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Global Urban History of Housing Justice

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A View from the Kitchen: Soviet Apartment Life

(Intro music that fades into dialogue)

Sofia: Hi everyone, and welcome to our student-produced podcast episode, *A View from the Kitchen: Soviet Apartment Life*. I am your host, Sofia Partida, and I'm a senior at Columbia. My classmates Brooke McCormick, Heli Sun, and I wrote this episode for our class, the Global Urban History of Housing Justice, taught by Professor Amy Chazkel.

For this episode we are leaving our New York dorms and traveling over 4600 miles away, to the city of Moscow, Russia. Just as a preface, we began researching for this podcast prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and our mid twentieth century historical deep dive will keep us mostly out of the weeds of contemporary politics. Humanizing and complicating the daily lives of the everyday people living in Russia living outside of the political arena or imperialist ambitions, may have come at a good time, though.

[[excerpt](#) from Cheryomushki, ~5 seconds, sound fades to quieter volume as dialogue resumes]

Sofia: Here we are listening to a brief clip of Dmitri Shostakovich's operetta, Cheryomushki. Around the 1950s, Cheryomushki was a district in Moscow full of cheap subsidized housing. The word Cheryomushki also refers to housing projects of the time.¹

When it came to deciding on a topic for this episode, we began with a hotly debated question on the topic of housing justice: What is the state's role in guaranteeing housing for its citizens? Logistically, what might large-scale state provision of housing look like?

¹ "Cheryomushki (1962) by Herbert Rappaport." Kino Klassika Foundation

We decided to analyze an example of how state-sponsored housing has played out in the real world by studying one of the most ambitious examples of such a program in history. Under Premier Nikita Khrushchev, the USSR added over a million housing units in just four years between 1956 and 1959. The four-to-five story walk ups that were ubiquitous in this era and revolutionized rapid construction and efficiency were nicknamed *khrushchyovka*, which means, Khrushchev's slums.²

The khrushchyovka were a no-frills response to a massive housing shortage. During our research, we wondered: To what extent does the design of state-sponsored housing shape the culture of the people living in them? It turns out that one room served as a particularly illuminating focus to help answer this question— the kitchen.

[chattering, sounds like kitchen utensils clashing, water pouring]

Sofia: The typical Khrushchev-era kitchen was compact and straightforward. Running water, a gas stove, and overhead cabinets and counters fitted for the height of the average Soviet woman were defining features of the space.³ But perhaps even more radical for the time was the fact that there was a kitchen included at all.

The private units each family received were part of a revolutionary approach to housing in the USSR. Until that point, most Soviet urban dwellers lived in barracks, hostels, and in the houses of the bourgeois' reclaimed homes, where apartments' rooms were often rented out to multiple families. Kitchens and bathrooms were shared by dozens of people; residents often prepared their food with hotplates in peoples' designated sections of the apartment or in the crowded communal kitchen of the unit.⁴

² Morton, Henry. *The Contemporary Soviet City (1st ed.)*. Routledge, 1984.

³ Attwood, Lynne. *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space*. Manchester University Press, 2010.

⁴ Interview with Dr. Brandon Schecter

When we got started on researching the kitchen and its ability to describe ideology, we noticed an inherent tension. How did a regime built on the philosophy of socialism and communal living evolve into backing and fully subsidizing private, individual units fit for a nuclear family from before the Russian revolution? What *did* the introduction of private units, and notably private kitchens, allocated to individual families mean for socialist ideology of the time?

(Transition music, same theme as intro and outro music)

Sofia: To begin to answer this question, we are going to need to go back to the Russian Revolution in 1917. In the immediately post-revolutionary era, the Soviet regime aimed to change the very structure of society to make it more egalitarian. More specifically, the new regime set out to liberate women from their subordinate status within marriages. The aim was to move away from the nuclear family, which socialist theory deemed a repressive structure that operated only in the interests of capitalism.⁵

These aspirations toward revolutionary changes to traditional family life meant that Soviet housing would be communal housing. Soviet planners envisioned public living, dining, and childcare as the key to freeing women from the drudgery of domestic housework and subordinate status within the nuclear family structure.

The Soviet Union also had ambitious goals of economic transformation. The Soviet Union industrialized extremely rapidly. Joseph Stalin's five years plans, collectivization, intense authoritarian rule, and the fight to compete with capitalist countries would characterize his tenure between 1922 and 1953.⁶

Sometimes forced to relocate due to government mandates and sometimes just in search of better living conditions, millions flocked to the cities during this time and would make up the work force behind Stalin's lofty goals to skyrocket the country's production of coal, iron, and oil

⁵ Atwood, Lynne. Gender and Housing

⁶ Morton, Henry. *The Contemporary Soviet City*.

production. Before the Russian Revolution in 1917, over 80 percent of the country lived in rural areas. By the 1990s, though, in the span of just a lifetime, the vast majority of the population lived in cities.

(Background sound effects such as noises of a factory, construction, city noises behind the dialogue of last couple paragraphs)

Sofia: Once we get to the 1950s, widespread homelessness, poverty, and food insecurity changed the trajectory of Soviet political goals. Several factors left people in dire need of housing accommodation. First was the Soviet Union's rapid urbanization and prioritization of industrialization over the expansion of housing and social services. Second was the wreckage following World War Two. This brings us back to the introduction of the state-sponsored individual khrushchevka housing units.

We spoke about this moment in Soviet history with Brandon Schechter, a historian of material culture and everyday life specializing in the Red Army during the Second World War who generously agreed to be interviewed for this podcast. Professor Schechter explained to us that the housing program was a radical move in subsidized housing globally. It also came at a time when the Soviet Union began questioning how they could channel the power of a socialist state to not only increase industry and military might but also improve everyday life.

Brandon Schechter: "And so Khrushchev shifts to we should live well and lots of people should live well. So this includes things like, really being concerned about how well people are eating. And this also concerns this bit of mass housing and this shift that takes place, which is, you know, potentially the largest shift of people to independent housing, to one family housing in human history. It is of an absolutely massive scale. And so it, for many people is very, very positive because you now have a space where you can have a private life. You now have a space where you are not constantly being observed by your neighbors in a society in which, you know, if you say the wrong thing, you can go to prison or worse. You now have room for a personal life"

Sofia: The mid-century Soviet kitchen was a place where music was played, poetry was recited, forbidden art and literature circulated, and political matters were discussed. Kitchen culture developed from the lack of spaces to speak freely. With that, the details of the function of spaces in the apartments offer valuable insight into the specific cultural adaptations that took place because of the political turbulence at the time. Since it was impossible to have a political discussion in public, kitchen circles became spaces where groups of friends would gather and engage in endless conversations about the meaning of art and politics.⁷ With these circles taking place in kitchens, citizens had a space to discuss and imagine life outside of the totalitarian regime.⁸

Sofia: The music of the time also reflected the exchange of “forbidden” topics in kitchens. Before the widespread use of tape recorders, the people recorded banned music on X-ray film salvaged from hospital waste bins. Kitchen culture is also mentioned in music of their time, with Nautilus Pompilius song “Bound with One Chain”, his lyrics translating to “Some words for the kitchen, the other for the streets”. **[play clip]** And the popular Russian singer and songwriter Viktor Tsoy also had something to say about this; when he sings, “I love kitchens because they keep secrets,” he speaks of the free, conversational nature that took place in Soviet kitchens, that contrasted with the social norms constructed by the strict totalitarian regime in public spaces, which made these safe private communal spaces feel necessary. **[play clip]**

People found ways to assert individual autonomy under an authoritarian regime, beyond having these forbidden discussions sitting around a kitchen table.. Even in the face of the overbearing Soviet government, people found ways to take control of their daily domestic lives in other ways that involved the uses of their homes. For example, residents of Moscow sometimes exchanged khrushchyovka-esque units with one another clandestinely in open air “stock markets.” The historian Henry Morton in his book *The Contemporary Soviet City* tells us that it even “became a given person’s ‘working capital’ to try to exchange current quarters for more suitable housing.”⁹ So, you might be wondering ... Why would people want to exchange their apartments in the first

⁷ Manaev, Georgy. “The Most Important Room in the Soviet Apartment.” *Russia Beyond*, January 26, 2021.

⁸ “How Soviet Kitchens Became Hotbeds of Dissent and Culture.” NPR. Morning Edition

⁹ Morton, Henry. *The Contemporary Soviet City*.

place? Well, their state-subsidized housing could have a whole host of issues, from poor workmanship resulting in dampness and draftiness to location-related issues to people simply not wanting to live together anymore, such as divorced couples. On a slightly lighter note, people could also assert independence in their living quarters by decorating and furnishing their apartments to their liking, as well as taking care of shared spaces like corridors or flower beds.¹⁰

The inclusion of the private kitchen reflected Soviet ideology regarding idealized gender roles and family structures in a socialist society. Despite previously renouncing nuclear families, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Soviet leaders considered the nuclear family to be the solid foundation that would make up Soviet society. This was an era where people were desperate for stability amid decades of industrialization, upheaval, and war. Restoring the family unit was part of the government's goal to increase the birth rate, which had fallen drastically due to mass food shortages, poverty, and widespread illness and death.

Decades of industrialization, food and housing shortages, and World War II's tumultuous effects would change the regime's outlook on how families should be organized. Women were once again glorified for their role in tending to the home. Women's liberation efforts were now framed as funding and expanding schools as well as providing public laundry, and public dining services, which officials projected to be a key part of everyday life by the 1970s.

(Background sound effects such as noises of a factory, construction, city noises behind the dialogue of last couple paragraphs, keeping it exciting)

Sofia: Until the regime could subsidize all forms of dining, housework, and childcare, who would be the one in charge of household duties? Both in theory and in practice, it would be

¹⁰ Varga-Harris, Christine. *Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life during the Khrushchev Years*. Cornell

women. And it would stay that way. As my tone suggests, public dining programs never gained popular support nor had the funding to ever come to fruition.

To understand why things seemed to contradict past decades' goals to liberate women from the home, we spoke to Professor Schechter, the Soviet history expert, again. He pointed out one interesting feature of Soviet government that could have played a role in how the regime was theorizing gender roles in the 1960s.

Brandon Schechter: “And you would see a relatively for, you know, as compared to the rest of the world, large number of women in very high, in, in, in high positions, in the twenties, thirties into the lesser extent into the forties, as time goes on, women continue to have careers and continue to be important. But if you look at the top level Soviet officials, it is increasingly male and increasingly aging. And that is one of the, you know, so, so much so that by the end of the Soviet union, you know, it is, it is, or by the last decades of the Soviet union, it's often viewed as kind of a, a gerontocracy of men, which is one of the, you know, one of the bizarre contradictions of Soviet history, right? You go from this incredibly, you go from the, basically one of the first states to, to give women the vote universally, and to be very much invested in gender equality, to still having formal gender equality. But, you know, there, there are, there are no figures. There's not like a Margaret, a Margaret Thatcher figure in Soviet history, right. Or in late Soviet history.”

Sofia: In brief: by the mid twentieth century, the Soviet regime felt they had effectively addressed and solved gender inequality. There was a very subtle differentiation between the Soviet woman homemaker and her American counterpart. At the Moscow Trade Fair in 1959, Vice President Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev compared U.S. and Soviet ideal kitchens in a now infamous debate.¹¹ There, they were hotly debating the question you would probably expect them to: under which system do people live better, capitalism or communism? Nixon pointed out

¹¹ “The Kitchen Debate.” New York Historical Society

the widespread use of domestic appliances making the lives of American housewives easier. Khrushchev said communism considers women differently.

(Audio clip of this dialogue)

Sofia: The austere, compact nature of the Khrushchev kitchen fell in line with Soviet ideology towards gender and theoretical egalitarianism at the time. The ideal Soviet woman was not a housewife, but rather, a woman who worked outside of the home. The Soviet kitchen embodied the fine line between embracing modernity and technology without making it a frivolous, romanticized site of domestic servitude. The government pursued implementing electricity in the home, harnessing nuclear power, and increasing the availability of consumer goods and appliances to reduce the burden of housework. Notably, beyond water and electric wiring, however, many amenities were rare and exclusive to more affluent or politically connected households.¹²

In short, the gender roles among urban women in Soviet Russia were not far off from pre-revolutionary days. Soviet women continued to balance work outside of the home with the also time-consuming and unpaid job of cooking and cleaning in a “second shift” after work. A 1969 novella written by Soviet writer Natalya Baranskaia called “A Week Like Any Other Week” helps sheds light on the daily life for many women living in Khrushchev-era units.¹³ Written in first person, the book shows the daily activities of a married woman who works as a scientist while also managing the maintenance of the home and cooking for her family of four.

In the short story, our protagonist is required to fill out a questionnaire handed out to all the women in the office by inquiring demographers. The questionnaire asked about women’s daily

¹² Reid, Susan E. “Everyday Aesthetics in the Khrushchev-Era Standard Apartment.” Etnofoor, August 10, 2019.

<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/42483549.pdf>.

¹³ Malaia, Kateryna. *A Unit of Homemaking: The Prefabricated Panel and Domestic Architecture in the Late Soviet Union. Architectural Histories*, 8(1), p.12, 2020.

lives, time spent at work, the type of housing they live in, and things like the amount of time they have for leisure. The story's author, Baranskaia, writes, "Oh, leisure, leisure. . . . What a clumsy word, "lei-sure." "Women fight for leisure!" What nonsense. Lei-sure. Personally, my sport is running. Running here, running there. A shopping bag in each hand and . . . up, down: trolleybus, autobus; into the metro, out of the metro. Our district has no stores; we've been living there for over a year, and they haven't been finished yet."¹⁴

Thus, this era forced women to take on both domestic and professional roles. At the same time, this emphasis on modernity, technology, and science discouraged women from tending to the home in the same traditional ways their mothers and grandmothers did and represented the assertion of state control over past generations' learned methods of cooking and housekeeping.¹⁵

(Transition music to distinguish the end of the podcast)

Sofia: We hope that this historical overview has given nuance to your understanding of the Soviet Union. If you're curious about khrushchyovka today, know that many of them are still standing and are still inhabited. As these units have greatly deteriorated and weren't meant to last this long, the Russian government advocated for their mass demolition in 2017, affecting thousands of residents who will now have to be resettled.¹⁶

Ultimately, the Khrushchev kitchen can help us speak to the politics, gender roles, family structures, and revolutionary attitudes towards housing during the era when they were constructed. Applying this level of analysis to the structure and design of *everything* we come in contact with can pave the way for a deeper understanding of how conceptions of gender and political trends appear in physical space.

¹⁴ Malaia, Kateryna. *A Unit of Homemaking*

¹⁵ Attwood, Lynne. *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia*

¹⁶ Mikhaylyuk, Vitaly. "The Condemned: Living in a Khrushchyovka." *Russia Beyond*, 2017.
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Sound Attributions:

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Game Music - soundbible.com

Shostakovich: Waltz from the Cheryomushki Suite - youtube.com

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