

Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space

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The revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky famously proclaimed in his suicide note, ‘the love boat has crashed against *byt*.’ That the banal problems of everyday life (*byt*) had undermined the hopes of the Revolution has since been widely inferred in evaluations of the Soviet system. The gender implications of the promises and disappointments of 1917 have not, however, been extensively detailed, particularly where a key matter of daily life is concerned: housing. Herein lies the most compelling achievement of *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia*. Enlivening a overview of housing policy from 1917 through 1991 with analysis of changing notions about the kind of dwelling that would be appropriate for a socialist society in general, and for the emancipation of women in particular, Lynne Attwood weaves together a multifaceted social history of the Soviet Union.

Certainly many features of the development of Soviet housing that Attwood recounts have been detailed in previous scholarship.⁽¹⁾ When the Bolsheviks assumed power in 1917, they immediately set about housing the proletariat in whose name the Revolution had been won. Committed to the mandate of simultaneously ending the existing urban housing shortage, and launching a proletarian order, already by March 1919, the new regime declared complete the municipalisation of living space. This process entailed seizing and dividing up the spacious apartments of members of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, and redistributing the rooms to provide a minimum of nine square meters of living space per person.

By the end of the 1920s, state determination to foster heavy industry began to take priority over the further amelioration of living conditions. The result was continued overcrowding and excessive government control over private life. By the 1930s, factories, enterprises and city governments had become responsible for allocating housing in the service of the state. At its most egregious, supreme power over this scarce commodity enabled the Stalinist regime to use housing to punish, motivate and reward individuals.

Focus on such sinister episodes obscures the ideals upon which Soviet housing was based, while preoccupation with shortcomings effaces the gender dimensions of both the housing crisis and the solutions to it that socialism offered. As Attwood demonstrates, each successive housing scheme was conflated with revolutionizing everyday life. And since Russian women were the traditional custodians of the hearth and responsible for activities connected with the home like cooking and childrearing, they featured prominently in pronouncements about the projected benefits of reorganizing daily life, and in actual efforts to improve

living conditions. However, various national crises, seemingly endless shortages of capital and resources, and poor planning repeatedly thwarted the realization of the lofty goal of mass housing. Meanwhile, enduring pre-revolutionary attitudes toward women reinforced stereotypes regarding their role in the domestic sphere. Highlighting these aspects of Soviet housing and society, Attwood commendably accomplishes her main objective of presenting ‘a systematic study of the ways in which the Russian home has been differentially experienced by men and women’ (p. 16).

The chronological approach of *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia* showcases recurring problems, solutions and mindsets, leading Attwood again and again to the very conclusion with which Mayakovsky ended his life in 1930. The first eight chapters are devoted to the initial four decades of Soviet power when ideas about socialist *byt* were being discussed and developed, and then a chapter is allotted to each of the successive post-war regimes – the Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev eras – and to an overview of personal accounts assembled from interviews with more than dozen individuals. Attwood largely draws upon official published sources, including popular magazines, publications for housing professionals, and newspapers. However, as an established gender scholar, she astutely reads between the lines of sometimes meticulously constructed rhetoric. She thereby discerns the various nuances of the position and daily life of Russian women in the domestic sphere vis-à-vis men, and in juxtaposition with official ideals and policies. (2)

Beginning with the conceptual realm, Attwood emphasizes that early Bolshevik thinkers initially imagined a Communist state that would simultaneously provide housing for all citizens and relieve women of the burdens of household labour by transferring domestic chores to socialized kitchens, laundries and childrearing institutions. Organized and financially supported by the government, such facilities would also uphold another Bolshevik aim, that of creating a collectivist society. The municipalisation of housing immediately after the Revolution signalled the inauguration of a new *byt* by increasing the supply of available living space and essentially decreeing that people of divergent class backgrounds cohabitate.

With the end of the Civil War, concerns over establishing economic stability and a new government led to a rapprochement with capitalism. To resolve problems of reconstruction like the need to accommodate more and more people as cities regenerated, the New Economic Policy (NEP) allowed for the partial re-privatization of housing. This process involved returning smaller apartments to their previous owners, who were allowed to rent out living space for a profit, as well as permitting individuals to join together to form housing construction cooperatives and build homes on spare plots of land. Effectively enabling the state to defer the costs of building repair and maintenance, as well as of new construction, privatization continued through 1927.

Nevertheless, as Attwood indicates, communal housing came to constitute the ideal. Providing a shared kitchen and collective childcare, this type of dwelling was seen to hold the potential to radically reconstruct bourgeois living arrangements, which, according to Bolshevik thinkers like Aleksandra Kollontai, had enslaved women. Communal housing was also perceived to be the best solution for relieving the relentless shortage of space and enforcing collectivism. Its earliest iteration, the ‘house commune’ (*dom kommuna*), gained a degree of popularity in the 1920s when such dwellings were set up voluntarily, motivated either by necessity or idealism. By the beginning of the First Five-Year Plan in 1928, communal living was officially portrayed as the most effectual path to a new *byt*.

The industrialization and collectivization drives, however, only put more pressure on existing housing and the resources needed to build more of it. Thus, although communal housing continued to be the ideal, factory barracks and hostels remained common forms of accommodation for urban dwellers throughout the 1930s. The Second World War posed new challenges, particularly in urban centres where homes were destroyed by bombing raids and by individuals tearing apart wooden buildings in a desperate need for firewood. Alongside destruction, residents temporarily evacuated from cities often found their homes occupied by others upon their return, further complicating post-war relocation. By 1948, desperate need led to a law requiring local authorities to provide land to people willing to build their own houses. Construction was slow, however, and communal housing remained the norm.

The first major shift in housing policy since the Revolution occurred in 1957, when Khrushchev proclaimed his ambition to provide every Soviet family its own 'separate apartment' (*otdel'naiia kvartira*). This commitment to single-family dwelling, which continued through the Brezhnev years, did not diminish earlier ideals about collectivism and female emancipation. Rather, the site for realizing these elements of socialist *byt* shifted from the shared spaces of the communal apartment to public service facilities located within new residential districts.

The next noteworthy change in housing policy occurred under Gorbachev, whose privatization program overturned the state paternalism on which Soviet rule was founded. Abandoning the ideal of mass housing was partly the result of *glasnost*, which had led to open examination of past policy failures. Circumstances, such as the need to quickly house the influx of soldiers returning from Soviet army bases closing down in the East Bloc, also played a role. As for privatization, the measures that the government instituted included offering loans to individuals wanting to buy their own apartments as enterprises and municipalities were relieved of their housing responsibilities, and providing legal support, financing and even technological assistance to those interested in building their own homes.

Assessing the impact of these shifting policies, Attwood reveals that throughout the Soviet era, even the best intentions could hold negative, unintended consequences – ones that affected women the most. To be sure, in the years immediately following the Revolution, relocation from factory barracks and dormitories on the outskirts of cities into rooms in municipalized apartments in urban centres created new problems for male and female workers alike. These included long commutes and heating comparatively spacious, grand living spaces. Working class women, however, endured additional burdens. For example, given their greater presence in the home, it was they who were most frequently subjected to the resentment of the previous owners of flats recently seized by the state. Government provisions for housing cooperatives during the 1920s appeared to offer an alternative to this situation, as well as to overcrowded state housing. However, women tended to be in the minority, both as lessees of existing cooperatives and as shareholders of new ones being constructed. They were also underrepresented in the management of housing cooperatives. Attwood attributes this to a lack of confidence in female organizational abilities (internalized by, and projected by others upon, women), a lack of free time (due to family obligations), and even disinterest (in part attributable to cultural preferences).

The communal apartment that became the norm at the turn of the 1920s to the 1930s, meanwhile, achieved little success in securing the ideal *byt* it had promised to women. As Attwood shows, for example, overcrowding and gender role expectations served to situate women (rarely men) in shared spaces like kitchens, and, in turn, at the centre of disputes regarding their use. Communal living also subjected single women, in particular, to sexual harassment, while the broader housing shortage made it difficult for married women to leave alcoholic or abusive spouses. The ambitious one-family housing policy that Khrushchev initiated also failed to provide women a new *byt*. For instance, poor planning and persistent shortages resulted in families quickly outgrowing the model flat (designed for a married couple and two children), sometimes forcing members of different generations to live together. In effect then, traits of communal apartment life – from kitchen squabbles to the inability to escape an unhappy marriage – continued. Completely excluded from the 'one-family' model for which the separate apartment was designed, the plight

of the single woman was infinitely worse: she could end up as a lifetime resident of a dormitory.

Even by the final decade of the Soviet era, an unavailability of living space continued to undermine altruistic policies and laws. Among them was a 1982 housing decree containing many stipulations of potential benefit to women. For example, it provided single mothers preferential treatment for acquiring living space alongside categories of people like veterans and people with debilitating illnesses, and it stated that a woman should not have to cohabit with an abusive husband. Together with the housing shortage that made such directives unenforceable, gender stereotypes too persisted. Indeed in the final throes of the Communist era, women gained little from privatization simply because they were not treated as entrepreneurs.

As Attwood demonstrates, deficiencies, stereotypes and domestic obligations also undermined the opportunities for emancipation that the reorganization of housing was supposed to advance. For instance, in combination with the shortage of communal amenities, assumptions about female inclinations meant that Soviet women were consistently designated responsibility for childcare, which in turn prevented them from taking advantage of new career prospects or advancing in their given profession. Meanwhile, in public domestic facilities, it was women who typically occupied jobs like doing laundry. Even the very goal of creating a new socialist *byt* was frequently relegated to women. In both the 1920s and the post-Stalin order, it was they who were most often summoned to participate in competitions for communist living focused on ensuring household cleanliness and hygiene. In detailing these quotidian predicaments, Attwood enriches the established characterization of Soviet women as enduring the multiple burdens of participating in the paid labour force and fulfilling the majority of domestic duties.

Another crucial theme of this monograph, one intimated by its subtitle *Private Life in A Public Space*, is the confluence of private and public situated at the intersection of gender and housing in Soviet society. Attwood argues that state distribution, which determined where and with whom one could live, together with overcrowding, rendered domestic space a public commodity. What is conventionally construed as private was undermined by other factors as well. For instance, since marital relations were seen to have bearing on the collective, apartment residents were encouraged to become involved in quelling spousal disputes. More generally, daily life in the communal apartment was governed by official rules for tenants, while house committees assigned to watch over neighbours attended the transition to separate apartment living. At the same time, individuals shrewdly navigated through spaces that, essentially, should have been private. Attwood reveals, for example, that residents locked up cupboards in communal flats or refused to cross the threshold of the room of another tenant even to defend a wife in distress. More generally, they tried to assume control over their housing circumstances, at times resorting to unofficial channels to exchange living space, or protesting official attempts to fill vacated spaces with new tenants.

Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Western assessments of Soviet private life had largely been restricted to the findings of policy analysts, political scientists, legal experts and sociologists intrigued by such matters as how the Soviet system works, and the impact of authoritarianism on the individual and society.⁽³⁾ During the 1990s, there was a blossoming of research delving into this topic from an historical perspective and affording attention to the convergence of daily life with such varied factors as political repression, Communist idealism, social norms, consumerism and material culture. Attwood draws upon the work of several of the scholars who have become strongly associated with such studies of everyday life, including the historians Sheila Fitzpatrick, Stephen Kotkin and Alf Lüdtke, the sociologist Oleg Kharkhordin, the art historian Susan Reid, and the cultural theorist Svetlana Boym. Two glaring omissions, however, remain in her secondary source base. The first is the monograph *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia*, in which Deborah Field examines the interplay between conceptions of privacy, family life and the reforms of the Thaw.⁽⁴⁾ The second is *Borders of Socialism*, edited by Lewis Siegelbaum, who in the introduction contemplates 'the private as a universal category of historical analysis'.⁽⁵⁾ Spanning the entire Soviet era, the collection then proceeds to address a number of phenomena related to the home with significant gender dimensions, including the Stalin-era domestic housewife activist (*obshchestvenitsa*) movement and the prevalent problem of 'domestic hooliganism'.⁽⁶⁾

As far as her most original primary source is concerned, the cache of personal narratives upon which the final chapter is based largely corroborates what Attwood has already gleaned from official publications. Nevertheless, some less known impressions about Soviet housing do arise here. For example, while the contributions of *babushki* (grandmothers) to Soviet childrearing are well established, the private employment of nannies in the absence of childcare institutions emerges as a fascinating avenue of inquiry. That sexual harassment might have been rampant in dwellings accommodating single women is another important issue raised in the oral accounts, as is the sense among men that it would have been inappropriate – that is, unmanly – for them to use their communal kitchen had they wanted to. In fact, throughout the book, Attwood merely skims the surface of such issues that captivate the specialist. These include the housing circumstances of destitute segments of the post-Civil War population like prostitutes and female domestic servants, or of aristocratic women who served as landladies throughout the NEP era, only to then be repressed under the auspices of class warfare during the Stalin period. Similarly intriguing is the impact on the home of state surveillance of dissidents during the 1960s and 1970s, a matter that Attwood hints at in a reference to postwar housing as site for extra-state activities.

Admittedly, an exhaustive foray into these and various other subjects would yield a monograph several times the length most publishers would permit. As is, situated at the conjunction of several themes – Bolshevik theory, women, housing and private life – and striking for the breadth of topics it covers, *Gender and Housing* is a valuable primer for anyone interested in how Soviet housing ideology and policy were shaped by crises like those posed by the Civil War, and by ambitions like building socialism in one country (under Stalin) or overtaking the West in consumer satisfaction (under Khrushchev). Scholars of everyday life would also find this book a stimulating read. Finally, gender specialists of different times and places might see in the experiences of Soviet women, repeatedly summoned to compensate for the shortcomings of government policy and daily life, striking parallels with their own research subjects in relation to the policies and prescriptions of their particular society. The French utopian socialist Charles Fourier asserted that the status of women reflects progress within a given society. Attwood abundantly proves that this was certainly the case where the state of Soviet housing was concerned.

Notes

1. Among the classics are John Alfred Di Maio, Jr., *Soviet Urban Housing: Problems and Policies* (Westport, CT, 1974) and Gregory D. Andrusz, *Housing and Urban Development in the USSR* (New York, NY, 1984). The following marks a transition to greater analytical emphasis on daily life in Soviet housing: Blair A. Ruble, 'From *Krushcheby* to *Korobki*,' in *Russian Housing in the Modern Age: Design and Social History*, ed. William Craft Brumfield and Blair A. Ruble (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 232–70. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Attwood has contributed articles and chapters to various scholarly journals and edited collections, and most recently served as both an editor and a contributor to *Women in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Melanie Ilic, Susan E. Reid and Lynne Attwood (Basingstoke, 2004). Her publications also include the monographs *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–1953* (New York, NY, 1999) and *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-Role Socialization in the USSR* (Bloomington, IN, 1990). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See for example, Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of the Soviet People: Changing Values in Post-Stalin Russia* (Oxford, 1989), and Raymond A. Bauer, Alex Inkeles and Clyde Kluckhohn, *How the Soviet System Works: Cultural, Psychological and Social Themes* (Cambridge, MA, 1956). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (Bern, 2007). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Lewis H. Siegelbaum, 'Introduction: mapping private spheres in the Soviet context,' in *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia*, ed. Lewis H. Siegelbaum (Basingstoke, 2006), p. 1. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. On the housewife activists, see the chapter in *Borders of Socialism* by Rebecca Balmas Neary, and on

'domestic hooliganism' see the chapter by Brian LaPierre. [Back to \(6\)](#)

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