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Housing Shortage in Soviet Russia in 1920s

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Abstract

The following article examines a housing shortage on the threshold of revolution and during the first decade after establishment of the Soviet regime. Problems, which had been accumulating during the period before the revolution, escalated in 1920s. The first decade after the establishment of the Soviet government, the housing crisis reached its peak throughout the country. Looking for a way out of the current situation, the Soviet authorities carried out a whole range of measures, including “ushchemleniye former”, the transfer of the private housing fund to housing associations, condensation, control of housing construction and the differential distribution of square meters. But, they resulted in “housing wars”. The article deals with the housing policy of Soviet regime. The article is based on the background of the control authorities, publications and private sources.

Keywords: NEP, Housing shortage, Housing crisis, Municipalization, Communal flat, Housing conflicts, History of emotions.

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Introduction

The first decade after establishment of Soviet regime is a rough period of development of the new state. This is a time when the new regime is being forced to solve pending problems, which were left by the czarist government including a housing shortage. In the early 20th century, urban population had increased dramatically. For example, population in Berlin had increased 6 times, in Brussels 5 times, in London, Paris and in Moscow 4 times (Dikansky, 1908, p.8).

Fast pace of development caused a housing crisis. 7-8 m² of dwelling space were accounted for one person in Czarist Russia. This ratio had been reduced to 4 m² after the First World War. Housing demand was particularly acute for urban fringes and labor districts (Dubrova, 1926, p.10). On average from 4 to 73 people were lodged in one apartment in Saint Petersburg. According to the population census data crowded apartments amounted to 33% of the urban housing fund in 1882 in Moscow. Each apartment was being lodged by more than 10 people. For example in Berlin this index was significantly lower under 1% (The Census of Moscow in 1882. Vol.1: Apartments and facilities, p.94).

In most cases less than 1 fathom of the space was on the account of a person (Pokrovskaya, 1903, p.3). Workers were forced out to hire dark and humid rooms, corners and corridors. Here is a typical description of Petersburg's workers lodgment: "The apartment is situated on the ground floor of a two-storied wooden house. It consists of two rooms and a kitchen <...>. Each room has two windows looking to the street. There is enough light. Walls are overlaid with a wallpaper. On the walls and on the ceiling are observed traces of moisture <...> Mainly workers and their families were housed in this apartment. 8 people are living in the first room: they are – three men, three women and two children. All of them are sleeping on three beds. There are two families and two singles in a second room, 9 people altogether. Only married people are living in a dark kitchen, as well as a landlady and her husband" (Pokrovskaya, 1903, p.7).

It should be pointed out that the majority of citizens of Russian Empire didn't have their own accommodation and forced out to hire accommodation – apartments or rooms, which quality depended on the welfare of the tenant. For example, employees and the intellectuals could afford to rent a bright and clean apartment without the settlers. The comic play "The official apartment" by V.A. Ryshkov portrays lively this current housing problem. In this play each character is dreaming about an official apartment – bright and warm dwelling. And each character is ready to play a mean trick to get this official apartment: "I won't let go this apartment <...> For this apartment I'll raise hell. Yes, how about if I just do a dirty trick in my old age" (Ryshkov, 1908, p.3).

180 thousand people were forced out to hire a tiny room or an in-patient bed in 1899. L.N. Tolstoy who had visited one of that sort of houses left the following memoirs: "All apartments were full, all beds were occupied not only by one, but commonly by two people. It was a terrible picture of cohabitation of men and women in overcrowded small apartment <...> And this stink was everywhere, the same sultry air and cramped living space" (Dikansky, 1908, p.13). In many cases residents of those apartments had to go outside just to come up fresh air. There were no difference between adults and children, women and men.

The new lap of housing crisis commenced after establishing of the Bolshevik government. The reasons of this crisis include consequences of the First World War and Civil war, destruction of houses due to natural causes, a new housing policy of Soviet Russia, high population growth.

Housing Shortage in Soviet Russia in 1920s

At the outbreak of the First World War housing development had virtually collapsed. The war had destroyed a number of cities and towns of Tsarist Russia, had forced people to leave problem areas (Kozhany, 1924, p.29). In 1920s a quick process of urbanization started, this was due to revolutionary breakdown of peasant

communities and increasing industrialization of the country, massive agricultural collectivization drive and dispossession of the kulaks.

Mass migration of people from rural areas to cities and towns in search of work and better life was particularly marked among young rural dwellers. Mass migration had led to a problem of overpopulated cities. Population growth in some areas increased to 4-5% from the incoming population. During the period from 1923 to 1927 only in Krasnodar population growth increased in 12.4%, whereas a living space increased in 4.05% only. However available housing facilities were presented with a single-story buildings (Dubrova, 1926, p.14). Urban population was growing three times faster than housing development (Nezhigay, 1999, p.55). Housing crisis became complicated by the over-population of the front-line cities with military units, which were required to be accommodated (SAKR. F.R-97. Op.1. D.6. LI.93).

In 1923 in Moscow there were 7 sq. m. of floor space per capita, in Rostov-on-Don 8 sq. m. (On the question of the survey of the housing crisis, 1927, p.3); in Krasnodar 5.6 sq. m. (SAKR. F.R-1547. Op.1. D.30. LI.265); in Novorossiysk 4.82 sq. m (SARR. F. R-1185. Op.1. D. 762. LI. 23); in Siberia 4.85 sq. m. (Khitsenko, 2015). In general in provincial towns one person occupied about 6 sq. m. Only 13.5% of laboring people had an accommodation corresponding to a basic sanitary standards (Sosnovy, 1952, p.291).

According to V. Ketlinskaya and V. Slepakov, 14% among 220 examined inhabitants of Leningrad have extremely poor housing conditions: overcrowded accommodation, crammed quarters, dampness, dirtiness. They were living in a corner or didn't even had a regular accommodation. One of female employees of Vyborg district in Leningrad was forced to live with her family in only one room (5 members) and with an alcoholic father who came back home late at night, made noise, uses bad language in front of daughters (Ketlinskaya, 1929, p.19). Housing crisis of 1920s couldn't meet even minimum sanitary needs. Therefore children and adults were forced to live together in one room. Children witnessed rude acts, sexual activity, talks and arguing of adults.

To bring the living space quota to basic sanitary standard it was necessary only in Moscow to spend to a minimum of 900 million rubles (Fight against the housing crisis in Moscow, 1926, p.34). On average, the cost of building of a small 2-3 rooms apartment was about 4.500 rubles. In order to reduce the cost of housing construction, the Rostov branch of the "Standard" suggested redesigning military barracks for the employee housing (Military barracks under residential buildings, 1927, p.2). However the project was never implemented.

In the 1920s in USSR the average cost of one building amounted to 280-300 rubles due to high prices of building materials whereas in Europe housing construction was cheaper. For example construction cost in Germany amounted to 120 rubles, in England – 100-110 rubles, in France 120-130 rubles, in the USA – 180 rubles (Konysheva, 2014, p.90). From 1923 to 1930 housing construction in Soviet Russia almost doubled, but this could not provide housing for all who needed it. For example from 1923 to 1926 over 11,000 buildings were constructed in Moscow.

Unable to commence large scale housing construction, and thereby eliminate the deficit of living space, the Soviet government moved to a "new housing policy" as an anti-crisis measure. Since 1917, all real estate transactions had been banned (Orlov, 2010, p.118). Shortly after the authorities began to pursue a policy of "eviction" and "ushchemleniye": "On December 24, 1928, at about two o'clock in the afternoon, a man in a police uniform came to me in the corridor of an apartment on the top floor and rudely asked my wife if you have a vacant room, my wife replied that we do not have any vacant room. Then the policeman began to insistently demand me, when I walked out the policeman said that wants to look at our rooms for the purpose of compaction, because we have 3 rooms, but our son does not live with us" (CDCHKR. F.797. Op.1. D.61. LI.5).

Primarily the following population groups were subjected to municipalization: a) confiscated at law b) owned by people escaped abroad but not members of their families who stayed, c) owned by the church, but not by certain clergymen, d) property owned by families died without leaving legal heirs or those who, together with the dead, conducted housekeeping together. Secondly, houses owned by the bourgeoisie (traders, priests, kulaks, but not by any means people existing by means of individual work) (SAKR. F.R-581. Op.1. D. 192. Ll.1.).

Lenin in his work "Will the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?" put forward the idea of confiscation of apartments of wealthy urban dwellers. The apartment was considered rich, if there were equal number of rooms or even more than family members. The rooms exceeding this standard were "compacted", for this purpose large rooms were often divided into several rooms by plywood walls. The new government declared that "the task of the RCP (B) is to <...> not touching the interests of noncapitalist homeownership, to strive with all their might to improve the living conditions of the working people" (Orlov, 2010, p.117). Initially, workers were given housing in vacant apartments. However practically those people in need were bureaucrats and party operatives. For example the Pleskov family from Krasnodar consisting of 8 members and 6 of whom were children occupied one damp room (SAKR. F.R-990. Op.2. D. 570. Ll.54). Whereas some Avetisyan alone occupied a room of 15 square meters (SAKR. F. R-226. Op.1. D.439. Ll.9).

Monitoring bodies repeatedly received claims from inhabitant who complained about inequitable distribution of living space: not the members of housing lease co-operative society were provided with vacant rooms but nepmen, the bourgeoisie or party operatives. It was more profitable for landowners to rent rooms to "byvshiy"² who were ready to pay "free money". In the process of "compaction" citizens had two weeks to try to seek out a roommate (Orlov, 2010, p.18). In case if the apartment was not compacted in terms of two weeks, the housing departments conducted a forced "compaction". Local executive committees were making lists of all properties (landed) and were filling out questionnaires of housing departments. Afterwards lists and questionnaires were delivered to municipalization commission, which decided whether the property would remain in private hands or would pass to the state (Housing desk book of Krasnodar, 1923, p.101).

In that way ex-wife of comrade V. Cherniy was deprived of her apartment: "Recently there was a clean sweep of collectives and I, as a member of the Trade Union, were cleaned out. Thus now I do not have a right to claim my room back <...> I am horrified by the thought that I have to be on the rove now. Can you just imagine this life. There is a noise, fuss, never break from 6 o'clock in the morning to 8 o'clock in the evening, and from 8 to 6 I have to listen to the snorting and breathing of 6 people. I can not bear it anymore, and could it be good for a child?" (SAKR. F.R-411. Op.1. D.611. Ll.14-15).

Housing Conflicts

The composition of residents of the house was formed accidentally. Side by side, sometimes even in one apartment or room, there were gathered people who were not related to each other at all: workers, employees, "byvshiy", intellectuals and party activists. Joint household, according to the plan of the party elite, was aimed on destruction of individualism, form a sense of collectivism in the minds of the inhabitant, but frequently led to conflicts.

Shared kitchen, bathroom and other rooms kept out of any possibility to stay alone. Neighbors knew almost everything about each other. Private life (divorces, marriages, lovers), sins (alcohol and physical abuse, adultery), political views – everything became a public information for the whole house. Quarrels, conflicts, apathy, jealousy and depression became indispensable components of inhabitants of communal flat. There

² People who lost their social status after the October Revolution

were permanent arguing, cat-and-dog life, fighting, small household wrecking (e.g. neighbors installed locks on doors of privies and on the wicket doors, without giving keys to their roommates and flat mates, smeared with mud laundry, broke windows etc.).

Acute housing crisis didn't allow people to find a comfortable accommodation in all respects along with emotional comfort. Therefore inhabitants of municipalized households were forced to experience emotional discomfort. Abuse, insults, wrecking – these all became an integral part of a daily life of inhabitants of housing lease co-operative society. For example, Mark Moiseevich Tregub from Krasnodar with his family had to bear with insults of neighbors. The style of the document is kept completely as he reflects an emotional condition of the applicant: “While living in a private household <...> me and my wife are continuously bearing different insults from the house owner and a small bunch of neighbors, calling me and my wife kikes. Children can't go out in the yard wherefore they run back quickly to the room crying saying that a woman or someone else kick them out or beats them” (SAKR. F.R-226. Op.1. D.51. LI.44).

The “compaction” policy could also avoid excessive uses. For the municipalization were exposed not only houses of “byvshiy”. Quite often workers and Red Army men were included in municipalization lists. For example, the small house of the mechanic K.V. Gorchakov from Krasnodar was municipalized. The citizen Gorchakov has specified in an explanatory note that his house has been built on labor money and is intended for accommodation for himself and his family (SAKR. F.R-226. Op.1. D.422. LI.63). The unskilled worker Tsyplakov, 67 y.o., extremely poor person who had a son the Red Army man has also suffered this “ushchemleniye” policy. All his property was taken away as well as 10 rubles - his salary. Tsyplakov wrote in the complaint: “They did not leave neither me, nor my family any shift of clothes” (Nezhigay, 1999, p.154).

Sometimes workers, peasants and party activists fell under the definition “byvshiy” not only representatives of an aristocratic family, merchants or the intellectuals. There are several explanations to this. First one is that in official documents there were no accurate orders for recognition of the person in need. Second is that, there were no accurate instructions and rules of seizure of valuables. Third reason is that “ushchemleniye” brigades consisted of marginal and pissed-off people who weren't ashamed of searching women, taking another person's things as well as rob the last thing left. Everyone who had more than they did, a priori became their class enemies of the new authorities.

Public places (such as kitchen, bathroom, toilet, corridor or storeroom) became a reason and a territory of conflicts. For example V.Y. Zarubin describes a kitchen in a shared household: “There are four women in one kitchen, in puffs of vapor, smoke, soot. And here Anna Pavlovna thinks that Vera Nikolaevna is a terrible slob. Vera Nikolaevna thinks that Berta Lyudvigovna is insufferably rude. Berta Lyudvigovna thinks that Anna Pavlovna and Vera Nikolaevna are absolutely clumsy. Pasha damns all the three – she absolutely has no place to put a casserole with a soup. Pots, cauldrons, saucepans <...> rushing in the hot, hissing stream from a stove in the oven, from the oven on a table, on benches <...> From the oven again in the oven, on a stove. Women wave their hands, push stone like pots. Trying to protect themselves. Bluish gray fog attacks their eyes. There is a twilight in the kitchen and a volcanic trashy mouth of the oven. To cook a dinner for eight adults and three children, four women have to float in this half of a day. Four women work with oven forks as if they are oarsmen on the oars, they scoop with frying pans, pokers, peels, in smoke, in a steam they float all sweaty, greasy. And in rooms there are untidy beds <...>” (Zarubin, 1923, p.67).

The psychological incompatibility of residents of municipalized households and the atmosphere of municipal apartments itself provoked the conflicts which were worsened by the “class hatred” imposed by the new authorities. In mass media along with the objective reasons of a housing crisis it was told also about a role of a “byvshiy” in growth of “housing hunger”: “Quietly and inaudibly, nepman has somehow sidled and comfortably settled down in the best dwellings of St. Petersburg, meanwhile a proletarian family, as well as in old days, huddles in a basement floors” (Valevsky, 1923, p.2), “housing collective pull through

workers to settle nepman”, “the housing crisis beats mostly the working people rambling around damp dark closets. As soon as the New Economic Policy was announced in Krasnodar a diverse number of different "housing associations" had begun to grow as mushrooms grow after a rain, <...> and speculative elements were already there”. The authorities tried to accuse “byvshiy” in inability to solve this “housing issue”. On the one hand the authority tried to explain itself, and on the other – introduced to the population a new ideology of class supremacy.

The inability of the government to solve “a housing issue” for the greater public good became the reason of so-called “housing wars” between neighbors. Scandals, denunciations, slander, attempts of dispossession, drunken brawls and wrecking were firmly implemented into everyday life in 1920s.

All over the country dispossessions of the bourgeoisie and resettlement into their apartments of workers had begun. For this purpose house committees were created they had to collect data on a condition of housing stock in the cities. Since March, 1918 the policy of resettlement of the inhabitants from working suburbs to “manors” apartments began (Lebina, 2015, p.91). However workers moved from working barracks not to separate apartments, but to municipalized houses where conditions weren't better and the way of life differed from the previous residence very little. The majority of apartments were unsuitable for living, mostly without electric lighting, plumbing and sanitary. The inhabitant due to lack of money and good accommodations in a housing stock has been forced to rent any rooms which temporarily could be used as the dwelling: sheds, cellars, attics, cars, corridors, dark and damp rooms etc. All municipalized housing stock was transferred to the communal authorities and rented out to Housing associations (ZhAKT) which in its turn distributed square meters between its members. In Leningrad the municipalized fund made 75% (Lebina, 2015, p.95), in Krasnodar 60%, in Rostov-on-Don – 63% (SARF. F.A7790. Op.3. D.19. LI.90). In Smolensk from 200 households in 1926 126 houses were municipalized (The report on the work of the Smolensk Soviet of workers and Red Army deputies, 1927, p.7).

According to the housing legislation, everyone above 18 and with electoral right could become a member of housing lease co-operative society (Housing legislation: A collection of decrees, orders and instructions with comments, 1926, p. 76). The cost of rent of housing in housing association is 20 kopeks for 1 sq.m. Thus, if the living space met the minimum sanitary standard, then inhabitants had to pay not less than 2 rubles whereas the payment in demunicipalized households was over 10 rubles expressed in gold. Though the quality of municipalized housing left much to be desired: damp and dark rooms, buildings out of repair etc. (CDCHKR. F.797. Op.1. D.243. LI.8).

To become a member of housing society it was necessary to apply to ZhAKT and to wait for your turn. Under conditions of shortage of living space, the inhabitant was ready to go for any tricks: trying to emphasized his contribution which he had made in a victory of the Soviet authorities (“Me at the risk of my life voluntarily entered the Red Army” (Letters to power, 1998, p. 376)”, “I am mother of the died Red Army soldier”, “I am the demobilized Red Army soldier, I was detached to the Red Army since 1920 <...>; honestly and unselfishly fulfilled the revolutionary duty, guarding state interests”), specified his social status (“worker”, “Red Army officer”, “high ranking functionary”, “always earned the leaving by work”), tried to blacken competitors. For example during the distribution of apartments by Tuapse Stroy cooperation, trying to get rid of competitors Smirnov had slandered one of the competitors to the apartment named Averina Marfa: “there were less apartments, than applicants and due to this have come to a settlement to do voting ballot and as a result comrades who haven't got the apartment made a "fuss". Comrade Smirnova raised the hell because comrade Nosov hasn't got the apartment and after distribution of apartments there was a board meeting of the Rev. and Housing commissions where Comrade Smirnova had told that apartments were incorrectly distributed that it was necessary to give first of all apartments to workers, and then asked non-party comrades Stanetsky, Harchenko and Leonidov: whether they had a party fraction and was this issue solved or not? And they have answered- no, but I have told her why are you asking these nonpartisan

about fraction? And why did you refuse when we asked you on this meeting where it would be possible to make a meeting of fraction what it has answered "yes well it to hell" and at a conversation I just called her "rowdy". That was the beginning of the strife and comrade Smirnova reported to the bureau of our cell that as if I protected kulaks ..." (CDCHKR. F.3669. Op.1. D.11. LI.25).

The discussions in 1920s concerning "a housing question" have shown that party leaders considered ideal option of resettlement the house commune in which people with common interests, resources and property will live in one commune. This idea was especially popular among young workers. In 1923 40% of young workers lived in communes. Young people organized communes in old factory barracks, rooms, at the universities. For example, in Rostov-on-Don one of communes has been organized in a bathroom. One of Communards recalls: "We lodged in a bathroom of some communal flat, one slept on a window sill, two others on a floor, the bathtub was occupied in turn". In such form of the hostel everything was public: kitchenware, clothes, food (Lebina, 2015, p.83).

During the early Soviet period also there were competitions on the best projects redevelopment of the cities. There took place discussions about what has to be the city of the future of communist society. In the period of the New Economic Policy the idea of the city- garden became popular. It should be noted that this idea isn't a new. The author of the project of the city- garden is an Englishman Howard. In 1925 in England there were over 60 city- gardens. Howard suggested to combine the city culture and the nature of the village. The city- garden of Howard was presented in the form of a circle with a radius more than 1000 meters. Six boulevards cross the city which are connect with each other in the center where a garden with fountains and pools is laid out. Around a garden there are situated the most important city buildings: the municipal government, concert hall, theater, library, the museum, hospital. The whole park is surrounded by a continuous round glass arch which Howard called the Crystal palace (Yampolsky, 1925, p.99). In 1903 between London and Cambridge in England the first city-garden had appeared.

The idea of the city-garden instantly became popular worldwide including the Soviet Russia. In the south of Russia the architect A.N. Yunger tried to implement this project. So, according to the project of Yunger Krasnodar city-garden had to be divided into two centers: "old" and "new". The 1st, 2nd and 3rd districts of the city belonged to an old part of the city. All new parts of the city (to the north from Severnaya Street) represented seven certain settlements located in parks and connected by streets of two types –"business" and "boulevard". All residential quarters were planned from the North on the South and were inaccessible for cars "business" street served as a roads for cars. In the same part of the city were located universities, sport facilities, passable streets. All city according to this project had to be surrounded by a roadside tree plantings. Also the factory zone was separately allocated out-of-town (SAKR. F.R-1547. Op.1. D.29. LI.174).

Trying to solve "a housing issue", the new authorities legalized the right of private building. Only in 1920 around Krasnodar 2,000 small lodges meant for 4-5 members family spontaneously appeared (SAKR. F. R-262. Op.1. D.362. LI.3).

The Soviet power rigidly regulated rules of building. Individuals and cooperative associations had to sign with municipal department the notarized contract for the rights of building for 40 years for wooden structures and for 60 – for stone. The amount of the rent, character and the size of structures, terms of building, an insurance were specified in the contract. The builder had been obliged to meet established norms of the construction, fire hazard regulations and sanitary rules.

Also the quality of the sites allocated under the building was regulated. So the site has to be dry or drained. Sites have to be provided with the infrastructure. It was forbidden to allocate the sites near city dumps, slaughterhouses and cemeteries (Housing legislation, 1926, p.20-21). All buildings which didn't meet these requirements were demolished. For example the household located behind the city cemetery of Krasnodar on the territory of the former dump in 1928 had been demolished (SAKR. F.R-226. Op.1. D.426. LI.174).

When started building, citizens had to provide the project of building meeting the established rules and standards which were approved in Head department of municipal services. Authorities strictly regulated the rules of private building: sanitary standards, the size of sites, building density, construction materials, planning and the equipment of apartments, height of buildings, depth of the ground work, utility systems in the house. For example, the size of the sites allocated under individual construction had to be not less than 600 sq. m. (Housing legislation, 1926, p.26). Surely all communications had to be carried out: water supply, dirt roads, drains, street lighting; the device for collecting, storage and removal of drainage.

Toward the end of the 1920s the authority realizes that the unified plan of building is necessary for a successful town-planning campaign, and it is necessary to shift away from the chaotic squatter settlement, which doesn't meet the elementary sanitary standards. Under building planned sites behind city boundaries for which owners paid taxes have been allocated. For this purpose several territories were allocated in the city of Krasnodar: the gardens on streets Novorossiyskaya, Stavropolskaya and gardens to the east from the Dubinka have been taken away. All area of gardens to the south from Kruglik and in the area of the tram on Pashkovka have turned into the factory settlement (SAKR. F.R-1547. Op.1. D.36. Ll.225). All lands for the building had been divided into 20 sites. Most of the houses for each family were presented by a mud dwellings with a household additional building only for one family.

Entering the right of private construction, the country leaders reckoned on the construction of houses for "communes" – two or three-storied houses for several families, with the public dining room, kitchen and a bathroom, but not a small individual lodges (Housing legislation, 1926, p.26). Construction of individual lodges for one family came under intense criticism of the authorities. For example a critical note concerning a private construction had been published in one of the issues of "Krasnoe znamya": "Workers mold for themselves mud huts on plans without the slightest observance of the most elementary rules of housing hygiene and sanitation. Such housing destroys proletarian collective consciousness". According to the authorities a construction on planned sites of small lodges with all conveniences, on 4–8 apartments is a more successful option. Krupskaya had voiced the general party opinion concerning this private construction in the Soviet state: to build small cottages, as existing in England, for the Soviet reality it isn't acceptable at all. Everyone in the house exists separately and there is nothing in common for life (RSASPH. F.17. Op.2. D.233. Ll.121, 123).

Concluding Remarks

Thus, the 1920s is a period of an acute housing crisis the main reasons of which became consequences of World War I and Civil wars and housing policy of imperial and Soviet Russia. On average no more than 6 sq. m. were the shared for one person. Trying to solve "a housing issue" the Soviet government had moved to a "new housing policy" which was expressed in carrying out confiscation of households and property from "byvshiy", resettlements of workers, a strict regulation of construction norms. Growth of a housing crisis which had led to the housing conflicts became a result of a housing policy of the Soviet Russia.

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