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"Trialling… and erring": a historical overview of housing in Petrograd, Leningrad, and Saint Petersburg

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Abstract:
This article provides a historical overview of housing in Saint Petersburg from the late Tsarist Empire, to the Soviet Union, and the successor Russian Federation. It is divided into five parts: an introduction, three sections that treat the distinct housing models enacted by the three political entities which have handled the city of Petrograd, then Leningrad, and lastly, Saint Petersburg, and a conclusion. These three entities are, respectively, the Russian empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation. In this manner, the first part gives insight into Petrograd's housing before the First World War and throughout the 1917 and 1918 Revolutions and the Russian Civil War, treating the deterioration of the housing stock. The second section looks at the housing situation in more generally the Soviet Union but also Leningrad, examining the housing policies carried out in times of Josef Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, and Mikhail Gorbachev. The third one assesses the process of housing privatisation in the Russian Federation, dissecting the reasons for its imperfect development. Finally, the conclusion suggests that none of the tree housing

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models mentioned above has been able to successfully cope with the housing shortage and points out Nikita Khrushchev as the leader who did the most to relieve the housing shortage.

Key Words:
Soviet housing, housing privatisation, housing shortage, Saint Petersburg.

Resum:
Aquest article ofereix una visió històrica de l'habitatge a Sant Petersburg des del final de l'Imperi tsarista fins a la Unió Soviètica i la Federació Russa successora. Es divideix en cinc parts: una introducció, tres apartats que tracten els diferents models d'habitatge promulgats per les tres entitats polítiques que han gestionat la ciutat de Petrograd, després Leningrad i, finalment, Sant Petersburg, i una conclusió. Aquestes tres entitats són, respectivament, l'imperi rus, la Unió Soviètica i la Federació Russa. D'aquesta manera, la primera part dóna una visió de l'habitatge de Petrograd abans de la Primera Guerra Mundial i durant les revolucions de 1917 i 1918 i la Guerra Civil Russa, tractant el deteriorament del parc d'habitatges. La segona secció analitza la situació de l'habitatge a la Unió Soviètica en general, però també a Leningrad, examinant les polítiques d'habitatge realitzades en temps de Josef Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev i Mikhail Gorbatxov. El tercer avalua el procés de privatització de l'habitatge a la Federació de Rússia, analitzant les raons del seu desenvolupament imperfecte. Finalment, la conclusió suggereix que cap dels models d'habitatges en arbres esmentats anteriorment ha estat capaç de fer front amb èxit a l'escassetat d'habitatges i assenyala Nikita Khrushchev com el líder que més va fer per alleujar l'escassetat d'habitatges.

Paraules Clau:
Habitatge soviètic, privatització de l'habitatge, escassetat d'habitatges, Sant Petersburg

Introduction

This article provides a historical overview of housing in Saint Petersburg from the late Tsarist Empire, to the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation. It is divided into four sections: the first one gives insight into the housing situation of Tsarist Petrograd before the First World War and throughout the 1917 and 1918 Revolutions and the Russian Civil War, discussing the transition from a private to a public housing model, the deterioration of the housing stock, and the massive exodus from the city. The second section examines the housing situation in the Soviet Union, assessing the consolidation of the Soviet housing model and the housing policies carried out in times of Josef Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, and Mikhail Gorbachev, along with touching upon the idiosyncratic situation of Leningrad. The third one assesses the process of housing privatisation in the Russian Federation, elaborating on the reasons for its unwholesome development, along with examining the situation of Saint Petersburg, a city where the presence of Soviet-inherited communal flats is still pervasive. Finally, a conclusion suggests that none of the housing models mentioned above has been able to successfully address the housing shortage and points out Nikita Khrushchev as the leader who quantitatively did the most to relieve it.

The housing Revolution: the late Tsarist and early Soviet Petrograd

This section offers an overview of housing in Petrograd before the First World War and develops the events related to housing throughout the 1917 Revolutions and the Russian Civil War.

Saint Petersburg, renamed Petrograd in 1914 to avoid Germanic resemblances in times of the First World War, was the capital and most populated city of the Russian empire with 2,300,000 inhabitants[2]. In the city existed various housing types, which were quite differentiated among them in terms of living conditions and space, as they were located in distinct quarters and inhabited by distinct social groups. This social and spatial fragmentation was flagrant in the Russian empire, where poverty and inequality were rampant for the majority of the population. On the one hand, the palaces, administrative buildings, and apartments of the nobility and the

[2] Blair A. Ruble, *Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 213–14.

bourgeois were located in the city centre, near the Admiralty and the Winter Palace. These were vast apartments of about 200 to 300 m2 and ceilings of over 4 metres, built in the late 19th century and early 20th century and located in the city centre, in the Avenues Nevsky, Ligovsky or Litevsky, and the Fontana and Neva Embankments. Crossing the Neva, in the Vasilevsky and Petrogradsky districts lived a mixture of small bourgeois and workers. They primarily were officials, high-skilled workers, or intellectuals, which could rent an apartment and were relatively well off. Nevertheless, many times they struggled to find apartments due to the housing shortage that was blatant already back then[3].

Likewise, the majority of workers lived and worked in factories in the upper, eastern, and lower regions of Petrograd, in areas that later would become Bolshevik strongholds. This eagerness for change by the worse-off is understandable, for their living conditions were appalling. To illustrate, before the First World War, there was an average of over 2 persons living per room and there were about 50000 apartments with up to 4 people per room. Moreover, the flats they inhabited lacked reliable water and electricity supply systems, public transport, or paved roads nearby. The relatively well-off workers owned a corner of about 2 metres separated with curtains within a room, while the worse-off shared bunks in dark, dirty, and poorly ventilated rooms and corridors, having dreadful consequences for their health. An example is the fourfold death rate of the workers in the district of Vyborg, who lived next to the garbage dump. Others lived in barracks, far from the centre and their working places, thus having to travel long distances by foot every day. This miserable housing cost around 15 of the workers' income. Petrograd had the highest rents of all European capitals, together with the most crowded flats and the most unhealthful living conditions[4]. Those that could not afford rents had to resort to charity groups. In the city, there were about 8200 beds in night shelters, for around 20,000 homeless. All in all, pre-revolutionary housing conditions were awful for most of the urban residents[5], and they even worsened during the First World War and the Revolutions.

As Vladimir Ilyich Lenin once famously said: “there are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks when decades happen.” One of these historical momentums occurred in February 1917, when the Revolutions sparked off. At that time, widespread looting and

[3] Hubertus F. Jahn, “The Housing Revolution in Petrograd 1917-1920,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 38, no. 2 (1990): 212–14.
[4] Jahn, “The Housing Revolution in Petrograd 1917-1920,” 213–14.
[5] Timothy Sosnovy, “The Soviet Housing Situation Today,” *Soviet Studies* 11, no. 1 (1959): 1.

expropriation of 'class enemies' housing and properties took place, in a spiral of chaos, vandalism, vague ideas of social justice and personal greed. Therefore, the political Revolution was paralleled by an unrestrained housing Revolution[6]. Eventually, the Bolsheviks understood that some degree of order was needed to bring about the Revolution and to avoid the blossoming of rival groups, such as the anarchists. Their housing policies drew on Lenin's and Engel's writings, based on the idea of putting the poor in the house of their 'former masters'. They were also inspired by the Marxist critique of the relationship between landlord and tenant, perceived as unjust and unproductive[7]. Accordingly, the Bolsheviks enacted two main regulations: the expropriation of empty houses for needy families and the expelling of political opponents from squatted apartments[8]. Moreover, they decentralised housing granting large autonomy to district authorities. In the same line, the Soviet of Petrograd drafted in early 1918 the policies of "compression" and "resettling", which dictated that bourgeois were to keep one room per adult plus an additional one for the children of their flats, while the remaining rooms were to be distributed among the needy ones[9]. Other sources assert the right was to keep one room per family[10], with this seeming credible for in the 1926 census most families lived in just one room. In any case, flats of 200 to 300 square metres previously owned by the wealthy were now to be inhabited by several families. The bourgeois started sharing kitchens and restrooms with the workers, marking the birth of the communal apartments or kommunalkas in conditions of hostile coexistence[11]. A decree of August 1918 also abolished private property of buildings with more than five flats, excluding only small private dwellings, thus seizing most urban housing[12].

For the rest of the housing, a census of empty flats was carried out, following the criterion that leaving an apartment for more than two months should lead to its expropriation. Luxurious hotels, such as the Severnaya or the Evropeyskaya, were nationalised, nesting the first workers'

[6] Jahn, "The Housing Revolution in Petrograd 1917-1920," 219.
[7] Thomas A. Reiner, "Land and Housing in the USSR During the Gorbachev Years," *Soviet Geography* 32, no. 10 (1991): 684, https://doi.org/10.1080/00385417.1991.10640885.
[8] Christopher Williams, *Health and Welfare in St. Petersburg, 1900–1941: Protecting the Collective* (New York: Routledge, 2018), Chapter 3.
[9] Jahn, "The Housing Revolution in Petrograd 1917-1920," 220.
[10] Alexey Krasheninnokov, "Urban Slums Reports: The Case of Moscow, Russia," Understanding Slums: Case Studies for the Global Report on Human Settlements 2003 (Moscow Architectural Institute, Moscow, 2003), 3.
[11] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 1–4.
[12] Bernard Rudden, "Soviet Housing Law," *British Institute of International and Comparative Law* 12, no. 2 (1963): 593.

communes. Even if some workers were reluctant to move to the city centre, concerned about the distances they would have to travel daily to reach factories usually located in the outskirts, policies such as free public transport, relocation to apartments with central heating, or subsidies helped moving 65.000 working families only in 1918 and 1919[13]. Around 550.000 people moved during the Civil War[14]. Expropriations were, nevertheless, not that caring with the ordinary worker, for 18,5% of the expropriated buildings went to the hands of trade unions, committees, and boards. Likewise, some expropriations were motivated by personal rivalries. To illustrate, the Bolsheviks confiscated houses of intelligentsia members or even a lunatic asylum without apparent reason. However, the new authorities also had some positively pioneering ideas, such as the creation of the House of Art, where housing was provided to writers such as Mandelstam, Gumiliov or Blok, along with the opening of private art collections to the public. After this new housing reconfiguration, a ground-breaking urban plan was drafted, which would nevertheless be postponed due to the lack of labour, money, and resources. Monumental projects such as public baths or garden cities were frozen, and some may wait forever to thaw[15].

By that time, the situation in Petrograd was critical: inhabitants were abandoning their housing and moving to the countryside driven by the shortage of essential goods, institutional abandonment, social unrest, and widespread industrial shutdown. The population plunged from 2,300,000 inhabitants before the First World War to 720,000 during the Russian Civil War. Many of those who left the city sought refuge abroad or joined the warring factions[16], although the largest explanatory factors for the population decrease are famine and infectious diseases such as typhus or dysentery, which spread easily due to housing overcrowding. To illustrate, the 1920 census showed that there were 43 houses inhabited by 500 people or more, and 379 houses with 201 to 500 residents. Nevertheless, the number of residents per apartment ratio fell from 5 to 2,8 from 1918 to 1920, and there were 53,822 empty flats in the districts of Spassky and Novoderevensky alone. Workers established communal apartments, but living conditions were not the best either, for privacy was a chimaera and fear regarding the other was pervasive in times of social unrest and rocketing political repression[17]. Meanwhile, the high-rank

[13] Jahn, "The Housing Revolution in Petrograd 1917-1920," 221.
[14] Williams, *Health and Welfare in St. Petersburg, 1900–1941: Protecting the Collective*, Chapter 3.
[15] Jahn, "The Housing Revolution in Petrograd 1917-1920," 222.
[16] Ruble, *Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City*, 42.
[17] Williams, *Health and Welfare in St. Petersburg, 1900–1941: Protecting the Collective*, Chapter 3.

members of the embryonic Bolshevik nomenklatura swapped their living conditions with those of the aristocrats, thus moving to the best apartments. Indeed, the inability to supply decent housing was a significant challenge for the Bolsheviks; the number of persons per room had descended to 1,2 people, but living conditions deteriorated since nobody looked after housing maintenance. Chilly winters, such as the one of 1918, worsened, even more, the situation, for the cold and the lack of upkeeping enormously impacted housing. Moreover, the shortage of wood and fuel caused the collapse of water pipes and sewage systems due to freezing. Wooden houses were looted to their foundations to get some firewood; during the Civil War, the number of available housing fell by 15% due to this. The shortage was acute: in 1916, only 26% of the requested wood arrived in the city[18]. Petrograd's loss of its status as capital to Moscow did not help improve supply systems either. This shift can be explained by Bolshevik authorities' eagerness to move power away from the imperial metropolis.

Concluding, the housing situation in Petrograd underwent a dramatic transformation between the beginning of the First World War and the end of the Russian Civil War, affected by migration inflows and outflows, expropriations and appropriations, in a chaotic process that flipped the housing coin. The privilege criterion in housing ceased to be wealth, to become, at least in theory, working-class belonging. This belonging was, in turn, instrumentalised for personal profit, for asserting that one was a member of the proletariat was a way of attributing oneself legitimacy regarding access to housing. Eventually, Petrograd became an abandoned and disregarded city of semi-demolished buildings, collapsing water and sewing systems, shortage of basic goods, diseases, rats, and piles of rubbish and snow. Ironically, there was no housing shortage anymore, or at least for some time. Yet, living conditions had not improved whatsoever.

From utopia to reality: the housing situation in the Soviet Union and Leningrad

This section assesses housing policies in the Soviet Union, assessing the transition from private to public housing and the consolidation of the Soviet housing model. Furthermore, it evaluates

[18] Williams, *Health and Welfare in St. Petersburg, 1900–1941: Protecting the Collective*, Chapter 3.

the housing policies carried out in times of Josef Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev, Leonid Brezhnev, and Mikhail Gorbachev. Finally, it touches upon the idiosyncratic situation of Leningrad.

Starting with the 1917 and 1918 Revolutions and until 1985, an unprecedented housing model operated in the Soviet Union, for housing was nationalised to a great extent and the state retained the majority of ownership. Five different processes helped to establish and consolidate this housing model. Firstly, housing was taken over by the Soviets in the early days of the Revolution, in an unrestrained and chaotic housing revolution. Secondly, the owners that failed to appear for several months were stripped from their housing, after the latter was considered ownerless. Thirdly, private dwellers could be deprived of housing due to poor management. These two latter processes had as a legal basis the August 1918 decree that nationalised buildings with more than five flats. Finally, and especially, after 1957, the vast majority of the new housing stock was made up of mass-constructed buildings built by the state[19].

As mentioned above, the Soviet authorities were usually the owners of housing. Meanwhile, local authorities undertook the housing distribution, supervision, and administration. The different Soviet Socialist Republics also played a role in this process, showing that it was a multifaceted and multi-agent housing model. Finally, and albeit uncommonly, private ownership existed, but it was to be used for living and not for profit. To configure a robust and coherent public housing model, the Soviet authorities tested distinct housing formulae, dynamically modifying the system. For example, in 1921 rent payments were abolished, triggering the decay of housing stock due to lack of funding for housing maintenance. Shortly after, the 1924 New Economic Policy (NEP) restored them, although with price caps[20]. Likewise, after the death of Lenin, Josef Stalin revoked the NEP and established the five-year plans. These were centralised economic programmes including details regarding housing production. In a period of six five-year plans, from 1929 to 1959, 373,6 million square housing metres were erected, out of which the state built 75%.[21] Individuals, housing cooperatives, trade unions or cooperative enterprises constructed the rest[22]. Hence, Soviet housing was to

[19] Rudden, "Soviet Housing Law"
[20] Rudden, "Soviet Housing Law," 2.
[21] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today"
[22] Michael Alexeev, "Market Vs. Rationing: The Case of Soviet Housing," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 70, no. 3 (1988): 415.

consist of centralised housing planning and building along with decentralised distribution, supervision and administration.

In the cities, there were primarily two types of housing. Firstly, there were flats allocated to one or several families. Secondly, there were communal dwellings, mainly barracks. The intelligentsia and the state officials usually were the privileged ones, inhabiting whole flats or several rooms. The top rank officials occupied apartments in specially built residences, such as the Moscow House on the Embankment, or even in private homes[23]. However, most working-class families shared flats or rooms or lived in communal dwellings or barracks, whose kitchens and bathrooms were many times located outside the building[24]. Regarding newly-built housing organisation was poor, and shortcomings were common. At the same time, the amount of required paperwork rocketed. This led to delays in construction and poor quality of housing. Examples are leaking roofs, inefficient ventilation, unfinished facilities, and more[25]. Housing was still largely overcrowded and there were low rates of municipal services' coverage, such as central heating. In the RSFSR, barely 1% of the citizens had hot water at home. Still, cold water, electric lighting, and sewer facilities were standard. After the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945), there were significant upgrades in the municipal services of Soviet cities, although, all in all, they were much more limited than those in the United States or Western Europe, with only Moscow having decent municipal facility rates[26]. After a decree of 1948 that improved the conditions for private housing, the authorities offered counselling to private dwellers and housing cooperatives, mainly because of the poor quality of their facilities, which were isolated and constructed with poor materials. However, this was not a substantial step towards privatisation or citizen empowerment, but a way to legalise the elites' bourgeois desires that wanted to acquire private houses of several rooms[27].

All in all, the targets of the five-year plans for housing construction went systematically unfulfilled, leading to acute housing shortages and overcrowding, mainly in urban centres. Furthermore, the policies of forced collectivisation and industrialisation of the 1920s and 1930s

[23] Yuri Slezkine, "Moscow's Communist Dorm," April 29, 2020, accessed February 15, 2021, https://access.historyhit.com/videos/moscow-s-communist-dorm.
[24] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 3–15.
[25] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 12.
[26] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 8–15.
[27] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 8–15.

brought massive migration inflows to cities, which could not absorb such demographic pressure. The newly built urban centres were the most severely hit by this phenomenon[28]. This was a spill-over effect of Stalinist economics, which prioritised the heavy industries or the army over housing[29]. During those times, flats for single families were largely allocated to reward model workers, the intelligentsia, and state officials. Therefore, most of the families lived in one room in flats with outdated facilities, sharing bathroom and kitchen, while the housing shortage kept increasing[30]. In fact, in 1956, housing conditions were worse than those of 1926, with around 5 square metres of living space per capita[31]. The latter conditions were nevertheless nicer than those of 1920, in the aftermath of the Civil War, but it is unclear if they were better than pre-revolutionary ones. Simultaneously, monumental and magnificent buildings were erected, such as Stalin's high-rises. Hence, even if the bulk of citizens did not directly benefit from their construction, Muscovites could enjoy gazing at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and similar edifices.

The housing situation drastically improved after the fifth five-year plan, for construction plans started to be fulfilled. This transformation was led by the attitude of the new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, who recognised the majority of citizens' dreadful living conditions[32]. In 1955, this governmental shift was made palpable in a series of decrees targeting the mass production of housing, the increase of construction workers' skills, and more efficient housing planning and designing. In 1957, the Politburo drafted a massive construction plan to provide each family with a separate apartment. Their aim was to differentiate pre-revolutionary housing, when workers lived in slums in dreadful living conditions under capitalist exploitation, from post-revolutionary housing, when families were to move into single, clean, and well-equipped apartments. Moreover, improved housing conditions were to enhance productivity and contribute to society[33]. These shifts were of massive importance for Khrushchev, who stated in the late 1950s that a major achievement of Communism would be

[28] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 3–6.
[29] Joost van Baak, *The House in Russian Literature*: *A Mythopoetic Exploration,* Studies in Slavic literature and poetics 53 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 419.
[30] Christine Varga-Harris, "Moving Toward Utopia: Soviet Housing in the Atomic Age," in *Divided Dreamworlds? The Cultural Cold War in East and West*, ed. Joes Segal, Peter Romijn and Giles Scott-Smith (Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 134.
[31] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 3–11.
[32] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 13–14.
[33] Varga-Harris, "Moving Toward Utopia: Soviet Housing in the Atomic Age," 134–48.

the provision of free and modern housing and communal services for each family[34]. During the Kitchen Debate with Richard Nixon at the American National Exhibition of 1959 in Moscow, Khrushchev recognised the superiority of Western technology in the domestic sphere but stated that Soviet citizens would soon wave while passing by at Americans regarding housing conditions[35]. He aimed too high, as there would have been a need for several multi-year plans to achieve this[36]. This statement shows that Khrushchev's ideas on wellbeing were influenced by Western standards, which formulated that improved housing commodities led to better living conditions. Nevertheless, he embraced a restrained type of domestic consumption[37].

Khrushchev made substantial efforts to ease the Soviet housing shortage, building thousands of cheap, capital-intensive, assembled five-story buildings made out of prefabricated panels[38] [see Figure 1]. These constructions were eventually supposed to leave space for better housing, but they are still prevalent in the landscape of the majority of post-Soviet cities. They were built in the fringes of existing urban constructions, as close as possible to municipal utility webs in order to hook them up cheaply[39]. These housing blocks were limited to five storeys to avoid the installation of lifts and other facilities[40]. Cutting costs was thus a major policy constraint. These housing units were built in a minimalist style after Khrushchev condemned the excesses of Stalinist classicist architecture. Nowadays, many consider them aesthetically unpleasant, making them, and therefore Khrushchev, accountable for the monotonous view of many post-Soviet cities. However, these housing blocks were made to provide plain housing, not beautiful or good-quality housing. A curious anecdote is that people did not ask for the bathroom in alien flats because they all had the same distribution[41]. Nevertheless, the authorities paid a large degree of attention to green and recreational spaces surrounding housing blocks, designing micro-districts that were to satisfy the residents' needs and bolster comradeship. This system also aimed at freeing women from labour-intensive housekeeping,

[34] Rudden, "Soviet Housing Law," 604.
[35] Greg Castillo, "Domesticating the Cold War: Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Plan Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2018): 262.
[36] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 19.
[37] Castillo, "Domesticating the Cold War: Household Consumption as Propaganda in Marshall Plan Germany," 284.
[38] Varga-Harris, "Moving Toward Utopia: Soviet Housing in the Atomic Age," 137.
[39] R. Anthony French, *Plans, Pragmatism and People: The Legacy of Soviet Planning for Today's Cities* (London: UCL Press, 1995), 75–77.
[40] Daniil Kramorov, "Interview to Daniil Kramorov, Staff Member of the NGO Nochlezhka," February 15, 2021, accessed February 15, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvLY0fYo2Uk.
[41] Varga-Harris, "Moving Toward Utopia: Soviet Housing in the Atomic Age," 139–47.

equipping flats with handy facilities, although their housekeeper role was not contested[42]. All in all, Khrushchev largely contributed to housing in terms of quantity, albeit not of quality or aesthetics. Housing materials were poor, roofs were low, living spaces tiny, and many buildings have already deteriorated[43], but the campaign he launched advanced the goal of allocating a flat per family, providing 300 million citizens with 70 million apartments by the late 1980s[44]. It was the largest housing programme in history, and indeed, single-family housing was very welcome by the worse off, whose living conditions substantially improved[45].

Figure 1. Five-storey building in the district of Frunzensky, Saint Petersburg, May 2020. *A large part of this district is made up of these housing blocks, popularly named after the Soviet leader as "Khrushchyovkas". Some of them are already damaged.* Own photo.

The policies of mass construction designed during the period of Khrushchev continued in place under the extensive mandate of Leonid Brezhnev and the short-lived ones of Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko. Although the design of buildings changed, the underlying ideas

[42] Varga-Harris, "Moving Toward Utopia: Soviet Housing in the Atomic Age," 139–47.
[43] Ilya Varlamov, "Free Housing in the Soviet Union: Myth or Reality?," January 17, 2020, accessed February 15, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obernoF5prc.
[44] Varga-Harris, "Moving Toward Utopia: Soviet Housing in the Atomic Age," 141.
[45] Jane Zavisca, "Property Without Markets: Housing Policy and Politics in Post-Soviet Russia, 1992–2007," *Comparative European Politics* 6, no. 3 (2008): 368–69, https://doi.org/10.1057/cep.2008.16.

were the same. Hundreds of thousands of housing blocks made out of prefabricated panels were built, shaping the Soviet urban landscape[46]. However, they now were taller buildings, ranging from 5 to 25 floors. By 1960, nine storeys had become the minimum height standard[47] [see Figure 2]. However, this was to change during Mikhail Gorbachev's rule since the new Soviet leader took gradual steps towards privatisation in order to improve the housing stock and cope with the housing shortage. Gorbachev envisaged a mixed economy, encouraging housing privatisation but warning against housing speculation. Housing was still to be used for living. By then, 42% of Soviet citizens listed housing as their biggest problem[48], and 17% lived in communal apartments, hostels or lacked a permanent residence[49]. Illustrating, one-third of urban households were on 10-year housing waiting lists. To fight this, the Soviet authorities set up a system of low-interest loans and mortgages and started subsidising cooperative and private housing[50]. Steps towards land privatisation meant a substantial break with Marxist-Leninist ideology, having detractors among the hard-liners of the Politburo. However, Gorbachev kept on and planned to build 30 million housing units by 2000, aiming to give citizens opportunities to choose their housing and provide building materials for dwellers. Yet, the leader asserted the provision of adequate housing for government employees, pensioners, invalid and low-income families[51], thus envisaging a regulated process of housing privatisation.

[46] French, *Plans, Pragmatism and People: The Legacy of Soviet Planning for Today's Cities*, 79.
[47] Michael Alexeev, "The Houses that Khrushchev and Brezhnev Built: Citadels of Support or Incubators of Political Protest?," PONARS Policy Memo 49 (San Diego State University, 2006).
[48] John Iams, "Gorbachev Decrees Peoples' Right to Own Land for Private Homes," *Associated Press News*, May 20, 1990, accessed February 15, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/3035869d97cf10c435d3b234a6c3647d.
[49] Lynne Attwood, "Privatisation of Housing in Post-Soviet Russia: A New Understanding of Home?," *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 5 (2012): 906, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2012.681243.
[50] Reiner, "Land and Housing in the USSR during the Gorbachev Years," 692.
[51] Michael Parks, "Gorbachev Reverses Communist Policy, Mandates Private Housing Soviet Union: He Wants to Ensure That Each Ci," *Los Angeles Times*, May 21, 1990, accessed February 15, 2021, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-05-21-mn-177-story.html.

Figure 2. Nine-storey building in the district of Frunzensky, Saint Petersburg, May 2020. *This kind of constructions was built throughout Brezhnev's mandate, and thus, they were baptised after him as "Brezhnevkas". They were also based on the repetition of prefabricated modules*. Own photo.

Now, focusing on Leningrad, whose name changed in honour of Lenin after his death in 1924, the city regained part of its inhabitants after the Civil War, although pre-Revolutionary population figures would only be surpassed by 1939 when the city reached a population of over 3 million. This increase was caused by the influx of peasants in 1928 after the launching of the forced collectivisation and industrialisation programmes[52]. Urban developers envisioned a new urban centre fitting with the Stalinist monumental ethos by the end of the Avenue Moskovsky, 10 kilometres away from the Tsarist districts. The construction of the House of the Soviets is an example of this plan. Later, the 1939 Winter War and the terrific siege of Leningrad led to a shrinking of the population to a fifth, along with the massive destruction of housing. After 1943, the aforementioned urban plan was abandoned in favour of a new one which envisioned the rebuilding of a war-stricken Leningrad, thus giving primacy to its historic centre and abandoning the previous plan of establishing a new Soviet urban centre. In the aftermath of the Great Patriotic War, the population boomed due to migration flows and military

[52] Ruble, *Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City*, 42.

demobilisation. Still, there was an ageing populace and a substantial imbalance in the adult sex ratio, with far more female than male population[53].

By then, there was a massive need for housing (re)construction to meet the need of residents and internal migrants. The housing shortage was acute: in 1951, an average of 3,3 families lived in each of Leningrad's flats. In the Tsarist centre, communal apartments continued to exist in large pre-revolutionary apartments mainly occupied by pensioners and students[54]. In general, Leningrad's housing situation was similar to that of other cities in the RSFSR, although aggravated by the terrific 872-day siege. Therefore, living conditions for the majority of households were awful, and until 1956, living space kept decreasing. If in 1926 each person enjoyed an average of 8,73 square metres, in 1956 it was only 5,18 square metres. In addition, municipal utilities were better off than those of many Soviet cities and even comparable to those of Moscow, but only 9,2% of the living space enjoyed central heating in an especially cold city. In 1935, 46,5% of the families lived in one room, and 25% of them in just a part of them, with only 10,8% of families enjoying a whole flat. With Khrushchev's mass housing campaign, the housing stock sustainedly rose. The majority of mass housing blocks after 1957 was constructed in the outskirts, shaping a substantially distinct urban landscape from that of the Tsarist centre. Yet, mass housing suffered from its distinct poor quality. Some buildings had unfinished façades, a lack of equipment, and other problems[55], but they relieved the housing shortage. By the late 1980s, 80% of the families lived in single flats and the area of the city had increased tenfold regarding Tsarist times, sustained by the construction of a well-functioning underground system[56].

All in all, even if there were substantial advancements towards the goal of granting one flat per family[57], the promises of the Soviet authorities went unfulfilled, for there was a large deal of housing sharing until the collapse of the Soviet Union[58]. In fact, there still is. Even if housing was quasi-free, the system was arguably also a curse for the citizens, as the authorities instrumentalised the allocation of flats to punish or reward them, establishing an acute relation

[53] Ruble, *Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City*, 42–55.
[54] Ruble, *Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City*, 65–70.
[55] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 5–12.
[56] Ruble, *Leningrad: Shaping a Soviet City*, 64–67.
[57] Rudden, "Soviet Housing Law," 599–605.
[58] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 7.

of dependence between the state and the citizens[59]. The housing system was also employed as a tool for propaganda: the authorities used it to claim that they cared about the working class and bolstered the idea that housing was a gift from the state to the people, for the rents were as low as 4-5% of the workers' income[60]. In a nutshell, the Soviet authorities promoted the superiority of the communist system over the capitalist one in light of quasi-free housing, while the latter system was depicted as based on the greedy pursuit of personal enrichment. However, the housing situation by 1959 was still more satisfactory in the United States than in the Soviet Union: by 1959, while a large part of workers in the US enjoyed separated flats with modern facilities, their Soviet had a room for their family in a flat, sharing kitchen and bathroom. After the mass construction of housing, they could enjoy a centrally planned to the detail and built with poor materials tiny flat of less than 60 square metres. Likewise, housing served as a tool for indoctrination for the Soviet authorities, for they aimed at educating the citizens through paternalistic rhetoric and policies according to an ideal of social order, which was to be imprinted in the planning of flats and micro-districts. However, the housing shortage was largely alleviated.

Opening Pandora's box: the privatisation of the 1990s in the Russian Federation

This section analyses the bumpy period of the 1990s in the Russian Federation, one defined by a massive transformation in all societal spheres. The most significant change in housing was the acceleration of privatisation. Boris Yeltsin's government based its economic policies on a shock-therapy approach to market reform through massive liberalisation and privatisation. The new cabinet abandoned Gorbachev's plans in favour of full-fledged privatisation, which was portrayed as the natural solution to the housing shortage. Moreover, they justified the social plight related to it by depicting it as an inescapable evil of capitalist transition[61]. In turn, some citizens supported this privatisation and regarded it as necessary[62], while others felt helpless and forsaken by the state.

[59] Ilya Varlamov, "Free housing in the Soviet Union: myth or reality?"
[60] Sosnovy, "The Soviet Housing Situation Today," 2–17.
[61] Zavisca, "Property without Markets: Housing Policy and Politics in Post-Soviet Russia, 1992–2007," 366–72.
[62] Attwood, "Privatisation of Housing in Post-Soviet Russia: A New Understanding of Home?," 913.

Housing privatisation was motivated by two main reasons: the need to solve the pervasive housing shortage in post-Soviet Russia, and the necessity to alleviate state expenses. Likewise, privatisation was thought to be a catalyst for an efficient housing market[63]. In the Soviet Union, housing was a decommodified good that required massive state expenditures in subsidies for building upkeep, communal services, and municipal utilities[64]. In times of economic crisis and inflation, the state could not cope anymore with such duty[65], thus privatisation, where the tenants would have to pay for the preservation of their properties, was perceived as a fitting solution. The underlining idea was that erasing state intervention in the form of artificially low rents and a hindering regulatory framework for private housing would naturally lead to the emergence of a wholesomely functioning housing market. Homeownership was also supposed to bolster tenant responsibility and was thus an easy and inexpensive way to improve the quality of the housing stock[66], which was in poor conditions due to neglection[67]. Accordingly, in 1991, housing privatisation became free and the extensive rights of tenants were curtailed to bolster this development[68]. Interestingly, housing privatisation became a multi-actor process: housing was firstly transferred by the states to the municipalities, and after, offered by them for free to the tenants. Regarding the non-privatised housing, tenants retained substantial rights, rents were low, and utilities were subsidised, just as in Soviet times[69]. Perhaps surprisingly, this give-away privatisation did not lead to rapid housing privatisation in Russia as it did in other post-socialist countries[70]. This is for different reasons.

Firstly, many people consciously decided not to become homeowners. For families that did not have any expectations of moving out or were on waiting lists for improved housing, privatisation was simply not attractive. Even if it would contribute to the family's wealth in the form of an asset, it would also become a substantial burden on the household's budget in times

[63] Nadezhda Kosareva and Raymond Struyk, "Housing Privatization in the Russian Federation," *Housing Policy Debate* 4, no. 1 (1993): 81–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/10511482.1993.9521125.
[64] Martin Lux and Petr Sunega, "Public Housing in the Post-Socialist States of Central and Eastern Europe: Decline and an Open Future," *Housing Studies* 29, no. 4 (2014): 504, https://doi.org/10.1080/02673037.2013.875986.
[65] Maria Plotnikova, "A Model of the Housing Privatization Decision: The Case of Russia" 088 (Henley Business School, University of Reading, Reading, 2010), 2.
[66] Kosareva and Struyk, "Housing privatization in the russian federation," 82.
[67] Rosa Vihavainen, "Homeowners' associations in Russia after the 2005 housing reform," Series A (Kikimora Publication, Helsinki, 2009), 70.
[68] Attwood, "Privatisation of Housing in Post-Soviet Russia: A New Understanding of Home?," 907.
[69] Plotnikova, "A Model of the Housing Privatization Decision: The Case of Russia," 3–8.
[70] Lux and Sunega, "Public Housing in the Post-Socialist States of Central and Eastern Europe: Decline and an Open Future," 502.

of extreme economic recession. Hence, being a public housing tenant was more attractive than being an owner who had to bear maintenance costs. Among the groups that were likely to privatise their housing, were elderly people aiming at the eventual bequeathing of their property, educated people less likely to fall into economic uncertainty[71], and young households that saw housing as an asset that could be traded up[72]. Moreover, newly-built housing was more likely to be privatised than that with upkeep problems, for many Khrushchyovkas were already deteriorating[73]. Secondly, privatisation was, for some, morally problematic, for it eroded the social contract that existed between the Soviet state and the citizens, where the former provided inexpensive housing to the latter and looked after its' maintenance[74]. For a few citizens, privatising former state assets was simply unacceptable[75]. Some others preferred the Soviet public housing system of tutelage to the navigation of an unknown privatised housing model. Thirdly, the uncertainty regarding legislation and property rights and in the early privatisation stages hindered housing privatisation[76]. The fear of fraud and crime related to housing was extensive once housing became a good that could be sold and bought. Violent entrepreneurs aimed at appropriating housing by any means, and mainly through racketeering activities. The elderly were the most likely criminal targets of these criminal groups[77], ruthlessly driving people to homelessness[78].

By 1989, only 0,03% of the housing had been privatised, rising to a modest 18% in 1993[79]. In 1994, this process slowed down, only to surge in the 2000s after a vast advertising campaign[80], when the then recently elected Vladimir Putin linked homeownership with the growth of a middle class, a stable society, a wholesome economy, and an empowered Russia[81]. By 2010, about 85% of housing had been privatised, accounting for roughly 30 million housing units[82].

[71] Plotnikova, "A Model of the Housing Privatization Decision: The Case of Russia," 4–15.
[72] Attwood, "Privatisation of Housing in Post-Soviet Russia: A New Understanding of Home?," 907.
[73] Plotnikova, "A Model of the Housing Privatization Decision: The Case of Russia," 14.
[74] Vihavainen, "Homeowners' associations in Russia after the 2005 housing reform," 204.
[75] Attwood, "Privatisation of Housing in Post-Soviet Russia: A New Understanding of Home?," 913.
[76] Kosareva and Struyk, "Housing privatization in the russian federation," 92.
[77] Vihavainen, "Homeowners' associations in Russia after the 2005 housing reform," 75.
[78] Nochlezka, "Annual Report 2018" (Charity Organization Nochlezhka, Saint Petersburg, 2019).
[79] Plotnikova, "A Model of the Housing Privatization Decision: The Case of Russia," 3.
[80] Elena Shomina and Frances Heywood, "Transformation in Russian Housing: The New Key Roles of Local Authorities," *International Journal of Housing Policy* 13, no. 3 (2013): 314, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616718.2013.820894.
[81] Attwood, "Privatisation of Housing in Post-Soviet Russia: A New Understanding of Home?," 904.
[82] Shomina and Heywood, "Transformation in Russian housing: the new key roles of local authorities," 313.

The chance for households to privatise their housing existed for more than 20 years[83], showing that the government rather fancied this option. Furthermore, criminal organisations related to housing racketeering activities were cracked down. Yet, some authors have pointed out that the remaining of the Soviet housing model characterised by waiting lists for social housing, the common idea of the right to public housing, low rent prices, extensive regulations, and large tenant rights, may suggest that housing privatisation was guided by relatively conservative policies rather than shock-therapy housing privatisation[84]. In this sense, privatisation in post-Soviet Russia was to some extent regulated to secure social stability and avoid housing speculation, although without much success, for the population's plight was pervasive.

Still, privatisation has not either led to the creation of an efficient private market for housing. The authorities expected the market to organically tackle the housing shortage after erasing institutional barriers to private housing, thus appearing as a "deus ex machina" that would solve the existing problems. However, this did not occur, as complementary measures to guarantee wholesome market development were lacking. Some of them could have been tackling criminal activities, more precise drafting of property rights, or the setup of a system of mortgages with affordable interest rates from the start. Therefore, the government outsourced all duties to the market, albeit the majority of modern states intervene in housing to some degree. Citizens became homeowners, but the housing shortage remained, and housing conditions kept being poor, along with rocketing housing insecurity due to fraud and crime. Moreover, citizens now had to pay for housing maintenance[85], having as a result, the emergence of poor homeowners, who struggle to upkeep housing[86]. This failure delegitimised the promise of improved living standards under capitalism.

In the case of Saint Petersburg, whose original name was restored in 1991[87], privatisation has not eradicated the housing shortage, for the existence of communal apartments is still

[83] Catherine Sokolova, "Free Privatization of Housing Could Be Extended for Another Year in Russia," February 19, 2015, accessed February 15, 2021, https://www.bashinform.ru/eng/702015/.
[84] Lux and Sunega, "Public Housing in the Post-Socialist States of Central and Eastern Europe: Decline and an Open Future," 508–10.
[85] Zavisca, "Property without Markets: Housing Policy and Politics in Post-Soviet Russia, 1992–2007"
[86] Vihavainen, "Homeowners' associations in Russia after the 2005 housing reform," 76.
[87] James H. Bater, "Central St. Petersburg: Continuity and Change in Privilege and Place," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 47, no. 1 (2006): 5, https://doi.org/10.2747/1538-7216.47.1.4.

widespread. The city hosts more kommunalkas than any other city in Russia[88], with around 500.000 people or 10% of the population inhabiting them[89]. Just like in Soviet times, the majority of tenants are pensioners and students[90], although migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have started to move to rooms in kommunalkas[91], aiming at cutting living costs and sending larger remittances back home. While some residents point out that communal living feels like living in a big family[92], and others call their kommunalka their palace[93], living conditions in these flats usually leave much to be desired and, in general, tenants would rather desire to move [94]. Still, sometimes kommunalka residents, many times elderly people, are reluctant to move out of their rooms, fancying communal living in a central location over loneliness in newly-built housing in peripheral districts[95]. In communal apartments, facilities such as electricity, water, or equipment are usually of low quality [96]. In terms of coexistence, there usually lacks awareness of responsibility for the cleaning of common areas such as kitchens and bathrooms among the residents[97]. Moreover, the lack of privacy and the constant struggle to distribute and manage common resources triggers, in many cases, a constant state of alert that can lead to the development of mental health issues and paranoic behaviour[98]. Indeed, the most minor problem can lead to awkward and hostile situations between tenants who share housing with people with whom they neither share any emotional or familiar bond nor would desire to live[99]. Indeed, the ideal of sharing everything in a solidaristic way is barely

[88] Expatica, "Kommunalka Flats Still Thrive in Saint Petersburg," *Expatica: the largest online resource for expat living*, September 8, 2020, accessed February 27, 2021, https://www.expatica.com/ru/housing/housing-basics/kommunalka-flats-106324/.
[89] Andrew E. Kramer and Sergey Ponomarev, "Too Close for Comfort, and the Virus, in Russia's Communal Apartments," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2020, accessed February 27, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/13/world/europe/coronavirus-russia-communal.html.
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[91] Juri Resheto, "Russia: 16 families in a single kommunalka apartment," *Deutsche Welle*, September 13, 2016, accessed February 27, 2021, https://www.dw.com/en/russia-16-families-in-a-single-kommunalka-apartment/a-19544660.
[92] AFP News Agency, "Saint-Petersburg: Residents Stuck in Soviet 'Kommunalkas' ," February 27, 2021, accessed February 27, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29vfw6-bwlU.
[93] Yulia Galkina and Viktor Yuliev, "Ya Zhivu V Kommunalke Kak Vo Dvortse," *The Village*, February 27, 2021, accessed February 27, 2021, https://www.the-village.ru/people/experience/252451-kommunalka-dvorec.
[94] AFP News Agency, "Saint-Petersburg: residents stuck in Soviet 'Kommunalkas' "
[95] Vihavainen, "Homeowners' associations in Russia after the 2005 housing reform," 73.
[96] Resheto, "Russia: 16 families in a single kommunalka apartment"
[97] French, *Plans, Pragmatism and People: The Legacy of Soviet Planning for Today's Cities*, 137.
[98] Ilya Utekhin, *Ocherki Kommunalnogo Byta* (Moscow: OGI, 2004), 274–75.
[99] Ilya Utekhin, "Antropologiya Kommunalki. Kurs Nº 15." May 11, 2016, accessed February 27, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gwRBX5paHfM&list=PLeNbGOow-rndUuv0_yphWTPF68UC6tk4T.

never accomplished since residents rather aim at protecting their properties in an inherently common space, something that proves quite challenging[100]. Interestingly, many tenants are the formal owners of their rooms within their kommunalka since they have privatised their rooms, therefore making up a complex model of fragmented ownership.

In a nutshell, privatisation exacerbated inequalities since it crystallised the privileges of the wealthy and the appalling conditions of the worse off, for the former privatised their well-off housing while the latter had to settle for their modest flats or rooms[101]. Furthermore, this new housing model went against the interests of those that could not afford private nor qualified for public housing and would have eventually accessed quasi-free housing through the public housing model[102]. However, housing privatisation eroded clientelist networks, as local officials were deprived of the power to arbitrarily allocate housing[103]. It also empowered some groups, such as young adults, who could now live on their own if they could afford to purchase housing, instead of having to wait for housing allocation[104]. In the case of Saint Petersburg, kommunalkas are still widespread as a housing type that is neither desired nor pleasant. Indeed, it is a heritage of Soviet Leningrad which has been passed onto today's Saint Petersburg, and it seems it will not disappear anytime soon, for the authorities goal to relocate all tenants to single flats by 2020 went largely unfulfilled[105]. In short, privatisation meant a shift in state ideology, moving away from a paternalistic housing approach that aimed at providing housing for all to one that emphasised citizen responsibility and let housing to the invisible hand of the market[106]. Therefore, post-Soviet Russia's governments renounced public housing as a legitimising tool, establishing a privatised model. Nevertheless, this became problematic since privatisation largely failed to alleviate housing-related problems. New legitimisation tools were now to be found, or at least constructed.

[100] Ilya Utekhin, "Antropologiya kommunalki. Kurs Nº 15."
[101] French, *Plans, Pragmatism and People: The Legacy of Soviet Planning for Today's Cities*, 136.
[102] Rosa Vihavainen, "Housing in Russia: Policies and Practices" (Workshop in St. Petersburg, 2005), 13.
[103] Raymond J. Struyk, "Housing Privatization in the Former Soviet Bloc to 1995," in *Cities After Socialism: Urban and Regional Change and Conflict in Post-Socialist Societies*, ed. Gregory Andrusz, Michael Harloe and Ivan Szelenyi, Studies in Urban and Social Change (Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 193.
[104] Zavisca, "Property without Markets: Housing Policy and Politics in Post-Soviet Russia, 1992–2007," 371.
[105] Expatica, "Kommunalka flats still thrive in Saint Petersburg"
[106] Shomina and Heywood, "Transformation in Russian housing: the new key roles of local authorities," 314.

Conclusion

Roughly a century after the breakout of the First World War, the 1917 and 1918 Revolutions, the Soviet takeover, and the establishment of the Soviet Union, housing is still a painful question for Russian citizens, for neither housing shortages nor unsatisfactory housing conditions have been suitably tackled by any of the three ruling regimes. Each of these governments, concretely those of the Tsarist empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation, have envisaged and employed three different housing models: Tsarist housing embraced a private housing model, while Soviet housing implied a radical transition to public housing, and current housing in Russian is a mixed model based on the encouraging of housing privatisation while maintaining a relatively large proportion of public housing inherited from Soviet times. Although both the in-depth evaluation of each of these models and the comparison between them fall without the scope of this paper, which solely aims at providing a historical overview of housing in Saint Petersburg and Russia, it is safe to state that none of the housing models implemented so far has properly tackled housing shortages nor substantially improved housing conditions. Nevertheless, if one approaches quantitatively this question, it would be fair to point out Nikita Khrushchev as the leader who did the most to provide housing for the population. Indeed, the massive housing programme launched under his rule and continued afterwards was the largest in history, providing 300 million citizens with 70 million flats by the late 1980s in order to allocate a flat to every family of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, ff one considers housing qualitatively, then perhaps his effort is to be evaluated differently, for the flats were made of poor materials which quickly deteriorated and shaped the monotonous and, to some people unpleasant, landscape of many post-Soviet cities.

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