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„To each family a separate apartment!“ is the mandate with which Khrushchev introduced the 1957 housing decree, one of his signature initiatives in the drive towards de-Stalinization. It was part of a number of measures towards an overall cultural, political and economic liberalization generally referred to as the Thaw, meant to counter numerous social deficits and economic stagnation. In her book „Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life during the Khrushchev Years“, Christine Varga-Harris provides an astute and comprehensive socio-political and cultural history of Soviet housing in Leningrad in the late 50s and early 60s, divulging real stories of house and home that portrayed not only the record-breaking construction of new apartments, but also associated shortcomings and Soviet citizen’s reactions.

Adequate housing has always been at the forefront of the new Soviet way of life in the pursuit of attaining Communism. And thus, housing was a political matter and intermittently intertwined with modernization and industrial, technical and social progress. In his speech entitled Socialist Reconstruction of Moscow and Other Cities in the U.S.S.R presented at the plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1931, L. Kaganovich, one of the main associates of Stalin, maintained that private two- to four-room apartments were the preferred form of housing for families. He however also stated that it was not possible to immediately solve all housing problems. Fraught with a severe housing shortage, the communal apartment, or *kommunalka*, was supposed to serve as a short-lived placeholder until it was possible to provide adequate housing to all. Instead it inadvertently turned into a transformative vehicle and into the foundation of the Soviet way of life, social relations and overall values.

Varga-Harris provides a short digression into the *kommunalka*-phenomenon just enough to illustrate its formative relevance and overall implications on the housing program, as it was the backdrop against which the rhetoric of mass housing as a normal way of living was conducted. In this context normalcy was constitutive of decent living conditions and adequate housing which ensures habitability, accessibility and usability. In the post-war and post-Stalin period, the discourse about house and home was a vehicle for larger discussions about getting back on track and to re-socialize and re-cultivate the Soviet way of life, i.e. to (re)construct Communism. By connecting to the prewar period Varga-Harris demonstrates a certain continuity and according similarities in the official rhetoric: While the goal of improving the living space with the housing campaign suddenly did not seem as abstract anymore, leaking radiators and water pipes in the newly constructed apartment buildings nonetheless pushed the drive for decent housing further into the future. The word „remont“ (repair, restore), as Walter Benjamin famously notes in his Moscow Diary (1926–27), continued to be prevalent in Soviet society, indicating a constant transformation of space and endless state of repair or rather stagnation, feeding people’s yearning for decent housing.

In the first three chapters Varga-Harris demonstrates the inherent ambivalences in the policy directives instated through the housing program by 1) illustrating the degree to which Western architectural and interior design concepts are merged with socialist values, 2) juxtaposing the wave of housewarming parties with an according slew of housing petitions by disgruntled apartment inhabitants in response to unsatisfactory housing conditions and 3) showcasing the alleged liberalization and democratization of Soviet ar-

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1 According to Varga-Harris, between 1956 and 1970 more than half the country moved in to new housing and between 1956 and 1960 more housing space was created (145 mio. m²) than in the entire period before that starting in 1918 and more than 13 mio apartments were built.

chitecture with the individual apartment life and consumerism in light of its „official, formalized, and mass-produced” (p. 103) nature. The next three chapters discuss the realms within which the state and the populace compensate the shortfalls and try to develop a viable or at least normal society (Until today, in Russia „normal’no” is the common reply when asked „How are you?”). One of the realms was the in-between, i.e., liminal spaces such as courtyards and corridors located at the threshold between the public or rather as Varga-Harris insists: the social and the private. Citizens engaged in the maintenance of Communist moral and socialist values through collective activities such as the subbotniki (Saturday voluntary work campaign). In the „quest for normalcy” Varga-Harris showcases the different ways that citizens found to improve the dismal housing conditions, which were diametrically opposed to the ambitious space program, for instance, and the overall propagandistic accounts of progress.

Another important realm for interaction was petitioning. Authors of petitions portrayed themselves as worthy of receiving decent housing while at the same time upholding and investing in a communist future. Here Varga-Harris provides valuable insight into the public discourse on housing, uncovering variations of identification with the system, which include war veterans, invalids, party members and even politically rehabilitated persons. According to Varga-Harris, petitioners offered a „vivid counter-narrative” (p. 169) to the propagandized improvements in daily life with the massive housing construction, be that in per capita living space or in the physical and psychological welfare. Essentially, petitioners reminded the authorities of a „social(ist) contract” (pp. 196-197), constitutive of both moral and material elements. By engaging in dialogue, Varga-Harris maintains that petitioning individuals „revitalized the bond between state and society” and in the end „manifested a collectivist spirit with a broader impact.” (p. 218) She asserts that by „engaging in this mode of discourse also revealed a sense of self by asserting entitlement to a decent dwelling based on their own proven role in building Soviet society” (p. 217).

„Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life during the Khrushchev Years” by Christina Varga-Harris is well structured, thoroughly researched and a pleasure to read. She draws on comprehensive sources such as archival materials, magazines, periodicals, contemporary literature and (at times autobiographical) housing petitions. Not only does she incorporate a comprehensive variety of sources, but she also demonstrates multidisciplinary capacity by aptly broaching and integrating other relevant topics into her analysis such as architecture and design, material culture and the culture of petitioning as well as literature and film. She makes sure to illustrate the proactive approach by citizens in order to try to improve their housing situation, and also the respective channels which made this possible. With this book, Varga-Harris joins the growing number of historical research that highlight Soviet citizen agency, in this case with the demand for better housing and simultaneous identification with the system and referral to a „social(ist) contract.” Soviet citizens had to compensate for the gaps and ambivalences inherent in the system, and this did not change over time.


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