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## Ecologies of socialism: Soviet *Gradostroitel'stvo* and late soviet socialism

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### ABSTRACT

The most lasting legacy of the Soviet experience, more so than institutions that persist in the Russian Federation today or the mentalities of citizens of post-Soviet states, was its transformation of Eurasia from a rural continent into an urban one. Particularly after the Great Patriotic War, the landscape of Soviet urban spaces changed as countless rows of low-quality apartment housing sprung up and a uniform socialist urban culture appeared to be forming. However, how and why this urban revolution happened, and what effect it had on the psychological makeup of Soviet citizens, remains lesser known. Meanwhile, while scholars of urban history such as Jane Jacobs, Reyner Banham, Lewis Mumford, and Mike Davis have produced fascinating tracts and monographs on the “ecologies” of American urban spaces – how, in other words, human beings in various political systems have interacted with the built urban landscape around them – limited work has been done on similar processes and histories in the Soviet world beyond the technical literature of the Cold War era. In this paper, I attempt to provide the outlines of such a history with such an approach by analyzing how changes in the Soviet urban fabric from approximately 1932 to 1980s affected social life in Soviet cities and among Soviet families. Basing my argument on close readings of Soviet books on *gradostroitel'stvo* (urban construction, urban studies) as well as literature, and guided by the insights of the above-listed urbanist thinkers, I argue that changes in urban planning so altered the relationship between citizens, the Party, and History that the Soviet system lost key strengths that had emboldened it during the 1930s and 1940s. In particular, while new Soviet housing projects obviously raised the standard of living of a great portion of the population, in resolving the housing problem, they also dismantled the “stranger’s gaze” – the everyday urban clashes that, enabled by denunciations and an efficient and brutal NKVD – that had dominated Soviet housing until then. Focusing on Magnitogorsk in the 1930s and a variety of new Soviet cities (Navoi, Dneprodzherzhinsk, etc.) to make this point, I argue that the Soviet system, in effect, built itself out of existence by building so much into existence. I also point to the possibility of rich transnational comparisons in this field in the future.

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More than destroying Hitler’s armies, competing for superpower status with the United States, or even creating the most literate society in the world, the Soviet system transformed Eurasia from a rural continent into an urban one. What had in 1913 been the Russian Empire, a country where peasants outnumbered urban residents by more than two to one, was by 1987 a Soviet empire where urbanites outnumbered rural dwellers by more than seven to one (Naselenie SSSR, 1980, p. 12). As the industrial city of

Magnitogorsk rose from the steppe in the early 1930s, one Tatar worker there “had never seen a staircase, a locomotive, or an electric light” before his arrival in Magnitogorsk, for “his ancestors for centuries had raised stock on the flat plains of Kazakhstan” (Scott, 1989, p. 16). And in the 1950s, Soviet towns became perpetual construction sites as cranes erected thousands of *khreshoby* apartment buildings; between 1955 and 1964, the nation’s housing stock almost doubled from 640 to 1182 million square meters (Hosking, 1993, p. 353). The most lasting legacy of the Soviet system was not institutions like the Russian FSB or statelets such as Transnistria, but the archipelago of cities imposed on what had for all of human history been peasant lands.

These new Soviet cities that rose from the Russian Plain and Eurasian Steppe like Magnitogorsk, Dzerzhinsk, and Angarsk were often explicitly constructed as “socialist cities,” as centers of a socialist civilization. As one Uzbek book had it, “the construction of new socialist cities was one of the specific conditions for the liquidation of the existing backwardness of Uzbekistan and its transition to socialism, bypassing the capitalist stage of development” (Zhukhrntdinov, 1982, p. 2). There was only one problem: no one knew what socialist civilization was. If we want to understand how the Soviet system conceptualized and tried to build socialism, then a focused way to do so is to ask the question: what do shifts in the Soviet urban experience tell us about the changing ideas of what socialist civilization was? This essay is an attempt to answer that question by comparing life in Magnitogorsk and other 1930s Soviet cities with Soviet urban life after the war with a particular focus on the new Khrushchev and Brezhnev-era housing units. I am more interested in the urban and residential life of working people than in how the Soviet elite lived. A close comparison of the Soviet cities of the 1930s and those of the latter half of the 20th century will show that the logic of postwar Soviet cities changed the relationships between individuals, the Party, state, and History so that the ways of “living socialism” that had made the system strong in cities like Magnitogorsk no longer existed or were severely weakened. The Soviet system built socialism out of existence by trying to build socialism into existence.

In order to see how the urban design of postwar cities destroyed the social fabric that had made the Soviet system strong, I examine pre- and postwar cities through three areas of analysis. First, I compare the construction of Magnitogorsk with that of postwar cities: what was the point of building such cities? Second, I compare Magnitogorsk with postwar cities as resettlement projects: how did people come to these cities risen from the ground, how did their lives change there? Third, I compare the living spaces of prewar and postwar Soviet cities: where and how did people live, and how did residential structures lend themselves to manipulation by residents and local authorities? I then devote some space at the end of the essay to respond to three possible objections to my argument as well as to my overall approach.

In approaching postwar Soviet this way, I aim throughout to ask what it was in the prewar urban landscape that made the Soviet system strong and to analyze how the postwar socialist urban landscape weakened these

institutions and practices that had made the Soviet system strong. Given the number and variety of cities in the Soviet Union, I have elected to argue my points more generally through examples from literature, history, and film rather than through a focused case study of one or two Soviet cities. At the same time, I attempt to provide as much city-specific analysis as possible through the visual materials that accompany this essay.

In focusing on *gradostroitel'stvo*, Soviet urban ecologies, and by trying to place this all into a comparative context, I seek to speak to current trends in the historiography of the USSR. On the one hand, if questions of Soviet nationalities policy and, before that, high politics and political biography dominated much of the scholarship of the Soviet Union, in recent years scholars, under the influence of the so-called “spatial turn,” have turned more to examine what has been called Russia’s imperial geography of power (Adams, 2010; Baron, 2007; Buckler, 2007; Cvetowski, 2006; Rittersporn, Rolf, & Behrends, 2003; Rolf, 2006, 2010; Schlögel, 2003; Schlögel, Schenk, & Ackeret, 2007). Often drawing on distinctions between “public spheres” and “private spheres” across societies, they pose the question: how, throughout history, have Russia’s rulers devised methods of rule – whether in law, economic planning, ethnography, administrative divisions, or urbanism – to exercise their sovereignty across an enormous continental space? (Burbank, von Hagen, & Remnev, 2007). On the other hand, other groups of scholars, more commonly associated with Central Asian Studies, have sought to place Russian Imperial and Soviet history in comparative international context in order to isolate precisely what made the Soviet experience unique (Burbank & Cooper, 2010; Edgar, 2004; Khalid, 2007; Kotkin, 2001b; Morrison, 2008; Northrop, 2004). And still Soviet urbanism remains a relatively underexplored topic among these trends (Evans, 2004).

Given the history of rich, informed, theoretically sophisticated scholarship on the history of urbanism of other regions, this represents a real loss. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, many intellectuals turned their attention to the unprecedented *American* suburban, exurban, and, later, posturban landscape emerging across the country, seeking to situate its rise in a universal history of cities (Baudrillard, 1988; Eco, 1986; Jacobs, 1961; Koolhaas, 1978; Mumford, 1961; Scott, 1988; Sessen, 1991). If authors like Vladimir Paperny have drawn some attention to the logic of Stalinist urban planning, the great Soviet urban projects of the postwar years, while featuring a rich contemporary Russian-language architectural and technical literature, still lack their Lewis Mumford to interpret them (Paperny, 1985). Likewise, if Paperny’s recent idiosyncratic *Mos Angeles* has contemplated the possibility of comparing American and (post-) Soviet metropolises, it remains an outlier in a literature that has seen limited attempts to situate Soviet urbanism in an international comparative context (Paperny, 2009). While the present essay does not yet seek to place Soviet urbanism into an international comparative context, I hope that in analyzing Soviet urban spaces as urban *ecologies* – built spaces in which citizens derived, grew, or rejected certain values in interacting with and living in the built

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