

## Review: *Soviet Communal Living*

*Andriy Zayarnyuk, University of Winnipeg*

Paola Messana. *Soviet Communal Living: An Oral History of the Kommunalka* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), XVI+168 pp. Appendices. ISBN: 978-0230110168.

This book consists of thirty short stories told in first person and rendered from the interviews Paola Messana did during her stint as a journalist in post-Soviet Moscow. All the story-tellers in this book relate their experience of living in the so-called communal apartments – where tenants occupied individual rooms while sharing kitchen, corridor, and bathroom. Some of those interviewed lived in such apartments for many years, other spent their whole lives, while a woman from Britain, the only foreigner in this collection, stayed in a *kommunalka* for only a year in 1990.

All these stories are very moving and do convey first hand experiences that oftentimes get lost in the academic jargon of professional historians. Shared accommodation did shape people's relationships, attitudes, conduct, mental and physical health, and, probably, no third-person account would elucidate this as powerfully as life writing. However, the book would have benefited from a conventional historical introduction about Soviet communal apartments, one more detailed than the three-pages-long foreword from a professional historian in the present book. Four regulations in the book's Appendices do not add much to the historical context either. Although they were meant as primary sources exemplifying official positions and regulating the use of communal apartment, the selection is highly arbitrary. Three of them are taken from a Leningrad newspaper but miss bibliographic information including years of publication. All this is especially regrettable since the scholarship on the subject by now has matured and numerous sources are widely available, including the whole virtual museum of "communal living" (<http://www.kommunalka.spb.ru>).

This collection is also a monument of a particular historical moment and of a particular encounter. 28 of the 30 interviews in the book were conducted between 1992 and 1995, immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and collapse of the Soviet system. During her first visit to the USSR in 1990, the author's reaction to her initial encounter with communal was one of "horror" (1). She realized that middle-aged professionals and sometimes whole families had to share apartments with "total strangers." For someone who grew up in an affluent post-World War II West, such an arrangement was not only exotic but also abnormal. Fully sharing the dominant language of post-Soviet "transition," the author sees the Soviet period as an aberration, and communal apartment as its embodiment in daily life. Those who lived in them "still carry in their subconscious the vestiges of that period" (4).

When it comes to the creation of communal apartments, the collection privileges the viewpoint of former owners, of their suffering and loss. Often from the nobility or upper middle class, they are confined to one room in their former palace or grand apartment, witness the theft of their possession and the decay (sometimes purposeful destruction) of a property that used to be theirs. Without diminishing the tragedy of these people, we should note that this leitmotif comes from the mythology of the late 1980s and

Andriy Zayarnyuk, "Review of *Soviet Communal Living* by Messana," *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 33 (2013)

1

early 1990s: imperial Russia as the “golden age” society destroyed by barbarians during and in the aftermath of the revolution. There are no stories in this collection of those for whom a room in *kommunalka* was a step up. There were workers who, instead of sharing a room with several other workers, now had an apartment all to themselves and were able to bring in their wives and children. There were maids who happily exchanged their bunk in a kitchen for the room in a communal apartment. In Russian villages before the revolution, married couples as a rule shared accommodation with other married couples related to them. To have boarders was far from unusual among property-owners, even in the most affluent pre-World War II societies. Finally, one can argue that the indelible imprint individual or single-family accommodations leave on their dwellers in our society is not uniformly positive and is often blamed for a distinct set of anxieties and health problems.

To be fair, the stories in this collection are not uniformly grim. There are recollections of happy childhoods, and generous, understanding and helpful neighbours. Moreover, sad or funky, these stories are entertaining and highly readable. I would recommend this collection to the general reader interested in the Soviet Union, or as additional reading for students in Soviet history courses.