Seizing the Means of Domesticity: Mass-Housing Spaces, Objects and Relationships in Soviet Everyday Life

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Abstract

The Soviet state created mass-housing to reshape the city and everyday life itself. This paper examines the spaces and objects of mass-housing to examine the relationship between residents, the state and objects within Soviet everyday life. Approaching the study of everyday life in the Soviet Union from the early 1920s to the late 1980s via the spaces of mass-housing can offer a tangible approach to a way of life that might otherwise seem strange or uncanny. This paper uses ethnographic analysis by drawing on scholarly sources along with five historical photographs. The mass housing spaces of the kommunalka and later khrushchyovka served as places of push and pull. The state attempted to expand the public realm while residents simultaneously tried to create privacy and individuality. Within the interior, the Red Corner and the commode were embodiments of contradictions between modernization and tradition. Despite the state's efforts, commodity fetishism lingered at the core of everyday life. Within Soviet everyday life, mass-housing spaces and objects can be useful to illustrate the changing yet stagnant relationship between residents and the state.

Introduction

Looking back from a contemporary western capitalist consumerist perspective to everyday life in Soviet Russia can bring to mind a certain strangeness of grey and drab apartment blocks. However, some of the most concrete and unique aspects of everyday Soviet life are found within these spaces and objects of mass-housing. Soviet mass-housing consisted of the *kommunalka* apartments from the 1920s and beginning in the 1960s expanded to include *khrushchyovka* apartments. This paper will use an ethnographic approach by combining scholarly sources of Soviet mass-housing life with historical photographs. The objects to be examined are the Red Corner and the commode. This paper will explore the contradictions of everyday life in Soviet mass-housing through looking at the spaces and objects, relationships between residents, the state and objects.

Concepts of Everyday life and Soviet Mass-housing

After the 1917 October Revolution, the early Soviet state continued its revolutionary approach by creating a new form of everyday life. Russian concepts related to this new everyday life are *byt, uiut* and *meshchanstavo*. The Soviets' focused on *byt* or ideas of existence, domesticity and everyday life (Buchli, 1999). In addition to *byt*, the Soviets translated the concept of *uiut* or coziness, hygiene and comfort from otherwise outdated and pre-revolution ideas (Buchli, 1999). The state's new socialist *byt* and *uiut* meant reshaping material culture to meet the needs and ideals of the Soviets. In this process, there were efforts to avoid *meshchanstavo* or a petit-bourgeois lifestyle which were considered distasteful and incompatible with new Soviet

byt (Varga-Harris, 2015). The desires for revolutionary *byt*, *uiut* and *meshchanstavo* meant the Soviets "would need to be 'anti-home'" (Buck-Morss, 2000, p. 192). In this new approach to *byt* there would be new massing-housing and material culture but no homes.

Kommunalka Spaces and Objects

Kommunalkas or communal apartments were developed by the Soviets to achieve a new *byt* and forms of mass-housing. Creating *kommunalkas* involved reconfiguring existing space to reduce any remaining separation between public and private life. The *kommunalkas* were made by seizing private homes and putting them under state control and collective ownership. This resulted in reconfiguring single-family apartments into smaller, partitioned and hardly private spaces with residents sharing communal kitchens and bathrooms. The state's idea of *byt* meant that residents were "not entitled to a room or private space but only to a number of square meters" (Boym, 1994, p. 123). The new Soviet *kommunalka* space blurred the lines between the individual and the communal, with partitions physically restricting the residents' *byt* and relationships. Residents mostly accepted the overcrowded conditions due to a severe housing shortage (Fitzpatrick, 1999). Coincidentally, the state was provided with an opportunity for mass surveillance within the *kommunalkas* through residents keeping track of each other. Any sense of privacy within the partitions was "to be subsumed into the public (political) sphere" (Sanatcose, 2014, p. 14) and under the surveillance of other residents and the state. Walter Benjamin, as a Westerner visiting Moscow in 1926, witnessed the strangeness of the Soviet *kommunalka* firsthand. Benjamin (1986) observed *kommunalka* "rooms which look[ed] like infirmaries after inspection" (p. 26) which he believed was because "[residents'] way of life has so alienated them from domestic existence" (p. 26). His ethnographic observations reflect the Soviets' efforts at reshaping *byt* and *uiut* through hygienic interiors. Benjamin also captures the *kommunalkas* as quasi-public spaces that lack places for private lives. Over a fairly short period of time, the *kommunalkas* restructured the interior spaces and lives of their residents.

The Red Corner

The Red Corner was a focus of the early Soviets' modernization of *byt* through the interior. Historically, the *kransnyi ugol* or Red Corner comes from the Russian Orthodox tradition of placing religious icons in the most well-lit and best corner of the home (Buchli, 1999). Initially, the Red Corner was appropriated to become *ugolok diadi lenina* or Uncle Lenin's Corner, a space aimed at teaching children to be good communists (Buchli, 1999). The Red Corner's traditional icons were replaced with new Soviet icons showing "Lenin and pre-revolution suffering" (Buchli, 1999, p. 43). This spatial context gives old quasi-religious meanings to the new Soviet icons. The Red Corner's icons expanded to include Soviet objects "from the family's home republic, maps of USSR, as well as flora and fauna" (Buchli, 1999, p. 43). The Red Corner's maps and plants provided a way for residents to connect with the physical vastness of the Soviet state. This might also diminish any negative feelings of being disconnected from nature and rural hometowns experienced by *kommunalka* residents in otherwise crowded urban life. Figure 1 shows a Red Corner and the apartment's most important space with modern Soviet photographs. The residents of the apartment in Figure 1 are *stakonovites* or workers recognized by the Soviets as ideal and exemplary (Fitzpatrick, 1999). This interior space in Figure 1 was believed to reflect and enhance a worker's character as being as clean and cultured. Everyday objects placed in the Red Corner took on charged meanings that pushed towards a modern Soviet *byt*.

The Commode

The early Soviets' modernization of *byt* and attack on petit-bourgeois *meshchanstavo* focused on the commode. A commode is a type of wooden furniture often "elaborately carved" as seen in Figure 2 and could include "glassed in

FIGURE 1 *Stakonovites* with Red Corner in apartment (1939). Retrieved from *https://187011.selcdn.ru/thumbnails/photos/w/7/e/w7e52b33118a59d7_1024.jpg*

FIGURE 2 The commode and Red Corner at a New Year's apartment party (1947). Savin, M. Retrieved from https://187011.selcdn.ru/thumbnails/photos/8/l/v/8lv52b30d9aa2884_1024.jpg

shelves" (Buchli, 1999, p. 88), as seen in figures 3, 4 and 5, to display a resident's status and prestige objects. Commodes were considered petit-bourgeois by the Soviet state "who actively strove to eradicate" (Buchli, 1999, p. 88) them along with other traces of *meshchanstavo* from the interior. Despite the state's attempts at getting rid of commodes, they became the location "where the most precious items were kept" (Boym, 1994, p. 151) by residents. The commodes were vital private spaces and often overshadowed the Red Corner both symbolically and literally. Commodes reduced the interior's *uiut* by taking away from the sense of cleanliness and adding stuffiness (Buchli, 1999). Figure 2 shows a large commode towering over the apartment that diminishes the Red Corner in comparison. The sense of individuality expressed by commodes and their contents could have drawbacks for residents. During the 1930s Great Purges, objects such as commodes were used as evidence of a resident's hidden bourgeoisie status when unmasked as being 'class enemies' or denounced by other residents (Fitzpatrick, 1999). The commode was favored by residents because it allowed them to express their individuality and privacy while circumventing the state-controlled Red Corner.

Kommunalka Residents' Relationships with the State and Objects

Kommunalka residents may have experienced contradictory or even opposing relationships with the state over visions for *byt*. A point of contention was the individuality expressed through possession of objects in the communal interior. The state considered private homes to have been abolished once housing was put under communal possession and "leased it out to individuals" (Buchli, 2000, p. 97) to be occupied. Despite this attempt, residents often viewed these *kommunalkas* as theirs and therefore private space. Another interesting aspect of the relationship is how residents lived in Soviet ideology. Ideally, the *kommunalka* and its material culture would be "a dialectical complement to the Soviet ideology" (Santacose, 2014, p. 8). The state expressed this by transforming the Red Corner through removing the Orthodox icons and attacking the use of commodes. However, for *kommunalka* residents the space became "deideologized in the sense that the contradictions of the system were experienced with no covering gloss" (Buck-Morss, 2000, p.199). The tensions between possession and ideology of space created mixed relationships between residents and the Soviet state.

Residents may have sought relationships with objects, due to the emphasis of material culture on *byt*. For furniture, most residents preferred "moderne or Neo-Baroque to a Rodchenko or Tatlin [design]" (Bowlt, 1980, p. 145). This attachment and fondness for petit-bourgeois objects and designs might have been an attempt to hold onto individuality. In contrast to the unpredictable and shifting public sphere, objects could provide residents with positive feelings and a sense of control or something to desire. Bowlt (1980) points out this kind of relationship between residents and petit-bourgeois objects as the focus of Ilf and Petov's 1928 satirical novel *The Twelve Chairs*. Residents were attracted towards petit-bourgeois objects as a way of showing individuality.

Soviet Mass-Housing and Commodity Fetishism

Commodity fetishism was interwoven into the residents' relationships with Soviet objects. Figure 3 shows a Stalinist interior furnished in a petit-bourgeois style, complete with an elaborate commode. The abundance of objects shown in figure 3 would not be a reality for most working residents but only the Soviet elites. However, the interior shown in this picture would be in commodity fetishized dreams of mass-housing residents. Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism uses the table as a vivid metaphor (1979). Marx (1979) exclaims the table's commodity fetishism "evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas" (p. 320). Looking within the *kommunalka*, another strange and fetishized commodity related to Marx's table might be found hiding in the form of plywood

FIGURE 3 Commodity fetishism that kommunalka residents could only dream of (1954). Tarasevich, V. Retrieved from https://187011.selcdn.ru/thumbnails/photos/i/p/y/ipy53554e6481285_1024.jpg

partitions. Svetlana Boym (1994) recalls from her childhood in a *kommunalka* that "[partitions] mark the intersection of public and private spheres within the apartment" and "delineate [residents'] minimum privacy" (p. 146). Looking deeper into the objects themselves can show that the privacy these partitions provided might be the most fetishized commodity. Examining privacy through objects can demonstrate the widespread nature of commodity fetishism within Soviet mass-housing. Figure 3 shows residents with joyful expressions amidst objects and solid walls that give the interior a sense of privacy. Commodity fetishism and the desire for privacy could be found throughout mass-housing from the objects themselves to their impacts on *byt* (Marx, 1979; Boym, 1994). Later in the 1960s thaw, the state attempted to revisit commodity fetishism. The state was interested in "correct, socialist, non-fetishistic relation[s] to commodities" (Reid, 2014, p. 99) as part of developing forms of more private mass-housing. Commodity fetishism may have caused residents to use objects as ways of gaining coveted privacy in mass-housing.

Khrushchyovka Space Updates and Changing Objects

Updates to mass-housing *byt* and material culture came under Khrushchev's thaw and shift away from Stalinism. *Khrushchyovkas* were developed as modern apartment blocks, meant to be mass-produced and prefabricated. The *khrushchyovka* gave residents a newer and less crowded modern socialist home (Reid, 2014). This new space also encouraged changes in material culture to move away from petit-bourgeois objects that dominated *kommunalkas*. The new *khrushchyovka* housing stock "was a gift, and [therefore]...imposed obligations on the [residents]" (Reid, 2014, p. 97). Framing the changes of *byt* as a gift allowed the *khrushchyovka* subtler ways of creating change as opposed to the early Soviets. This gifting set the tone for changes in *byt* and material culture of *khrushchyovkas*.

The updates in *byt* brought changes and new aspects to material culture. Standardized and simplified objects with Constructivist designs such as 'combination furniture' came following the emergence of modern homes (Bowlt, 1980). Such furniture can be seen in figure 4, with less details and made to fit more efficiently into the housing space. In contrast to the scarcity and Great Purges experienced under Stalin, the *khrushchyovka* offered residents "a complete fresh start" (Reid, 2014, p. 112). This was a delayed follow-up on the 1930's promise that "socialism would bring abundance" (Fitzpatrick, 1999, p. 89) to *byt* through material culture. Beginning in the 1960s, mass-produced objects such as furniture, radios, televisions, cameras and electrical appliances began to enter the new *khrushchyovkas* (Buchli, 1999). The Red Corner was updated again to include the television (Boym, 1994). This new technology gave the state a more direct way of spreading and

FIGURE 4 Resident with commode (1981). Afanasyev, S. Retrieved from https://187011.selcdn.ru/thumbnails/photos/2017/10/23/du0qi55t8ht6l0aq_1024.jpg

FIGURE 5 Commode with Troll Doll (1970). Retrieved from https://187011.selcdn.ru/thumbnails/photos/2016/08/30/f3tnctzvokvf7atx_1024.jpg

displaying Soviet icons within the *khrushchyovka*. The commode was recommended by the state to be replaced with the *Slavainskii Shkaf*, a newer and narrower cabinet (Buchli, 1999). A key difference between the two pieces of furniture is that a *Slavainskii Shkaf* lacks any 'ornamental details and is considered to be less commodity fetishized than a commode (Boym, 1994). However, figures 4 and 5 show residents using this modern piece of furniture for essentially the same propose of displaying commodity fetishized objects. Similar to their role in the *kommunalka*, commodes and the newly adapted *Slavainskii Shkaf* continued to be expressions of individuality. Updates in mass-housing and material culture and continued to modernize *byt*.

Khrushchyovka Residents' Relationships with the State and Objects

Khrushchyovka residents' relationship with the state continued to be conflicting in terms of control of space and consumption of objects. Although the *khrushchyovka* offered privacy, control over the space remained a point of contention. The total security of the residents provided by *khrushchyovka* was exchanged for residents having "control over immediate satisfaction" (Buck-Morss, 2000, p. 205) which the state

still held. This relationship created insecurity for residents who lacked control of the space, and looked to consumption of objects. In order to get the new, tasteful and modern objects residents were forced to "conform to the economic conditions of scarcity" (Chapman, 2013, p. 43). This left residents with few options of getting objects and allowed the state more control over the mass-housing interior. The conflict between the state and residents over control of *byt* as well as consuming material culture resulted in a somewhat dysfunctional relationship.

The *khrushchyovka* led residents to further develop their relationships with objects. Despite the shortages, there was a new "playful attitude toward fetishism and acquisitiveness" (Chapman, 2013, p. 39) of objects, meaning that residents could be now be more upfront and open with their commodity fetishism. In the context of shortages, residents took to "scarce items or even their remnants" (Chapman, 2013, p. 27) instead of unattainable new objects. This behavior shows a deep attachment to objects and preserving parts of the past. It might also explain the residents' continued attraction towards the commode. The *khrushchyovka* acted as a space for newer and more intensified commodity fetishized relationships with objects.

Objects and Control over the Interior

The objects and spaces within Soviet mass-housing represented a push and pull in reconfiguring *byt*, in terms of individuality and time. Both the *kommunalka* and *khrushchyovka* were created by the state to dismantle privacy and in opposition residents used them to express individuality. Despite the state's ongoing efforts, residents still held onto and assembled a sense of individuality through objects and spaces within mass-housing. This is reflected by residents assembling "objects of trivial private utopias and of mass aesthetics" (Boym, 1994, p. 154) to create their own interiors. Figure 5 shows part of such a space, with a commode holding a decorated glassware set, artificial plants, and a Scandinavian troll doll. The troll doll, as a prized and commodity fetishized object from the West, gives its owner an individuality and an awareness for life outside the Soviet reality. The troll doll and other objects of the mass-housing interior also act as "souvenirs of privacy itself" (Boym, 1994, p. 159) which may have been the most fetishized commodity by residents and the state. The state's early efforts at creating a new *byt* were attempts to use mass-housing to "subvert individual subjectivity itself" (Santacose, 2014, p. 8) by taking control of the interior spaces and objects. Residents, in spite of shortages and scarcity, attempted to assert their own control over byt by turning the interiors into "spaces of excess" (Chapman, 2013, p. 43) as seen through the commodes in figures 2, 3, 4 and 5. Individuality was a focus of the reconfiguration of *byt* and the interior.

The idea of time was another focus in the struggle over *byt* and material culture. The state dictated the housing of tomorrow and modern tastes in objects. On the other hand, residents held on to the past with "commemoration and preservation" (Boym, 1994, p. 150) in older and traditional housing or objects that they could acquire. Boym's (1994) metaphor of *kommunalkas* as "avant-garde matreska-dolls" (p.127) might best express the struggle over time. Boym's (1994) metaphor captures the Constructivist modern ideas and traditions of Red Corners and commodes occurring in close proximity, cramped beside each other in Soviet mass-housing. This also expresses time as fractural with layers that can be scaled up and down, between the degrees of modernism and tradition. Within mass-housing, the past and future often existed side by side or enclosed by the layers of remaining privacy in *byt* and everyday life.

Conclusion

Soviet mass-housing was the site of many contradictions in everyday life, starting with the kommunalka where the commode and its petit-bourgeois objects captured the focus of residents from the Red Corner. Within the kommunalka, the state focused on creating a new byt, while

residents attempted to express individuality and privacy. The era of the *khrushchyovka* gave residents privacy but the state held control over the interior and the limited supply of mass-produced objects. Within the *khrushchyovka*, commodity fetishism was embraced by residents through displaying new mass-produced and old objects. Throughout the time and spaces of Soviet mass housing commodity fetishism dominated the interior. The state's intentions of producing an expanded public realm inadvertently encouraged the residents to push back through commodity fetishism in seeking privacy and individuality. In the end, Soviet mass housing spaces and objects were the focus and products of both the changing and stagnant relationship between the state and residents.

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