COMMUNISM on Tomorrow Street
MASS HOUSING AND EVERYDAY LIFE AFTER STALIN

Steven E. Harris
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Introduction:
Moving to the Separate Apartment

The year 1956 was a tumultuous one for the Soviet Union. In February, its new leader, Nikita Khrushchev, stunned the party faithful at the Twentieth Communist Party Congress with a stinging denunciation of Joseph Stalin’s crimes. Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” was a dramatic moment in turning the page on Stalin’s bloody regime, encouraging a thaw in state-society relations, and reviving the country’s quest for communism. But by year’s end, Khrushchev was meting out his own brutal repression to Hungarians for daring to declare that they would define their own course and even reject the Warsaw Pact.

Below the surface of these well-known events, daily transformations were taking place in the Soviet Union, whereby ordinary citizens tested the waters of Khrushchev’s thaw, unsure of where the new limits lay, but determined to make the most of Soviet life after Stalin. Though lacking the political spotlight of the “Secret Speech” or the geopolitical drama of the Hungarian Revolution, ordinary Soviet citizens’ words and actions could be dramatic in their own right and can tell us as much, if not more, about what this post-Stalinist existence and Khrushchev’s reforms were all about. The present study examines the reform in which most citizens were eager to participate: Khrushchev’s campaign to resolve the “housing question” (zhilishchnyi vopros) by moving people out of overcrowded communal housing and into single-family, separate apartments. As I argue in this book, moving to the separate apartment was the way most ordinary people experienced and shaped Khrushchev’s thaw.
To begin our investigation, let us start with a forgotten story of revolt in 1956, far removed from the streets of Budapest but right under Khrushchev’s nose in Moscow. In December 1956, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (Ministerstvo Vnutrennikh Del, MVD) informed the Communist Party’s Central Committee that 131 workers, joined by their families, had squatted under cover of night in twenty apartments in a new building. The laborers were all employed by the state in housing construction, with some working for a construction firm and others at a factory producing reinforced concrete. They were workers at the forefront of new housing construction and prefabrication technologies that produced the ubiquitous five-story apartment blocks of the Khrushchev era (figure I.1). The single-family apartments in these buildings would later become known as khrushchevki (singular: khrushchevka), a nickname that mocked their diminutive stature and forever linked them to Khrushchev. But for these workers desperate for better housing, the khrushchevka, or “the separate apartment” (otdel’naia kvar’tira), as it was commonly and officially called, was as much theirs as it was the state’s or Khrushchev’s, and no less desirable for its paltry dimensions.

The previous living conditions of these workers and their families—a dormitory in which three to four families were crammed into individual rooms 28 to 32 square meters in size—made even the smallest khrushchevka seem like a luxury. The new building’s proximity to their present dwelling just one street away suggested how frustrating it must have been to live in their incredibly overcrowded dormitory, while building new housing. (Whether the laborers had worked on the building they took over was unclear, and how the families planned to divvy up twenty apartments among what appeared to be 131 households was also uncertain.) The squatters’ action suggested a subversive Marxist interpretation of exploited workers taking back the fruits of their labor through collective action. In their dormitory and through their work, the workers and their families had constituted a community where they shared the same grievances and trusted one another enough to plan the takeover of a building and face the repercussions together. Their strategy, as far as the MVD account indicated, was to hold out until the local authorities caved in and allowed them to have their new homes.

The district prosecutor at first ordered the police to evict the squatters. Whether the police tried to use force was unclear, but whatever they did evidently failed. Subsequently, local party and soviet (municipal) officials tried negotiating with the squatters to get them back to their dormitory. But the squatters held fast to their demands that the authorities issue them housing permits and turn on the building’s water and gas. For three days already they had barricaded themselves in the building and created a human barrier at its entrance with pregnant women in front, followed by women and children, and men in the back. Their dramatic display of civil disobedience and the powerful symbolism evoked in its gendered organization came through even in the dry MVD report chronicling their revolt. The most physically vulnerable members of the community held its greatest power and were practically daring the police of one of the most violent and murderous regimes in world history to violate their power by force. The squatters gambled that the authorities would take pity on people who needed good housing. Insofar as avoiding physical removal was concerned, their strategy had thus far worked. Even the MVD wanted nothing to do with these
squatters and referred the Moscow police to the city procuracy for help in evicting them if all else failed. By the third day of the squatters’ action, the police had evidently chosen not to use force and were hoping that the more civil approach of negotiation or simply leaving the squatters in the dark without water would eventually work.3

The MVD report does not tell us what ultimately happened to the squatters. Yet this two-page snapshot of these workers’ lives raises questions that this book seeks to answer about where ordinary people and Khrushchev’s efforts to adequately house them fit in the Soviet experiment after Stalin. As the squatters’ story suggests, mass housing was not something that the “state” created for “society,” as if one was entirely separate from the other. These workers were agents of the state as builders of housing, but they were also members of families and together formed a community that was willing to take dramatic action to get better housing. How does such a blurring of the lines between state and society help us rethink who made the separate apartment under Khrushchev and who could claim it to be theirs? What roles did ordinary citizens play in this campaign to modernize urban life and continue the project of creating a classless society? What kind of post-Stalinist subject did the new social spaces of mass housing and its official discourses produce in conjunction with what ordinary people said and did in their everyday lives?

In December 1956, Khrushchev’s moves to overcome the “excesses” of Stalin’s terror state were hardly permanent, as the events in Budapest made clear. The unpredictable nature of this post-Stalinist existence raises other questions about the Moscow squatters’ actions. In their desperate, last-ditch attempt to ameliorate their living conditions, the squatters risked provoking the wrath of the world’s most powerful totalitarian regime. What convinced these people that this was a wise decision and that they were entitled to their own, single-family apartments? The MVD, evidently paralyzed by the power that pregnant women wielded, preferred negotiation over violence to resolve the situation. What did such an uncharacteristically restrained response by the Soviet Union’s organ of internal police suggest had happened to the state’s willingness to use violence and terror since Stalin’s death? What, if anything, did mass housing have to do with the Soviet state’s decision to curtail its use of mass violence and terror under Khrushchev?

In addressing these questions, this book demonstrates how the state and its citizens made a distinctly Soviet version of mass housing that forever changed the country and what its people expected to gain from socialism. At the center of this study is the story of ordinary urban dwellers and their move from communal apartments, barracks, and dormitories to separate apartments. I use residents’ mass, internal migration out of the housing that they had been forced to share with others and into their own private apartments as a frame for exploring the Soviet Union’s broader move out of the Stalin era and into the Khrushchev period. When the members of a family left their communal apartment (komunal’naia kvartira or komunalka) for a separate apartment, they left behind the Stalinist past as embodied in their previous housing for a new and empty apartment, a clean slate mirroring the uncharted reformism and “thaw” of the Khrushchev era. After architects and urban planners had done their work, these ordinary residents set about building communism on “Tomorrow Street”—as portrayed in Yuri Pimenov’s famous painting (see below)—by inhabiting the empty and sometimes incompletely built spaces of mass housing. Moving to the separate apartment is an ideal metaphor for exploring the transition from Stalinism to the Khrushchev era; but unlike most metaphors, it was experienced by millions of people annually. From 1953 to 1970, the Soviet government and its citizens in both cities and the countryside constructed 38,284,000 apartments and individually built homes, which permitted 140,900,000 individuals to acquire newly built housing.4

This book contributes to a growing body of scholarship that examines the critical roles that mass housing and consumption played in the post-Stalinist reinvention of the Soviet Union and other state socialist regimes such as East Germany and Czechoslovakia.5 Blair Ruble’s earlier study remains the most succinct account of Khrushchev’s mass housing campaign, the design of the khrushchevka, and its limitations in meeting Soviet citizens’ needs.6 Scholars have subsequently explored the mass housing campaign through analyses of specific topics of the overall project, such as property relations and gender.7 Turning our attention to architectural history, Stephen Bittner has examined how mass housing intersected with the high cultural politics of the thaw and debates over the architectural legacies of the Soviet and pre-Soviet past.8 Examining the prescriptions for consumer behaviors and domestic tastes in official discourses on mass housing, scholars have interpreted the khrushchevka as a central site in the Khrushchev regime’s project to fulfill the revolutionary goals of creating a New Soviet Man
and Woman. In a series of important articles, Susan Reid has studied several different topics, such as the intersection of gender and Cold War politics, the scientific discourses that informed mass housing, and urban residents' comments at furniture exhibitions.

Building upon this scholarship, the present study seeks to provide the most comprehensive and integrated historical analysis of the design, distribution, and consumption of Soviet mass housing and ordinary people's experience of moving to the separate apartment. Scholars of Soviet social history have paid the greatest attention to such groups as workers, the intelligentsia, peasants, the family, women, and nationalities. This book shifts our attention to the ordinary residents of mass housing and the separate apartment as a new social group that began to take shape under Khrushchev in a newly built environment on the outskirts of the Soviet citiescape. Like the couple and their neighbors in Pimenov's iconic painting of the period, Wedding on Tomorrow Street (1962), shown as figure I.2, urban dwellers entered their new neighborhoods and apartments full of anticipation about a new way of life that awaited them. As Pimenov’s painting suggests, Communism on Tomorrow Street was a work in progress, whose final steps ordinary residents would need to take on their own. In adapting the title of his painting for the title of this book, I point to my exploration of how ordinary people's expectations for the future and their lived experience intersected in mass housing with the regime's own hopes of reviving the communist project after Stalin. To explain how this occurred and why it mattered, this book examines the history of Soviet mass housing in three historical contexts: the international "housing question" that originated in the pan-European housing reform movement of the nineteenth century; the goals and legacies of the Russian Revolution; and the "thaw" in state-society relations after Stalin.

The Housing Question

Far from being a uniquely Soviet experience under Khrushchev, mass housing transformed cities around the world in the second half of the twentieth century, from Chicago and Moscow to Brasilia and Islamabad. As a major project of the modern welfare state, it provided millions of urban dwellers with single-family apartments designed according to standardized plans in high-density, multistory buildings. Its minimalist aesthetics and prefabricated materials promised a postwar urban existence permeated by scientific planning and synthetic materials. Countries around the world built mass housing to sustain or attain modernization and to at last resolve the "housing question" of the nineteenth century.

After World War II, mass housing emerged as a universal form of habitation that met the needs of the masses in vastly different contexts, including postwar reconstruction in Europe and the building of a new capital in Brazil. It existed across political and socioeconomic systems,
from capitalist liberal democracies to socialist one-party states and the postcolonial developing world. Mass housing was thus a global phenomenon that created the foundations of a common urban existence across borders, while still allowing states an opportunity to emphasize their fundamental ideological differences. One of these states was the Soviet Union, which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as a superpower on the world stage after more than thirty years of revolution, wars, and brutal dictatorship.

The Soviet system of housing that Khrushchev inherited from Stalin was one particular, if extreme, outcome of the pan-European housing reform movement and its adherents’ search for a definitive solution to the housing question. European social reformers and governments since the nineteenth century had positioned the housing question as a subset of the overall “social question,” both of which crystallized during and after World War I when state intervention in social and economic spheres such as housing massively expanded. Whereas other combatant states retreated from such interventions after the war, the new Soviet state remained firmly entrenched, driven by its Marxist-Leninist ideology to create a classless society and facing few obstacles from a decimated civil society.11

The Soviet Union subsequently failed to resolve the housing question during the New Economic Policy (NEP) and under Stalin. But the NEP and the Stalin era were not merely periods in which housing conditions worsened, only to be suddenly set on an entirely new course by Khrushchev’s team of reformers. Instead, Khrushchev’s regime built the mass housing campaign upon the economic, architectural, and legal frameworks of a housing sector forged since 1917, particularly under Stalin before the war.12 What was new about Khrushchev’s approach in contrast to Stalin’s were massive investments of material, financial, and labor resources, and a renewed commitment to finally resolve the housing question.

But Khrushchev’s mass housing campaign was not only a Soviet story of reform after Stalin. Equally important to explaining how it ultimately shaped ordinary residents’ everyday lives were its origins in the ideas of the nineteenth-century pan-European housing reform movement, especially norms for minimum living space, whose adaptation by the Bolsheviks and long-term impact on the design and distribution of the khrushchevka remain little understood by historians. In its broadest historical context, mass housing under Khrushchev was the realization of the Bolsheviks’ original plans for housing, whereby the workers’ state would eliminate once and for all the pan-European housing question of industrializing societies by providing all citizens with adequate and healthy habitation on an egalitarian basis. As this book seeks to show, the ordinary resident of mass housing who lived in the khrushchevka was the social product of an enormous state experiment in building housing that had its origins in nineteenth-century housing reform ideas and their particular evolution in the Soviet context.

Mass Housing and the Russian Revolution

As those Moscow workers who squatted in a new apartment building in 1956 showed, mass housing’s appearance in the Soviet cityscape could trigger desperate actions among residents eager to immediately improve their living conditions. It seemed that everyone wanted to get more out of this project and to do it more quickly than was humanly possible.

Instead of definitively resolving the housing question, I argue in this book, Khrushchev’s regime touched off a crisis of rising expectations that affected all major actors. Under Khrushchev, the leadership’s expectations of what mass housing could do stoked its broader utopian plans for building communism and beating the capitalist West in the competition over living standards. In 1957, Khrushchev’s regime boldly announced that all housing shortages would be eradicated within ten to twelve years.13 This deadline set a powerful precedent for Khrushchev’s better-known declaration in 1961 that Soviet society would build communism by 1980.14 Local soviet officials and factory managers believed that waiting lists for living space would finally be cleared and that labor turnover would be reduced once factories had satisfied their workers’ housing needs. The architects of mass housing saw it as an unprecedented opportunity to expand their power to reshape the everyday lives of an entire society through the rational organization of space. The members of the cultural intelligentsia who were charged with explaining to urban dwellers the proper ways of living in a separate apartment believed that they could at last rid society of its philistine tendencies and raise the “culturedness” (kul'turnost’) of all Soviet citizens.15 Meanwhile, the urban dwellers languishing in communal apartments and dormitories put incredible pressure on Khrushchev’s regime to fulfill its goal of putting all Soviet families in separate apart-
ments. But once they got there, these residents found themselves writing new petitions about construction and design defects, while others searched stores in vain for new furniture and household goods.

What did people—from the top leaders to the ordinary urban dweller—do when their expectations continued to rise in the face of a reality that never seemed to catch up? The answer to this question focuses our attention on how the Khrushchev period differed from the Stalin era and the violent legacy of the Soviet Union's origins in the Russian Revolution. In the face of an important campaign's shortcomings and failures, state and society under Khrushchev did not engage in mass terror. This was unusual in a country where waging war on society had been the government's modus operandi and executing scapegoats was the norm when things did not go as planned. After the Russian Revolution of October 1917, the Bolsheviks used Marxist ideology to sanction the mass murder of their perceived enemies and the violent destruction of the old ways of life to achieve their revolutionary aims: an industrialized and classless society free of exploitation and enjoying material plenty. Khrushchev's regime, scholars have shown, saw itself reviving and advancing, rather than abandoning, these aims of the Russian Revolution and used mass housing to bring them about. As will be shown in this book, Khrushchev's regime embarked on the mass housing campaign to finish two incomplete projects of the Russian Revolution—resolving the housing question and constructing communism—but without mass violence and terror.

Although historians have examined the intersection of housing, terror, and coercion from the Russian Revolution to Stalin's years in power, they have yet to explore the connection between mass housing and the Khrushchev regime's abandonment of terror and mass violence. This book argues that the two were closely related and mutually reinforcing. As a campaign that mobilized human, financial, and material resources to fulfill a state objective, mass housing was nothing new. Under Stalin, the state mobilized society and its resources for collectivization, rapid industrialization, and war. But unlike these past campaigns, Khrushchev's mass housing program was the first major campaign in Soviet history that did not result in the widespread destruction of human life.

In choosing the separate apartment, state and society were choosing a different set of political and social relations than those of the Russian Revolution and Stalinist past. Under Khrushchev, the architects, constructors, municipal government functionaries, and local party members who were responsible for shortcomings in housing still risked public reprimands and demotions, but they were not labeled enemies of the people or executed. Instead of relying on neighbors denouncing each other as enemies of the people, the state under Khrushchev used nonviolent "social organizations" to have citizens bring each other into line. By taking warring neighbors out of communal apartments and putting them into single-family apartments, Khrushchev's regime reinforced its turn away from terror in everyday life. In short, when the Soviet state provided an individual and his or her family with their own toilet, it was making an investment in the civil order of a new society whose members would be trained to use their new private spaces responsibly and to police one another in the public spaces of the mass housing community.

Mass housing's role in fulfilling the Russian Revolution by civil means was further reflected in one of its most understated, but revealing, features: the broad consensus between state and society on the superiority of the single-family, separate apartment and their shared distaste for communal housing. How did this consensus emerge? When and why did state and society "choose" the separate apartment over the alternatives? These questions draw our attention to the origins of the separate apartment, the very existence of which in the Soviet Union should strike us as an ideological anomaly. After all, what was a single-family apartment with the trappings of bourgeois family life—privacy, traditional gender roles, new consumer goods, and aspects of private ownership—doing in a socialist country in the first place?

Under the Tsarist regime, workers languished in overcrowded tenements and factory barracks while the single-family apartments of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy stood out as symbols of class inequalities and exploitation. In the wake of the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks and their fellow travelers waged war on the family, private property, and traditional life as pillars of the Tsarist order. The family would soon "wither away," once collectivist living arrangements had laid the foundations for socialism in everyday life. From the perspective of these early Bolshevik visions, the separate apartment was not the solution but the problem. But by the mid-1950s, Khrushchev's regime presented mass housing and the separate apartment as the long-awaited fulfillment of the Bolsheviks' revolutionary aims to resolve the housing question and create a classless society.
As I argue in this book, the consensus on making the separate apartment a mass phenomenon in Soviet life began to take shape under Stalin before the war. Stalin's and Khrushchev's regimes contributed different elements to this consensus, which reflected the cultural values and social priorities of each. The Stalinist regime marginalized radical architectural theories on collective living and rehabilitated the single-family apartment as a "cultured" form of urban housing that reflected Stalinism's profamily values and social stratification. Stalin's regime made separate apartments available only to the elites in the party-state hierarchy, industry, and the cultural intelligentsia, while the rest of society made do in communal apartments, barracks, and dormitories. By the time Khrushchev came to power, the single-family apartment had thus already emerged as the ideal, if extremely scarce, form of urban housing. What made Khrushchev's approach different was his decision to make the separate apartment a mass phenomenon. Through the mass housing campaign, his regime distributed separate apartments to the one social group—the family—that cut across all other social divisions. This reflected and advanced the populism of his social agenda like no other reform. For the first time in Soviet history, the state was taking significant steps to improve the housing conditions of most urban dwellers and fulfill the egalitarian promise of the Russian Revolution.

The Separate Apartment and the Thaw

In the early 1950s, the Soviet Union's housing crisis intersected with the political turmoil brought about by the country's search for new leadership and new directions after Stalin's death. Khrushchev ultimately emerged as the country's new leader and spearheaded fundamental reforms to the socialist system until his removal from power in 1964. Both contemporary observers and scholars have described the period after Stalin as a "thaw" in state-society relations, during which the Communist Party curtailed the worst excesses of Stalinism and allowed for greater freedoms in social and cultural life. Whereas historical periods typically acquire their labels after the fact, the origins of the term "thaw" were situated at the very beginning of this era, when the Soviet writer Ilya Ehrenburg wrote his 1954 novella The Thaw (Otepel').

Ehrenburg's tale, set in a provincial town far from the high politics of Moscow, examines the lives of several couples in the local Soviet intelligentsia that undergo turbulent changes in their love lives, family relationships, and careers in the transitory period between a harsh winter's closing weeks and the dawn of a liberating spring. The novel's main point is that there is more to life than meeting production quotas or enduring loveless marriages. People have personal needs and desires, which must also be fulfilled alongside work to achieve one's full potential as a human being. Removed from its mid-twentieth-century Soviet context, Ehrenburg's novella is a modern tale of urban professionals anywhere in the world attempting to achieve a balance between their private and professional lives with enough spare time on their hands to contemplate the meaning of the choices they face. But in its post-Stalinist context, the novella also captured the sense of the new opportunities and changes that people enjoyed as the deep freeze of Stalinism gave way to an uncertain but invigorating set of alternatives for what lay in the future.

In the wake of Ehrenburg's novella, images of ice melting after years of deep freeze became the choice metaphor for repairing the injustices of the Stalin years and describing positive change under Khrushchev. The 1961 film Clear Skies (Chistoe nebo) depicted a river breaking out of its freeze as the sign that the political reforms of a new day would allow the hero (a fighter pilot previously disgraced for having been a prisoner of war) to become whole again in his personal life and regain his Communist Party membership. In a similar fashion, mass housing would allow families, individuals, and apartments to become whole again following the violence of the Stalin years, which had torn apart people's lives and homes. The fragmented world of communal apartments was subdivided between warring neighbors and reflected the upheavals of life under Stalin. In theory, the move to a fully integrated, family apartment in a well-designed neighborhood would repair that fragmented existence and resolve any tension between public and private life.

Although Ehrenburg made only vague references in his novella to dramatic changes in high politics following Stalin's death, the dilapidated state of industrial workers' housing emerges in his story as a central sign of the Stalinist state's neglect of people's everyday material lives and the positive improvements that must come once the thaw begins. The factory director Ivan Zhuravlev's decision to endlessly postpone the construction of new housing for his workers in favor of production ultimately ruins him. When an unexpected storm destroys their makeshift habitats, he is called to Moscow to answer for his mis-
placed priorities and loses his job. As spring arrives, the company town at last sees the construction of workers’ new housing.

The industrial workers who are the beneficiaries of such change and their role in the novella suggest that not all members of this community are meant to experience the thaw in the same way. The representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia at the center of Ehrenburg’s story—teachers, painters, engineers, and students—grapple with the weighty issues of love, art, and death in a changing world and exercise their agency by making life-changing decisions at critical moments. In contrast, ordinary workers are faceless, passive characters on the margins of the novella, who are to be pitied for their dire living conditions and fate at the hands of nature’s arbitrariness and a neglectful boss but who are properly grateful once construction gets going.

Scholars, inspired in part by Ehrenburg’s story, have used the “thaw” as an organizing concept to examine the new and unpredictable ways that people—namely, the cultural intelligentsia—could talk and act after Stalin’s death. In this sense, the thaw represents a mentalité, made possible but also delimited by the top leadership through such actions as Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech,” the dismantling of the Gulag, and the rehabilitation of those repressed under Stalin.22 For other scholars, the thaw represented a relaxation of controls within the state apparatus, which enterprising members of the cultural intelligentsia exploited to reshape education and popular tastes in matters ranging from clothing to home décor. Still others use the thaw to describe the emergence of the Soviet Union’s foreign policy of peaceful coexistence with the West and its greater openness to cultural contacts with the outside world.23

In addition to the thaw, scholars have employed the concept of “de-Stalinization” to describe the reforms of the Khrushchev era. Although the “thaw” and “de-Stalinization” are sometimes used interchangeably, meaningful distinctions exist. Scholars tend to prefer de-Stalinization when examining policies that effected systemic changes, primarily in the Communist Party, the police state, and the economy.24 They use de-Stalinization to describe how the power vacuum created by Stalin’s death and the dismantling of his personality cult reshaped all spheres of life, from public opinion to the Soviet citizen’s sense of self.25 Although some scholars have examined the institutional and economic history of mass housing as examples of de-Stalinization,26 others have seen it as part of the thaw when studying such topics as architectural and cultural history.27

The range of social actors who appear in scholars’ traditional treatment of the thaw has often reflected the subtle distinctions between the Soviet intelligentsia and ordinary workers that Ehrenburg included in his story. Although scholars have tended to imply that the thaw touched most Soviet citizens, as Ehrenburg does, their evidence has mostly been drawn from the intersection of high politics and high culture. From Khrushchev’s “Secret Speech” to Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s novel One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, the thaw’s chief agents were Communist Party leaders, who managed and occasionally reversed it, and the members of the cultural intelligentsia who exploited it to nurture their liberal values, supposedly on behalf of the rest of society.28 Scholars often assume that the cultural intelligentsia’s words and actions captured the thaw’s essence and shaped how most Soviet citizens experienced it.29 In a rather self-serving gesture, it is a novella within Ehrenburg’s own novella and the local Soviet intelligentsia’s various reactions to it that get his story going. How else could Soviet citizens possibly begin to think and act differently than by reading and discussing a novel?

Including social groups outside the cultural intelligentsia in the thaw narrative has proven difficult for scholars. While the cultural intelligentsia enjoyed the thaw, ordinary people, like the passive workers in the background of Ehrenburg’s novella, got “reforms,” including new consumer items, better housing, and tourism.30 Some scholars have examined ordinary people in the context of the thaw, but mainly where their actions intersected with key moments of its traditional narrative, such as popular reactions to the “Secret Speech” and Solzhenitsyn’s book.31 Casting a wider net, others have explored how the cultural logic of the thaw—a schizophrenic approach to liberalization, punctuated by contradictions and reversals—shaped and reflected the discourses of social policies such as mass housing, through which ordinary people left their mark on the thaw by further legitimizing demands for better living standards.32

Further complicating the picture, a few historians have shown that people did not always react as expected according to traditional thaw narratives. Rather than celebrating the dismantling of the Gulag, a move that seemingly embodied the thaw, some citizens criticized prisoners’ releases and did so in the Stalinist discourse of rooting out “enemies of the people.”33 And some readers of children’s literature not only refused to heap praise on writers for exploring new themes but
sometimes challenged their authority to set moral standards and proper taste.34

This latter dynamic—the unpredictable things that ordinary people said and did, especially to the consternation of members of the cultural intelligentsia—represents a major understudied aspect of the thaw and features prominently in this book. City dwellers’ words and actions reveal a different field of tensions within the thaw from the conventional narratives of society (i.e., the cultural intelligentsia) struggling with the state (Communist Party ideologues) over the limits of the permissible (in high culture). As we will see, ordinary residents who were willing to challenge the authority of the architects, furniture designers, and local housing officials involved with mass housing exhibited what scholars have identified as the thaw’s chief dynamics but reserved for the cultural intelligentsia: iconoclasm, calls for change, attacking founding myths, scorning past accomplishments, and recalibrating existing discourses for new aims.35 By living in a separate apartment and critiquing mass housing, urban dwellers transformed the thaw from an elite into a popular experience.

The mass housing campaign encompassed all layers of society, from the top leaders who devised it to the urban residents who moved into separate apartments. Everyone had a housing question to resolve in the Soviet Union, including those, like the Moscow construction workers discussed above, who built separate apartments for a living. Recognizing the range of actors and what they could decide in this campaign complicates our conventional understanding of how this state and its society organized themselves. The evidence presented in this book makes it difficult to say that the “state” imposed or gave “society” the separate apartment with little input from the latter, as traditional models of Soviet totalitarianism or the welfare state would suggest. Government functionaries with their own housing questions to resolve benefited as much from mass housing as the ordinary people it was intended to help, who themselves were required to invest incredible amounts of time, labor, and financial resources to improve their living conditions.36

A survey of the many actors involved in the mass housing campaign who appear in the pages of this book illustrates the mass participation it elicited. Those directly involved in the campaign included the architects, construction workers, civil engineers, and factory workers in the building supplies industries who designed and constructed the housing, and the local municipal officials and factory managers who were in charge of its distribution. The campaign depended upon an army of bureaucrats who worked for various ministries and institutions in charge of mass housing’s planning, financing, and statistical accounting. A new line of furniture designed specifically for new housing required an additional contingent of designers, planners, manufacturers, furniture store personnel, and managers of furniture exhibitions. Bureaucrats at the Party Control Commission, the State Control Commission, and the All-Union Central Council of Professional Unions provided much-needed oversight on the campaign. Writers and artists represented mass housing and shaped the meanings of the separate apartment in literature and art. Journalists from both national and local newspapers chronicled the campaign’s successes and failures. Writers for magazines and homemaking advice pamphlets explained the new aesthetic principles and rational way of life of separate apartments. All these workers, bureaucrats, and professionals not only worked in some fashion to make mass housing possible but were also urban residents with their own housing question to resolve.

Urban dwellers in occupations completely unrelated to housing likewise participated in ways that went far beyond receiving a separate apartment from the state. In the “people’s construction” campaign, industrial workers volunteered for overtime work on their factory’s housing projects in exchange for a separate apartment. Members of housing construction cooperatives helped finance the construction of their housing. With the aid of state loans, people continued to build single-family homes in midsized cities and towns. Urban dwellers participated directly in the distribution of housing by initiating legal (and not so legal) living space exchanges, and shaped the meaning of the waiting list for living space by lobbying municipal officials in writing and in person. Once in their new apartments, residents invited friends and family over for a housewarming party (novosel’ e) to celebrate their new way of life. They joined neighborhood “social organizations,” patrolled their own streets, and attended house committee meetings. They visited furniture and apartment exhibitions, where they shared their impressions of the khrushchevka and its household objects with architects and furniture designers in comment books. Their complaints in letters to architectural congresses and at residential meetings even
influenced design changes in the next generation of separate apartments. And with an eye on life in the West, they flocked to the American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 to see how their capitalist counterparts lived while Khrushchev and Nixon sparred in the kitchen.

As these interactions illustrate, the ordinary residents of mass housing actively engaged state actors in shaping the separate apartment and its meanings. They exercised their agency within official discourses and institutions that ultimately remained under the control of the Communist Party's Central Committee and its top leadership. Khrushchev's regime exercised the sole authority to start the mass housing campaign and to determine the contours of its most important features, such as the amount of housing built and the rules for its distribution. Through its total control of the mass media, the party defined the permissible representations of mass housing. Propaganda heralding the campaign's goals and achievements delimited the discourses that people used in residential meetings and letters of complaint. Advice literature on homemaking established norms for domestic and consumer behavior meant to guide residents (especially housewives) in their new everyday lives. Yet the moment we begin to identify the persons who wrote the content of housing propaganda, we find ourselves once more dealing with individuals far removed from the top leadership with their own housing question to resolve. Such persons worked for the state within its rules, but they were also urban residents in search of a separate apartment with a vested interest in making mass housing work.

Finally, several paragraphs are in order to explain my use of the terms "ordinary people" and "ordinary residents" when describing the main characters of this story—the millions of Soviet citizens who moved into separate apartments under Khrushchev's regime. I use "ordinary" first and foremost to capture the common experiences of mass housing residents that cut across social lines. The experience of moving to a separate apartment and settling into everyday life in new microdistricts on the outskirts of town was becoming a rather ordinary thing for Soviet citizens from almost all walks of life. In this sense, the "ordinary residents" of mass housing were people who lived through and shaped a common experience repeated in cities throughout the Soviet Union. I do not mean to suggest, however, that these residents were an undifferentiated whole. Quite the contrary; throughout this book, I try to identify as much as possible who such residents were in terms of age, gender, profession, and personal history, and how their individual backgrounds and social identities intersected with their experiences as "ordinary residents" of mass housing.

Thinking about who belonged to the ranks of "ordinary people" and how Khrushchev's mass housing shaped them as a group also allows us to both question and clarify social differences that run deep in twentieth-century Russian history. Although Ehrenburg's novella suggests a sharp distinction between the Soviet intelligentsia and ordinary people, this book shows that members of the intelligentsia could be ordinary residents as well in search of their own separate apartments. Throughout the book, I adopt the broader, official definition of the intelligentsia, which not only included members of the remaining prerevolutionary Russian intelligentsia and the cultural elite but also members of the Communist Party and those who had received a technical or higher education and moved up the ranks of society as engineers, administrators, educators, lawyers, doctors, agronomists, and so on. Many of these members of the "Soviet intelligentsia," as this broader category is known to historians and as they are called throughout this book, joined industrial workers in making the move to the separate apartment and becoming the "ordinary residents" of mass housing estates.

A useful distinction between these "ordinary residents" and the intelligentsia does exist, however, when I discuss the relationship between residents of the khrushchevka and its makers—namely, mass housing architects, furniture designers, and homemaking advice specialists. In this case, I use the term "cultural intelligentsia"—which included writers, artists, composers, and filmmakers among others—to denote the subset of the Soviet intelligentsia whose job it was to advance the cultural edification of the masses. Concerned as they were with redefining ordinary people's everyday lives and cultural habits, mass housing architects, furniture designers, and homemaking advice specialists belonged to the cultural intelligentsia. As this book shows, their authority to reshape everyday life came under attack by ordinary residents of mass housing, some of whom were members of the broader Soviet intelligentsia.

I also use "ordinary" to contrast mass housing residents with the more well-known actors of the thaw, to whom historians have normally assigned the greatest agency. Unlike politicians or writers who were famous in their time and left lengthy paper trails in print media
and the archives, most of the people in this story left only fleeting traces of their existence in statistical sourcebooks, letters of complaint, comment books at exhibitions, or residential meetings that somebody thought worthwhile to record. These residents of mass housing are thus "ordinary" to the historian in the sense of having fallen largely out of the historical record and not belonging to the ranks of individuals who were well known at the time. The intent of the present study is to identify experiences that were common or ordinary to millions of mass housing residents, and to restore their proper place in Soviet life after Stalin.

But as Yanni Kotsonis points out in a recent historiographical essay, the historian of "ordinary people" should not only attempt to recoup their fleeting traces in a noble effort to restore their voice and agency for their own sake. The historian must also explain what was extraordinary about the words and actions of these people who have typically slipped through the cracks of the historical record and receded into the faceless whole of the masses. I hope this book achieves this by demonstrating how ordinary residents anticipated and enacted aspects of the thaw that we have traditionally attributed to Khrushchev, the Communist Party, and well-published members of the cultural intelligentsia.

Another way I reveal what was extraordinary about mass housing residents' everyday lives is to contrast their experiences with what came before the Khrushchev era. As Sheila Fitzpatrick has shown, everyday life under Stalin was anything but ordinary with respect to what Soviet citizens thought to be normal and predictable. Whether one experienced social mobility up the ranks of Soviet society or was cast down to the lowest depths of the Gulag in a nightmare of false accusations and terrifying repression, there was something inherently extraordinary about life under Stalin. In the Khrushchev era, people's lives became decidedly less turbulent and less violent, and more settled and more normal, which in itself was an extraordinary thing. The move to the single-family separate apartment embodied this incredible change from the Stalin era to the Khrushchev era. The ordinariness and normality that its way of life represented were something that Soviet citizens had come to crave under Stalin and demanded once he was dead. The fact that the Soviet leaders under Khrushchev, normally accustomed to waging war on society, agreed with this craving and thus tried

to make the separate apartment available to everyone was an extraordinary moment in Soviet history.

Plan of the Book and an Overview of Primary Sources

As with any human-made object that enjoyed a social life worth studying, a history of the khrushchevka requires us to examine its production, circulation, and consumption and show how each was related to the other. This book is organized accordingly.

Part I, which consists of chapters 1 and 2, focuses on the making of the separate apartment, with particular attention to its design. Chapter 1 traces the origins of the khrushchevka's layout and dimensions to the quest for minimum living space standards in the nineteenth-century pan-European housing reform movement. I demonstrate how the Bolsheviks' peculiar adaptation of these minimum standards created a fundamental contradiction between the principles of socialist housing distribution based in square meters of living space per person and the ideal of single-family occupancy once it was resurrected in the Stalinist 1930s. Chapter 2 examines how the architects of mass housing resolved this contradiction, which had led to the communalization of apartments, and in so doing laid the foundations for the khrushchevka's design. The chapter also traces the dramatic expansion of mass housing construction under Khrushchev and architects' failed attempts to reform the principles of design in response to residents' growing needs and desires. These first two chapters together provide an original explanation of the khrushchevka's design origins that allows us to better understand what urban dwellers said and did about the apartment's problems.

In part II, which comprises chapter 3 and 4, we turn our attention to the allocation of housing and its role in reorganizing Soviet society after Stalin. In a case study of Leningrad, chapter 3 reveals the problems that Khrushchev's regime faced implementing its vision of the egalitarian social order that mass housing promised to deliver. In response and in resistance to that vision, urban dwellers and municipal officials put forth various notions of socially differentiated access to housing based on who a person had become in Soviet society and what he or she had contributed or suffered under Stalin. In doing so, they reshaped the
very meaning of the waiting list for living space and politicized it as a
register of existing social hierarchies precisely at the time that Khrus-
chev's regime hoped to empty it of its political meaning and bring the
housing question to a final resolution. In chapter 4, I examine how the
regime's egalitarian visions were further complicated by two opportu-
nities that it gave urban dwellers to gain fast-track access to the sepa-
rate apartment outside the system of waiting lists for state housing.
The first was "people's construction" in the middle to late 1950s, which
enabled factory laborers to work extra hours on their enterprises' hous-
ing in exchange for a separate apartment. Its rhetoric of volunteer-
ism and mutual help presaged a communist way of life in which
workers could pursue their self-interest not at the exploitation of
others but within communities whose members both worked and lived
together. The second opportunity was the housing construction co-
operative, which appropriated the rhetoric of people's construction,
displaced it as the fast-track method for obtaining a separate apart-
ment, and served urban professionals and cultural elites instead of
workers. By shutting down people's construction and opting for the
cooperative, the regime quietly signaled that class still mattered in a
society that was theoretically about to make the final transition to
communism.41

Having considered the separate apartment's making and distribu-
tion in parts I and II, we turn in part III (chapters 5 through 7) to what
residents said and did when they moved into their new apartments and
neighborhoods. Chapter 5 examines how the discourse on the "com-
munist way of life" incorporated separate apartments as a critical link
in the idealized mass housing communities of the communist future. It
then explores how residents went about creating community in new
neighborhoods that suffered design and structural deficiencies. Despite
these shortcomings, residents' efforts often bolstered rhetoric on the
communist way of life that called upon urban dwellers to take an active
role in running their communities. In chapter 6, I venture into the
khrushchevka and its material world of new furniture and household
objects as further signs of what the communist way of life promised in
theory and delivered in practice. Chapter 7 concludes by examining the
politics of complaint that emerged as residents of the khrushchevka
confronted architects, furniture designers, and housing officials about
the shortcomings of mass housing and furniture. In their complaints,
urban residents brought discussions back to the unresolved design is-
sues addressed in chapters 1 and 2. They insisted that the housing ques-
tion was far from over and that some were willing to invoke Stalin-era
tactics of coercion and public denunciation to force architects and
housing officials to fix design flaws and construction defects.

The present study is based on extensive research in archival and
published sources. From top Communist Party archives to local new-
papers, the primary sources used in this study allow for an original
analysis that connects the khrushchevka's design origins and its alloca-
tion to Soviet citizens' everyday lives and their own participation in its
making. Original research in central state, party, and economics ar-
chives elucidates the leadership's role in shaping little-understood
phases of the mass housing campaign, such as a failed reform of the
waiting lists for state housing and high-level discussions about class
that stalled the re-creation of cooperative housing for urban profes-
sionals and cultural elites. The roles that the campaign's architects,
furniture designers, and taste arbiters played in shaping the khrushchevka
and their dialogue with ordinary residents are revealed through original
research in the art and literature archives of both Moscow and
Saint Petersburg, as well as extensive research in published sources such
as architectural journals, homemaking advice pamphlets, and newspa-
pers. New research in Saint Petersburg's local archives shifts our at-
tention away from the leadership and Moscow to ordinary people's
roles in shaping the move to the separate apartment, the meaning of
the waiting list, and the creation of mass housing communities. With a
prerevolutionary housing stock that primarily consisted of communal
apartments created in the wake of the Russian Revolution, Leningrad
provides an ideal setting for examining how urban dwellers relocated
from the overcrowded kommunalka to the single-family separate apart-
ment. To begin our investigation, let us first turn to the nineteenth-
century origins of the housing question that Soviet citizens in the mid-
twentieth century were far from convinced had been answered to their
liking.
Notes

Introduction

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. These figures were tabulated using official statistics in Narodnoe khozjatstvo SSSR v 1959 godu (Moscow: Gosstatizdat TsSU SSSR, 1960), 568; Narodnoe khozjatstvo SSSR v 1967 g. (Moscow: Statistika, 1968), 677, 681; Narodnoe khozjatstvo SSSR v 1974 g. (Moscow: Statistika, 1975), 581, 585.
5. Greg Castillo presents a fascinating transnational history of mid-twentieth-century domestic design, including East Germany, in which he demonstrates how Cold War warriors on both sides of the Iron Curtain claimed the mantle of the international style in staking the superiority of their socioeconomic systems after World War II. See Greg Castillo, Cold War on the Home Front: The Soft Power of Midcentury Design (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). See also Kimberly Zarecor’s recent history of mass housing and architecture in the postwar construction of socialism in Czechoslovakia: Kimberly Zarecor, Manufacturing a Socialist Modernity: Housing in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1960 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).
7. In a recent study that locates the origins of Khrushchev’s mass housing campaign in the late Stalin era, Mark Smith focuses on the evolution of property rights in mass housing and what they reveal about the Soviet Union’s status as a welfare state under Khrushchev. Mark Smith, Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010). Lynne Attwood has recently examined the intersection of mass housing and gender in tracing women’s evolving role in Soviet society. Lynne Attwood, Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).


12. For a study that emphasizes the origins of Khrushchev’s mass housing campaign in the late Stalin years after the war, see Smith, *Property*.


15. On the ways in which the cultural intelligentsia took advantage of the mass housing campaign to pursue their ideas on transforming the Soviet everyday, see Buchli, “Khrushchev, Modernism”; Reid, “Khrushchev Modern”; and Reid, *Khrushchev Kitchen*.


21. Others have similarly noted the importance of housing in Ehrenburg’s story. See Geoffrey Barraclough, “Late Socialist Housing: Prefabricated Housing in Leningrad from Khrushchev to Gorbachev” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1997), 6–7.


29. Stephen Bittner explains how the thaw’s meaning as a metaphor for the Khrushchev period has changed over time and how the cultural intelligentsia’s collective memory of the thaw shapes scholars’ understanding of it. Bittner, *Many Lives*, 1–18.


of life of separate groups of the population that allow for one or another increase in these norms.” A. Systin et al., *Sanitarne zakonodateli'svo: Sbornik vashneishikh zakonov i rasporazhenii po voprosam sanitarno-profilakticheskogo dela* (Moscow, 1926), 7.

3. I thank Alexander Vlasov for this illustrative joke.


8. An exception in the scholarship is Geoffrey Barraclough, who notes how distribution norms shaped design and the dimensions of rooms in his study of mass housing under Khrushchev and through the Gorbatchev era. His analysis, however, does not trace the origins of this relationship between distribution and design further back than the Khrushchev era. Geoffrey Barraclough, "Late Socialist Housing: Prefabricated Housing in Leningrad from Khrushchev to Gorbatchev" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1997), 188–205.

9. In relating the khrushchevska to the pan-European history of minimum living standards, this chapter and the next draw in particular on the study by Dana Simmons, “Minimal Frenchmen: Science and Standards of Living, 1840–1960” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2004).


12. The 1897 congress, attended by a delegation from Russia, featured state intervention as its first question. *Actes du Congrès international*, v, xxv. The question was also featured at the congress in 1900. *Compte rendu et documents du Congrès international*, 6.

Chapter 1

1. Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiiv literaturnyi i ikonostas), fond (f.) 674, opis’ (op.) 4, delo (d.) 12, list (l.) 44.

2. Regulations on minimum living space in July 1919 mandated that "when establishing local norms, take into account the professional circumstances and way