

Smith, Mark. B. *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010. xii + 240 pp. \$40.00. ISBN 978-0-87580-423-1.

Property of Communists is by Mark B. Smith, currently a Lecturer in Modern History at the University of Leeds. The book starts from Nikita Khrushchev's rash promise, made in July 1957, to solve the Soviet housing shortage by 1970. By the end of the 1950s, the Soviet Union had the biggest urban construction programme in the world. As Smith explains it, we can understand neither the promise nor the programme without looking at Soviet society and politics over a longer period. Prewar Stalinist industrialization put urban housing under intense strain. The war destroyed housing that already existed in the cities of the Western USSR and increased the urban populations in the East. Wartime sacrifices created a new sense of mass entitlement to adequate housing. Smith tells how housing gradually forced its way to the top of the Soviet agenda. The progress made after 1957, substantial though incomplete and painful, would have been impossible without years of preparation.

The book has two parts. Part 1 is narrative: three chapters cover housing under postwar reconstruction (1944 to 1950), the transition from Stalin to Khrushchev (1951 to 1957), and Khrushchev's campaign (1958 to 1964). The narrative ends on the role that the urban micro-region was supposed to play in prefiguring communist neighbourhoods. Part 2 is thematic: two chapters look more closely at public and private residential property under Soviet socialism.

Property of Communists has five main outcomes. First, Smith argues, the urban housing programme was "rationally" conceived (p. 75), but during gestation and execution "irrational" elements arose from Khrushchev's bad judgement, the administrative disregard of quality, and special-interest lobbying (pp. 95-99). Second, while failing, "on its own exceptionally ambitious terms" (p. 122), to eliminate the housing shortage, the programme did lift tens of millions of people rapidly out of shanty-town misery and so was a comparative success. Third, it did so with notable egalitarianism. Fourth, private initiatives played a role that the state fostered, but then squeezed; this finding challenges oversimplified, state-centred narratives. Fifth, actual and potential tenants continually tried to assert private property rights over public housing, but such entitlements relied for enforcement on powerful patrons, not the courts.

This fascinating and mostly readable study left me with some unanswered questions. I wondered what Smith meant by "irrationality," exactly: "unintended consequences," I concluded, but would have liked confirmation. I tried to grasp the "communist" significance of a micro-region. It seems to have involved ten thousand living units, a store, a school, a clinic, a cinema, and a meeting room. The meeting room was crucial because that is where the residents would get together and ... do what? In principle,

self-organize the estate; in practice, probably just complain. Stripped to essentials, the idea seemed trivial and impoverished; was that the reality, or was I missing something?

I was pleased that the book contained some tables and charts, including some international comparisons, but I longed for more. It would have been informative to plot rates of housing reconstruction rates by city (pp. 37 and 38) against population changes over the same years. Other figures (pp. 124 and 129 to 130) show that, by the early 1960s, some cities and some social groups had similar average levels of housing provision, but these do not prove housing equality without data on within-city and within-group variation.

The concluding thematic chapters added less than I hoped. I found their structure hard to grasp; the flow of contrasting anecdotes did not always seem to point clearly to the generalizations that followed.

With *Property of Communists*, Mark Smith has cast important new light on Soviet economic and social trends in the Khrushchev era.

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