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Young People Take Back Soviet 'Kommunalkas'

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During the Soviet era, it wasn't uncommon for people in big cities to share a single apartment with up to 20 other people — often sharing just one bathroom and kitchen. Half a century later, with rents in central Moscow and St. Petersburg soaring, some people still live in these kommunalka apartments out of necessity. We took a look at everyday life inside one of them.



These apartments can house up to 20 people, and many of them haven't been renovated in years.

Sergey, 24, removes a plate caked in sausage grease from an overflowing sink before he starts brushing his teeth. Bugs skitter over the forks and spoons left in the bottom. He rinses his well-used toothbrush and shoves it in the back pocket of his shorts.

There is no washbasin in this apartment — only one steel sink.

It is used by 17 roommates for washing dishes, brushing teeth, cleaning shoes and even for filling a spray bottle to ward off bed bugs.

“Call it whatever you want,” says Sergey. “Some people call it a *kommunalka*, others co-living, even a squat. No wait, not a squat — nobody pays for a squat.”

These *kommunalka* apartments are made up of a long corridor lined with lots of small, separate bedrooms and one kitchen and bathroom, where dozens of families lived together.

They were first built under the tsars, then used by the Soviets to prevent a housing crisis.

The classic *kommunalka* cliche, borne from archive footage and in the collective memory, is a long line for a single shower that was often used by up to 20 people.

Half a century later, with rents in central Moscow and St. Petersburg soaring, some people still live in a kommunalka out of necessity.

There’s still a queue for the shower, and the electrics don’t look like they’ve been upgraded since Soviet times.

But factory workers’ families have been replaced by immigrants or young, artsy people. Basically anyone with a low salary who has just moved to the big city. These *kommunalki* are paradises for slum landlords.

“I sleep in the corridor,” says Diana, 21.

Her single mattress is laid out on a makeshift wooden platform suspended from the ceiling. If she removes her blankets she can see people walking underneath her through the cracks in the wood.

“Every night I wake up when somebody comes home late and starts to talk loudly. […] But that’s okay, I’m young and I can survive on three hours sleep a night.”

For this nine-square-meter room without windows, Diana pays 15,500 rubles ($250) per month.

The flatmates in this apartment come from the Caucasus, Siberia, St. Petersburg and Kazakhstan. Only one of them was born in Moscow.

This evening, Karina has just returned from her hometown of Pyatigorsk in the Caucasus Mountains with heaps of the traditional flatbread called lavash.

She has no family or roots in Moscow. The only thing keeping her here is her job as a cosmetologist.

“In small cities, salaries are very low, and there is basically no future there. No future.”

Nibbling on another piece of lavash, she says she misses the mountains of her homeland.

“I miss my family, but when there are people around you, you never feel alone […] Here I feel like we are one big family.”

Sitting on the windowsill in his pajamas, Sergey enjoys one of his last cups of tea in the kommunalka.

After 10 months here, he is moving to France.

“Of course I will miss the people here, I will miss friends [...] When you move in here you understand quickly that you’re going to be living with a lot of people, that’s why the rent is so low. But there’s always somebody to talk to!”

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