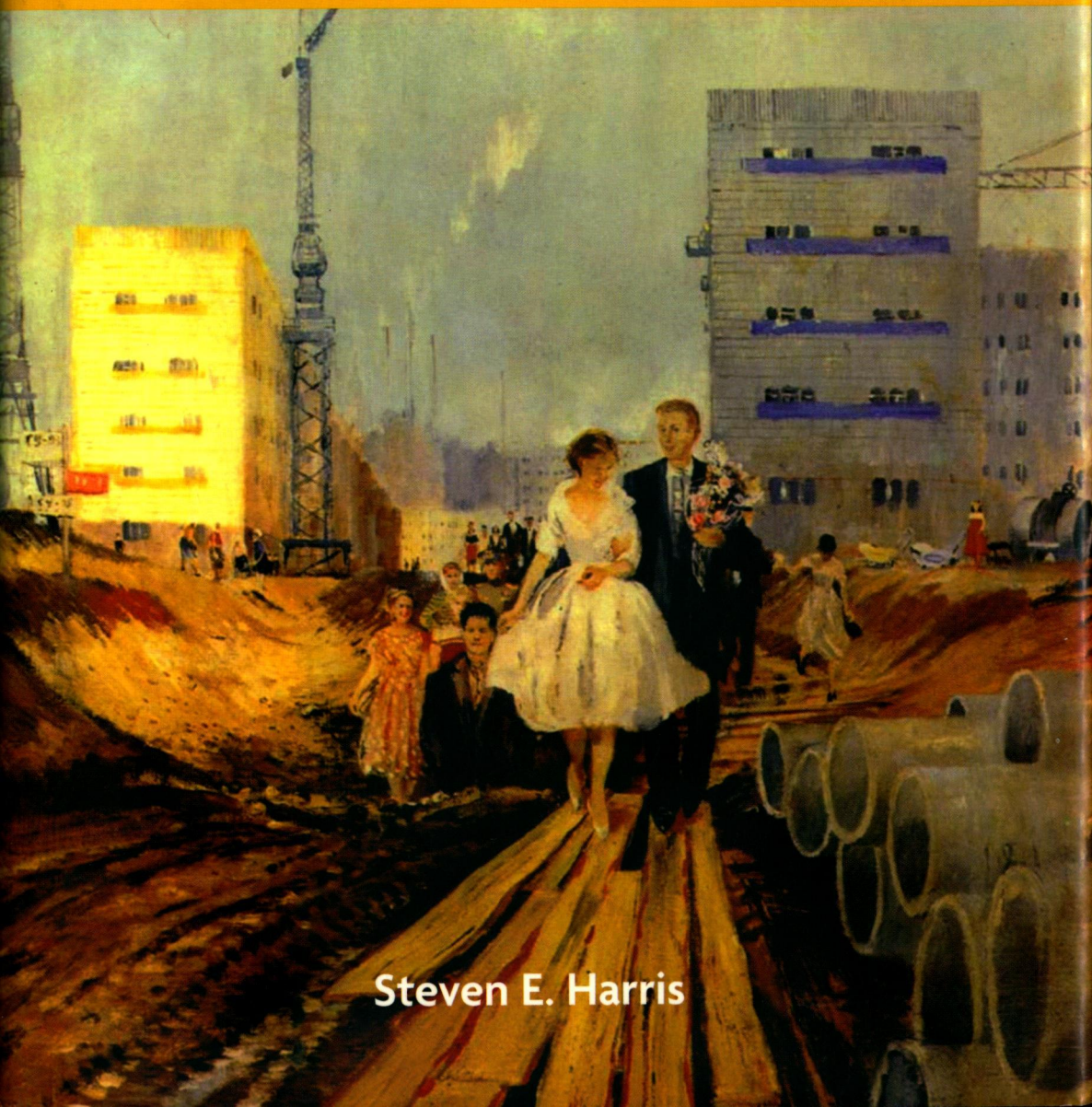


COMMUNISM *on Tomorrow Street*

MASS HOUSING AND EVERYDAY LIFE AFTER STALIN



Steven E. Harris

Communism on Tomorrow Street

Mass Housing and
Everyday Life after Stalin

Steven E. Harris

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Contents

Tables and Figures	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction: Moving to the Separate Apartment	1
Part I. Making the Separate Apartment	
1 The Soviet Path to Minimum Living Space and the Single-Family Apartment	27
2 <i>Khrushchevka</i> : The Soviet Answer to the Housing Question	71
Part II. Distributing Housing, Reordering Society	
3 The Waiting List	111
4 Class and Mass Housing	154
Part III. Living and Consuming the Communist Way of Life	
5 The Mass Housing Community	191
6 New Furniture	228
7 The Politics of Complaint	267
Conclusion: Soviet Citizens' Answer to the Housing Question	300
Notes	309
Bibliography	353
Index	377

Chapter 6

New Furniture

In December 1954, a Muscovite, E. Lashun, wrote to the All-Union Conference of Constructors in Moscow to tell the architects and builders what she expected from new housing. Lashun, who was living with her husband and two daughters in an 8.85-square-meter room of a wooden house, explained that they had been on their local soviet's waiting list for four years and that "not a few years will probably still pass when we will live normally, as it befits a Soviet toiling person, to whom the Stalin Constitution has given the right: to labor, study and cultured rest!"¹

The December conference meant different things to different members of the Soviet polity. For Khrushchev, it presented the opportunity to declare a clear break from Stalin's expensive architectural aesthetics and insist that architects take up economical mass housing designs. For architects beholden to Stalinist aesthetics, the meeting was a bruising experience, whereas for others it opened a space for reexamining their constructivist past.² For an ordinary Muscovite like Lashun, the conference unleashed a cathartic torrent of complaints about her family's everyday existence and her expectations for the future: "One can hardly believe that one day we will not in fact freeze in a damp and cramped kennel, that we will stop to wallow on the floor, underfoot, but that we will rest on a couch in a cultured way, for which there will be space in the room." Looking to the future, she imagined that "arriving from work and school, we will sit as an entire family at the table and not eat in line one after another."³

Alongside more space in a private apartment, furniture was a critical part of what ordinary citizens like Lashun expected from Khrushchev's

mass housing campaign. Her letter depicted what she believed would be her family's transition from its present, cramped housing to a "normal" domestic sphere. Objects and spaces would no longer serve multiple functions. It would be possible, she mused, "to do homework quietly without harassment like our seventh grade schoolgirl does her homework now—she studies, but she's pushed and everything gets poured onto her books and notebooks, which is on the only table, where the kitchen and the dining room and the bedroom and so on and so forth are situated." This multifunctional table and their lack of space only served to frustrate her family. She continued:

Imagine our family at the table: the father eats his meal, the schoolgirl does her homework, and as the housewife I'm cooking at one and the same table, yes and the younger daughter also climbs up to the table, and under the table there's all the kitchenware, that is, a tea kettle, a pot, and a frying pan and the rest, since we don't have a kitchen, but just a narrow passageway where there are gas stoves . . . and all the gas emissions and the steam from boiling linens gets into our room.⁴

If meals and homework were not difficult enough, the cramped conditions of their remaining dilapidated furniture made sleeping impossible. "At night we settle down 'comfortably,'" Lashun added sarcastically, "the children sleep on the bed, and my husband and I sleep on the floor under the children's feet, because there is no more free space."⁵ The Soviet state's answer to Lashun's demands was a small, single-family apartment with all the technological amenities and consumer goods of modern urban life. A new line of furniture was likewise part of its long-awaited answer to the housing question.

This chapter examines the role that furniture played in the construction of the *khrushchevka* as a new space in which the values and social norms of the communist way of life were defined. The millions of new small apartments required entirely new consumer items that would correspond to the dimensions and aesthetics of mass housing, shape people's everyday behaviors according to the values of the communist way of life, and remain distinct from consumerism in the capitalist West. What this new furniture would look like and what these values and behaviors would be were neither predetermined nor decided by the Communist Party's top leadership. As scholars have argued, the separate apart-

ment did not signify the end of the revolutionary process, but rather its reinvigoration under Khrushchev's regime, which mobilized mass housing and the consumer items that went with it to fulfill the Revolution's project of creating the New Soviet Man and Woman.⁶ Although Khrushchev's regime boosted production of consumer items and defined the broad ideological contours of the communist way of life, it delegated furniture design and defining the new Soviet home's communist content to architects, furniture designers, and taste arbiters. With the regime's blessing, these members of the cultural intelligentsia tied such tasks to the broader processes of de-Stalinization and the Cold War struggle with the West over standards of living, to reexaminations of early Soviet design aesthetics and their relationship to modernist design, to women's role within the home, and to what a classless society looked like at home.

This chapter also explores the new furniture designs that residents of the *khrushchevka* were promised and the meanings that members of the cultural intelligentsia ascribed to these new household goods. And it delineates what ordinary urban dwellers actually brought to their new homes. Internal government reports on Soviet citizens' consumption patterns for furniture and other household goods in the early 1960s, examined here for the first time, revealed to Khrushchev's regime that the state of people's household possessions diverged significantly from ideal images of the modern Soviet home as the site of a rationally organized and aesthetically modern domesticity fit for the transition to communism. Despite expansions in production, chronic shortages prevented many people from finding new furniture and household consumer items in stores, forcing them to make do with older makes. People's continued reliance on mechanical consumer goods instead of electrical ones undermined propaganda that celebrated the scientific and modern direction of the Soviet household. Social differentiation in consumption patterns undercut the egalitarian ethos in the rhetoric on new furniture and the *khrushchevka*. Comparisons with consumption patterns in the capitalist West revealed to the leadership how far behind the Soviet Union really was, and how foolish Khrushchev had been to declare otherwise during his famous "Kitchen Debate" with Richard Nixon in 1959. In short, as this chapter demonstrates, two starkly different images of ordinary people's furniture and household consumption patterns emerged in the 1950s and 1960s: The first comprised ideal representations of the new Soviet home and its household

objects; the second included the realities residents faced in trying to find new furniture and consumer goods for their new homes. Each played a significant role in shaping what Communism on Tomorrow Street promised to be and how it turned out in practice.

In Search of New Furniture

Like all consumer goods, furniture was an item of extreme scarcity under Stalin. Before World War II, the furniture industry was based largely on handmade methods of production and was insufficiently mechanized.⁷ Khrushchev's regime faced an uphill battle when it committed itself to meet ordinary citizens' furniture needs. In March 1955, an audit found that supply was still slipping further behind "the growing needs of the population" because the industry was based on "handicraft methods, predominantly with the use of manual labor." Factories with technology "for the mechanization of production processes" continued to depend upon labor-intensive techniques.⁸ The Soviet leadership redoubled its efforts in 1957 to "organize the manufacture of small-sized furniture and built-in kitchen equipment for apartments of the new type in the necessary quantity."⁹ But government agencies inexplicably lowered production targets during the next couple of years, despite evidence of increasing demand. The Central Committee of the Communist Party soon learned that "the production of furniture by far will not satisfy the needs of the population of the republic [Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic, RSFSR], and the shortage of furniture will be felt all the more sharply."¹⁰

As the domestic embodiment of Communism on Tomorrow Street, the well-appointed separate apartment was supposed to come with its own line of furniture that met every family member's needs. Internal government reports and empty store shelves, however, indicated that there would be many sparsely furnished *khrushchevki*. In February 1957, for example, the director of a furniture retailer, Mosmebel'torg, reported on the uncoordinated state of his industry to the Soviet of Ministers of the RSFSR. The director, a certain Fokin, explained how problems with dinner tables had worsened considerably during the past two years. Mosmebel'torg had obtained and sold 94,000 dinner tables in 1955, and 77,000 in 1956. For 1957, it would handle only about 55,000 to 60,000 dinner tables, falling far short of the 150,000 it