

MUNICH, 22 June 1970 (CAA). The following article by Anita Glassl of the Institute for the Study of the USSR appeared in the June 9 (No. 603) issue of Analysis of Current Developments in the Soviet Union.

The majority of Soviet town-dwellers still live in shared apartments or hostels with little hope of a rapid improvement in their living conditions, despite an intensive housing construction program. Even the fortunate minority who manage to get hold of separate (and by Western standards extremely small) apartments are frequently sadly disappointed by the lack of amenities, inadequate public transport and poor quality of workmanship and materials that are characteristic of Soviet housing schemes.

"Everything is relative," said a Soviet fitter, when asked in an interview how he felt about his new flat. After moving to Moscow as a child he lived with his family of seventeen in one room, sharing a bed with two brothers. Later, after marrying, he and his wife had a bed to themselves in the communal room and this they considered a great luxury. After the birth of their first child they received a separate room, and only after twenty years of married life had they recently acquired a flat of their own. (Sputnik, No. 6, 1968, p. 38). He was speaking for the vast majority of Soviet citizens, who have nearly all had experience of shared apartments or hostels at some time or other. In Moscow in 1956, for example, before an extensive housing construction program was launched, 99 per cent of the inhabitants were living in these communal apartments and hostels and forced to share kitchens and other amenities and only a fortunate 1 per cent had separate flats (Literaturnaya gazeta, March 5, 1969, p. 11).

The housing problems of the urban population fall into two main categories: firstly, the larger section of the population living in shared apartments and faced with all the inconveniences and lack of privacy this entails and, secondly, a smaller proportion of people who have acquired a flat of their own and who have problems of a different nature.

The acquiring of a separate flat (usually allocated by the appropriate State administrative departments or by the factory or office where one works) is quite a procedure, and depends primarily on the recommendations of a worker's superior and of the trade union and Party committees, who take into account the applicant's work performance and his social and political activity. The only other ways of acquiring an individual flat, through membership of a housing co-operative or by purchase, are difficult because of the high cost and the exceptionally long waiting list.

In 1961 the average size of new flats being built in the Soviet Union was 42 square meters of utilizable floor space (Narodnoye khozyaystvo SSSR v 1968 /The Economy of the USSR in 1968/Moscow, 1969, p. 575) and they were, for the most part, handed over to families of four. The average size has now been increased slightly to 45 square meters, which is still too modest for families of this size, especially as in the Soviet Union the kitchen, lavatory and corridor are also considered utilizable living space and thus no more than 67 per cent of the flat (or 30 square meters) is available as living and sleeping space for four people.

Although housing construction has been speeded up in recent years the housing problem is hardly likely to be solved in the near future. Years of neglect have to be made good, and though since 1956 a considerable effort has been made to catch up with the backlog the program is constantly being disrupted. According to figures published by the Central Statistical Board, 102.5 million square meters of new living space were occupied in 1969 out of a planned 121 million square meters (Pravda, December 11, 1968 and January 1, 1970). Party chief Brezhnev himself stressed some of the major problems in housing construction in a recent speech in Kharkov:

It is still not possible to consider the housing problem solved. We must continue to strive to fulfill the planned program, which requires the most efficient utilization of the large sums that the State makes available for housing construction. Unfortunately, everything is not in order here. There is no lack of examples where, in some oblasts and rayons, a large number of administrative buildings, stadiums, clubs and other structures not envisaged by the plan are being built at the cost of living accommodation; there is also unjustified expenditure on various ways of embellishing towns, etc. (Izvestia, April 14, 1970)

Although total available urban housing space rose from 958 million square meters in 1960 to 1,410 million square meters in 1968 (Narodnoye khozyaystvo SSSR v 1968, p. 580) the amount of living space per head of urban population rose only from 9.3 to 10.7 square meters, because over the same period the urban population increased from 103.8 to 131 million (ibid., p. 7). Furthermore, even this limited amount of living space is not at the disposal of the ordinary Soviet citizens, because members of privileged groups -- Party officials, administrators, etc. -- have larger than average flats and frequently week-end houses as well. A sociological survey conducted at Leningrad engineering factories revealed an interesting link between standards of accommodation and social status:

With approximately equal amounts of living space (workers 6.2 square meters for each member of the family and managers 7 square meters), 24 per cent of workers had a separate flat or house, 29 per cent of team leaders, 38 per cent of foremen and 41 per cent of workshop, department and office managers. (Molodoy kommunist, No. 8, 1968, p. 2)

Single people are especially handicapped in the housing stakes and are usually forced to lodge with strange families or live in hostels which frequently lack even the most elementary comforts. The following description of hostel life by a young worker in a Krasnoyarsk wood-processing combine is typical:

This is how we live: there is no washing; there is also no drinking water and no water for washing. You arrive tired after your shift and you must grab a bucket and go and fetch water. On Sundays we look after the boilers ourselves, because the stoker has the day off. Instead of resting we chop wood, fetch water, stoke the boilers and clean up the premises. The hostel has no recreation room, no newspapers and no magazines....and such a boon of civilization as a telephone is out of the question. We tried appealing to the chairman of the works committee and to the newspaper Krasnoyarskiy rabochiy, but to no avail. So this is how we live and nobody cares a hoot about it (Trud, February 13, 1968, p. 3)

The future outlook remains bleak for single people, because even large families on the priority list must wait years for a flat. Many people marry in the hope that their chances will improve, yet even divorced couples must frequently continue to live together because of the difficulty of finding alternative accommodation, an intolerable situation that has been described more than once in Soviet literature.

Even people fortunate enough to secure a flat of their own often have to cope with the inevitable problems of life on the new housing schemes where, especially during the first few years, there is often an irritating

lack of amenities and shopping facilities causing great inconvenience to the inhabitants. For example:

In the Grazhdanka district (Leningrad - author) where we carried out our investigation the population has already increased to over 100,000. The general plan included the construction of 34 shops and other amenities to cater for the needs of this section of the population, but less than a quarter of the planned shopping and service centers have been built. Only half of the number of schools required have been built and there is not a single post office, chemist's shop or polyclinic. (Chelovek i obshchestvo /Man and Society/, No. 5, 1969, p. 99)

Transport is another major problem in these new residential areas and usually years elapse before adequate and properly co-ordinated public transport is introduced:

In areas of intensive housing construction 60-70 per cent of all passengers are conveyed by bus, but because the network of bus routes is small and not always properly orientated to cope with the flow of people the inhabitants of newly constructed residential areas must use a considerable variety of transport to reach their place of work. Consequently, not only do passengers spend extra money on traveling but also lose a great deal of time changing from one connection to another (Ibid., p. 105)

The poor quality of much new building is another source of complaints. Flats are frequently handed over to the tenants before they have been properly completed and builders often ignore requests to finish off the job, especially if the customer has already paid everything. A pravda article described how 300 occupants of a new block of flats could not use their gas cookers for almost two years because the gas supply had not been connected up. After numerous unsuccessful appeals to various official departments they eventually wrote to the newspaper's editors and

when we began to check up as a result of this letter the builders sent welders and fitters to House No. 4 and promised to supply the flats with gas immediately. But what is the position with regard to hundreds of other houses and thousands of other flats where the gas supply has not been laid on? Is there a properly thought-out, realistic plan for eliminating these "tail-ends"? Is there any check? Nothing of the sort. (August 13, 1969, p. 3)

To a large extent this poor workmanship and bad organization is due to the practice of shturmovshchina (last-minute rush tactics), a frantic attempt to catch up in the second half of the year on delays caused by various organizational and supply difficulties during the first half and to fulfill the annual plan by the end of the year at any price. Quality suffers accord-

ingly, as the chairman of the RSFSR Gosstroy (State Committee on Construction), D. Basilov, pointed out in an interview last year:

In recent years the reprehensible practice of handing over living accommodation and other social amenities in the fourth quarter of the year has become prevalent in our construction organizations. They are never completed in spring and summer, the best time for the completion of their construction. Each year up to 40 per cent of new flats are occupied in December, when over the greater part of the territory of the Russian Federation it is impossible to carry out roofing work and finish off façades to high standards.... In 1968 the acceptance committees assessed about a half of the new accommodation and public buildings as "middling", and in Ufa, Elista, Magadan, Togliatti, Vladivostok and Belgorod up to 90 per cent. The important thing is that these difficulties have long been known to everyone: unsatisfactory brick laying, the slipshod joining together of external panels, the use of sub-standard building materials and products, tasteless finish and interior decoration. (Sovetskaya Rossiya, June 28, 1969, p. 1)

The situation is further aggravated by the fact that the construction organizations are not made to pay for these sins of omission. A letter written by a woman to the editors of Sovetskaya Rossiya indicated what the occupants of these jerry-built houses must put up with:

Four years ago I received a separate one-roomed flat in a new five-storey block. You can imagine how happy I was! But my delight was washed away by the first rain: the walls let the water through, and it turned out that the builders had not filled in the joints between the edges of the panels in the prescribed manner. They just flung things together and departed, and now I've had to put up with it for four years. In wet weather it is damp and in winter I freeze, because the temperature rises no higher than 10° centigrade. Nobody wants to help me, neither the house-building trust nor the communal housing department of my combine. (September 24, 1969, p. 2)

Because such cases are so wide-spread and occur time and time again, a group of Sovetskaya Rossiya readers suggested that slipshod work could be prevented by exercising public control during construction, that the practice of shturmovshchina should be stopped and houses handed over to occupants throughout the whole year and with a guarantee, and that builders should be compelled to reimburse in cash the costs incurred by defective workmanship (*ibid.*). Although these proposals would curb all the major abuses and shortcomings in Soviet housing construction there is little chance that they will be adopted because they involve reorganization of the entire economic system in which breakdowns in supply and the resultant shturmovshchina are endemic.

The move from a communal to a separate flat always alters the whole family's living habits to some degree or other. It is a great advantage for a housewife to have a kitchen of her own and the other amenities that many older houses lack (official statistics reveal that at the end of 1968 of all socialized urban accommodation only 71 per cent had running water, 68 per cent a proper sewage system, 66 per cent central heating and 56 per cent gas -- Vestnik statistiki, No. 3, 1970, p. 11), and there is also a tendency for tenants on new housing schemes to spend more time on their own families and gradually withdraw from communal, social and political activities, either because of the transport problems or because they now feel more at home in their new flats:

Among all people in new housing schemes, with very few exceptions, there is a sharply rising tendency to spend leisure time within the family (reading, watching television, among friends, etc.). Consequently less time is being spent outside the home (visits to theaters, clubs, the cinema, sports events, etc.).

It is disturbing that under certain circumstances this stay-at-home tendency can lead (and sometimes is leading) to an increasing proportion of inactive leisure and a passive attitude to cultural activities among a certain sector of the population. (Chelovek i obshchestvo, p. 107)

These "individualist" tendencies do not square with the Party's aim of creating a new type of "collective" man and attempts are being made to counter them. This, presumably, is the motivation behind the new-type housing blocks (DNB), now under construction in several of the larger Soviet cities, in which the collective spirit is to be fostered by means of communal dining rooms and other amenities. Their main function is to serve as a model for the ideal Soviet home which, in theory at least, should be wide-spread by the year 2000. A house of this type now being built in Moscow has 812 comfortable apartments, a swimming pool, saunas, sports halls, a cinema, café and many other amenities and leisure facilities. Everything is directed towards ensuring that the occupants think and feel collectively and for this reason separate kitchens have been replaced with common dining rooms on each floor: literaturnaya gazeta, January 8, 1969).

But long before the completion of this new-style house in Moscow critical letters began to arrive at the editorial offices of Soviet newspapers complaining about the high cost of this experiment and the provision of privileged living conditions for a select few at the expense of the many people housed under much less favorable conditions:

In the DNB there will be sports halls, a swimming pool, a cinema, etc., but how will they all be used? If they are to be restricted, i.e. accessible only to the residents of the house, then these latter will be enjoying privileges at the expense of other people, for example those living nearby, because the State will be maintaining these installations from public funds, funds intended for everybody. Does it mean that out of the communal pot some people will receive more than others? (Ibid.)

Many of those who wrote in to complain feel that because these new-type houses can be built only in limited numbers and because of the high price of the apartments only people in the top earning brackets will be able to afford them. This, they say, could lead to the formation of exclusive, isolated communities -- the very opposite of what the experiment hopes to achieve. The introduction of such experimental schemes not only hamper efforts to solve the existing serious housing problems but also proves that ideological considerations take precedence over the urgent need to improve living conditions for the vast majority of the Soviet population.

jsb 1638/70