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**ON THE EVALUATION OF HOUSING CRISIS IN THE EARLY YEARS  
OF THE SOVIET POWER (ON THE MATERIALS OF TYUMEN)**

*SUMMARY.* The reasons, the nature and consequences of the acute housing crisis of 1919-1920 are analyzed using materials from Tyumen. It is found out that it was based on a set of objective and cultural circumstances, the content and appearance of the crisis are investigated. It is shown that the thesis on the housing crisis in Soviet Russia voiced by some researchers, according to which some Bolsheviks deliberately planned destructive action, is not supported by historical sources.

Analysis shows that the housing policy of the Soviet government was determined not only by ideological postulates or a class approach, but also the realities of life, requiring immediate and effective action, which in the extreme situation of war and economic collapse inevitably resulted in methods of "redistribution" and largely coincided with the social attitudes of the masses. The totality of these circumstances not only prevented the Bolshevik Party from developing any effective housing policies which even in the long term, would satisfy the natural human need for private space and privacy, but also from solving a specific problem — if not to eliminate, at least to reduce the growing housing crisis.

In these conditions, the resolution of the housing problem is linked to the adjustment of social and economic policy and the civil foundations of life prevailing in war communism.

*KEY WORDS.* Civil war, the housing crisis, mentality.

In history studies, the acute housing crisis of the first Soviet years is usually supposed to be caused by a number of objective and cultural circumstances that determined a significant gap between the real state of housing maintenance and utilities and people's needs. For those who are interested in this problem, the book by the architect and historian M.G. Meerovitch from Irkutsk "Punishment by housing: housing policy in the USSR as a way of manipulating people (1917-1937)" turned out to be a bolt from the blue. The main idea of the book can be formulated as follows: "naive" scientists do not even suppose that the acute need for housing in the "country of dictatorship of the proletariat" was created intentionally, "with reason and purpose", and the "shortage of housing was beneficial for authorities", because that was the way not only to "show mercy or punish", but also to "provide control and monitoring of people's moods, everyday behavior and thoughts" [1; 5-7].

Even though the scientist has a right to scientific research and alternative assessments, it is important to remember that any hypothesis needs argumentation. No hypothesis can be suggested by guess-work or without all-round analysis of the facts and events of the past. Regretfully, in his study M. G. Meerovich rather often ignores these fundamental rules and can be blamed for numerous distortions.

To see that, it is enough to look through the opening passages of the first chapter of the aforementioned study. The author contradicts well-known facts, claiming that “in the first days of their existence Soviet authorities took over all (!) the rights of possession and disposal of housing. These rights were concentrated in the hands of government” [1; 11]. In support of this idea, the author refers the reader to the first decrees of the Soviet authorities, including the decree “On Land”, that allegedly proclaims land and residential buildings on it “the subject of exclusive state possession and disposal” [1; 12], which is, in fact, an example of nationalization.

Meanwhile, any researcher knows that the decree “On Land”, as well as any legislation of the first days and months of the Soviet regime, proclaimed land a public possession, and not a state possession. And this decision was also true for state land resources. “All the land, previously possessed by the state, crown, government officials, or church; or lands, that are entrusted (given by authorities to non-aristocratic entrepreneurs for the development of industry), entailed, private, public, peasant and etc. — as it was proclaimed in the decree “On Land”, — all these lands are placed in the public domain to the ownership of the people working on them” [2; 15].

There was not full-scale nationalization of housing resources either, and if nationalization took place, it was partial. For example, in Tyumen even in 1932, when centralization of power and control in the authorities’ hands turned out to be considerable, only 6.1 thousand square meters (2.3%) out of 260.4 thousand square meters of total housing resources were in state possession, while 180.7 thousand square meters were in private possession (69.4%), and 3,4 thousand square meters in cooperative possession (1.3%) [3].

Unfortunately the publication volume and its topic do not give us the possibility to analyze the whole list of manipulation means that served M. G. Meerovich in his “study” of “nationalizing houses” after the Bolshevik revolution. Nevertheless, the problems studied in his book deserve a thorough research, especially because many of them had not been specially analyzed yet.

In this article the main trends of housing policy in the first year of the Soviet regime are described; our research was carried out on the basis of Tyumen, which is a relatively large town in Siberia where the housing problem has always been a burning issue. In the conditions of the Civil war it became even more important, because the economic life of the region was in disarray, and the town’s population greatly increased to almost 100 thousand people [4] (in 1914 this number was 42,550 [5;123]) due to the influx of refugees. This index falls after the military setbacks of Kolchak’s supporters: a large number of the bourgeoisie, high officials, well-to-do white-collar workers, professional class representatives and refugees went East with the retreating Whites. Nevertheless, at the moment of the entry of the Red Army in Tyumen on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 1919, there were about fifty thousand people in the town, and almost half of them at the social “bottom” (or close to it) and nestling in poky houses; they were in dire need of better housing conditions. Along with that, there were no less than seven thousand refugees in the town; new military units and employees of various management services were arriving, and Tyumen inhabitants who had left houses at

the time of Kolchak's supporters' control were returning [6; 125, 126]. Hundreds of houses were needed to accommodate all of them, and there were not enough of them in Tyumen. Also many houses in Tyumen were in poor condition. According to a contemporary's information, in the conditions of war and total devastation, these houses "were in such a state that without immediate repair they would never again be in a condition to serve the needs of the State or people" [7].

A new and peculiar type of world perception formed by giant social cataclysms was also a very significant factor in the growing housing crisis. A person who breaks the links with the past stays in a new mental space where uncertainty about the future dominates, and internal motivation to improve housing and maintain its proper condition was slowly dying away.

All these circumstances affected the behavior of all population groups of Tyumen, but it was especially reflected in the proletarian "base", in people who, even in peaceful times, thought of housing as a minimal set of private services that can guarantee only partial rest. The unprecedented disasters of the Revolution era and the Civil war, on the one hand, dragged these people into the abyss of stagnation and social degradation, and on the other hand they created social aggression by contributing to the number of fierce opponents of the old system, so-called "spontaneous Bolsheviks", implying people who supported the new order with the motto "who was nothing will become everything"; an order that presupposed no deprivation. As part of such representations, the easiest way to solve housing problem was to redistribute existing housing resources guided by the principle of radical equation.

Statistical materials do not yield any exact figures concerning the housing resources of Tyumen in the first years of the Soviet regime; they represent only fragmented information about the number of housing units and the number of rooms without mentioning the size of the living areas. This fact definitely makes it difficult to carry out comparative analysis, but allows us, nevertheless, to state a number of things important for our research.

Firstly, just before Kolchak's supporters' evacuation, there were about 4.3 thousand houses with 8.4 thousand rooms in them, and about 2 thousand rooms (23-24%) were the property of the bourgeoisie and classes close to them; the number of these people with their families was not more than 2-2.5 thousand people (5-6% of the total town population [6; 125], [8-9]). So, the average representative of the bourgeoisie had approximately one room, and a significant number of these rooms were "large" in size.

Secondly, our calculations reveal that in 1919 about 3 thousand rooms or fewer in Tyumen belonged to representatives of the social "base", and the majority of these rooms were "small" by their size. Given that this group ranged from one-third to half of the whole Tyumen population (15-20 thousand people), it turns out that each representative of the social "base" had approximately 0.2 rooms.

Thirdly, these numbers allow us to state that the living space of the average representative of the social "base" of Tyumen was five times lower than that of the average representative of the middle class. Also, given the difference of these rooms in size, we may calculate that the gap between the living space of the poor and that

of the higher classes could range from 8 to 10 times. It is also necessary to remember that a part of the town's proletarians did not have any house at all and were forced to rent fairly expensive lodgings. The living conditions of these Tyumen inhabitants were generally even more unfavorable.

In these circumstances, the housing policy of the Soviet regime was dictated not only by ideological postulates or a class-based approach, but also by objective realities that required immediate and effective action; in the extreme wartime situation and economic ruin such action inevitably resulted in different ways of "redistribution", which fitted the mood of people from the "base", who were the most numerous social group in the town.

In Tyumen the policy of "redistribution" began with the municipalization of empty houses, the owners of which had escaped with the Whites. As a result, by 1920 the City Department of Public Utilities had taken 450 houses [9], or 10.5% of all residential buildings in the town, under its jurisdiction. Approximately half of these buildings (among the best ones) were given to military and civil institutions, and others were given to Tyumen inhabitants who had no houses or lived in overcrowded or badly-dilapidated houses, and by the middle of the 1920s only 28% of municipalized housing resources were overcrowded or in a critical state [10].

At the same time, measures for "compaction" were taken against well-to-do categories of the population. On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1919, the Tyumen provincial Military Revolutionary Committee adopted a resolution on the standards of living space distribution. According to them, "every working citizen" had the right to "have one room of 3 square fathoms (13.6 square meters) in size and, in addition to that, to have one extra room of the same size for two children under the age of fifteen". A citizen who owned "extra" living space was obliged to "make the room tighter within a week at their own discretion", which meant that they were supposed to lodge outsiders in their houses [11].

Since statistics for the first years of the Soviet regime did not record important figures concerning housing resources in Tyumen, we will try to determine the effectiveness of measures for its redistribution from indirect sources and by correlation. For this we will use the earliest information on the total size of the living space of all the town buildings (269.4 thousand square meters in 1925) [12]. According to these facts, we may say with a high level of probability that in 1919 and 1920 this figure was not more than 225-235 thousand square meters, so 14-15% less. This assumption can be confirmed by the statistics on the dynamics of house numbers in Tyumen: in 1924 there were 4932 of them [13], and in 1920 4304 [8], so likewise 14.6% fewer.

This same material gives us the opportunity to calculate that in 1920 there were 5.4 square meters of living space per one citizen (total living space — 225-235 thousand square meters; total population — 42 962 [14]), or significantly less than the norm introduced on September 1, 1919. In addition to that, the norm was significantly lower than minimal sanitary requirements, and hundreds of townsmen (989 by the November of 1920 [9]) still had nowhere to live or lived in specially-reserved railway carriages (79 carriages were used for this purpose in January 1921 [15]). The sum of these and

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related facts gives the basis for the conclusion that redistribution of houses in 1919 and 1920 affected the general situation of housing resources to a very small extent, and the situation stayed critical.

This crisis resulted in a permanently high level of public dissatisfaction with poor housing conditions, as indicated by our analysis of complaints filed with the party and Soviet authorities by Tyumen inhabitants. For example, in the first eight months of 1921, townsmen filed 1064 complaints to the Complaints Bureau of the Tyumen Province Committee of the Russian Communist (Bolshevik) party, and 134 of them (12.6%) were about dissatisfaction with “housing conditions”. Besides, the number of such complaints was higher by 45.7% than the number of complaints about the difficult food situation, 2.8 times higher than the number of complaints about illegal searches and arrests, and 2.9 times higher than the number of complaints on the violation of labor laws. Only the number of complaints about the requisition and confiscation of property (299, or 28.1%) was higher than the number of complaints about poor housing conditions [16].

In these circumstances, it was usual for lodgers to show neglect towards the living space allocated to them. For example, one house inspection conducted by the officers of the Department of Public Utilities show that “it was very dirty there, and the walls were pricked with large holes left by nails, and in the majority of rooms there were no electric wires. The kitchen in its present state was almost completely destroyed, and ovens had holes and were completely black because of smoke. The floor was cut because of chopping firewood inside, and two stone slabs were destroyed. The stall for carts that was in the yard before had been ruined too. The fence made of robust wood that stood in the backyard was also destroyed” [17].

These facts, as well as many others, reflect very obvious features of real life; they prove that after two years of the Soviet regime, Tyumen “base”-class representatives still felt like “stepsons of proletarian culture”, it was still not natural for them, and they still suffered because of the regime. This caused the appearance of a line between the “base” social groups and the authorities, which could turn out to be antagonistic; this fact shows a growing shortage of social optimism of the part of society that was constantly appealed to by the Bolsheviks.

This phenomenon also had another side. The Bolshevik party, by identifying itself with the “masses”, was also to consider that many party activists (not to mention simple party members) suffered from the housing crisis as well. With an attempt to “become closer to the people” and make their life easier, the Soviet authorities introduced free use of a large number of public utilities. For example, the city water station was to provide 3 buckets of water per person, and per horse or cow as well [18]. Electricity for house lighting was free too, but it was very limited: from 1.45 hours a day in June to 6 hours a day in December [19]. At the same time, a maintenance bill remained, and it depended on the accommodation area of the occupant. For example, for people that lived in the center of the town, the fee for 1 square fathom (4.5 square meters) of living space was 15 rubles, and for people that lived in the suburbs about 6 rubles [9]. It is easy therefore to calculate considering that the salary of a worker or clerk could reach thousands or even dozens of thousands of rubles, the

fees for public utilities were no more than 1% of its real amount and such sums were unable to compensate the cost of maintaining the housing resources. That, among with other reasons, resulted in extreme shabbiness of houses, because it provoked lodgers to neglect the state of their houses.

Thus, in 1919-1920, the Tyumen Soviet authorities in any way not only failed to design an effective housing policy able in perspective to satisfy the natural human need for private space and private life, but also they did not solve the concrete problem that was to eliminate, or at least to ease the growing housing crisis. Under these conditions, the solving of the housing problem was increasingly connected with the adjustment of social and economic policy and civic foundations of life prevailing in the conditions of war communism.

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