with illegal work in the underground ? with all that can entail.

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