УДК 94(470.54-25).084.6

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EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE SOTSGOROD OF URALMASH: A SOVIET PROJECT FACING THE HOUSING QUESTION DURING THE FIRST FIVE-YEAR PLAN (1928–1933)

Статья посвящена «социалистическому городу». Этот тип поселения был задуман как спланированный город, оборудованный социальной инфраструктурой для его жителей, и должен был радикально трансформировать их образ жизни и заложить основу социалистической цивилизации. Но какова была природа и результаты этого опыта? Этот вопрос затрагивается в статье через исследование быта рабочих на стройке соцгорода Уралмаш, возведенного с 1928 по 1933 гг. вблизи Свердловска. Первоначальные чертежи города, подготовленные архитекторами и градостроителями, были поставлены под вопрос неконтролируемой политикой первой пятилетки, которая привела к хаотичной ситуации на Уралмаше: начался острый жилищный кризис, бараки рабочих были перенаселены и найти жилье стало серьезной проблемой. В связи с этим исследование жилого пространства, рассматриваемого как инструмент партийной идеологии, показывает, насколько сложно проходило приспособление жителей к новой «культурной» жизни.

Ключевые слова: быт, жилье, соцгород, Уралмаш, первые пятилетки.

The 15th of July, 1933, the Ural Heavy Machine Building Plant (UZTM), better known as Uralmash, was officially opened near to Sverdlovsk (today Ekaterinburg). The main newspaper of Uralmash, *Za Ural'skij Blyuming* (*ZUB*), devoted his whole edition to celebrate the event as one of the greatest achievements of the first five-year plan. The first pages depicted the plant, but the last page was put aside to introduce the workers' neighbourhood built next to the factory, and argue that it was no longer a mere settlement (*posyolok*) but a "socialist city" (*sotsialisticheskij gorod* or *sotsgorod*). The new town was indeed supposed to own all communal services and facilities necessary to the workers and their families, such as canteens, hospitals, schools and clubs, and enable a healthier and more civilized way of life [Za Ural'skij blyuming, 1933, July 15].

In which extent is it possible to know how inhabitants experienced life in the *sotsgorod* of Uralmash through this utopian picture? Answer this question implies to know what was a *sotsgorod* about. The concept of *sotsgorod* appears to be a key urban project of the USSR developed at the end of the 1920's. A large number of theoretical debates took place to work

out a type of settlement capable of creating a new way of life and laying the groundwork for a socialist civilization. Most of these urban theories remained on paper, as the well-known linear city imagined by Nikolaj A. Milyutin. The concrete realisation of socialist cities was inextricably linked with the first five-year plan and the construction of huge industrial complexes through the USSR. Neighbourhoods conceived to house workers next to new giant factories were often called socialist cities. They were built *ex nihilo*, out of old urban centres, and so were "enclaves" [Crawford, p. 16], insular towns where perfect conditions to experience new architecture and urban planning were gathered. *Sotsgorod* thus formed an original "socio-spatial system" [Bocharnikova, Harris, p. 4], with communal housing, facilities and services. The aim was to create what Stephen Kotkin called a "new society", or "Stalinist civilization" in his fundamental study of Magnitogorsk [Kotkin, Magnetic Mountain, p. 2], that is to say collective relationships between individuals, new ways or thinking and behaving.

To transform "*byt*", or everyday life, was one of the momentous ambitions of the Soviet regime: private life was an ideological target [Crowley], and planned cities as *sotsgorods* were convenient tools of ideological intervention and control over population. However, it is impossible to study these topics only with blueprints or official discourse made during the Stalinist era. A microscale approach is actually necessary. In this way, the history of everyday life has contributed to an important historiographical renewal these last two decades. It disproves the totalitarian historiography of the USSR develop during the Cold War, stressing capacities of reaction, adaptation or resistance of indivuduals facing the political, economic and social environment of Stalinism [Zakharova, p. 307; Kiaer, Naiman]. This approach will be followed here, focusing on the housing issue in the *sotsgorod* of Uralmash: the study of housing and domestic space gives access to the tiniest aspects of inhabitants' life, their intimacy, their living strategies and practices, and enables to know how they experienced the socialist city.

The socialist city project of Uralmash confronted by the first five-year plan

The socialist city of UZTM was planned since the beginning of the project, launched by a decree of Council of Labor and Defense of June 3, 1927. The Gipromez (*Gosudarstvennyj institut po proektirovaniyu metallurgicheskih zavodov*) first gave a project proposal for both plant and workers' settlement. In its 1928 report, it scheduled a population of around 11 000 people, including workers' families, but assessed that part of them would live in Sverdlovsk or by their own means [Ural′sky mashinostroitel′nyj zavod v Sverdlovske (proekt), p. 224]. These expectations were blown up by the launch of the first five-year plan in 1928. The Gipromez's project was

thought for a plant capacity of 18 000 tons of output per year. But with the exponential goals of the first five-year plan, the output was fixed at 100 000 tons per year in July 1931, and 200 000 per year in 1932, which required 23 000 workers in the plant [Ural′sky zavod tyazhelogo mashinostroeniya, p. 10]. Consequently, the number of people in the construction site dramatically increased: from a few workers in 1928 at the beginning, to 15 000 in summer of 1931, no counting their families [Unpelev]! This widely exceeded the Gipromez's expectations. What resulted of unceasing and erratic changes of plans and politics was urgency and chaos in the construction site [Iltchenko, p. 57].

Overtaken by the uncompromising politics of the first five-year plan, the administration of UZTM took measures to increase house building in the future *sotsgorod*. From 1930 onwards began massive construction of prefabricated wooden buildings to house the flow of workers arriving in Uralmash [Ageev, Bril']. In 1932, a "socialist competition" was launched to build 82 000 m² of living space (*zhilaya ploshchad'*) in prefabricated houses [Unpelev, p. 117]. But these were insufficient attempts: as other giant industrial projects of the first five-year plan, Uralmash suffered from recurrent lack of building materials, such as steel or concrete, and workforce, of which the party cell responsible for housing construction often complained [ЦДООСО, f. 1020, op. 1, d. 53]. The plant building was a priority with the result that the socialist city and workers' housing remained marginal goals in Uralmash, as everywhere [Kotkin, The Search for the socialist City].

At the end of the construction, in 1933, the new *sotsgorod* consisted of 43 brick houses, 49 log houses, 103 prefabricated houses and 149 sheds, for almost 200 000 m² total living space, in which the sheds represented alone 73 000 m² [Ot Uralmashstroya k Uralmashzavodu, p. 12–13]. During the spring of 1933, a government commission was charged to control the construction site and give an advice about the imminent launch of the plant. The commission ended its work on May 26, 1933, and produced a report, in which a part was dedicated to the construction of the socialist city. The commission generally regarded the *sotsgorod* of Uralmash as unfinished, since all planned facilities weren't ready to work, and pointed out the serious lack of living space: more than 70 000 people lived in Uralsmah during the commission inspection, but 60 000 m² of living space were missing to correctly house everybody. Moreover, lots of construction faults were noticed, such as cracks or wall collapses, and the commission deplored the absence of canalisations and the global health conditions of the settlement [ГА РФ, f. R5446, op. 14, d. 136b]. The general picture of the socialist city the government commission provided finally shows how the initial projects were undermined, confronted by the maximalist context of the first-five-year plan, and gave birth to a failed utopia.

Rationing and evicting: housing politics in the socialist city

In its report, the government commission brought to light that an important number of workers still lived in sheds, or even in *zemlyanki*, sketchy wooden houses built by workers near to the plant. The writer Mihail Prishvin, who went at Uralmash at the beginning of 1931, gave a frightened picture of the construction site, in particular due to the dreadful living conditions of workers in *zemlyanki* [Prishvin, p. 326]. This was the result of a critical housing crisis in Uralmash. As a result, almost all apartments were communal, and rooms were shared between families. Crowding in houses was the rule. In 1931, according to Viktor Anfimov, who was an engineer in the construction site and later wrote his memoirs, no less than 400 families lived in 8 prefabricated houses with 12 apartments each in the Molotov street [Ageev, Bril']! In sheds the situation was even worst: inhabitants had to cram into dormitories, without intimacy, families used curtains to get their own space. Toilet was outside [Kotkin, The Search for the socialist City; Ageev, Bril']. Some workers preferred to live in *zemlyanki* or in Sverdlovsk. At the end of 1932, there were 4 m² per person in sheds, and 4,7 m² per person in permanent houses of the socialist city [Unpelev], far less than the norm of 8 m² per person which was fixed in the 1928 Gipromez's project.

Not only a house was hard to find, but the critical lack of living space led the administration of UZTM and local heads of Party to take strict measures of control over workers' housing. A complex sharing system of apartments, rooms or beds in hostels and sheds was set up, producing a strong hierarchy between workers. Actually, a spatial hierarchy was sketched since the beginning of the *sotsgorod* project, in the Gipromez's blueprints of 1928. The city was shared into three zones: the very centre, near to plants administration buildings, was the "stone buildings zone"; an intermediate zone was designed for the "wooden buildings"; the third and last zone, called "outskirts zone", covered the rest of the site, with unspecified types of *buildings* [Ural′sky zavod tyazhelogo mashinostroeniya, p. 119]. It is however clear that here were located part of the prefabricated houses, and the totality of sheds and *zemlianki*, which constituted altogether what was called the "workers' settlement" (*rabochij posyolok*) which housed the under-qualified builders (*chernorabochie*) during the construction. The first and twice zones were kept for engineers and qualified workers. This "class politics" [Ageev, Bril', p. 67] concerning the access to housing was expressly heartened. In a Party regional cell meeting dated from December 8, 1932, participants decided to evict unqualified workers from brick and wooden houses of the centre and rehouse them in prefabricated buildings or sheds. A special control commission was established to manage this issue [ГАСО, f. R262, op. 2, d. 297]. To get access to the very *sostgorod* housing thus remained a privilege.

Apart from hierarchized sharing of housing, the Party cells and the plant's administration didn't allow some people to live in *sotsgorod* or even in the "workers' settlement". Measures of eviction were taken against various categories of population: in January, 1933, the Party cell in charge of housing question in UZTM urged houses managers to evict from apartments all "foreign elements and unlinked to the factory" [ЦДООСО, f. 1020, op. 1, d. 131]. This politics also wrestled with offenders or "shirkers" who badly worked in the construction site. An article of *ZUB* from February 1933, denounced a worker named Prokopov as a shirker, pointed out the fact that he spent a whole day drinking instead of working. For this reason, Prokopov should be fired and evicted from his apartment [Za Ural'skij blyuming, 1933. February 2]. Eviction out of the *sostgorod* of Uralsmash reveals how housing was used as a political tool: all types of deviancies could by paid by the loss of house. Eviction can thus be regarded as a prophylactic means to keep the model city safe from all moral or ideological contamination.

A new way of life? Living conditions in the sostgorod houses

"New relations have been forged between people – a socialist city has been built, followed by a new, socialist way of life," M. Kogan wrote in 1934 [Kogan, p. 8]. To found a new, socialist civilization was indeed at the heart of the *sotsgorod* project, and a constant concern of the Party. The housing conditions were a key issue of ideological intervention, as the reform of "*byt*" required to enter the people's privacy. Party members had to lead a political work into sheds and houses, and "mass education" took place in articles of local newspapers. An article of *ZUB* dated from February 9, 1933 gave the model of the perfect worker to be followed: it pictured the comrade Nikonov, an "exemplary worker" who always cleaned up his room, which was the best arranged of his shed. The article added that he often went to cinema and circus [Za Ural'skij blyuming]. He epitomized the new Soviet man to be promoted, a hard-working, cultured and of course communist worker [Kotkin, The Search for the socialist City].

However, this promoted picture didn't match with the everyday reality. The people who lived in Uralmash were often regarded as backward, for lots of them were peasants enlisted to build the plant. During his journey at Uralmash, Prishvin noticed that people who lived in *zemlyanki* were peasants, seasonal workers in the construction site who tried to run away collectivisation [Prishvin, p. 326]. Peasants behaviours were blamed for representing the exact opposite of the new, urban and "civilized" society the regime wanted to find. On March 9, 1933, *ZUB* devoted an article to some "backward" inhabitants. Among them was Myagkih,

a female manager of a canteen whose apartment was depicted as a "country pigsty", since she there cut wood and never cleaned her domestic space. Another article laid out the instance of Sajlov, Sadovoj and Chistyakov, who didn't wash and slept in their dirty clothes [Za Ural'skij blyuming, 1933, March 2]. In both cases, the lack of "mass education" was pointed out as the cause of these troubles, which proves that everyday behaviours were seen as ideological issues.

Of course, this alleged backwardness was closely linked to concrete housing conditions: inhabitants often had no choice but to behave in a "uncultured" way. The newspaper *Komsomol'skaya Pravda* devoted special issues to UZTM in the spring of 1933, entitled "40 days in Ural" [ГА РФ, f. 5546, op. 14, d. 136a]. A section called "workers' letters" reported complaints of inhabitants due to outrageous housing conditions. On March 17, 1933, a mechanic called Lizyaev wrote that he couldn't wash because there was neither water, nor heating in his apartment. The same day, another article told the story of Pavlyushnev, who lived with his wife and their two children in a 10 m² unfurnished room. Promiscuity in overcrowded houses moreover produced neighbourhood disputes. In *ZUB*, inhabitants of the shed No. 32 wrote an article to cancel Suraev, who "became debauched", beat his children and threatened his neighbours to get their ration coupons. They consequently asked for his eviction out of the shed [Za Ural'skij blyuming, 1933, March 21]. Such conflicts were very current in overcrowded sheds, where often existed "comrades' courts" in order to settle these everyday problems [Kotkin, The Search for the socialist City]. All these instances eventually bring into light how difficult to get was the new Soviet man project that *sotsgorod* was supposed to bring, despite the new, promoted urban culture.

The socialist city project was an endeavour to bring utopia into everyday life [Crowley], or, to use Kotkin's words, a "search for socialism", which remained to be concretely implemented after the 1917 revolution [Kotkin, The Search for the socialist City, p. 232]. But as seen with the case of UZTM, projects and blueprints had to challenge with the unpredictable politics of the first five-year plan, and the socialist city was left in a deep state of crisis. The study of housing conditions shows nevertheless that an original social and political model emerged from chaos, by rationing and controlling living spaces, even if forced communal housing didn't lead to the scheduled socialist civilization.

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