

THE HOUSING GAME

by Henry W. Morton

In "The Exchange," a story by the late Yuri Trifonov, a popular Russian writer who often dealt with the stratagems of the Soviet urban middle class, a Moscow woman changes her official apartment registration and legally moves in with her husband's dying mother—whom she hates.

She makes the shift for one important reason: to prevent the old lady's precious single room from reverting, upon her death, to the state. The woman reckons that, through the bartering system used by millions of city folk, she will be able to use the place to swap for more space for *her* family.

As the story suggests, urban housing remains one of the Soviet Union's major problems. Housing was bad under the tsars; it grew worse during Josef Stalin's reign (1924–53), when headlong industrialization policies drove peasants to urban factory sites and World War II destruction left more than 25 million homeless. The crowding of many families into one apartment became universal. By 1950, the average city resident had less than five square meters (about seven feet by seven feet) of living space to call his own. As late as 1960, some 60 percent of all city families lived communally, sharing rooms with others.

I vividly remember sitting in the office of M. I. Romanov, the vice-chairman in charge of housing for the Leningrad District of Moscow, one day in 1964. In four and a half hours, he saw 31 people, all of them seeking separate apartments. They came as supplicants entreating an official representative of Soviet power to grant them this favor, small for him but enormous for them, that would immeasurably improve their lives. Only three, all very sick, got satisfaction. The others accepted their fate with resignation, except for a few who began berating Romanov for having failed them in their hour of need.

Stalin's successors decided to try to eliminate the housing shortage, and since 1957 the state has built an average of 2.2 million units yearly, far more than any other country. In most cities, old housing districts are now outnumbered by new ones, ranging from "Khrushchev slums," four- or five-story walkups thrown up in the late 1950s,* to clusters of taller elevator build-

*Appalled by the housing shortage, Nikita Khrushchev approved hasty, slipshod construction. "Do you build a thousand adequate apartments or 700 good ones?" he asked. Rapid urbanization argued for mere adequacy. The USSR had two cities (Moscow and Leningrad) of more than one million in 1926; today it has 23, and apartments are the staple. Single-family houses may not be built in towns of more than 100,000.

ings (nine to 25 stories) built during the 1970s and '80s to limit urban sprawl. By 1982, the average urban living space per capita was up to nine square meters, or almost 100 square feet.

Typically, however, some citizens have fared better than others. Some Soviet families I knew and officials I interviewed in Moscow and Leningrad during the 1970s had their own apartments; a decade earlier, they were squeezed into one room and sharing kitchens and toilets with strangers. The knowledge that a class of housing "rich" exists has bred resentment among the millions of housing "poor" still awaiting a place of their own.

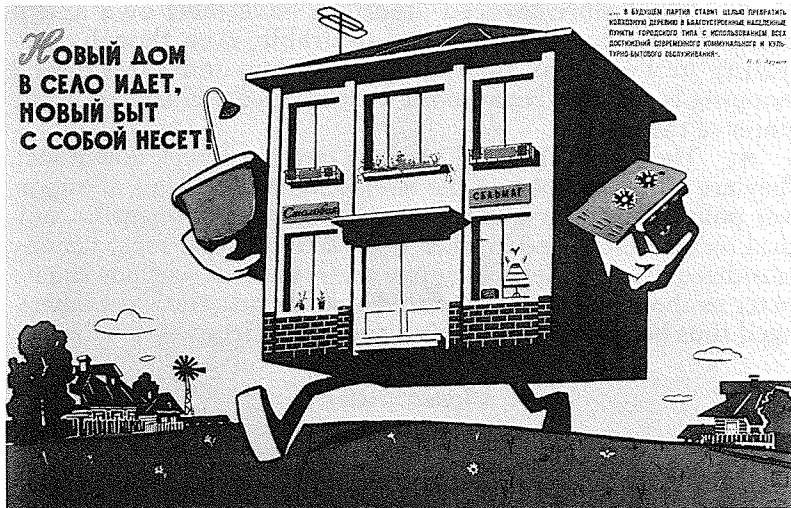
Even today, 40 years after World War II, the USSR has the worst housing shortage of any industrial nation. New construction notwithstanding, Soviet cities are still overwhelmed by the numbers of people who have come to them, or want to. Twenty percent of urban "households" were sharing apartments in 1980, and five percent lived in factory dormitories. The Soviet government claims that every year 10 million people improve their living situation in one way or another. But no statistics are published (as they are in other countries) on the gap between numbers of households and housing units. Yet the gap remains wide. Between 1973 and 1982, new marriages exceeded the number of new housing units built by 6,175,226. Young Soviet couples are destined to live with in-laws for years, perhaps decades.

Not surprisingly, good housing, being scarce, is one of the Soviet regime's rewards to the deserving. Along with a car and a country dacha, an apartment is one of any city family's most sought-after material goals. Unlike an auto, which costs about four times the average annual pay of an industrial worker, and an even more expensive dacha, a state-owned apartment is allocated free to the fortunate family that gets one. Rent, heavily subsidized, typically accounts for only five percent of a family's monthly earnings (versus roughly 30 percent in America).*

But low cost does not mean easy availability. Government agencies allocate state housing and approve all private housing transactions. (The state owns 75 percent of all urban units.)

*The Soviet cost of housing, as a percentage of income, was the lowest in the world when it was set in 1928. It has never been raised. The cheap rent, which today covers only one-third of the average cost of maintaining state-owned housing, is very popular with city-dwellers, although they pay for the rent subsidy through higher prices for clothing and other goods.

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"A new home is coming to the country, and with it, a new way of life." Despite the optimism of this 1960 poster, most rural folk still live in izbas, squat log cabins that lack indoor plumbing.

They do not do so on the basis of need, and never have.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, homes and apartments of the nobility and the bourgeoisie were divided among workers and peasants; some got more than others. In *Hope Abandoned* (1974), the second volume of her memoirs, Soviet author Nadezhda Mandelstam recalled how, during the early 1920s, writers in favor with the regime received privileged housing, even if only a room, as well as extra food rations; those not so highly regarded received nothing. Today, quarters are still apportioned, to a certain extent, by degree of "favor":

- The "least favored" urban-dwellers are those clustered beyond the borders of Moscow, Leningrad, and other large cities; they commute long distances to work by bus or train. Living in crowded tenements and dormitories, often in sight of the city's outermost high-rise buildings, they are the Soviet "urban poor," people who lack access to the amenities of the cities in which they toil, such as shops, theaters, and parks. Comfortable suburbs, as Westerners know them, do not exist.

- The "less favored" folk are usually relegated to shared apartments and dormitories, but these quarters are within the city limits. Possessing a legal right to live there, they can at least aspire to an apartment of their own. Meanwhile, they can enjoy urban amenities.

- The “more favored” families have their own apartments in new housing districts—desirable, even though commuting to work may take an hour by bus and subway and shopping is difficult because the best stores are clustered in the center of the city.

- The “most favored” citizens live in or near downtown. They are often members of the *nomenklatura*—officials of important political, military, state security, economic, scientific, cultural, educational, and worker organizations. The most heavily subsidized city-dwellers, they pay the same low rent per square meter as those elsewhere in shared apartments. The most advantaged thus become the system’s biggest beneficiaries.

Closed Cities

Whether they are old inner-city residences or new, prefabricated apartment blocks that seem to have sprung from a single blueprint, most urban housing structures are not “differentiated” for middle-class or working-class folk. In one older building, a typical 450 square-foot apartment with four bedrooms, kitchen, and one bath may house: a retired couple; a factory worker and his divorced wife and their daughter, all still together because he cannot find other lodging; a widow; and a young couple who work during the day and study at night. Another apartment of similar size may have only two families. A third may accommodate just one (privileged) family.

But “differentiation” is increasing. Government departments, the armed forces, the Committee of State Security (KGB), individual factories, and other organizations build apartments solely for their own employees. In the buildings erected by the Writers’ Union on Moscow’s Red Army Street near Dynamo Station, high-ranking people not only get first crack at apartments but can also obtain them for their relatives.

Class also counts in cooperatives, the state-built apartments primarily purchased by professionals and other members of the “intelligentsia” who pay to get better housing faster than do ordinary workers. The down payment for a two-room (plus kitchen) unit may be 6,500 rubles, more than three years’ pay for the typical industrial worker averaging 175 rubles a month. And space in the rare co-op that is near a subway station (most are built in remote districts) may require bribes of 1,000 rubles to the co-op chairman and the inspector who processes the application. Still, owners exhibit much pride of place. A Moscow engineer told a Westerner: “See our block. . . . We live in one made up entirely of cooperative apartments. Around us—over there,