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Soviet Everyday Culture: An Oxymoron?

Svetlana Boym

Mikhail Mishin, a Soviet satirist, wrote that Russians recognize themselves in the famous fairy-tale character Ivan the Fool. He bides his time napping on the heated furnace and gets up only to undertake major heroic feats. Ivan the Fool might be a great hero, but he has no idea how to survive his everyday life. Everyday life, captured in the Russian word *byt*, is a more dangerous enemy to him than the multi-headed fire-spitting dragon. The everyday is Russia's cultural monster. The nation might worship its heroes and their fabled ability to withstand hell or high water, but it also celebrates their impracticality and helplessness in the face of everyday life.

The distinguished linguist and literary critic Roman Jakobson claims that the Russian word for the everyday, *byt*, is culturally untranslatable into other languages: in his view, only Russia among all the European nations was capable of fighting "the fortresses of *byt*" and of conceptualizing radical alterity to the everyday (*byt*). [1] The opposite of *byt*, the spiritual, poetic or revolutionary being (*bytie*), is at the heart of Russian culture. In a similar way, Vladimir Nabokov claims the Russian conception of "banality," *poshlost* -- a word that refers at once to artistic triviality, lack of spirituality, and obscenity -- to be absolutely original. In Nabokov's view, only Russians were able to devise neatly the concept of *poshlost'* -- because of the "good taste of old Russia." [2] (This is perhaps one of the least ironic sentences in Nabokov, bordering on the banal). No wonder, another word that was claimed to be untranslatable is *podvig* -- heroic feat, dynamic force. It does not necessarily refer to a specific courageous accomplishment; rather, it embodies the notion of unlimited dynamism, perpetual movement (*dvizhenie*) itself. [3] Two Russian "untranslatable" words, then, one referring to the everyday and the other to the heroic feat, are closely linked and reflect what Russian and Soviet Russian critics perceive to be a fundamental feature of Russian mentality. For many Russian and Soviet cultural critics, the expression "everyday culture" would appear problematic, if not oxymoronic, because culture in the Russian context, in the singular and with a capital "C," has been defined as a heroic battle against the everyday [4] .

Thus, there are radical differences between the "American dream," the dream of the private pursuit of happiness in the family home, and the Russian dream that -- at least in the conception of Dostoyevsky and his great admirer, the philosopher of the "Russian idea," Nikolai Berdiaev --

consisted of spiritual homelessness and messianic nomadism. In Russia , the preoccupation with the everyday was frequently conceived as petit-bourgeois (marked by the derogatory term "*meshchanstvo*"), inauthentic, unspiritual or counter-revolutionary: it was fought against by Westernizers and Slavophiles, romantics and modernists, aesthetic and political utopianists, Bolsheviks and monarchists alike. To some extent, the modern concept of a secular everyday culture has never sunk roots in Russia .

If the American dream is pursued in the individual family house, the Soviet dream can only be fulfilled in the communal house. Our central archeological site of Soviet civilization is the communal apartment. It is at once a memory of Soviet collective home, the institution of social control, and the breeding ground of the grass root informants in Stalin's times. We will eavesdrop behind the flimsy communal partitions and on the "private" collections of "domestic trash" and kitschy souvenirs. Those everyday rituals, practices of deviation and secrecy reveal how the official ideological designs were inhabited. As such, they seem to precede and survive both the Soviet ideology and the communal apartment itself. I will combine the perspective of a cultural critic with my own memories of a former communal apartment resident who never fulfilled her "communal duties" and was frequently chided by watchful neighbors.

Any discussion of everyday culture is inevitably anachronistic; it raises issues of continuity and change in the national self-definition and daily practices in Russia , from prerevolutionary to post-Soviet times, from the time when there was no single word for "privacy" to the post-Soviet era, when privacy became a buzz word. If *byt* exemplifies the collective Russian mentalities, which have survived long durations of time, wars, uprisings, and revolutions, so does the opposition to *byt*, the anti-*byt* discourse that is also a part of Russian collective mentality. The opposition between *byt* and *bytie* can be traced back to Russian Orthodox dualism between the sinful existence of this world and the blessed transcendence beyond it. Later, it will be redefined and perpetuated by symbolist poets (Block, Bely, Soloviev) and the avant-garde revolutionary theorists (Tretiakov, Bogdanov); by Soviet semioticians (Boris Uspensky and Yuri Lotman) and the philosophers of the "Russian idea" (Berdiaev). Boris Uspensky and Iurii Lotman insist that the binary opposition between *byt* and *bytie* is a fundamental feature of Russian culture; they point out the crucial difference between the Western medieval "world beyond the grave," divided into three spaces -- heaven, purgatory and hell, and the Russian medieval system, based on a fundamental duality. In Russia , the everyday could not therefore be

perceived as a neutral sphere of the human behavior where the concepts of "civil society" and private life originate. [5] But is Russian history (like anatomy) destiny? Do the critics of culture describe the historical situation of the past, perpetuate cultural mythology, or both? In other words, is there, in fact, no neutral sphere of behavior in early modern Russia, or has it simply been insufficiently described by Russian cultural historians, and hence not integrated into the Russian cultural identity as constructed in literary and political writings? [6]

The Soviet construction of "new *byt*" did not escape the old dichotomy of *byt* and *bytie*. In this respect, there is a clear ideological continuity between the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia and early Soviet leftist theorists. [7] The Soviet iconography of the new *byt* was thought through to the last detail -- or, as Mayakovsky put it, to the last button on one's suit." The new *byt*, one of the early Russian revolutionary dreams, was based on the complete restructuring of both time and space; from Gastev's utopian schedules of everyday life to the total design of the new communist space, from the all-people's house-commune to the making of new men and women. But can everyday life be contained by a utopian topography? Perhaps it is not surprising that hardly anywhere else in the modern Western world in the twentieth century did such a precise construction of ideologically correct everyday life exist; nowhere else there were so many deviations from this utopian construct. [8]

New *Byt* and Stalinist Domestic Bliss

Let us begin the discussion of iconography of Soviet everyday life with a picture of a Stalinist domestic idyll. It is represented by Laktionov's programmatic painting "Moving to The New Apartment." The room is cheerfully lit, although the source of light is hidden from us. It is the natural light of the Socialist Realist bright future. In the center is a middle-aged woman with a war medal, proud mistress of the new apartment, who seems ready to break into a Russian folk-dance. Nearby is her son, an exemplary boy and young pioneer. A portrait of Stalin takes the place of a father. The gazes of this Soviet family do not meet; the mother looks into the audience as if inviting our approval, the son looks up to his proud mother, and Stalin looks in the opposite direction, as if watching us through the half-open door, guarding the limits of the visible. The scene appears to belong to some familiar totalitarian sitcom: the characters wear appropriate Soviet uniforms and freeze in the established theatrical poses known from films and paintings, as if waiting the predictable prerecorded applause. A few neighbors with whom the family will share the communal apartment gather at the door, jolly smiles frozen

on their faces. The furniture in the room is very sparse and the private objects are limited to books, a radio set, toys, a political poster, a globe with the largest country of the world usually colored in bright pink, a balalaika, and a sickly-looking rubber tree plant (*Fikus*) in the foreground.

The painting is neither reflective nor self-reflective; people and objects hardly cast any shadows, and there is no mirror hidden in the corner. The scene flaunts its perfect transparency of meaning. Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (*Les mots et les choses*), with an icon of early modern civilization, Velazquez' *Las Meninas*, which tests the rules and limits of representation, exposes visual *trompe l'œil*, and at the same time pays homage to the patrons of art -- in this case the royal couple. "Moving to the New Apartment," though similarly an icon of Soviet civilization that prescribes the order of everyday things, carefully hides all visual and ideological manipulations. This is the way a culture wishes to see itself and be seen, without thinking about the act of seeing. There are no uneven brush strokes and no blind spots; rather, everything is made readable in a didactic way, to the point that nobody has to bother reading it. The books near the rubber tree plant are all works by established Russian and Soviet classics -- of which the revolutionary poet Vladimir Mayakovsky stands out, and on the poster we can read the slogan "Glory to our beloved Motherland!" The painter cannot afford being suggestive or allow anything contingent and accidental to appear on the canvas. [9] This is a perfect Socialist Realist genre scene reminiscent of the old Academic paintings. What is important is that this is not an image of cozy *petit bourgeois* domestic bliss, not a picture of that settled and established private life by definition suspect by the Soviet order. [10] Moreover, this is not merely a private family festivity, but a celebration of the Soviet collective in miniature, in the newly repaired communal apartment. There is no distinction between public and private here, only one fluid and seemingly cheerful ideological space.

It is difficult to imagine what could have been judged "ideologically incorrect" in this painting that is so carefully and moderately ideological. Yet its seamless surface was censored twice from two different sides: first, for the rubber tree plant, and later, for the portrait of Stalin. One could draw a mental diagonal to connect those two images that were iconographically incorrect. When the painting was first exhibited in the early nineteen fifties, it was the rubber tree plant in the foreground that "rubbed" critics the wrong way. The painting was accused of celebrating the *petit bourgeois* values embodied in the rubber tree plant and of "varnishing Soviet reality." The rubber tree plant was regarded as a symptom of counter-revolutionary and *petit bourgeois* tastes, a personal

item that should not be a part of collective iconography. But what is so wrong with rubber tree plants?

When I have explained the painting "Moving to the New apartment" to my American students, they have attempted to figure out what, specific to this plant, made it into a symbol of bad taste. But no knowledge of horticulture was helpful in this case. The "rub" is not inherent in the rubber plant as such; rather, it depends fully on the context. It turns out that the rubber tree plant is a part of American mythology of the nineteen fifties as well, but its meaning is completely different. Here is a passage from a song featuring a rubber tree plant very popular in the fifties, entitled "High Hopes": "Just what makes that poor little ant/Think he can move that rubber tree plant/. He's got hi-i-i-gh hopes, he's got hi-i-i-gh hopes. . . ." Here the plant is a symbol of natural obstacles to be overcome by confidence and hard work, a milestone on the way to the American dream.

The portrait of Stalin is located on a straight diagonal from the rubber tree plant; it almost appears that the "great leader of all people" is turning his eyes away from this bourgeois "flower of evil." In albums of Soviet art during the 60s after the half-hearted official campaign of de-stalinization, the painting appeared without the portrait of Stalin that was deemed in bad taste. It was seen as a kind of historical embarrassment, implicating the painter and his audience in the Stalinist compromise. By covering up the compromise of mass collaboration with Stalin, the critics of the 60s engaged in another compromise, one of forgetting. The erasure of the portrait continued a long tradition of erasing and remaking of history that originated in the 20s and continued through the late 80s. It consists of omitting historical embarrassments and -- to use the term of a Stalinist art critic -- of "varnishing" the reality of authoritarian representation. Since this is a didactic painting, we are supposed to learn a lesson from it, and the lesson is that the everyday is as natural as the rubber tree plant, that history and ideology are as hidden as the portrait of Stalin, and that the relationship between everyday and ideology is as "seamless" as the painting.

As we begin to uncover the ideological roots of the rubber plant, the cultural plot thickens. It reflects many paradoxes in the Soviet construction of the "new everyday" (*novyi byt*). The iconography of the rubber plant is ambiguous. It might have been regarded as the last sickly survivor of the exotic palm trees of the imaginary "greenhouses" of the upper bourgeoisie, or a poor relative of the infamous geranium on the windows of the merchant dwellings that were purged and physically

eradicated in the campaign against "domestic trash" in the Stalin's time. The rubber plant, an iconographic blemish on the image of Socialist Realist domestic bliss, and perhaps the only true-to-life object in the painting, can function as a trigger of cultural memory and a key to the "archeology" of Soviet private and communal life. This cultural archeology is not without contradictions. [11]

The communal apartment depicted in the painting is a far cry from the house-commune imagined by the revolutionary architects in the early Soviet era. In the post-revolutionary period, architecture turned into a major art -- an arch-art, a material embodiment of the revolutionary superstructure, a foundation of the social order. It was a rational art of conquering and reconstructing the mysterious, the unresolved, and the chaotic. Since Marx and Engels did not develop a specific picture of communist life, post-revolutionary visionaries turned to utopian writers like Moore, Campanella, Owen, Fourier, and tried to adopt for practical use their exemplary *Ikarias* and *Cities of Sun*. The modern utopias, called *sots gorod* (socialist cities), were expected to spread around the whole world through the "socialist resettlement of mankind." The house-commune was envisioned as a microcosm of the *sots gorod*. The *sots gorod*, in turn, served as a microcosm of Soviet society as a whole. The elaborate projects for house-communes were developed by Melnikov, Ginsburg, Vengerov, and others. The nucleus of the new utopia, the "house-commune," reflected an ideal of "socialism in one building," to use the expression coined by Richard Stite [12]. The house-commune, also known as the "new proletariat house," radically reconstructed the individualist bourgeois quarters; it de-familiarized them by replacing the familiar bourgeois family structure with "proletarian comradeship." In the house-commune, children were to be cared for collectively to alleviate the burden that once fell upon the bourgeois family's individual members. A popular slogan was making headway at the time, "Down with the dictatorship of the kitchen!" The individual kitchen was denounced as a symbol of the nuclear family and women's enslavement by *byt*. By contrast, communal home was not just a retreat for the individual, a place marked by personal traces and memories; rather, it was a public and therefore ideologically charged site. The communal dwelling's simple and stark geometry had to be enjoyed for its own sake. Characteristically, contemporary Soviet theorists praised empty spaces shot through with light, uncluttered by objects and personal artifacts that could spoil the dwelling's pristine purity. Where domestic objects appeared, they were to be strictly non-representational and anti-realistic, hinting at alternative spatial dimensions that transcend industrial domesticity. El Lissitzky compared the room of the future "to the best kind of traveling suitcase."

He wrote that, for a modern person, it was enough to have an empty room, a mattress, a folding chair, a table and a gramophone. [13] (The gramophone was his concession to popular taste).

The campaign for the new *byt* began with the debunking the old *byt*. Both new and old *byt* acquired their specific features in the 20s, when the revolutionary intelligentsia joined in the bolshevik attack on *byt*. In his suicide note, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Soviet society's foremost revolutionary poet, wrote: "The love boat has crashed against *byt*." This was not only the fate of his personal "love boat." In the poet's eyes, the revolution itself was held hostage to everyday life. Mayakovsky feared that communism would be murdered by yellow canaries and the revolution would be betrayed by Marx -- in the crimson frames of a cozy *meshchanski* interior. Mayakovsky fought against all signs of post-revolutionary domesticity, such as rubber plants, lyrical gramophone songs, and all kinds of pets, dead or alive -- kittens, canaries, and the infamous elephant figurines. Porcelain elephants, symbolizing private happiness, would become notable enemies of the Soviet regime from the 20s to the 90s. No other animal, except perhaps for a few birds of bad taste -- like pink flamingos or yellow canaries -- was to receive such a shabby treatment from the revolutionary artists.

In 1928-29, responding to the poet's call, the Newspaper Komsomolskaia Pravda started a campaign "Down with Domestic Trash." "Let us stop the production of tasteless bric-à-brac!," urged the newspaper. "All these dogs, mermaids, figurine devils and elephants only help smuggle back *meshchanstvo*. Clean your room! Summon bric-à-brac to a public trial! [14] The campaign recreated the rhetoric of the civil war and cultural revolution. In 1929, the plans were laid for a series of exhibits "On the Manifestation of *Meshchanstvo* in Art" and "On the Anti-Aesthetic Objects in Worker's *Byt*." It could be compared with the Nazi exhibit of "Degenerate Art," except that the Soviet exhibit was supposed to be about the "degenerate everyday." Actually, the Soviet project never got off the ground because the cultural politics changed drastically by the late 1930s. The war against the "little gods of things" was a war against fetishization, reification, and objectification of life's simple pleasures, but it was also a war for the war's sake, a nostalgia for the nomadic life style of a true revolutionary. Which is why the furniture had to be simple and portable (*skladnaia*), always ready to be folded and carried along during some major political offensive, economic drive or military campaign. Many leftist artists who were bent on designing the authentic revolutionary everyday were purged during this era. Ironically, the war against "domestic trash"

outlived its idealistic proponents.

By the mid-30s, the trashing of domestic life and the critique of philistinism temporarily subsided, after expunging some of the left intellectuals who attempted to transfer revolutionary art into the practice of everyday life. The new acquisitiveness of Soviet citizens was cautiously encouraged in official writings, partially in order to justify and partially to disguise the legitimation of new order of social inequality, with special privileges allocated for the Stalinist elite (who usually resided in spacious private apartments). [15] Yet, there was tension in the official acceptance of domesticity, and the depiction of its ideal iconography is unstable. In the period of High Stalinism, especially after the war, came the attempt to create a different iconography of the everyday, in not an avant-garde but imperial socialist realistic style, with the privileged few; yet, some iconographic elements -- including the rubber tree plants, those peculiar Soviet flowers of evil -- survived. The purging of the rubber plant, from 20s avant-garde to 50s Socialist Realism, reveals some paradoxical continuities of the utopian vision, although the styles of those two utopias were quite different. It also points to some tragic paradoxes in the Socialist realist culture which, in a rather cruel manner, realized the old dream of the Russian intelligentsia -- the dream of creating a unified "people's culture" by abolishing the distinction between "high" and "low."

During the 30s, intrusion into the everyday became more than rhetorical - - the home search (*obysk*) grew to a haunting image of the new Stalinist perestroika of everyday life. The brightly lit room of "Moving To The New Apartment" is so paranoidly codified because behind the threshold there is another scene, that of "removing someone from an old apartment" -- the scene of the arrest and home search.

The 1950s saw a brief domestic revival, a new infatuation with pink-shaded lamps and escapist sentimental romances about "banana-lemon Singapore," sung by the repentant Russian emigre and born-again patriot, Alexander Vertinsky. The intelligentsia of the 60s criticized the collaborationist philistinism of Stalinist culture and recreated the spirit of nomadic romanticism characteristic of the 20s. It sang about the trips "in search of the fog and the smell of taiga," about the romances of alpinists, geologists, and flight attendants, and launched its own "campaign against domestic trash." This was a peculiar romantic crusade against domestic coziness, against not only pink lamp shades and porcelain elephants, but also all kinds of comfortable furniture -- soft divans and armchairs, love-seat sofas, "lyra," and plush curtains -- in the belief that one had no need to cultivate little domestic nests. Although the 60s returned in many ways

to the revolutionary and very mildly avant-garde discourse of the 20s (mildly, because most of the art works and texts remained unavailable), yet this return was in many ways revolutionary, particularly in the understanding of self and private life. The official "collective" was rewritten as an unofficial association of friends, a rather casual community of transient soul-mates. Occasionally, one of the soul mates would report on another one, occasionally the other one would be called to KGB, but as the Soviet anecdote has it, a great progress was made in Brezhnev's times -- the 10-year prison-sentence joke became only a three-year one. In some ways, this imaginary community of the 60s friends ironically flaunted its own fragility. By the late 1960s, "privacy" began to be seen as the only honorable and uncompromising response to the system of public compromise. Not an escape, but rather as a way of carving an alternative space, and a way of personalizing and deideologizing (to use the favorite term of perestroika intellectuals) the official maps of everyday life.

In the 70s, after the Soviet tanks trundled into Prague , a different kind of "nomadism" emerged, the members of intelligentsia went into a private retreat and questioned the imaginary "kitchen communities" of the 60s. Some became dissidents and experienced violent invasion of privacy, including KGB home searches, while others conformed to a life of stagnation, and a few emigrated abroad -- into capitalist lands where "privacy" is protected by law and elevated to the status of a state religion. From there, they observed the collapse of Soviet civilization.

From the ideal image of Soviet collective bliss, marred only by one ideologically incorrect plant, we will move to its less ideal representation in the communal apartment of the former Leningrad . My "thick description" of the communal apartment and the Soviet home -- to borrow the term from cultural anthropology -- combines its utopian designs and revolutionary genealogy with the examination of actual everyday practices that reflect the tragicomedies of Soviet communal living. My reportage combines images of utopian house-communes envisioned by the revolutionary architects with the few glimpses into the tragical comedy of actual communal living. The story of Soviet domestic life and communal apartment estranges some of the familiar conceptions of domesticity, privacy, and commodity. From Gogol to Chekhov, domesticity in the Russian tradition was connected not only with "family values" but also with *poshlost'*, and with a routine both endearing and stifling. Communal apartment is at once a result of the revolutionary war on commodity-fetishism, domestic kitsch and *poshlost'*, a fortress of commodities and kitsch in its own right. My description will be shaped by inevitable personal memories that will hopefully provide a necessary balance between

familiarity and defamiliarization, between homesickness and the sickness produced by being home.

The Archeology of the Communal Apartment

Here is another version of the Soviet family romance. Instead of a portrait of Stalin, there is a televisual image of Brezhnev, who is not listened to, but merely present as a background noise. My parents were having foreign guests for the first time in their life in our room in the communal apartment. Our neighbors, "Aunt Vera" and "uncle Fedya," were home. Russian children call their adult neighbors "aunts" and "uncles" euphemistically, as if they were members of one very extended family. Uncle Fedya usually came home drunk and, when Aunt Vera would refuse to let him in, he crashed right in the middle of the long corridor -- the central "thoroughfare" of the communal apartment, obstructing the entrance to our room. As a child, I would often play with the peacefully reclining and heavily intoxicated uncle Fedya, with his fingers and his buttons, telling him tales to which he probably did not have much to add. This time we were all in the room, listening to music to muffle the communal noises, and my mother was telling our foreign guests about the beauties of Leningrad. "You absolutely must go to the Hermitage, and then to Pushkin's apartment-museum and, of course, to the Russian Museum" As the conversation rolled along, and the foreign guest was commenting on the riches of the Russian Museum, a narrow yellow stream slowly made its way through the door of the room. Smelly, embarrassing, intrusive, it formed a little puddle right in front of our dinner table. This scene, with the precarious coziness of a family gathering, both intimate and public, and a mixture of ease and fear in the presence of foreigners and neighbors, remained in mind as a memory of home. The family picture is framed by the inescapable stream of Uncle Fedya's urine effortlessly crossing minimal boundaries of our communal privacy, disrupting the fragile etiquette of communal propriety. (And it smelled too much to be domesticated or turned into a metaphor).

If there was such a thing as a Soviet cultural unconscious, it must have been structured as a communal apartment with its flimsy partitions between public and private, sober-mindedness and intoxication. The Soviet "family romance," to use Freud's phrase, now in its melancholic twilight stage, is punctuated by the fluttering sound of a curious neighbor's slippers or by an inquisitive representative of the local Housing Committee. It is a romance with the collective that is equally unfaithful to the communitarian mythologies and to traditional family values.

In 1926, Walter Benjamin wrote a provocative and laconic sentence in his essay about Moscow: "The Bolsheviki have abolished private life." Private life in Soviet Russia, Benjamin felt, was to be eliminated along with private property. Anything private was denigrated as politically dangerous, literally de-prived of social utility and significance. Benjamin astutely noticed that just as private life was collectivized, public cafés tended to disappear as well. Somehow, the two were linked together. A public sphere embodied in the café culture shriveled away along with the excised private life, with critical intellectuals becoming an endangered species on their way to extinction.

"Privacy" is a notoriously recalcitrant word when it comes to finding for it a Russian analogue. Does it mean that "private life" was lacking in Russia, that it was completely abolished by the Bolsheviki, as Walter Benjamin claimed, or perhaps that it was never properly acknowledged and conceptually appropriated by the Russian intelligentsia? All examples given in the famous Dal's Dictionary of the Russian Language under the entry "private life" seem tendentious and negatively colored. [16] From Fonvizin and Herzen to Dostoyevsky and Berdiaev, Russian thinkers ridiculed the Western middle class ideal of "a chicken in every pot and a little house of your own." The Russian soul was supposed to be homeless and impervious to the middle-class appeal of private life. The latter seemed alien to the Russian mores by definition, or perhaps it is the lack of definition that made it appear non-Russian. Russian writers declared private life as practiced in the West to be "inauthentic" and unspiritual. By the same token, Western travellers to Russia, from the Marquis de Custine to Benjamin, lamented its inhabitants' flagrant disregard for private space. (Custine observes that the bed is among the least used items of Russian furniture, acquired mostly for public display. [17])

The Russian *kommunalka*, a term of endearment and deprecation for communal apartment, owes its being not just to a housing crisis; it derives its roots from a political aesthetic program, a revolutionary experiment in collective living. Since very few house-communes were actually built, the authorities resorted to a cheaper option: reconstructing and partitioning already existing "bourgeois quarters." This was the first compromise with the utopian idea of house-commune and the first tacit acknowledgement that the drive for the new *byt* might not be fully successful. Perhaps only utopian ideas could have been fully inhabited.

As so many other things in Soviet Russia, *kommunalka* sprang from Lenin's head. A few weeks after the October Revolution, Lenin drafted a plan of expropriation of "big apartments." Any apartment was considered

big if the number of rooms in it equaled or exceeded the number of its regular residents. [18] (A Russian poet, Joseph Brodsky, once called his family's living quarters "a room and a half"). Lenin's decree reflected a different perspective on home and space than the one found in the West. A person, or rather an impersonal statistical unit was entitled not to a room or a private space but to certain square footage. The space is divided mathematically and bureaucratically, as if it were not a "living" space, a concrete home once inhabited by real people, but some topological abstraction. As a result, countless apartments in major cities that were partitioned in the most bizarre manner, creating unlivable spaces, long winding corridors, black entrances, and labyrinthine interior yards.

In the literature and art of the 20s, the search for the dwelling-place lost appears to be an all-embracing passion, and identity crisis is closely linked to the housing crisis. In the literature and film of the 20s, 'defamiliarization' is not simply a metaphor for a literary device, but also a central thematic preoccupation -- a frustrated attempt to create a new Soviet family in the context of the housing shortage. Love, hatred, and even melancholia are all secondary passions -- it is usually love of "dwelling space" (*zhilploshchad*), hatred for those who have it, and melancholia for the housing lost. The quest for housing space and furniture appears to be the major driving force of plot in the 20s literature and film.

Structurally, many literary works and films of the 20s are organized around a very desirable object of furniture. Thus the celebrated film 'Bed and Sofa' (*Tretia meshchanskaia*, 1928) portrays a peculiar love triangle - - between a young woman, her husband (the representative of the new Moscow proletariat), and his friend, a printer with whom he fought in the Civil war. The friend moves in with the couple because he simply has no other place to live. The bed and the sofa in the film are like musical chairs -- the husband and the friend change their positions and move from spousal bed to marginal sofa as the plot of the film unfolds. It is appropriate that in both the English and Russian titles of the film are not the names of the heroes but the symbolic names of the street they live on or the prominent objects of their household. At the end, the heroine abandons the uncomfortable communal arrangement leaving the two men in their rather unusual male bonding over a cup of tea with jam. The satirical tales of the late 20s and early 30s contain abundant tragicomic images of neighbors persuading each other to commit suicide for their sake, of publicly shamed intellectuals composing iambic tetrameters in the communal closet while their neighbors are busy expropriating the

rooms of absent explorers of the North Pole, or subletting six single beds in one communal apartment. [19] In Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, *Master and Margarita*, the communal apartment turns into the most fantastic place on earth -- more fantastic than the palace of Ponty Pilat . The Satan's ball takes place in the "fifth dimension" of the Moscow communal apartment. The devil himself is amazed at the tricks of Moscow "apartment exchange" and the expansion and divisibility of the dwelling space in the post-revolutionary capital.

Since the late 20s and especially during Stalin's times, the communal apartment has become a major Soviet institution of social control and a form of constant surveillance. The laws of strict "resident permits" (*propiska*) and the campaign against those who were deprived of the rights of citizenship (*lishentsy*) were all connected to the consolidation of communal apartment. The communal apartments were under observation of the local Housing Committee and were a training ground for grass root informants in Stalin's times. By the mid-30s, "separate apartments" came into being that became a sign of a special privilege, or occasionally, a special luck. [20] Only in the late 50s, new revolution in Soviet daily life began with the resettlement of the communal apartments in the "micro-districts" in the urban outskirts, where many for the first time in their life were able to have a state-owned separate apartment. These newly built houses were given the unflattering name *Khrushchoby*, a cross between Khrushchev and *trushcheby* or slums. Until 1990, about 40% of the population in the urban centers like Leningrad lived in communal apartments. As a form of living, the communal apartment combined futuristic designs and premodern ways of living, reminiscent of leprosiums, hospitals, camps, and other earlier forms of imposed communality. In a sense, communal apartment is Soviet society in miniature, a leap of faith from utopian theory to everyday reality, as well as a sadly deconstructive allegory of what happened to revolutionary constructivism.

Soviet *kommunalka* shared with house-commune (*dom kommunna*) more than a linguistic root. It was engendered by the same revolutionary topography as the house-commune and propelled by the same utopian longing for unfettered collectivity. Architecturally, both were alike in two crucial respects: communal kitchen (though each family had its own pots and pans and a gas burner on the shared stove) and the corridor clearly marking (though never fully separating) the public and private spheres. If the house-commune was a microcosm of the ideal revolutionary universe, the communal apartment was an actual Soviet microcosm. Economic hardship was not the sole reason why the purist socialist idyll turned into

a social farce. The problem is that any utopia, be it social, political or architectural, is a u-chronia, forced atemporality, interrupted time-flow, life standing still. What architectural utopia does not take into account is history; both in the broad sense of social history and in a sense of individual history with its multiple narratives of everyday life.

The Psychopathology of Soviet Everyday Life

The partition is the communal apartment's central architectural feature. Made of plywood and oddly situated, the partition marks the intersection between the public and private spheres within a communal dwelling. Because of the chronic housing shortage, the old rooms and corridors were endlessly partitioned and subdivided, creating angular spaces, windowless living quarters, and rooms overlooking half-lit back yards. Tenants strained their imagination by inventing all manner of curtains and screens to mark minimal privacy. A plywood partition was a far more tenuous barrier against the invasion of privacy than a wall, more a sign of division than a division itself. Too flimsy to keep secrets from your neighbors, the partition served to create an illusion that some intimacy was possible after all.

Privacy in the communal apartment was often equated with secrecy. The secret was a way of life, a form of resistance to forced communality. I recall how in the kindergarten we used to play a game called "secrets." We would go to the far end of the park somewhere near the fence off the public paths and perform a ritual burial of secrets in the ground. The "secret" could be a fragment of colored glass, an old stamp, a discarded candy wrapper, an old badge -- any useless "found object" that exerted a peculiar fascination on us. The "secret" -- something to be hidden in order to be shared -- served to affirm a bond of friendship, to escape an imposed collective sociality, to create an alternative community. The game of secrete was opposed to the official game of hide-and-seek where there was nothing to conceal and therefore nothing to uncover. The real secret in our game was a voluntary community that we built. This secrecy celebrated and dramatized play-acting, albeit in a different mold. This was not your run-of-the-mill children's game encouraged by the adults, but a symbolic bonding that transcended the officious sociality of Soviet everyday life. Adults in the communal apartments would play their own games of secrets trying to establish unofficial communities, but not necessarily individual privacy.

One of the main features of communal interactions was "performance disruption." Sexual disruption or a sudden invasion of the couple's

intimate life is comically featured in Soviet fiction and films. Soviet sexologists consider the lack of privacy, coupled with the deeply internalized fear of interruption, to be the major source of sexual disfunction and neurosis among Soviet people. Embarrassment is endemic to communal life; it is fed by a painful awareness that one has very little control over one's life, that one is doomed to act in the other's presence. One could not be embarrassed in complete solitude. Embarrassment requires an audience; it is an exemplary trope for social theatricality. Etymologically, the word embarrassment signifies physical obstruction. It was first applied to human relations only in the 18th century. Ever since, it has been inexorably present wherever the private and the public spheres rub against each other. The incident with uncle Fedya's urinating in the communal corridor is embarrassment the Soviet style. Embarrassment my mother felt in front of honored guests, along with nonchalance she tried to feign to cover up uncle Fedya's "impropriety," were familiar to every Soviet citizen. The embarrassment was such a commonplace that it became ritualized and internalized in the Soviet psyche. It might have even engendered a kind of communal tolerance, an attitude of benign neglect the collective adopted in the face of an odd scene or awkward circumstances. But it also concealed repressed anger which could break into open any moment.

A locus of Soviet communality, communal apartment can be both endearing and stifling. It is hardly the rational communality of self-selected members imagined by the 19th century social-democrats or by the 20th century architects who designed house-communes. The latter were based on the assumption that the new collectivity would make obsolete the extended and nuclear family. Communal apartments are communal by necessity, not by choice. The communal neighbors are joined together in a kind of "mutual responsibility" (*krugovaia poruka*), i.e., they share the duties, use each other's property, and partake in domestic gossip. This is essentially a pre-modern type of collectivity and centralized control that spread in Russian villages since the time of Mongol invasion. Yet, the comparison can be made only with the village commune stripped of its romantic and patriotic idealization; moreover, the central feature of communal apartment is precisely the clash of different classes and social groups, of people with different backgrounds unlike the fairly homogeneous neighbors of patriarchal village communes). The main features of the village life that influenced Russian political folkways included the following: "a strong tendency to maintain stability, a kind of closed equilibrium, risk avoidance, the considerable freedom of action and expression "within the group," [and] the striving for unanimous final

resolution of potential divisive issues." [21]

Various survival strategies were adopted by the inhabitants of communal apartments which helped mitigate the harsh realities of communal living. The very deficiencies of communal living were sometimes turned upside down and used to accentuate the inhabitants' individuality. Thus the neighbors would often exaggerate their separateness by mounting their own individual door bells, vociferously guarding their exclusive access to a particular gas burner, or setting up personal electricity gauges. At the same time, residents in communal apartments tended to internalize the communality as a fact of life and a guarantee of stability.

The communal apartment was a classical Soviet stage where the chorus of conservative public opinion prevailed and where many, though not all, impossible conflicts were resolved. For instance, public opinion would compel an intellectual residing in an apartment to refrain from reading in the communal closet; the drunkard would be assigned a special kitchen corner where he could rest while sobering up; kids were expected to wheel their bicycles in the communal corridor very quietly, and Aunt Shura reported to the local KGB officer only every other political joke, not all of them. The communal stage was not only the field of battle but also a field of compromise. Alcoholism, which became rampant in Brezhnev's times, was tolerated as a fact of life. The social psychologist Alexander Etkind sees alcoholism as a metaphor for stagnation (in Russian *zapoï*, "an alcoholic binge," and *zastoi*, "stagnation," rhyme.) The addict was not compelled to sober up, and a consistently sober person was looked at with suspicion: nobody should stand out in the collective and be better than the next person. In a way, alcoholic intoxication was a state of mind most adequate to bizarre Soviet reality. "The best moments in the life of an alcoholic are not his sober achievements but the drunken unity with equal others." [22] No wonder Gorbachev's reforms began with the anti-alcoholism campaign.

Individualism or uncommon behavior were discouraged in communal apartments, just as they were in the old village commune, and envy permeated relations between residents. "Envy" is the title of one of the earliest Soviet novels of Soviet cohabitation that preceded communal apartments. While envy is by no means peculiar to Soviet everyday life, it is marked here by what Igor Kon, a leading Russian sociologist, calls "historical immaturity." It is akin not so much to the competition present in developed capitalist societies but to interactions found in pre-industrial communities, where relationships are governed by a "zero-sum" presupposition: one person's gain is regarded as the other's loss.

According to Kon, "the dictatorship of envy, disguised as social justice, efficiently blocked individual efforts to do better and to rise above the average," and it discloses "a general mistrust of the individual achievement and the fear of social differentiation. [23]

Any communal apartment dweller is scared for life by that symbolic "mutual responsibility" -- a double blind of love and hatred, envy and attachment, secrecy and exhibitionism, embarrassment and compromise; people in collective dwellings professed to hate any form of communal interaction, yet, they often internalized the communal structures and later recalled them with nostalgia. An elderly woman, a Russian emigre now living in the United States, suffered all her life in the horrendous communal apartments. Now she complains of solitude: "Worse come to worst, even after peeing in your teapot, they [my neighbors] would call you an ambulance when you needed one, or lent you a little bit of salt for your cooking . . . it is this spoonful of roughly grained salt that I miss so much."

Communal apartments have no living rooms, bedrooms or studies -- only "rooms," so the traditional "bourgeois division of labor" and the separation of domestic spheres are supposed to be banished. The room is an ideally transformable stage fit for all occasions. It can be made into a bedroom, a guest room, a dining room, a nursery or a salon. The kitchen is not a communal meeting place; quite to the contrary, it is a place of forced communality that must be avoided. One recently interviewed communal apartment resident called it "domestic Nagorno-Karabakh" (a region in the former Soviet Union torn by an ethnic strife). The communal kitchen is a battleground -- not of ideas, but of petty rivalries. What is at issue here is who burns more gas, whose turn it is to cook or clean, and who is to blame for the breakdown in communal etiquette. Each family has its burner and a designated time to use it. When the cooking is done, the family members make sure they carry to their rooms all their pots and pans so that nobody else would use those scarce personal belongings. In the same way, toilet paper, a rare commodity in the Soviet Union, was kept in the room and carried inconspicuously to the toilet. However, for those who could not procure toilet paper, there was usually the newspaper Pravda stocked in the bathroom to be read or put to another functional use. The intellectual in the communal closet -- in the literal rather than literary sense -- is a character prominently featured in Soviet literature.

In the 1960s, an alternative kitchen culture began to appear in Soviet society, following Khrushchev's thaw. It was widespread among Soviet intellectuals, especially those lucky enough to have an apartment of their

own. An unofficial kitchen gathering featured frank political talk, good company, and some food. The kitchen functioned as an informal salon for the intelligentsia in the 60s. The most important issues were discussed in the overcrowded kitchen, where people "really talked," shared news, flirted and occasionally munched on whatever the family's refrigerator would have to offer. The kitchen salon of the 60s was a perfect site where grown-up children could continue to bury their secrets and celebrate shared escapes from the predictability of Soviet life.

Soviet Interiors: Aunt Liuba's Still Life

Benjamin wrote, "To live is to leave traces." [24] Perhaps this is the best definition of the private -- to leave traces for oneself and for others, memory traces of which one cannot be deprived. A room in the Soviet and post-Soviet communal apartment reveals an obsession with leaving traces, with commemoration and preservation in the most ostensible fashion. The campaign against "domestic trash" failed miserably in most communal apartments. Indeed, we can discern signs of rebellion in the conspicuous accumulation of "domestic trash." The so-called "domestic trash" (the expression derives from a well known Mayakovsky's play) survived all ideological purges and changes in leadership. A secret residue of privacy, it defended people from externally imposed and internalized communality.

Let us enter the room of a sixty-year old widow, "Aunt Liuba," whom I visited in the Summer of 1991 and 1992. Liuba N. came to Leningrad from Belarus after World War II. She was assigned a room in a communal apartment and found a job as an accountant in the medical student's dorm. Aunt Liuba belonged to a lower urban strata which never completely freed itself from *meshchanski* impulses. Aunt Liuba's room contained nearly everything that was considered to be in bad taste from the 20s to 70s, including the infamous rubber tree plant. She did not move to a newly renovated apartment as in the exemplary Stalinist painting, but continued to live in the old communal flat for about thirty years, from the late 50s to the 90s. Her room appears untouched by both the 60s campaigns for good taste and more recent trends in fashion. Although the city and the country where aunt Liuba lives have recently changed their name, her room preserved a certain domestic mentality that has survived historical upheavals.

This is how the room looked the first Summer after the dissolution of the Soviet Union . In Aunt Liuba's only room of some 13 square meters, there is a cupboard -- a kind of a commode made in the early sixties, a bed, a

table, and an old-fashioned TV set. The television stands in the center of the table on a Russian shawl that serves as a table cloth and is treated like an altar of modern conveniences. The TV set is covered with a special lacy cloth that used to cover icons and, later, gramophones, all of which were treated with a peculiar reverence. Aunt Liuba's room reminds us of many traditional Slavic dwellings, except that the functions of a stove and a red corner (where icons were displayed) are now taken up by the TV and the display shelf of the commode where all the most precious items are stored for everyone to see. The blinking artificial light of the TV is reflected in the commode's glass doors, casting bluish shadows upon personal possessions.

The commode-cupboard is the most important piece of furniture in the old-fashioned communal apartment room. It has survived the campaign against domestic trash, the civil war on *meshchanstvo*, and ironic debunking by high brow writers. (At the end of Erdman's play *The Suicide*, the main character, would-be suicide Semion, begs his neighbors and friends to spare him and not to force him to kill himself. He is ready to sign off everything to them, to refuse food, enslave his wife, send his mother in law to work in the mines, and . . . to sell his commode). The genesis of the commode symbolizes the development of both bourgeois commodity and of the conceptions of comfort, home, and interiority. If the mid-19th century is an historical moment when, in Benjamin's words, "the private individual enters the stage of history, [25]_ then the mid 1920s is a turning point when that private individual goes backstage in Russia . And yet, the old and rather modest commode found in Soviet communal apartments reminds us that personal pride and the desire for individuation have not died.

Aunt Liuba has carefully arranged the objects on her commode. There is a big plastic apple, brought from her native Byelorussian village, a Chinese thermos, with bright floral ornaments, a naturalistic porcelain dog, three bottles containing different glass flowers (daisies and more exotic red flowers with a touch of elegance), a samovar, a set of folk-style Soviet porcelain cups. "You see I have it all here, it's my still life," she tells me proudly as I photograph her room. Curiously, she uses an artistic term "still life" to describe this corner of her quarters. In fact, she says "nature morte" -- a Russian gallicism that might have reflected her high school tours of painting galleries obligatory for Soviet students. The display is clearly tinged with an aesthetic quality in her mind, as well as with personal memories. Indeed, there is something pleasing and cheerful in the brightness and unabashed eclecticism of her collection, which contrasts sharply with the bleak uniformity of the communal corridors.

How can we frame conceptually this amateur "still life" in the communal apartment?

In Russia , one can only speak about nostalgia for a still life, nostalgia for sustained and sustaining materiality of everyday life that withstands the winds of time and never-ending crises. Liuba's collection of Soviet ready-mades exemplifying her trivial private utopias and everyday minor aesthetic, framed by the glass of the commode as if it were a museum exhibit, is a monument to that desire for a still life, for a life that does not rush anywhere amidst the whirlpool of social metamorphoses. Liuba's "still life" has no masterpieces or truly exotic objects: her beloved objects are all mass-produced and slightly out-of-fashion, giving to the whole scene an aura of time past. The woman has gathered together all her beautiful and memorable things. The ornaments clash, re-creating distant images of the village home and pre-revolutionary images of cozy merchants' dwellings; their covers, napkins, and laces give the feeling of "completeness and personal touch" which Benjamin identifies with bourgeois interiors.

Liuba's room is full of flowers: Soviet Victorian roses on the communal wallpaper; exotic red glass flowers and simple plastic daisies on the shelf; stylized gold and yellow daisies on the porcelain, red floral decorations on the wooden "khokhloma" spoon. The only real flower is a little rubber tree plant comfortably perched on the window sill (I was glad to find this old friend here). Aunt Liuba's carefully gathered exhibit presents a daunting challenge to the theoretical framing of domestic objects.

From the 1920s and through the 1970s, domestic object was a precarious possession in the Soviet homes, an endangered species constantly threatened by the ideological, social and economic conditions of the time. The fact of being denied objects is not only a social deprivation but also a sensory deprivation, a thwarting of sentience, human contact, the powers of projection and reciprocity. The war on fetishism carries a different meaning in a country where most people have experienced the loss of domesticity at least once in a life time and where the preservation of domestic objects spelled not so much consumerism as survival.

The artifact on communal display is an object preserving private memory, a souvenir to privacy itself, a remnant of a pre-industrial and possibly pre-revolutionary world. The souvenir displaces the object from common into individual history. The souvenir's owner becomes the author who reinvents the objects and their uses and refuses to accept the official "system of objects," whether that system is the one of capitalist

commercialism or of frugal collective ideology.

The personal domestic objects of aunt Liuba are difficult to theorize. They are too useless for both use-value and exchange value theories, neither authentically primitive nor exotic enough for transgressive modern usages, too trivial and banal in a non-fatal manner to be turned into a simulacrum à la Baudrillard. In other words, they are impure and outmoded on all grounds. The analysis of aunt Liuba's still life is about the everyday resistance to sociological theories, yet her objects can tell us a lot about eclectic Soviet cultural mythologies. They are not about de-familiarization but rather about domestication of estranged ideological designs. Liuba's objects are not bare essentials, neither are they objects of status or conspicuous consumption. If they do represent a need, it is first and foremost an aesthetic need, a desire for beauty with minimal available means, or an aesthetic domestication of the hostile outside world.

In the rooms inhabited by ex-Soviet intellectuals, by contrast, we do not find cheap old-fashioned chests of drawers. What we encounter here are the 1960s style wall units and shelves designed in a modern functional fashion and made in so-called "developed Socialist countries" like Hungary or even Yugoslavia. On the surface, such objects de-emphasize the fetishistic quality of the furniture and eliminate the excessive curves and ornamental details of the commodes. However, the wall units and ample book shelve space popular among the intelligentsia were also status symbols, fetishes of rediscovered modernist functionality. Hard-to-get books and collected works of foreign authors signaled one's membership in the esteemed status group of intelligentsia (note that the prestige bestowed on the intelligentsia is itself a trace of the pre-revolutionary civilization where intellectuals were held in high esteem). Given the material scarcity in the post-World War II era, personal possessions were hardly acquired exclusively for "conspicuous consumption." The space between the folding glass on the bookshelf, an ephemeral space, where the owners would typically display especially meaningful personal objects like photographs, images from travel, baby pictures, portraits of Hemingway, or of popular Soviet bard Vladimir Vysotsky (both with beards and with or without cigars), snapshots of far-away friends, occasional toys or souvenirs from Crimea or Susdal, envelopes with foreign stamps, loose pages from disjointed old books, dated newspaper clippings, and so forth. This narrow two-dimensional space behind the glass covering the book shelf is a coded image of the room's owner, the person's carefully arranged interface with the world. The narrative of the treasured objects cannot be easily reconstructed by the outsider, for it is non-linear,

unreadable, with many blank spots, oddly meaningful banalities and mild obsessions. It is not a biographical fiction but a fragmented history of one's fragmented life, a story of spiritual odyssey fashioned by circumstances, a record of what really matters, assorted traces of lived or vicariously experienced life that have survived the drudgery of dailyness. Sometimes, it is a travelogue that regales us with real or imaginary journeys to exotic places and daring escapes into wishful thinking. In the 60s and early 70s, when traveling abroad was nearly impossible, the Soviets engaged in "virtual travel" by watching an immensely popular TV program "The Club of Cine-Travelers," a Soviet version of National Geographic that offered everyone a free transit to the West and beyond.

There appears to be an unwritten law of fashion which tells everyone when Hemingway and Pasternak are out and Vysotsky and Solzhenitsyn are in. With the passage of time, Solzhenitsyn also becomes passe, supplanted by the photo-reproduction of the exotic and apolitical Nephertiti, the mythical beauty queen of ancient Egypt whom Soviet intellectuals inherited from the traveling exhibit, "The Treasures of Tutankhamen." Now side by side with Nephertiti is a half-dressed foreign pin-up girl with a non-Russian smile that have replaced all past political and poetic heroes. Private memorabilia is not deprived of cultural myths; it is separated from the dominant discourses only by a fragile plywood partition. But it is the space where fragments of those myths can be reconstructed in a creative personal collage, even if this collage lacks aesthetic unity. The objects/souvenirs are often the only personal possessions, offering us erratic narratives of utopian coziness and homeliness. Both priceless and cheap, conspicuous and private, they make us question some cherished precepts of the commodity theory.

The Ruins of Soviet Communality

The communal apartment has always been an exemplary metaphor of Soviet communality, official and unofficial. Nowadays, it is a frequent subject of editorials in the post-Soviet press. When Stalin was taken out of the mausoleum, people joked that Khrushchev had resettled Lenin's communal apartment, which (the joke is updated in the post-Soviet era) could be now fully "privatized." [26] A writer Alexander Kabakov ridiculed Russian ultra-nationalists for their "communal apartment tactics." By mobilizing neighborhood bullies (*kham*), Kabakov argues, ultra-nationalists hope to force intellectuals into playing by their boorish rules of insult and coercion. [27] Memories of the communal apartment, like chronic childhood diseases, cannot be cured; communal apartment strategies of attack, survival, and resistance shaped the mentality of

several Soviet generations.

Once a realm of powerful myths, the communal apartment itself is on its way to becoming a myth. From a forward-looking utopia, it has evolved into a nostalgic memory of a quasi-paradise lost. Some former communal apartment neighbors remember it with a mixture of anger and endearment, not merely as "domestic Nagorno-Karabakh," but as a place of their old-fashioned Soviet childhood and youth, when life was difficult, pleasures simple, and -- for better or for worse -- there did not seem to be any exit. A recent article in a popular weekly *Ogonek* titled "*Kommunalka*" remembered the communal apartment with bitter-sweet irony as a never-never land where one could be happy with so little. This precarious Soviet happiness is now largely extinct. And to many former Soviet citizens deprived of privacy in the past, the old miseries seem less frightening than the incoming privatization.

Although the communal apartment lost its status as an officially sanctioned institution at the end of Gorbachev's reign, it has survived as an unfortunate fact of life reflecting the continuous housing shortage. The radical perestroika brought down many old partitions in the former communal apartments. This latest revolution in everyday life had to proceed slowly, for it had to grapple with the consequences of the older campaigns, such as the drive for new *byt* that brought forth communal apartments, and Khrushchev's reforms which moved about 30 percent of Soviet urban dwellers into separate apartments on the cities' outskirts. Before the privatization campaign, there were 300,000 communal apartments in Moscow . According to the official statistics, forty percent of the population in Leningrad , recently renamed into St. Petersburg , still lives in communal apartments. The housing conditions are particularly harsh in the city center. Privatizing apartments turned out to be an excruciating task, straining the emerging post-Soviet legal culture which has stumbled against the unpredictable (or rather very predictable but never legally accounted for) webs of Soviet everyday practices. In 1988, the Council of Ministers approved an amendment to the existing laws that allowed citizens residing in private apartments to buy them from the city government. There were very few takers at first. In 1989, only 0.03 percent of all apartments and 0.07 percent of apartment residents turned their apartments into private property. [28] In July of 1991, the Supreme Soviet adopted a new law that was designed to speed up the apartment privatization process. The rooms in the communal apartment still could not be privatized.

The privatization policy encountered a lot of popular criticism reflecting

not only Soviet prejudices but also the traditional Russian suspicion of private property. A friend of mine reports a conversation on the trolley overheard in 1991: "They are going to get privatization vouchers; we are going to privatize!" To which another person replies, "Aren't you ashamed to use such words in the presence of women." "Privatization" remains a bad word for many ex-Soviet citizens. An aging school teacher wrote a letter to Ogonek, complaining that she was ostracized by other dwellers residing in the same housing project when she decided to privatize her one-room standard apartment. She was called "NEP woman, capitalist, and private property owner" -- the words sound derogatory if not obscene in Russian and come directly from the vocabulary of the political insults that carried a mortal danger in the Stalinist epoch: *sobstvennitsa*, from *sobstvennost*, "property owner" or *chastnitsa*, from *chastnyi* (private, particular).

By 1990, only a few completely dilapidated and sub-standard even by Soviet standards communal apartments had been taken over by artists and, later on, almost like in downtown Manhattan, reclaimed by the newly emerging shady businessmen, real estate operators, and some "astrologists anonymous." After the 1991 law on domestic property privatization came into effect, a new wave of housing "gentrification" (to use the American term) began in Russia, which left in its wake the clearly visible trail of bribery and coercion.

Imagine a post-Soviet *nouveau riche*, a young woman who works as a financial director for the international "joint venture" and falls in love with a dilapidated but spacious Moscow communal apartment featuring bay windows and a neo-classical facade. She would have to pay to each communal apartment resident a hefty fee and supply each of them with a separate apartment where they would be willing to move. Moreover, she would have to find her way around (usually by bribing) the obsolete yet fully functional Soviet bureaucrats from the Housing Committee. Also, there is still in place an old Soviet mechanism of social control -- resident permit or *propiska*, without which a person is not allowed to settle in a given city. "A birthmark of the past," this resident permit is a bureaucrat's dream opportunity to extol bribery. In one of the many stories I have heard on this subject, an *apparatchik* from the Housing Committee demanded a bribe of no less than \$20,000 (probably more than a year's income of all the building's residents) for the permit to privatize a particularly attractive apartment on Arbat Street. When the would-be owner refused to pay the bribe, the bureaucrat resorted to threatening phone calls demanding that his terms were met. The harassment ceased only when the aspiring owner solicited help from the wife of a prominent

Russian politician. [29]

These stories point out that the old Soviet ways are far from dead. The old techniques of coping with the Soviet bureaucracy come handy when ex-Soviet citizens have to battle for their newly acquired rights. The dream of a western-style private dwelling is still just a dream for most Russians who have survived socialism. By the same token, many post-Soviet reforms are but legal abstractions and nobody know how to put them into practice. "Free market" and "democracy" remain empty foreign words in the minds of the Russian people, as "socialist political economy" and "communism" used to be.

In these post-Soviet, post-communist, post-modern times, all the words formerly deemed untranslatable into Russian are finding their way into post-Soviet discourse: *mentalnost*, *identichnost*, *manadzher*, *sponsor*. The once ubiquitous adjectives like "collective" and "communal" are out of fashion. Everything that starts with the foreign prefix "inter" (like "international") is in. International companies, joint ventures, cooperatives are in vogue. And so is privatization in all its numberless forms. Where in the Soviet past private life used to be forbidden in public, now there is a newspaper called

Private Life (*Chastnaia Zhizn*) specializing in personal ads, cries of loneliness, and searches for "Western" husbands and wives. One female reader wrote a funny teasing line, in response to the newspaper's verse contest, that reflects all the ambiguities and paradoxes of the new and still untranslatable (or at least unprecedented in any Western language) post-Soviet *byt*: "So, what is to be done? Oh, well, I won't despair. I don't have personal life but 'Private Life' I do." Here "private life" is placed in quotation marks; it is only a name of a newspaper, a new cliché of the post-Soviet language and a fitting name for a newspaper ready to tap a Soviet language, not yet a "property" of still deprived Russian citizens.

References

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1. Roman Jakobson, "On the Generation that Squandered its Poets," in Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy, eds., *The Language in*

Literature (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1987).

2. Vladimir Nabokov, "Philistines and Philistinism," in *Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: HBJ, 1981), p.313.

3. Nikolai Rerikh complains that the Oxford English Dictionary includes only two Russian words, *ukaz* and *sovet*, both connected to Russian and Soviet systems of power and bureaucracy (quoted in Dmitri Likhachev, *Zametki o russkom*, Moscow: Soviet Russia, 1984, p. 11). Likhachev also writes that two Russian words -- *volia* (freedom) and *udal'* (courage) -- are connected to the Russian landscape and emphasize the enormity of the central Russian plain.

4. In response to a questionnaire on mass culture offered to prominent Soviet writers, artists, and intellectuals, Tatiana Tolstaya, a contemporary Russian writer, wrote that mass culture is "not a culture by definition." Mass culture is a contradiction in terms, which Tolstaya dismisses as "kitsch." *Iskusstvo kino*, no 6 (June 1990), pp. 69-70.

5. Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspensky, "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture," in Alexander Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone-Nakhimovsky, eds., *Semiotics of Russian Cultural History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p 32.

6. A similar description/perpetuation of the Russian extraordinary resistance to ordinary life can be found in the writings of Nikolai Berdiaev, but with an additional twist. Berdiaev insists that the opposition between *byt* and *bytie* is rooted in the Russian apocalyptic conscience (see Nikolai Berdiaev, *Rusaskaia ideia*, Paris: YMKA Press, 1946. Russia's conception of national identity depends on its extraordinary deeds (*podvig*) and on its eschatological mission, not on its everyday. Real life and true happiness is only possible in the "future perfect" of the utopia or the apocalypse, not in the transient present of everyday life. Russia herself is frequently personified as a flying *troika* that leaves the limits of this world and runs away without aim or restraint. In Blok's *fin-de siècle* vision, Russia appears as a spiritual dancer who has given away her flesh and now dances accompanied by a sad song about escape from the everyday (*bez-byt-nost*) and fleeting moments. And as she dances, an apocalyptic horseman lurks in the twilight. So, Russia is defined by her perpetual nomadic spirit, wanderlust, and liberation from dailiness. In this iconography, the everyday (*byt*) is perceived not just as unspiritual but also as non-Russian in a higher, poetic sense of the word.

7. Sergei Tretiakov, the propagandist of the Left Front, redefines the opposition between *byt* and *bytie*, in which *bytie* turns from a spiritual into a revolutionary being. The dynamic force of the revolutionary *bytie* is opposed to the materialistic *byt*, the realm of those petit bourgeois kitschy objects -- romantic postcards, gramophone records, porcelain peasants and gypsies, pink ivory elephants, and all those other "enemies of the people" that do not simply comprise a private world but also profane the revolution.

8. Secular modern everyday life was defined as the residue of theory and metadiscourse. Michel de Certeau describes everyday life as a series of minor practices of ruse and *bracconnage*, the arts of survival that undermine the prescribed Art of Life, official ideologies and some sociological theories. In other words, this conception of everyday life (which owes to the French rather than the Russian intellectual history) is anti-utopian by definition. The everyday and its cultural descriptions were regarded as resistance to utopia both in practice and in theory. Hence to write the history of the everyday means to go against the grain of Russian cultural myths and many paradigmatic descriptions of Russian cultural history that reproduce them. For the European theories of everyday life see Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, translated by Sasha Rabinovitch (New Brunswick, New Jersey, Transaction Press, 1984). For the development of Lefebvre's theories see the special issue of the *Yale French Studies on the Everyday* (YFS, no. 73, Kristin Ross and Alice Kaplan, eds., Yale University Press, 1987). Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien/Arts de Faire* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1980).

9. The painting seeks to convince us that it is not about painting but about life. It is a blueprint for life, not the way it is, and certainly not the way it was, but the way it should be.

10. In contrast to the Nazi Germany art, we hardly find any depiction of private or domestic life in the Soviet art of the 20s and 50s, which was primarily dedicated to epic subjects. This is a painting about moving to domestic life, about domestic life-to-be in a victorious post-war Soviet Union. It does not portray domesticity as a given, but domesticity as an award presented by the Party for heroic deeds.

11. The archeology of the everyday offers us neither a complete reconstruction of the past nor its single authorial explanation, neither a comforting taxonomy nor a scientific periodization. It only helps to unearth a few material exhibits, like the rubber plant, that illuminate twisted plots of forgotten cultural history. Walter Benjamin compares

archeological digging to the operations of memory. In his view, the archeologist "must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter: to scatter it as one scatters, to turn it over as one turns soil. For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes a real treasure hidden within the earth; the images, severed from all earlier associations that stand like precious fragments of torsos in a collector's gallery -- in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding. Walter Benjamin, "A Berlin Chronicle." In *Reflections*, p. 26. For the notion of archeology in contemporary theory see Michael Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) and for the critical discussion of the concepts of "history" and "archeology" see *Modern European Intellectual History*, edited by Domenick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

12. For a historical description of revolutionary utopias, see Richard Stite, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*; V. E. Khazanova, *Iz istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury, 1917-1925* (Moscow: A.N.S.S.S.R. 1963); *Sovetskaia arkhitektura pervykh let oktiabria*; (Moscow: Nauka, 1970); *Sovetskaia arkhitektura pervoi piatiletki* (Moscow: Nauka, 1980).

13. *Kultura Zhilia, Stroitelnaia promyshlennost*, no. 12 (1926), p. 881. Quoted in Khazanova, *Sovetskaia arkhitektura pervykh let oktiabria*, p. 220.

14. *Komsomolskaia pravda* (November 4, 1928).

15. On the "new deal" Stalin's style and the "new acquisitiveness" in the 30s see Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976). See also Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Becoming Cultured: Socialist Realism and the Representation of Privilege and Taste" in *The Cultural Front. Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 216-217.

16. Vladimir Dal, *Tolkovy slovar zhivago velikoruskogo iazyka* (St. Petersburg: Volf Editorial, 1882), p. 259. Other examples include "personal insult" (*lichnoe oskorblenie*): if a clerk is insulted in the workplace or because of his position, this is not a personal insult (*oskorblenie chinovnika po dolzhnosti ego ne est obida lichnaia*) and "personal responsibility" (*lichnaia otvetstvennost*); the latter offers the only example that is not defined in opposition to the community, but here the responsiveness to the community is internalized. Hence Russian

personal life, "*lichanaia zhizn*," seems more like a realm of publicly sanctioned guilt and of a heightened sense of personal duty.

17. It is symptomatic that in the *History of Private Life* recently published in France and in the United States there is almost no mentioning of Russia. Perhaps the editors conceived private life exclusively in western terms and now it time to issue a complimentary volume on the "history of communal life" with Russia as the case in point.

18. Quoted in Vladimir Paperny, *Kultura Dva* (Ann Arbor: Michigan, 1986), p. 83.

19. I refer specifically to Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov's satirical novels *Twelve Chairs* and *the Golden Calf*, Nikolai Erdman's play, *The Suicide*, and Mikhail Zoshchenko short stories. I offer a more detailed examination of the literature of the communal apartment in *Common Places*, Chapter 2.

20. The Establishment of new privileges allowed certain groups of population -- party apparatchiks, intellectual and artistic elites that collaborated with the regime (and was not arrested) -- to have additional "living space." Living in a separate apartment was a mark of prestige. Yet, elements of Soviet communal mentality persisted beyond communal apartments.

21. Edward Keenan, "*Moscow Political Folkways*," p. 128.

22. Alexander Etkind, "Psychological Culture of the Soviets," a paper presented at the Nevada Conference on Soviet Culture, Las Vegas, November 1992.

23. Igor Kon, "The Soviet Moral Culture," a paper presented at the conference on Soviet Culture, Las Vegas, November 1992.

24. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections* (New York: HBJ, 1989), p. 155.

25. *Ibid*, p. 154.

26. See *Istoriia SSSR v anekdotakh*, edited by Robert Vikkers.

27. Alexander Kabakov, "Na chuzhom pole," in *Moskovskie novosti*, no.

49, (December 6, 1992), p. 5.

28. These figures are cited in *Ogonek*, no. 38 (September 1991), p. 18.

29. See Celestine Bohlen, "Moscow Privatization Yields Privacy and Problems," *Sunday New York Times* (February 28, 1993).
