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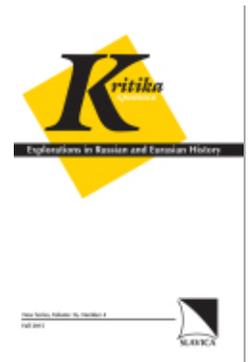
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Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 16, Number 4, Fall 2015 (New Series), pp. 1003-1011 (Review)

Published by Slavica Publishers

DOI: [10.1353/kri.2015.0064](https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2015.0064)



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Housing and Meaning in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia

KATHERINE ZUBOVICH

Steven E. Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin*. 416 pp. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. ISBN-13 978-1421405667. \$60.00.

Jane R. Zavisca, *Housing the New Russia*. 264 pp. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012. ISBN-13 978-0801450372. \$79.95.

In 1986, Joseph Brodsky's essay "In a Room and a Half" was published in the *New York Review of Books*. In it, the exiled poet enters, through the door of his family's Leningrad home, into a lyrical meditation on memory and loss. While Brodsky moves in his essay toward themes that are as timeless as they are universal, the memories of material forms that give the writer passage to the metaphysical are so time-bound and particular as to render them almost untranslatable. "The room and a half (if such a unit of space makes any sense in English) in which the three of us lived," Brodsky begins, "had a parquet floor, and my mother strongly objected to the men in her family, me in particular, walking around with our socks on."¹ Brodsky describes the strange configuration of space that made up his family home by recalling the logic of square-metered housing distribution that dictated familial relations and everyday life in Russia during the Soviet period. A decade and a half after emigration, the writer could still recall that "the minimum living space per person is nine square meters"; he could remember the arcane system of property exchanges that allowed his parents, as newly weds, to trade their two separate rooms for a single room-and-a-half in a communal apartment; and he could picture the clerks in the district property office who decided

¹ Joseph Brodsky, "In a Room and a Half," *New York Review of Books*, 27 February 1986, 1.

the fates of many and whose “initial impulse is to give you less.”² Brodsky’s “Room and a Half” makes clear that when the Soviet state sought to dissolve the bonds of private property, the matter of personal property, of home and housing, took on a new, acute, and often painful meaning for Soviet citizens and officials alike. Of all the transformations in everyday life brought about after 1917, the revolution in living space was one of the most sustained and personally felt effects of Soviet power.

In two monographs, the historian Steven E. Harris and the sociologist Jane R. Zavisca show us that the way the Soviet Union approached the housing question had profound and long-term effects on the lives of Russia’s urban inhabitants well into the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Harris and Zavisca contribute to a growing literature that examines the history of housing allocation and construction and the issue of urban property in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Recent work in this field also reveals the continued importance of socialist housing policies in the postsocialist period. Works by the historians Mark B. Smith, Lynne Attwood, Christine Varga-Harris, Mark Meerovich, by the anthropologist Stephen Collier, and others have shown that attention to housing and the built environment yields new answers to questions about the nature of Soviet power and its relation to everyday life.³

² Ibid., 4.

³ Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010); Lynne Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Christine Varga-Harris, “Homemaking and the Aesthetic and Moral Perimeters of the Soviet Home during the Khrushchev Era,” *Journal of Social History* 41, 3 (2008): 561–89; Mark Meerovich, *Nakazanie zbilishchem: Zbilishchnaia politika v SSSR kak sredstvo upravleniia liud’mi, 1917–1937* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008); Stephen Collier, *Post-Soviet Social: Neoliberalism, Social Modernity, Biopolitics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also Victor Buchli, *An Archaeology of Socialism* (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Katerina Azarova, *L’appartement communautaire: L’histoire cachée d’un logement soviétique* (Paris: Sextant, 2007); Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Blair Ruble, *Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Il’ia Utekhin, *Ocherki kommunal’nogo byta* (Moscow: OGI, 2001); Susan Reid, “The Meaning of Home: ‘The Only Bit of the World You Can Have to Yourself,’” in *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 145–70; Paul Stronski, *Tashkent: Forging a Soviet City, 1930–1966*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010); Greg Castillo, *Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010); Kimberly Elman Zarecor, *Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); Brigitte Le Normand, *Designing Tito’s Capital: Urban Planning, Modernism, and Socialism in Belgrade* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014); Katherine Lebow, *Unfinished Utopia: Nowa Huta, Stalinism, and Polish Society, 1949–56* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Heather DeHaan, *Stalinist City Planning: Professionals, Performance, and Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013); Emily Pugh, *Architecture, Politics, and Identity in Divided Berlin* (Pittsburgh:

This new wave of scholarship on the history of housing draws on earlier work by geographers, political scientists, and sociologists—like Gregory D. Andrusz, who observed in 1984 that housing still remained a central problem for the Soviet state well over 60 years after the Bolshevik revolution had promised to fundamentally transform property relations and to solve the housing crisis once and for all.⁴ Both Harris and Zavisca focus on the single-family apartment, officially adopted as the solution to the housing problem in the late 1950s. In examining how these apartments took on meaning for ordinary citizens, and how these meanings lived on through the dissolution of the USSR and into the 2000s, these scholars offer a model for approaching the housing problem that raises issues about policy and materiality alongside questions about the meanings articulated by residents themselves.

In *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, Harris explores the history of the USSR's mass housing campaign undertaken in the late 1950s and 1960s. The campaign saw the construction of unprecedented numbers of small separate family apartments known as *khrushchevki*. These apartments were typically built in standardized five-story residential buildings on the outskirts of existing cities, thereby necessitating the expansion of transportation networks and urban infrastructure more broadly. In numbers alone, the mass housing campaign is astonishing. The massive investment of financial, material, and labor resources for the project resulted in the construction, between 1953 and 1970, of 38,284,000 apartments and individually built homes in both city and countryside that allowed 140,900,000 residents to move into newly built housing (5). In his account, Harris moves past a top-down history of housing policy and considers the outcomes of the campaign in people's everyday lives, asking how ordinary citizens in the RSFSR acquired apartments and how they lived in them, making these spaces their own. Although many Soviet families remained in *kommunalki*, urban residents' mass migration from communal to single-family apartments, Harris argues, was the most wide-ranging feature of

University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014); S. S. Bukin, ed., *Zhilishchnaia problema v gorodakh Sibiri, 1920–1960e gody* (Novosibirsk: Parallel', 2009); Kirsten Dörhöfer, ed., *Wohnkultur und Plattenbau: Beispiele aus Berlin und Budapest* (Berlin: Reimer, 1994); Robert Liebscher, *Wohnen für alle: Eine Kulturgeschichte des Plattenbaus* (Berlin: Vergangenheitsverlag, 2009); Carsten Keller, *Leben im Plattenbau: Zur Dynamik sozialer Ausgrenzung* (New York: Campus, 2005); and Harald Engler, *Wilfried Stallknecht und das industrielle Bauen: Ein Architektenleben in der DDR* (Berlin: Lukas, 2014).

⁴ See Gregory D. Andrusz, *Housing and Urban Development in the USSR* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); James Bater, *The Soviet City: Ideal and Reality* (London: Hodder Arnold, 1980); Alfred John DiMaio, *Soviet Urban Housing: Problems and Policies* (New York: Praeger, 1974); R. A. French, *Plans, Pragmatism, and People: The Legacy of Soviet Planning for Today's Cities* (London: UCL Press, 1995); and Blair A. Ruble, *Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

the Soviet state's renewed commitment in the post-Stalin period to improving urban residents' quality of life and to creating a more egalitarian and classless society.

After Stalin, the state's project to lift all of society up, to promote social mobility in equal measure was carried out through housing policy rather than through the violence of the preceding era. Harris contends that by the time tenants were moving into their new apartments in the early 1960s, life had become less extraordinary than it had been under Stalin and was instead becoming more stable, more predictable, and on the whole more "ordinary." Harris provides rich evidence for the "ordinariness" of this period, showing that mass housing created a widespread feeling of stability and the expectation that this stability would endure. The common experiences of "ordinary" residents are the focus of Harris' study, which attributes agency to the lesser-known actors of the Thaw era, who "left only fleeting traces of their existence in statistical sourcebooks, letters of complaint, comment books at exhibitions, or residential meetings" (20).⁵ The *khrushchevka*, Harris argues, gave these ordinary people "a stake in Soviet socialism" (306). As the single-family apartment became a right to which the majority of citizens felt entitled, it raised expectations, prompting urban residents to engage directly with state officials, seeing "how far the politics of complaint would take them with a regime that still seemed willing to improve their living standards and build Communism on Tomorrow Street" (307). Zavisca continues the narrative of ordinary Russians' normative assumptions about housing in her analysis of the long-term effects of these raised expectations in the post-Soviet period. She finds that decades later, the single-family apartment was still considered "normal" by most Russians. How the single-family apartment was perceived outside the Russian context is beyond the scope of both of these studies, but it is worth emphasizing the cultural specificity of this particular brand of "ordinary" and questioning how it might have traveled, or not traveled, within the USSR as a whole.⁶

Harris's *Communism on Tomorrow Street* traces the history of the production, distribution, and consumption of mass housing in the RSFSR, focusing chiefly on Leningrad and Moscow. In the first two chapters that make up part 1 of the book, Harris presents a novel interpretation of the origins of the *khrushchevka*'s design, incorporating the Soviet apartment into the history

⁵ For a discussion of the uses of the "ordinary" in recent historiography, see Yanni Kotsonis, "Ordinary People in Russian and Soviet History," *Kritika* 12, 3 (2011): 739–54.

⁶ Paul Stronski's work on Tashkent reveals that regional differences came into play in a variety of ways in the implementation of the mass housing campaign outside the RSFSR (*Tashkent*, 216–33).

of Western architecture. The architects of the Khrushchev period, Harris explains, were constrained by two principles that were adopted during the first decades of the Soviet period but originated with 19th-century European reformers. The first was the USSR's adaptation of minimum sanitary living space norms. The second was the principle of single-family occupancy. In the first of these principles, "living space" referred to the floor space in an apartment's rooms, excluding the kitchen, corridors, bathrooms, and toilets, which were called "auxiliary space." As Brodsky accurately recalled in 1986, minimum living space was set at nine square meters per person. In practice, this minimum was typically used as a maximum amount in the distribution of housing. This system worked so long as the communal apartment, which was created by partitioning larger apartments or rooms into an individual's allotted amount, was the norm. But once the mass housing campaign took single-family occupancy as the standard for everyone in the late 1950s, architects, still forced to work within the square-metered distribution system, were faced with a challenge. To ensure that the policy of separate family apartments would be maintained, and that the new apartments would not be turned into communal living spaces, architects stuck to the minimum allotments for living space per person, shrinking auxiliary spaces to lower costs. The small *khrushchevka* was the result.

Harris' central argument in *Communism on Tomorrow Street* is that ordinary Soviet citizens experienced the Thaw through the move from communal to single-family apartments. A period stretching from the late 1950s through the 1960s, the Thaw has until recently been discussed primarily in relation to the activities of the intelligentsia and Soviet elites. Harris does not supplant the standard narrative of the Thaw, but he adds a new layer to our understanding of the period.⁷ The mass housing campaign, he argues, "transformed the thaw from an elite into a popular experience" (16), as ordinary urban residents "emerged in such milieus as residential meetings and furniture exhibitions as critical players in the politicization of mass housing under Khrushchev" (299). Examining the Soviet state's intentions as well as citizens' responses to the new housing, Harris uncovers both the achievements and the limits of Khrushchev's housing reform. He shows the unintended consequences arising when ordinary urban residents "repoliticized the meaning of the housing question in ways that Khrushchev's regime had hoped to avoid" (304). Long waiting lists, unequal access to new housing, and, once residents were settled, deficiencies in design led many to complain to state officials that they had not

⁷ Another work that incorporates a social component to histories of the Thaw is Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, eds., *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

received what had been promised to them. Nonetheless, by the 1960s, the single-family apartment had become the standard marker of “normal” life, and the *khrushchevka* was officially cast and popularly understood as a “critical element in the creation of the communist way of life” (305). Despite its many problems, the mass housing campaign, which raised the living standards of millions of urban inhabitants, did more to bolster the Soviet system, Harris argues, than to undermine it (306).

Harris shows the many ways in which ordinary citizens were more than passive recipients of state reform, becoming active participants in the distribution and consumption of mass housing, in parts 2 and 3 of the book. In a chapter on housing distribution in Leningrad, Harris explores how local residents and officials reacted to Khrushchev’s goal of doing away with social stratification through the housing campaign. Rather than erasing social differentiation, waiting lists and distribution practices on the ground enabled ordinary *leningradtsy* and district officials alike to assert and maintain social differences and ultimately to politicize housing distribution. Whereas the Moscow leadership insisted that housing allocation be based on objective criteria, with need defined on the basis of how much living space a person already had and how long she or he had resided in the city, district officials in Leningrad followed their own agendas. Harris shows that, in practice, housing distribution had changed little from the Stalin period, as local officials continued to grant apartments based on workplace performance while disadvantaging those they deemed socially undesirable or unproductive. In their many letters of complaint and at neighborhood meetings, residents invoked the “accusatory discourse” of Stalinism to coerce and denounce architects and officials for impractical designs and shoddy repairs. “For ordinary citizens,” Harris argues, “experiencing the thaw did not mean that they were or even wanted to be free from ‘speaking Bolshevik’” (295). But while local officials and residents alike stymied central authorities’ goals for housing reform, the leadership in Moscow also changed course midway through the campaign. In the mid- to late 1950s, the state had allowed some workers to bypass waiting lists if they participated in “people’s construction” by working extra hours on their factories’ housing construction projects in exchange for an apartment of their own. “People’s construction” was soon shut down in favor of housing construction cooperatives, which favored members of the cultural elite, signaling that class still mattered to the Khrushchev leadership, unwilling to take reforms too far. Despite the eventual curtailment of the housing reform, the transformation in material life that had been brought about in just a few years, and the connections that

were drawn between housing and the “communist way of life,” left a powerful impression on Soviet society. Although the mass housing campaign initiated in the late 1950s failed to provide equal access to material comforts that the state claimed were universal, the program nonetheless shaped the meaning of housing in fundamental and lasting ways.

In *Housing the New Russia*, Zavisca affirms that the Khrushchev-era housing campaign established a normative framework within which Russians have attributed meaning to housing up to the present day. “Most Russians,” Zavisca argues, “even those too young to remember the Soviet epoch, believe that a separate apartment for the nuclear family is a need and a right” (194). *Housing the New Russia* examines the cultural causes and consequences of Russia’s failed attempt to transition in the 1990s and 2000s from a socialist model of housing distribution to a market-based and mortgage-dependent model of home ownership. Like Harris, Zavisca traces how the Soviet state’s approaches to the housing question shaped the expectations of ordinary citizens. She further explores how these expectations have carried into the post-Soviet period with data collected in interviews taken in 2009 in Kaluga, a city of just over 300,000. Zavisca selected Kaluga for its position neither at the center nor the periphery in both geographical and economic terms. It is also a city in which the *khrushchevka* remained the most typical form of housing in the late 2000s. Zavisca focuses on urban Russians who, in 2009, were aged 21–35, making them too young to have been granted apartments as adults during the Soviet period and young enough to have been eligible to receive special housing subsidies for young families. Zavisca convincingly argues that the failure of the mortgage market in Russia is as much a cultural as an economic phenomenon. The aversion to mortgages in Russia, she contends, can be traced back to a particular disposition to housing that has its origins in the Soviet period.

The mass housing campaign under Khrushchev marked a turning point in popular Russian understandings of home and property rights. Along with the single-family apartment, the nuclear family became the norm; as mass housing became widely available, it came to be understood as a right and a reward for socialist labor. Legal ownership, Zavisca argues, is not a necessary component in a person’s sense of possession. “For Russians,” Zavisca observes, “long-term and inalienable usage rights are intrinsic to ownership” (5). The crucial difference between U.S. and Russian conceptions of housing lies in differing understandings of what it means to have a “home of one’s own.” Whereas Americans equate a mortgage with home ownership, Russians see in the risk of foreclosure a threat to their long-term usage rights. As Zavisca learns

from her interview respondents, mortgages are interpreted by Russians as a form of “debt bondage” (9). The Russian understanding of home ownership made the neoliberal reforms implemented in Russia after the Soviet collapse difficult, if not impossible, to realize. Nonetheless, in 1992, the Russian government signed an agreement with the United States to set up the Housing Sector Reform Project. It created new financial institutions based on the U.S. model that were intended to stimulate a Russian housing market. But, as Zavisca argues, mortgage markets require “consumers [to] misrecognize debt as outright ownership. Russians see things in the opposite light—they insist that the bank is the true owner, even if the mortgagor holds title” (181). In drawing a distinction between owing and owning, most Russians have been unwilling to participate in the mortgage market. The result is what Zavisca calls a system of “property without markets,” in which most housing has been privatized but never fully commodified.

The emergence of “property without markets” is the subject of part 1 of Zavisca’s book. Here she examines the Soviet origins of Russians’ post-Soviet aversion to mortgages before tracing the failed attempts to implement a U.S.-based mortgage market in Russia during the 1990s. Zavisca turns next to the Russian state’s efforts, beginning in 2006, to couple its pronatalist agenda with its continued attempts to develop a housing market. Maternity Capital, a federal program of assistance for women who give birth to a second child, officially linked the failing housing market to Russia’s declining birthrate. Zavisca argues that Maternity Capital funding, which can be spent on buying or building a house or paying off a mortgage, “complicates the political project of transforming housing from an entitlement into a commodity” (85). At the time Zavisca was writing, the program had yielded little in the way of results in Russian demographics, though it had raised Russians’ expectations about the level of support their government should be providing.

In part 2, Zavisca considers the effects on young Russians of the failure to create a U.S.-style mortgage market in Russia. In her examination of the new inequalities that have emerged in the post-Soviet period, Zavisca finds that neither wages nor education have improved the housing opportunities of young Russians, who tend to believe that their best chance at future home ownership lies in either inheritance or simply in luck. Instead of replacing Soviet-style socialism with U.S.-style capitalism, Zavisca explains, the Housing Sector Reform Project “carried forward extant Soviet inequality, while introducing a glaring element of chance—prospects for inheritance—into young Russians’ housing trajectories” (88). It has now been over a decade since the United States and the European Union recognized Russia as a market economy, yet

the country's housing market and popular attitudes toward market reform tell a different story. Many of Zavisca's respondents, ambivalent about the market transition, looked back at the Soviet housing system as fairer, because, they asserted, it was based on merit. In today's Russia, property acquisition often takes place within networks of extended families. But like the waiting lists of the Soviet period, this process is often lengthy and frustrating.

In her final chapter on why Russians have consistently rejected mortgages, Zavisca argues against the literature that attributes the failure of the mortgage market in Russia to high housing prices, high interest rates, and an unstable currency. Instead, she asserts that "most Russians would not have wanted a mortgage even if they could have qualified for one" (175). The problem of demand and the perceived illegitimacy of mortgages in Russia serves for Zavisca as a useful counterpoint to the American example. Writing in the wake of the subprime mortgage crisis, Zavisca's study of Russia serves in part to illuminate the peculiar cultural dispositions that support the mortgage market in the United States. "There is nothing natural," she argues, "about equating mortgage debt with homeownership, or about the state abdicating responsibility for providing secure housing" (198). The mistaken assumption among policy makers adhering to reforms recommended by the Washington Consensus that there was something natural about the U.S. approach to housing has, nonetheless, left Russia and Russians today with a host of new challenges.

Just as Brodsky insisted on the difficulty of conveying "to an outsider" the logic of rooms-and-a-half and square-metered living space, the inability to transplant U.S. housing institutions and understandings of home into post-Soviet Russia serves as a testament to the endurance of the cultural meanings embedded in material spaces. As Harris's work shows, housing was one of the most daunting problems the Soviet state had to contend with in the transition after the Stalin period. Given the Soviet state's inability to solve the housing question once and for all, it should come as no surprise that housing, as Zavisca reveals, continues to be a "painful question" in post-Soviet Russia today.

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