

**Varga-Harris, Christine. *Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life during the Khrushchev Years*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015. Hardcover. \$49.95. xvii + 289 pages. Index.**

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*Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life during the Khrushchev Years* is Christine Varga-Harris's first monograph. This well-written and engaging discussion, published by Cornell University Press, focuses on letters that Leningrad residents sent to housing committees, newspapers, and officials. These, the author maintains, illuminated how citizens saw themselves as participating in a society that attempted to meet their needs. The author bases her claims on solid archival research in St. Petersburg. Varga-Harris outlines how Nikita Khrushchev revolutionized apartment policy, greatly expanding the number of separate apartments (despite many of these being shoddily constructed or inconveniently located).

Her approach draws on the work of Stephen Kotkin (letter writers "speaking Bolshevik" to plead their case for new apartments), as well as Susan Reid and Steven Harris, who have written on housing, everyday life, and material culture after 1953. Because she focuses on the USSR's northern capital, *Stories of House and Home* pays special attention to how the legacy of the Great Patriotic War and urban migration made Leningrad's situation both typical and anomalous. Varga-Harris also highlights the 1959 Kitchen Debate between Khrushchev and Vice President Richard Nixon, a clash over consumerism that has become a touchstone for how our field reevaluates the Cold War.

The introduction theorizes the shift (for the fortunate) from cramped yet sociable *kommunalki* to separate apartments, arguing for housing as a "negotiated site" combining cultural expectations, policy, and *byt* (6). Chapter One discusses the conveyor-line construction of *khrushchevki*, exploring how interior design and physical assembly echoed the Thaw's obsession with technology but often yielded slipshod results. The *khrushchevki* were built only to last a quarter of a century, after which the arrival of communism would presumably bring more durable housing solutions. Those planning the apartments stressed functionality and minimalism, an implicit rebuff to the Stalinist style that Vladimir Papernyi has linked to hierarchy and stasis. The second chapter sees *novosel'e* (moving to a new home) as confirming Soviet society's concern for its citizens. Here and throughout, Varga-Harris liberally sprinkles her book with fascinating cartoons from *Krokodil*, posters exhorting speedy construction, and so forth—these are valuable as supporting evidence and could also be used in explaining housing policy to students, a group increasingly attuned to the visual instead of the verbal.

Chapter Three delves into the internal space of the apartment, connecting its spartan furnishings to concerns about *meshchanstvo* (crass materialism), which supposedly stemmed from a glut of knickknacks and overly comfortable furniture. This shortcoming was incompatible with what Deborah Field has examined as the moral code expected of (literal and metaphorical) builders of communism. This volume examines the role of the past as well: throughout the book Varga-Harris notes how 1950s-1960s ideas about apartments recycled many modernist conceptions

from the 1920s, an era Vladimir Maiakovskii linked to a suspicion of objects. Here the author replicates the Soviet state's focus on those in urban centers, as opposed to the peasants who would have been happy for the material goods scorned by Maiakovskii and his ilk. The fourth chapter looks at the areas around the apartment—entryway, courtyard, and environs—as rich in meaning for residents, builders, and policy-makers. Varga-Harris examines how efforts to build more apartments involved both “internal spaces” and “the liminal spaces bordering housing complexes” (116). This approach credits Svetlana Boym’s seminal discussions, as well as those by Katerina Gerasimova.

The fifth chapter surveys various tactics for obtaining better apartments. Varga-Harris discusses Joseph Brodsky’s ideas on the communal apartment and Iurii Trifonov’s famous novella *The Exchange*, thus revealing how two otherwise dissimilar writers coincide. Throughout the volume she brings in images from literature and film as these reacted to the Khrushchev housing reforms and their aftermaths. This is a welcome tendency in Russian and Eurasian studies; it complements well her focus on complaint letters as a cultural genre. The final chapter examines how veterans, the disabled, and those rehabilitated during the Thaw all used Soviet discourse when trying to wrangle better housing. In the conclusion, Varga-Harris surveys apartment policy after the end of first the Thaw and then the USSR. She argues that in post-Soviet culture *khrushchevki* have become a locus of nostalgia. This is, of course, only part of the story—the crumbling apartment blocks also were prominent symbols of social decay beginning already in the late 1980s (for example, the setting of the film *Little Vera*).

*Stories of House and Home* is a nuanced look at how top-down policy and bottom-up expectations interacted in the Thaw. Varga-Harris’s clear yet sophisticated style makes this work a pleasure to read. A usable index, helpful glossary, and extensive bibliography make the book an especially helpful resource.