

## Olga Smolyak

**Christine Varga-Harris. *Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life during the Khrushchev Years*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015. 289 pp. ISBN 978-0-80145-307-6.**

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Christine Varga-Harris is a historian with particular interest in Soviet everyday life, who is currently Associate Professor of History at Illinois State University, USA. In *Stories of House and Home* she focuses on the mass housing campaign launched by Nikita Khrushchev in 1957. Taking as a starting point the housing crisis of the mid-1950s, which was exacerbated by the postwar devastation and the diversion of capital and resources from consumer needs to intense industrialization, Varga-Harris delineates the meaning and implications of the mass housing campaign designed to solve this acute problem. Relying on previous studies by Susan Reid (1997, 1998, 2005, 2006a, 2006b), Lynne Attwood (2010), Mark Smith (2010), and Stephen Harris (2013), she has contributed to a consumption-centered approach to studies of everyday practices. This approach draws a crucial distinction between the late 1950s and previous decades relating to Soviet housing policies and urbanization processes. Unlike Mark Meerovich (2008), who interprets the Soviet housing deficit of the 1920s–1940s as an uncompromisingly repressive tool that the Soviet regime applied for establishing surveillance, the scholars who focus on the Khrushchev decade have underlined the reciprocity between the state and its citizens in their goals to lead a better life. The divergence in the perception of mutual objectives, as well as the state’s approach to (mis) understanding citizens’ needs, has been recognized as a fruitful topic for grasping the ordinary Soviet person as an agent and consumer. In this sense, the mass housing campaign is considered as one of a number of themes revealing how Soviet people developed civic consciousness through practicing consumerism.

Varga-Harris’s research showcases the transition from communal to single-family dwellings as “a material cultural artifact of de-Stalinization” (p. 7). By doing so she approaches housing in a multifaceted way: as a point of interaction between citizens and channels of authority, as a place for creating community, and as a set of norms associated with material culture. From this perspective, housing, which implies the design, construction, and decoration of living space, is presented as a negotiated site where the language of propaganda, policy matters, public opinion, and people’s maneuvers in the field of consumption all converged. To unravel such a complicated and confused tangle of meanings and implications, Varga-Harris employs, so to speak, two “anchors” as conceptual tools, which help to arrange and present the material in a logical way.

One of these tools is the commonplace “return to normalcy” that served as the basis of official arguments and was cited by Communist Party leaders, Soviet au-

thorities, and media, as well as by people in their petitions addressed to official institutions. This generally applied phrase—"return to normalcy"—does three things. Firstly, it evokes the utopian rhetoric of attaining communism; secondly, it foregrounds the points of agreement and dispute in the understanding of both the ideas and interactions between officials and people; and, thirdly, it inculcates in these actors the desire to meet the stated objectives. By describing the mutual aspirations of both state and citizens for the normalization of life, Varga-Harris shows how the mass housing campaign was embedded into the affirmation of real socialism and, as a result, became not only an arena of political slogans but also a battlefield for their implementation. Furthermore, it was a battle not only for meeting construction schedules but also against the ineffective management of housing stock. Thus, the "return to normalcy" functioned as a necessary discursive tool in the negotiations between state representatives and people who were expecting the improvements in their living conditions. By addressing petitions—which had certain degree of efficacy—to authorities, Soviet citizens revitalized the bond between state and society and contributed to the functioning of, as Varga-Harris terms it, the "socialist contract" (see, for instance, pp. 196–210).

The second "anchor" focuses on material of another kind. It is the metaphor of "house and home." It is important to understand that the pairing of these two concepts was not only uncommon in Russian culture but also impractical in the Russian language. "House and home" is essentially a culturally determined figure of speech describing people-dwelling relations in English. While the "house" indicates the physical structures used by individuals to live in, the "home" has a wider connotation that involves feelings and affective bonds. Also, as Henry Coolen and Janine Meesters pointed out, the concept of "home" has at least five facets that refer to different dimensions: environmental, spatial, temporal, social, and the process of homemaking (Coolen and Meesters 2012:2–4). Such an extended symbolic language that accompanies the core notions of house and home enables one to link housing with a broad range of phenomena and processes. By pairing "house and home" Varga-Harris conceptualizes the Soviet dwelling in a way that incorporates a number of its aspects. First, she explores the discourses of making cozy and comfortable interior spaces. Second, she examines the place of neighborhoods within housing policy. And third, she investigates how the construction of housing blocks corresponded with broad ideological and political trends. In sum, by employing the metaphor "house and home" she describes *byt* (Russian for "everyday life")—a phenomenon with a distinctly socialist aesthetic (see, for instance, pp. 81–98).

The book consists of six chapters, each of which reflects either one or both of the of two "anchors." The first chapter focuses on the standards for the new type of Soviet apartment blocks and discusses a number of areas that were influenced by the mass housing campaign: the new method of block construction, the new approach in urban planning (*mikroraion*), and the discourse on decoration and individualization of dwelling space. The second chapter is centered on the housewarming celebration, and it shows how the Khrushchev regime publicized the private family occasion in order to denote the embodiment of revolutionary ideas, as well as to present the

state as a paternal figure and as a worthy competitor in the Cold War. The third chapter examines published materials like advice literature, magazines, and fiction and discusses “Sovietness” in styles of dwelling decoration by addressing the question on how the concept of Soviet taste was fitted in between two terms—*kul’turnost’* (“culturedness”) and *meshchanstvo* (“middle-class lifestyle”). The fourth chapter explores the activism of Soviet people in regard to the improvement and maintenance of common spaces (courtyards) and how this activism correlated with the discourse on the ideal Soviet society as represented in the local press, agitation brochures, and readers’ letters to newspaper editors. The fifth chapter depicts the situation of Leningraders, how they lived in old apartments, and how they struggled for essential repairs and improved amenities by writing letters of complaint or appeal to different institutions, such as local and municipal governments, factory administrations, newspapers and magazines, and Party officials. The final chapter analyses the autobiographical details incorporated in petitions for better housing. It portrays ordinary people as confident and competent citizens who challenged officials to meet the clearly expressed obligation of the state to ensure their social welfare.

*Stories of House and Home* is a comprehensive study that has filled a gap in scholarly discussion of late Soviet everyday life by contextualizing Soviet society and overcoming methodological limitations in the discussion about the public and private boundaries of Soviet social space. The book leaves its readers with a convincing impression of Soviet everyday life in the Khrushchev era, although it does not reduce the opportunities for further exploration of the topic. Three areas make the study especially interesting and, at the same time, provoke both reasonable criticism and productive discussions.

First, the research includes elements of comparative analysis of housing in Western and Soviet societies, although it only sketches the context in a very general sense. However, the niche of comparative studies is very much unfilled and, consequently, remains open for further research, especially in terms of discovering comparable cases in the West. The development of this approach would positively enhance our understanding of socialist modernization and draw discussion of Cold War Soviet society into a broader international context. At the same time, by employing the metaphor of “house and home,” Varga-Harris studies Soviet society from a cultural distance, which implies the positive transference of meaning from one cultural framework to another. It appears that this application of an English idiom of dwelling to Soviet circumstances could be extremely productive in shaping a new conceptual framework in order to bring apparently disparate features of socialist everyday life into coherent focus.

This brings us to the second point. This research significantly contributes to discussions about the transparency of private and public boundaries in Soviet society. By applying the various meanings of “home” to different spaces, Varga-Harris describes situations that might be considered private, albeit embedded in public space. For instance, she closely analyses the assumption (supported by propaganda and, at the same time, enthusiastically accepted by the populace) that a workplace should be designed “just like home” (pp. 46–49).

The third remark relates to the subjectivization of the Soviet person. By focusing on petitions that people addressed to the state representatives, the book describes the ordinary Soviet person as an active and loyal citizen who understood the "return to normalcy" as the actual realization of communist ideas. At the same time, people became vigorously involved in the consumerist boom that undermined public discourses on the priority of social interests over personal ones. Varga-Harris argues that both ideas were harmoniously intertwined in such a way that the extension of consumption practices entailed reciprocal obligations on the part of consumers, such as participation in socialist activism (pp. 102–104).

On the whole, Varga-Harris's book provides a broad understanding of the process of reconciling socialist ideas with the concept of a cozy home during the Khrushchev decade. This book would be of interest to scholars, students, and others interested in Soviet cultural history.

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