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Everyday Revolution: The Making of the Soviet Urban Communes¹

Andy Willimott

In October 1918, just shy of one year since the Bolsheviks seized power in the name of the proletariat, the Soviet press stumbled across one of the first self-proclaimed “domestic communes” of the new revolutionary state. This was a cohabiting alliance of young activists and workers who had taken up residence in one of the apartment blocks near Preobrazhenskaia Gate in Moscow. Despite its poor conditions and a lack of running water, this small band of revolutionary enthusiasts sought to turn their humble residence into a bastion of socialism. They established a system of comradely cooperation and mutual regulation - arrangements expressly designed to facilitate and monitor the sharing of resources, material, income, and, most important of all, modern socialist ideals. Inhabitants were expected to pick clothing and even underwear from a common pool, subsidize group costs and activities, live by a collective code governing behavior and habit, and instil socialism within one another and in the world around them. This was a construct of practical and ideological necessity. It provided accommodation and support during a period of intense political and social upheaval, but it also attempted to implement key revolutionary visions in an immediate and concrete form. “With the rise of the working class,” it was optimistically reported that “such groups would help to reclaim the domestic and urban landscape from the ‘bourgeois yoke.’”² This commune was eagerly (if

¹ The research for this chapter was originally funded by a UK Arts & Humanities Research Council Studentship; it has come to fruition with the support of a Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowship. Constructive criticism was provided by: Peter Waldron, Simon Dixon, Adele Lindenmeyr, Matthias Neumann, Jonathan Waterlow, and Jennifer Davey, as well as the readers and board of *Russia's Great War and Revolution* series.

² “Po kvartiram rabochikh,” *Kommunar* 9 October, 1918, 3. *Kommunar* was a daily newspaper published in Moscow under the auspices of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist

disproportionately) cited as an example of the socialist revolution taking root in Russia. Far from an isolated or eccentric development, however, the same article noted that similar units of eight to ten people living in this manner made the most of the limited accommodation available and released social life from the “oppression of the old order.”³

In this early revolutionary environment, as old tenements were being claimed by enthusiasts and the new government issued decrees sanctioning resettlement rights, the first domestic communes, as another report put it, started to “sprout like mushrooms.”⁴ At first, local soviets sought to lead the reclamation of housing space on behalf of the proletariat, acting directly on Bolshevik Party imperatives, but they soon looked to local bodies and revolutionary organisations for support. The process of eviction and resettlement passed into the hands of small workers’ organisations, housing commissions, and even factory committees. In some cases revolutionary authorities expressed concern over the zealous potential of these organisations. At the same time, while soldiers, workers, and activists struggled to find suitable residential arrangements, a number of self-styled “communes” and “communards” declared their intention to rectify the “housing problem” and the inadequacies of their surroundings.⁵

Party (Bolsheviks). It was in print from October 1918 to June 1919. The vast majority of its pages were concerned with collective farming but included numerous articles on worker communes and urban, collective housing. The stories covered under this title were subsequently added to the remit of *Pravda* and *Bednota*. See: *Rossiiski gosudarstvennyu sotsial’no-politicheskii arkhiv* (RGASPI) f. M.1 (Komsomol Presidium), op. 3, d. 1, ll. 4-4ob.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Pereselenie v burzhuaznye doma,” *Kommunar*, 17 October, 1918, 2.

⁵ I. Gromov, “Zhilishchnaia nerazberikha,” *Kommunar*, 1 November, 1918, 3.

Cohabitational communes sprang up across Petrograd and Moscow, often united around both a common fund (*obshchii kotel*), into which members placed a share or all of their income, and a founding charter (*ustav*), which regulated domestic rules and collective principles. Among the early, scattered examples of domestic association, both form and practice varied, but as the challenges of civil war unfolded most seemed ready to equate revolutionary advance with the political, social, and cultural reform promised under the Communist Party. In line with the dominant social tenets of revolutionary discourse, many focused their resources and time on the development of equal relations, collective dining, and new cultural activities associated with modern socialist habit.⁶ The dormitories and accommodation attached to the Soviet institutes of higher education witnessed the formation of a number of student communes run in this manner.⁷ Some went on to replicate the “red corners” and structures of Soviet workers’ clubs, dedicating space to reading, studying, and other enlightening activities. Others took the form of worker-communes, appropriating the practices of the Russian *arteli* (pre-revolutionary labor associations) by living together and selling their efforts collectively for mutual security.⁸ Here, too, the ideological pertinence of collective living and new cultural habits was clearly evident and frequently expressed in overtly revolutionary terms.⁹

By 1919, some revolutionary commentators were urging the Communist Youth League (Komsomol) to help its members form “exemplary communes” that would lead this assertively

⁶ “Uluchshenie byta chernorabochikh,” *Kommunar*, 22 November, 1918, 3.

⁷ V. S. Izmozik and N.B. Leбина, *Peterburg sovetskii: “novyi chelovek” v starom prostranstve, 1920-1930-e gody* (St. Petersburg: Kruga, 2010), 143; N. A. Filimonov, *Po novomu ruslu* (Leningrad: Lenizdat’, 1967), 12.

⁸ “Rabochie i kommuny,” *Kommunar*, 24 December 1918, 3; “Gorodskie kommuny,” *Kommunar*, 27 December, 1918, 3.

⁹ *Ibid.*

collectivist development and provide a space for its members to interact with workers.¹⁰ The central Komsomol leadership did not act upon these suggestions directly, but the domestic, urban commune did become a preserve of Komsomol activists and those seeking admission to party organs. It also attracted the interest the press, particularly the youth press. Here we find the central tension of the early commune movement: this phenomenon was not part of an official initiative, yet it often proved attractive to those that did operate within the official apparatus of state. In this sense, the urban communes flirted with the political infrastructure of the Revolution. At the start of 1918 a small faction of the Socialist League of Young Workers (SSRM) - the body that eventually evolved into the Komsomol - founded a short-lived commune in an apartment on Dvorianskaia Street, Petrograd, with the express aim of providing a living example of socialism to young workers in the city.¹¹ In the years to come, a number of local Komsomol representatives encouraged youths to join existing communes or establish their own groups to help press the revolutionary agenda. At the Moscow Automobile Society (AMO) plant, for instance, “a certain Rudakov,” it was reported, “suggested that all Komsomol members form a commune.”¹² Similarly, at the Red Proletariat (*Krasnyi proletarii*) plant in Moscow, one young Komsomol member by the name of Anikeev helped to establish a commune that managed to attract “strong support from the factory committee and party cell.”¹³ But actions like these remained unsanctioned by the higher echelons, occasionally opening local officials,

¹⁰ [Aktivnyi rabotnik] “Kommuny molodezhi,” *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 3-4, 16 March (1919): 10-11.

¹¹ G. Driazgov, “Anarkhistskaia kommuna,” *Leninskoe pokolenie*, ed. P. F. Kudelli (Leningrad, 1926). First cited by: Isabel A. Tirado, *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League, Petrograd 1917-1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 41.

¹² E. Milich, “Raspad,” *Sotsialisticheskii Vestnik*, no. 5-6, 16 February (1923): 9.

¹³ *Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (GARF) f. 7952, (Stenogram of Komsomol cell based at Red Proletariat factory) op. 3, d. 98, l. 7-ob. I thank Simon Pirani for bringing this and the above source to my attention.

including Rudakov, to criticism and reprimand.¹⁴ At a time when both the Komsomol and the party were concerned about their ability to stimulate the mass participation necessary for the construction of communism in Russia, the urban communes were not an unwelcome development, but *de facto* inclusion of these groups within official operations was sometimes seen as a step too far.

Nevertheless, in many cases, Komsomol representatives and members continued to view the urban communes as a means of escaping the poor living conditions left in the wake of war and revolution. It was thought that they could provide the formative ideological environment necessary for the first generation of communists. As proclaimed the vocal Komsomol delegate, Vladimir Dunaevskii, these communes seemed to offer a precursor to the erosion of the old family and its bourgeois habits.¹⁵ For figures such as Dunaevskii, who was also a leading exponent of the more contentious notion of youth soviets and youth sections in the trade unions, the formation of spontaneous, urban communes bore the promise of “new social patterns.”¹⁶ The Third Congress of the Komsomol formally dismissed the idea of youth soviets and youth sections in October 1920. Each was deemed a factious proposition, detrimental to the Komsomol’s wider political duties.¹⁷ But the communes survived largely because they stoked significantly less controversy and criticism. They offered a form of agitational engagement and revolutionary participation that did not directly challenge the institution's authority or newly established political structures. Emerging from this period of possibility, therefore, the communes and communards that had formed were able to present themselves as the cadre of the domestic agitational front, attempting to take the lead on issues that officials were still debating.

¹⁴ E. Milich, “Raspad,” no. 5-6, 16 February (1923): 9.

¹⁵ Vl. Dunaevskii, “Oktiabr’ i trud rabochei molodezhi,” *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 15, 7 November (1919): 2-5

¹⁶ See: Tirado, *Young Guard!*, 151-155.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Situated between official ideology, activist interpretation, and the urban public, these communes did not fall under the purview of any single state institution. As a result, no central study or numerical assessment was conducted until the end of the 1920s, when the Komsomol noted that the urban communes had developed into a “network of activism” with up to fifty thousand participants.¹⁸ During the early months and years immediately following October, the nascent structures of this “network” remained modest - a range of press reports suggest a number limited to a few hundred across Petrograd and Moscow. Nevertheless, the formation of the urban commune phenomenon during these years speaks to a number of issues of broader significance. The urban communes show how the rank-and-file could operate in the margins of state apparatus. Furthermore, they shed light on the interaction between activist citizens and revolutionary discourse understood here as a popular response to revolution and as the field of ideas that could be called upon to drive or construe revolution.¹⁹ While dealing with a revolution that clearly gave birth to a centralized regime employing violent and authoritarian methods of government, this chapter reveals a degree of independent appropriation and an indeterminacy that has been underrepresented within the historiography of the early Soviet state and its ideological formation. It shows that where there was no clear or absolute modality to revolutionary developments, the voice of activism could be heard. This is not to suggest that such formations represent the driving force of the wider revolutionary project. Rather, by bringing the urban communes into sharp focus, this chapter offers a new social history based on popular interactions with state imperatives. Ultimately, the story of the urban

¹⁸ RGASPI, f. M.1 (Approved Directives from Secretariat of the Komsomol, June 1930), op. 4, d. 45, ll. 33-34.

¹⁹ Cf. Steven Best and Douglas Keller, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Peter Schöttler, “Historians and Discourse Analysis,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 27 (1989): 37-65.

communes and communards enhances our understanding of how revolutionary visions were constructed within society.²⁰

Identifying with Revolution

The October Revolution of 1917 marked the birth of the first avowedly socialist state in history. As the earliest posters, fliers, decrees, and declarations appeared promising radical change, young idealists, including the urban communards, set about putting into practice their own conceptions of what it meant to be part of this brave new world. These activists and enthusiasts tried to turn theory into practice, imbricating the promise of collectivist visions and revolutionary messages within their everyday lives and popular experience. As they interpreted and implemented revolutionary ideals, they increasingly saw themselves as participants in the construction of a new state. Their practice and lifestyle exhibited a sense of revolutionary citizenship, which, as Isabel Tirado has shown in relation to the activities of the rank-and-file, could send “ripples” throughout local and national branches of the Soviet system.²¹ Indeed, by mid-1919 even the main press organ of the Bolshevik party, *Pravda*, was citing the urban communes as an ideologically pertinent example of “mutual collective agreement” and rational domestic management.²²

Only recently, however, have the daily “interpretation” and “performance” of revolution come in for closer inspection from historians. Traditionally, studies that stress the totalitarian and coercive

²⁰ Here “society” is not understood in the normative sense or as a homogenous whole, but as a space of social interaction and communication that involved people who were not directly acting on behalf of the state apparatus. See: Malte Rolf, *Das sowjetische Massenfest* (Hamburg: Hamburger Editions, 2006), 26-29.

²¹ Isabel A. Tirado, “The Komsomol’s Village Vanguard: Youth and Politics in the NEP Countryside,” *The Russian Review* 72 (July, 2013): 427-46, 429.

²² “Raboचाia zhizn’,” *Pravda*, 12 August 1919: 4.

nature of the Soviet state have left little room for popular identification with revolutionary goals or the potential of human action in the face of a centralized regime. In this context, Soviet socialism has been presented as both a “lie” and “fraud” conducted against a wholly passive or sleeping people.²³ In opposition to these readings, a number of revisionist social histories published predominantly between the 1960s and 1990s sought to detail incidences of support and dissent within the Soviet population, making room for popular agency. But a disconnect between the “above” and “below,” as well as a disproportionate focus on cases of noncompliance, it has been suggested, continued to obstruct a fuller view of revolutionary experience.²⁴ Extending critically on past studies, current intellectual trends have encouraged an understanding that recognizes and better accounts for the complexities of revolutionary appropriation and conditioning. In particular, Stephen Kotkin’s influential study into the different forms of expression and self-expression among the inhabitants of the industrial city of Magnitogorsk during the 1930s posited that, whether through genuine belief or through careerism, most citizens had mastered the art of “speaking Bolshevik.” By conforming to the

²³ Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917-1991* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 270; Jeffrey Brooks, “Socialist Realism in Pravda: Read All about It!”, *Slavic Review*, 53, no. 4 (1994): 978. Also see Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1990).

²⁴ For a survey of this literature, see *The Resistance Debate in Russian and Soviet History*, ed. Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Marshall Poe, *Kritika Historical Studies* 1 (Bloomington: Slavica Publishers, 2003), esp. Lynne Viola, “Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s: Soliloquy of a Devil’s Advocate”, 69-102. On the “detached” image of the subject in these histories, see Jochen Hellbeck, “Speaking Out: Languages of Affirmation and Dissent in Stalinist Russia,” 103-37.

accepted language, customs, and identity prescribed by the party, Kotkin argued, individuals empowered themselves and, crucially, the ruling system.²⁵

Focusing on the subjectivity of the Soviet population, one developing school of thought has since used diaries, autobiographies, and memoirs - the writing of which was encouraged by the Soviet educational curriculum and the party admission process - in an attempt to show how citizens formed a view of both themselves and the wider world through the medium of “official discourse.”²⁶ Combined with Kotkin’s work, these studies have advanced our understanding of how state-sponsored rhetoric could shape habit and practice, helping to form new social and political structures across the opening decades of the Soviet Union. The “official discourse” of Bolshevik ideology, some scholars have suggested, presented an eschatological understanding of the world that encouraged individuals, especially former non-Bolshevik socialists, to narrate their life and their past as a journey

²⁵ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 222-23. The author cites his specific sources of influence on pp. 22-23: Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (2nd ed.); The Howison Lectures Berkeley, 20 October 1980. He also notes the essays and analysis provided in *Power-Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Colin Gordon, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1980); *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow, ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

²⁶ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006); Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies: Initiating the Bolshevik Self* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2011).

of redemption, concluding with admittance to the Party.²⁷ Looking at the techniques by which people initiated this “self-fashioning” in line with Bolshevism during the 1920s, Igal Halfin has argued that party cells and representatives attached themselves to student debating circles to help determine the topics and results of discussion.²⁸ Again, the importance of revolutionary discourse and the individual’s exposure to Bolshevik thinking is clearly demonstrated.

The seeds of these practices were certainly sown during the opening years of the Revolution, as the Bolsheviks sought to secure political power and limit the threat of rival socialist parties. Among other things, they sought to control the language of revolution, curtailing non-Bolshevik press organs to ensure the spread of a unified and ideologically acceptable narrative. Party cells and official representatives were also placed within local organizations in order to monitor and mould the Revolution on the ground. However, while accepting that language management played an important part in the formation of the Soviet state, we must be careful to avoid linguistic determinism. Equally so, party-approved identities should not blind us to those individuals and groups that partook in revolution in a manner other than that determined by state policy.²⁹ When it comes to assessing the subjectivity of the Soviet people, selected diarists are not necessarily an accurate reflection of broader social experiences. In their quest to join the party, for instance, many autobiographers wrote texts to secure the favor of local authorities. In other words, these accounts were often written *to power*.

²⁷ Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light. Class, Consciousness and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 1-38.

²⁸ Igal Halfin, *Stalinist Confessions. Messianism and Terror at the Leningrad Communist University* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009) and I. Halfin, *Intimate Enemies. Demonizing the Bolshevik Opposition, 1918-1928* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).

²⁹ Cf. Steve A. Smith, *Revolution and the People in Russia and China. A Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 234-35.

Moreover, to suggest that effective propaganda methods alone explain the development of revolution neglects the full dynamism of events. It presents a one-dimensional view that renders any/all expression as the implementation of power, denies the existence of spaces outside the official party apparatus, and assumes that the Soviet citizen was an entirely malleable entity.

It is important that we also explore spaces, practices, individuals, and groups operating outside the apparatus of state. This shows how official discourse could be both adopted and, at the same time, “colonized” in imaginative, stubborn, and even idiosyncratic ways.³⁰ Revolutionary ideas and causes can thus be seen to align with other norms and experiences within society. If we accept that official power was not omnipresent, we must acknowledge the variety of circumstances and encounters through which revolution was accommodated and developed, as well as how these interactions fed back into official structures over time. This is especially true for the period with which this volume is concerned, the formative years of the revolutionary project. While it has been argued that state-driven agitation campaigns during these years elicited social support and convinced its perpetrators of the validity of their messages, it should be remembered that the spread of revolution was also aided by the fact that mobilized forces, especially young communists, were permitted to take initiative at ground level.³¹ The communes and communards were a prime example of this “informal” or “unofficial” initiative. As evidenced in their activities, the communards embraced many Bolshevik visions, but they did not kowtow to the methods of state authorities. They had a tendency to extend upon the political campaigns of the Komsomol and party, even calling for the removal of politically unsympathetic teaching personnel within Soviet educational facilities as early as 1918-1919.³²

³⁰ Rolf, *Das sowjetische Massenfest*, 28-29.

³¹ Cf. Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 5-7, 84-85.

³² N. A. Filimonov, *Po novomu ruslu, vospominaniia* (Leningrad: Lenizdat', 1967), 9-12.

Subsequent commune groups extended upon the operations of university authorities and local cells by standing as exemplary practitioners of revolution, sponsoring fellow students and agitation missions, confronting non-socialist teaching staff, and helping to establish collective dining halls for all students.³³ Others tried to implement greater collective practices within industry and society at large. At a time when state resources were focused elsewhere, the communards tried to take responsibility for the political, cultural, and working environments in which they were situated; challenging official organs to act on the issues they cared about and affecting the manner by which the Revolution extended across state, society, and institution. Their practices were not accommodated in full, but, in some cases, they did help to conceive the manner by which socialist visions and state imperatives came into being.

Interpreting revolution

The urban communes and communards constructed their world through the revolutionary trends and prevalent themes of the new Soviet state. Utilizing the French term “commune” (*kommuna*), as opposed to the Russian term *mir* or *obshchina*, meaning traditional community or peasant commune, the activists who formed these groups of collective cohabitation and revolutionary living were, in part, a response to the new Soviet state’s active glorification of the Paris Commune of 1871. After all, this was an insurrectionary event that lived on in the memory of many revolutionaries and was used by the Bolsheviks to legitimize their actions both before and after October 1917. Throughout 1915 and 1916 Lenin insisted that the Paris Commune had taught the world that the only way to escape the spectre of imperialist war was through civil war.³⁴ Following the abdication of

³³ “Kommuna,” *Pedvuzovets*, no. 3-4, (1931), 4.

³⁴ Marian Sawyer, “The Soviet Image of the Commune: Lenin and beyond” in *Images of the Commune. Images de la Commune*, James A. Leith, ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978), 245-263.

Nicholas II in March 1917, Lenin refused to work with the Provisional Government, again summoning the example of 1871 when the communards of Paris did not work with bourgeois institutions but instead sought to replace them with their own body of proletarian democracy. *State and Revolution*, Lenin's boldest and most utopian text, declared that, in "the [1871] Commune is the form 'at last discovered' by ... [which] the bourgeois state machine ... can and must be *replaced*."³⁵ Armed with this example from Europe (carrying special connotation due to the likewise imported theories of Marxism and Socialism) the Bolsheviks set about constructing a workers' state. Even the Bolshevik call for "All Power to the Soviets" was linked to the "democratic" structure of the Commune, providing local representatives for the working class.

After the seizure of power in October, however, the realities of governing and civil war highlighted the need to retain old bureaucratic and institutional elements. The systemic overhaul advocated in *State and Revolution* proved wholly infeasible. The last attempt to implement an ambitious citywide commune structure akin to 1871 came in the form of the Petrograd Consumer Commune (*Petrokommuna*), which was established to tackle the mounting food crisis of 1918-1919. For a short period the *Petrokommuna*, with 8 trains, 40 carriages, and over 100 canteens and tearooms, was "the largest economic organisation run on communist principles" in Soviet Russia.³⁶ Despite this

³⁵ V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, trans. Robert Service (London: Penguin, 1992), 50-51. *The Civil War in France*, a pamphlet written by Karl Marx shortly after the collapse of the Paris Commune, was widely circulated in Russia from 1905. It famously eulogized this struggle as "the first dictatorship of the proletariat." Lewis S. Feuer, ed. *Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 389-429.

³⁶ [Anonymous pamphlet], *Peterburg, den' mirovogo internatsionala 19 iulia 1920 g.* (Petrograd, 1920). Also see: A. E. Badaev, *Desiat' let bor'by i stroitel'stva: Provol'stv.-kooperativ. rabota v Leningrade, 1917-1927* (Leningrad, 1927); M. N. Potekhin, *Petrogradskaia trudovaia kommuna 1918-1919* (Leningrad: Izd-vo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1980); Martin McAuley, "Bread

grand endeavour, the importance of 1871 to the Soviet leadership rapidly shifted from its supposed example of good governance to its value as an inspirational tale of working class heroism. In this form, the legend of 1871 became a feature of celebration on the Red Calendar and an entrenched topic of discussion in Soviet publications.³⁷ Increasingly, the word “*kommuna*” became a signifier of socialist revolutionary aspirations. It was associated with the values of workers’ control, direct democracy, institutional and social reformation, as well as collectivism and collective action.

These were the principles through which the activists of the urban communes imagined themselves. As surviving accounts reveal, often in the form of letters and reflections written to the Soviet youth press, many communards tried to implement a system of management that put all motions to the collective vote. Everything, from daily practical contingencies, to founding rules and regulations, underwent group scrutiny.³⁸ The communes attempted to practice an idealized and uncompromised vision of democracy commonly associated with the Paris Commune, socialism, and early Soviet claims of representation. Furthermore, as the accounts of a later commune reveal, some

without the Bourgeoisie,” *In Party, State, And Society In The Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History*, eds. Diane P. Koenker, William G. Rosenberg, and Ronald G. Suny (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 158-179, 159; A. Iu. Davydov, *Kooperatory sovetskogo goroda v gody NEPa. Mezhdru ‘Voennym kommunizom’ i sotsialisticheskoi rekonstruktsiei* (St. Petersburg: Aleteiia, 2011), 51-60.

³⁷ See: N. M. Lukin, *Parizhskaia Kommuna 1871g.* (Moscow, 1922); A. A. Slutskii, *Parizhskaia Kommuna 1871 goda* (Moscow, 1925); A. I. Molok, *Parizhskaia Kommuna i krest’ianstvo* (Moscow, 1925); A. I. Molok, *Parizhskaia Kommuna 1871g.* (Leningrad, 1927); P. M. Kerzhenstev, *Istoriia Parizhskoi Kommuny* (Moscow, 1959); I. S. Galkin, *I Internatsional. Parizhskaia Kommuna* (Moscow, Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1963); A. I. Korolev, ed. *Parizhskaia Kommuna i Sovremennost’* (Leningrad, 1971).

³⁸ For example: Kollektiv, “Stroiut novyi byt,” *Iunyi kommunist* no. 1, 1 January (1924): 45.

groups explicitly cited the heroism of 1871 as a source of inspiration, directly equating themselves to the exemplary figures much eulogized within Soviet readings of this foundational socialist event.³⁹ “Spark” (*Iskra*), a commune with the same name as the revolutionary émigré newspaper formerly edited by Lenin, vowed to replicate what they referred to as the “selflessness and devotion” of the Communards of 1871. To carry the name of these heroes, they insisted, was a “great responsibility.”⁴⁰ Like many commune groups before them, Spark tried to channel this example and lead their peers, gaining a sense of self-affirmation in the process. Situated within institutes of higher education and in “factories big or small,” wrote one activist, the urban communes displayed a sense of “obligation” and “duty” that emboldened them and gave them the confidence to engage in local revolutionary projects.⁴¹

The manner in which the urban communes and communards conducted themselves displayed a great deal of ingenuity and enterprise. The idea of instilling collective values within the domestic setting, however, was not entirely their own creation. In this area they took influence from a number of sources. As the word “*kommuna*” became popular shorthand for revolutionary ideals, it was also adopted by Soviet institutions as diverse as local schools, orphanages, juvenile detention centers, and provincial administrations. On top of this, the opening years of revolution witnessed the transformation of a number of luxury hotels, such as the Astoria and *Hotel de l’Europe* in Petrograd, into specialized residences for party officials. Known as “Houses of the Soviets” (*Doma Sovetov*), they contained collective services, including general catering and shared facilities, designed to free the inhabitants from domestic chores and introduce new socialist environments.⁴² The designs for

³⁹ “Dnevnik odnoi kommuny,” *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, 9 July (1930), 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ [Aktivnyi rabotnik], “Kommuny molodezhi,” 10-11.

⁴² N. B. Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn’ sovetskogo goroda: normy i anomalii, 1920-1930 gody* (St. Petersburg: Letnii sad, 1999), 161.

non-party variations, very few of which were actually built, even became known as “house-communes” (*doma-kommuny*). Building on Lenin’s citations of Friedrich Engels’s *The Housing Question* (1872), which stated that the Paris Commune had shown how the proletariat could benefit from “the rational utilization of ... buildings,” the renovation of domestic and interior life became increasingly identified with communism itself.⁴³ While a lack of stability and finite resources prevented the standardization of the house-commune model at this time, a formative discourse on home planning and daily life was firmly established.⁴⁴ This was a discourse imbued with the confidence of modernity and bolstered by the Marxist conviction that matter determines consciousness.⁴⁵

Highlighting the connection between this discourse and the formation of the urban communes, the Third Congress of the Komsomol in October 1920 declared that the cohabitant arrangements exhibited by these groups would reform the home and “advance life in general.”⁴⁶ One year later, Komsomol delegates confirmed that the urban communes offered a means of “protect[ing] youths from the corrupting influence of the street, the petty-mindedness of the family, and the heavy weight of ... [bourgeois] domesticity.”⁴⁷ Keen readers of the Soviet press, many urban communards

⁴³ Lenin in *State and Revolution*, 53. cf. Robert Service, *Lenin, A Political Life*. Vol. 3, *The Iron Ring* (Macmillan: London, 1995), 34-37. cf. Michael David-Fox, “What Is ‘Cultural Revolution’?,” *The Russian Review*, Vol. 58, no. 2 (April, 1999): 181-201, 199.

⁴⁴ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 201.

⁴⁵ Also see: David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds. *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 11.

⁴⁶ *Tovarishch komsomol. Dokumenty s’ezdov, konferentsii i TsK VLKSM, 1918-1968* (Moscow, 1969), vol. 1, 34.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 63. Also see: Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn’ sovetskogo goroda*, 164.

subscribed to the leading newspapers and journals, which frequently led them to discuss and enact ideas surrounding the “new way of life” (*novyi byt*) - the socialist reformation of daily customs, practices, and habit.⁴⁸ Indeed, this became an increasingly important area of consideration within the urban commune phenomenon. By the end of the 1920s, while the communes remained disconnected from official structures, the Komsomol went on to report that, “articles on the organization of everyday life and collective habits in Soviet society could ignore neither the lessons of the urban communes nor the voices of their inhabitants.”⁴⁹

The closest that state-sanctioned developments came to the urban commune movement was the promotion of “agricultural communes” (*sel'skokhoziaistvennyye kommuny*), which fell under the jurisdiction of the Commissariat of Agriculture (*Narkomzem*). With 500-600 registered agricultural communes in 1918, and a number of common traits, including the use of common funds and the strict regulation of membership, it is likely that reports of these rural creations served as a source of direct, practical inspiration.⁵⁰ Indeed, some communards, including Stepan Afanas'evich Balezin, who went on to become a prominent figure within the student communes of Petrograd, would bring the experience of rural life and collective farming with them.⁵¹ But when rural practices were introduced to the urban communes, they were not always well received, as seen in the case of Kolia Silin, who

⁴⁸ See for example, G. Levgur, “Komsomol'skaia kommuna ‘Kauchuk’,” *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 9, October (1923): 26-27.

⁴⁹ M. Gol'braikh, “Kak dolzhen byt' organizovan studencheskii byt,” *Krasnoe studenchestvo*, no. 3-4, (1928): 6-17.

⁵⁰ On the agricultural communes, see Robert Wesson, *Soviet Communes* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1963). Also see: Eric Aunoble, “*Le Communisme, tout de suite!*,” *Le Mouvement des Communes en Ukraine soviétique, 1919-1920* (Paris: Les Nuits Rouges, 2008).

⁵¹ *Muzei istorii, Rossiiskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo universiteta im. A. I. Gertsena* (MRGPU im. Herzen), d. B-5 (Personal file of Balezin) ll. 20-16.

earned the nickname “peasant ideologue” (*ideolog krest’ianskii*) for bringing a pig into the cramped quarters of his city-based commune.⁵² Furthermore, it must be noted, there is no evidence of a coterminous, interconnected relationship. The most ambitious rural-based “communes” or “colonies,” some formed by optimistic foreign immigrants, remained exclusively agricultural; functioning as holistic microcosms or new socialist farming prototypes.⁵³ Some returning soldiers did form rural collectives out of conviction, but, for *Narkomzem*, the agricultural communes represented a more overt means of extending their influence in the countryside, as traditional peasant communities and farms were offered financial support for registering with this section of the Soviet government.⁵⁴ In this sense, there was also a greater level of state involvement in their evolution. Nevertheless, with *Narkomzem* issuing model charters for the agricultural communes from July 1918, championing the pooling of resources and a communist lifestyle, what linked these two developments together was the wider discourse on domestic reformation, new comradesly relations, and the commune.⁵⁵

The unintentional result of all this was that the meaning of *kommuna* shifted from a form of governance to a concentrated mechanism of revolutionary transformation. In the immediate aftermath of 1917, publications such as *Kommunar*, or “*The Communard*,” helped to ground the grand

⁵² M. Iankovskii, *Kommuna sta tridtsati trekh* (Leningrad, 1929), 35-38. Silin was subject to a number of pranks for his troubles. In one instance, he was given a series of empty egg shells for dinner. After two eggs fell apart in his hands he screamed, “What bastard did this?” At the moment he was passed a third egg, he threw it away in anger, only to discover it was not empty. In fact, it had landed on the head of a fellow communard.

⁵³ Cf. Benjamin W. Sawyer, “Shedding the White and Blue: American Migration and Soviet Dreams in the Era of the New Economic Policy,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2013): 65-84.

⁵⁴ Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution 1917-1921* (Clarendon Press, London, 1989), esp. chap. 3. Also see: Wesson, *Soviet Communes*, 104-8.

⁵⁵ M. Sumatokhin, *Davaite zhit’ kommunoi!* (Moscow, 1918), pp. 20-24.

revolutionary visions and the imagined principles of 1871 in concrete, even prosaic form, eagerly reporting on collective units of farming, accommodation, and labor as examples of “spontaneous communes.”⁵⁶ Many pieces of advice literature subsequently jumped at the opportunity to report on tangible examples of commune and collectivist practice. These included reports on Komsomol summer-camps (self-styled “commune-camps,” “school-communes,” “summer-colonies” or “collective dachas”), which promoted communist habits and collectivism.⁵⁷ In this way, the activists that formed the urban communes were both agent and subject within a developing revolutionary experience. In other words, they were influenced by common and established revolutionary discourses, but often employed their readings in a manner not foreseen. The urban communards helped to conceive the Revolution and the Soviet imagining of the Commune within the autonomous space of everyday life. By appropriating and re-appropriating, sometimes in a subtle rewriting of existing influences, the urban communes and communards established an un-mandated means of revolutionary participation.

Making their revolution

The actions and undertakings of the urban communes offered its members the chance both to display their revolutionary identity and to partake in revolutionary developments. Internally the urban commune groups looked to extend the collective principles advocated by the Revolution. Having attended one of the Komsomol’s summer camps at the start of the 1920s, a group of young activists, all aged between nineteen and twenty-two, were determined to translate the discussion of collectivism into real-life action.⁵⁸ In its simplest form, this was understood as the act of putting the common good before personal interest. To facilitate this vision, these youths found an apartment in Moscow,

⁵⁶ “Po kvartiram rabochikh,” 3

⁵⁷ L. Nizhegotodets, “O letnikh koloniakh,” *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 3-4, (1921): 12.

⁵⁸ A. Mar, “Zelenye pobegi,” *Smena*, no. 19, October (1929): 2-3.

purchased a few essential items, established a common fund, and wrote a founding charter, declaring their intentions to form new comradely relations. Initially taking forty per cent of an individual's income, the group later voted to increase this to one hundred per cent. This went towards food, lighting, fuel, and group leisure activities, including trips to the cinema.⁵⁹ In this way, they embraced one of the key tenets of Marxism: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!"

Formed in humble conditions, this and other urban communes developed strict systems of domestic regulation and collective living. Another Moscow-based group, composed predominantly of Komsomol members frustrated at the slow pace of change in Soviet housing, wrote to *Young Communist (Iunyi kommunist)* to declare that while many of their peers still lived in the "false collectivism" of the hostel, they had broken away to create "not a hostel, but a commune."⁶⁰ The Rubber (*Kauchuk*) commune, named after the factory where its ten members found employment, proclaimed that they did not merely live in close proximity, but rather had built a "cell" to press for change.⁶¹ It was their belief that the Komsomol leadership was not doing enough to promote collectivism and domestic reform. As well as sharing their clothes, footwear, linen, and general accounts, the Rubber commune implemented a daily schedule to ensure that all members conducted their fair share of household duties, while also allocating set times for working, studying, eating, and sleeping.⁶²

On the one hand, the collective practices undertaken by the urban communes represented an overt display of their political conviction. Further to the name *kommuna*, the language of the urban communards reveals a degree of revolutionary astuteness. Adopting the phrases "cell" and "collective" when describing their activities, for instance, the Rubber commune tapped into a

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Levgur, "Komsomol'skaia kommuna 'Kauchuk'," 26-27.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

revolutionary lexicon associated with the small revolutionary groups and spontaneous worker alliances that emerged in the wake of the 1905 revolutions.⁶³ They were showing their place within the *zeitgeist* of early Soviet Russia. Correspondingly, student activist and local Komsomol representative at the Herzen University, Balezin, recalled how he first encountered spontaneous collective initiative in the form of the “Red Student Artel’.” This was an association of students that lived in cohabitation, worked at the port to support their studies, and shared their resources equally. In this environment the term *artel’* (labor association) was a symbol of political consciousness, working class affiliation, and revolutionary intent.⁶⁴ Within revolutionary circles, the worker *arteli* and labor associations of late tsarist Russia had long been held up as higher forms of comradely organization and as the precursors of working class authority.⁶⁵ The activists that formed the first urban communes displayed a keen awareness of these developments, employing the labels “cell”, “*artel’*,” and “collective”, alongside “commune”, as a sign of their revolutionary credentials.⁶⁶

But it would be a mistake to think that the internal structures and the revolutionary display of the communes prevented the application of practical contingencies in the wider sphere of their

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ MRGPU im. Herzen d. B-5, ll. 20-16.

⁶⁵ Cf. Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia, A Study in Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 76; Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910-1925* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 64-65, 102-106; Steve A. Smith, *Red Petrograd. Revolution in the Factories, 1917-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1-55.

⁶⁶ Also see “Gorodskie kommuny,” *Kommunar*, 27 December, 1918, 3; K. I. Kochergii, “Bor’ba za reformu universiteta,” *Na shturm nauk.; vospominaniia byvshikh studentov fakul’teta obshchestvennykh nauk leningradskogo universiteta*, ed. V. V. Mavrodina (Leningrad, 1971), 16-23.

activities. Indeed, the records of leading Bolshevik and wife to Lenin, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaiia, reveal a constructive affinity between early factory-based commune forms and the memory of the *arteli*. Amassing information on these groups, Krupskaiia noted that by 1921 a number of “labor-youth-communes” (*kommuny trudovoi molodezhi*) were engaged in cohabitant living, the pooling of resources, and collective working practices akin to the “self-contracting” of the *artel*.⁶⁷ Before the advent of the shock-work movement, socialist competition, or the “production” (*proizvodstvennye*) communes that emerged in the late 1920s, some activist communards saw the *artel* as the precursor of new working habits. By channelling these units they thought they could transform the operational and working culture of the Soviet factory. What is more, their actions did not go unnoticed. The AMO plant, for instance, discussed helping activist workers form *artel*-like commune units as a means of overcoming the “bureaucracy, self-seeking, slovenliness, and dishonesty” embedded in the Russian workplace.⁶⁸ The party cell attached to this plant also thought that this would help foster good relations among workers.⁶⁹

Writing later, in 1930, Krupskaiia emphasized the connection between the *artel* and the urban communes further still, going so far as to place these groups in a teleological narrative incorporating the Russian *arteli*, the European guilds, and the co-operative movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷⁰ Within this idealistic reading, however, she also examined the practical implications of building on *artel* traditions. Krupskaiia did not assess the urban communards as

⁶⁷ GARF, f. A.2313, (Krupskaiia’s notes from her time with the Political Education Committee of the RSFSR) op. 1, d. 57, l. 138.

⁶⁸ *Tsentral'nyi arkhiv goroda Moskvy*, (TsAGM), f. 415, (AMO factory cell discussions) op. 16, d. 590, ll. 51-55. First cited in Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-24* (Oxford: Routledge, 2008), 53.

⁶⁹ TsAGM, f. 415, op. 16, d. 590, ll. 51-55.

⁷⁰ N. K. Krupskaiia, *O Bytovykh voprosakh* (Moscow, 1930), 30-36.

utopian anomalies, but as worker activists concerned with the development of socialist duty in the workplace and society.⁷¹ In search of both comradely relations and efficiency gains, she noted, many communards tried to extend their experimentation with collective methods to group work and self-training, often articulated with references to *artel*' habits. By the late 1920s, as the Soviets began to mobilize for industrial expansion, such practices became the cornerstone of a growing commune phenomenon. As Krupskaja explained with hindsight, those that viewed the first post-revolutionary communes as "exceptions" would, ten years later, witness the formation of a "common movement" (*obshchee dvizhenie*).⁷² Between the centralized policy, local improvisation, and general upheaval of the First Five-Year Plan (1928-1932), the urban communards went on to help forge a new working culture on the factory shop-floor.⁷³ Expanding on their early forays into industry, contemporary activist explained that the communes increasingly demanded that their members form a "public face" (*obshchestvennoe litso*) and act as "social activists" (*obshchestvenniki*).⁷⁴

In turn, the domestic display of the urban communards was not limited to private or insular aspirations. As well as offering activists the opportunity to openly exhibit their revolutionary convictions, the collective space of the urban commune became inextricably linked to wider revolutionary concerns. Chief among these were calls for a cultural revolution, with which the urban communes became increasingly embroiled. This was a conscious and explicit discourse, present in the first flowerings of revolution. It sought the formation of a "new person with ... new feelings and

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, 35.

⁷³ Ibid; Kurt S. Schultz, "Building the 'Soviet Detroit': The Construction of the Nizhnii-Novgorod Automobile Factory, 1927-1932," *Slavic Review*, Vol. 49, no. 2 (Summer, 1990): 200-212.

⁷⁴ Iu. Verber, "Krasnovorotskaia," *Krasnoe studenchestvo*, no. 6, (1929): 20-21.

moods.”⁷⁵ Marked not just by learning and the arts, but by the cultivation of socialist values, goals, and practices, “cultural revolution” encompassed a wide range of activities.⁷⁶ The most determined urban communards avidly recorded their attempts to implement “cultural revolution” through new collective activities and living arrangements. In 1919, one anonymous activist wrote to the Soviet youth press to promote his commune’s practice of collective reading and self-betterment activities, which included trips to the theater and cinema.⁷⁷ It was believed that these efforts would improve the cultural level and revolutionary consciousness of each member; the domestic rules and regulations of the commune, it was noted, were designed to foster self-assessment and socialist responsibility.⁷⁸ A number of urban communes, at this time and later, stressed the importance of reading and taking out subscriptions to the major newspapers and journals of the day. A cyclical relationship eventually developed whereby activists embraced the ideas and language presented within the press, and the press eagerly reported on the progress of cultural revolution in the domestic spaces of communes.⁷⁹ In 1919, therefore, Dunaevskii was already referring to the urban communes, somewhat grandly, as “a socialist revolution in life” itself.⁸⁰

⁷⁵ V. Polianskii, “Pod znamia Proletkul’ta,” *Proletarskaia kul’tura*, no. 3, August (1918): 35-36; Michael David-Fox, “What Is Cultural Revolution?” *Russian Review*, Vol. 58, no. 2 (April, 1999): 181-201, 189.

⁷⁶ For discussion on this topic, see: Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution Revisited,” *Russian Review*, Vol. 58, no. 2 (April, 1999): 202-209, and Michael David-Fox, “Mentalité or Cultural System: A Reply to Sheila Fitzpatrick,” *Russian Review*, Vol. 58, no. 2 (April, 1999): 210-11.

⁷⁷ [Aktivnyi rabotnik], “Kommuny molodezhi,” 10-11.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ See: Levgur, “Komsomol’skaia kommuna ‘Kauchuk’,” 26-27; Kollektiv, “Stroiut novyi byt,” 45; “V nastuplenie!,” *Smena*, no. 19, October (1929): 1.

⁸⁰ Vl. Dunaevskii, “Kommuny molodezhi,” *Iunyi kommunist*, no.16, 25 November (1919): 5-6.

These themes were particularly prevalent among the student-based communes. Formed by those previously denied access to higher education, as some of these youths recounted, dormitory-based communes rallied in opposition to the “hangovers” of imperial higher education.⁸¹ In 1919, one student from the Third Pedagogical Institute was shocked to discover that Soviet universities did not yet constitute communist entities; Bolshevik resources had not come to bear and they were still staffed by non-communists.⁸² Activists frequently noted a lack of communist infiltration, individualistic behavior, and limited collective facilities.⁸³ While there was no uniform policy driving these voluntary formations, records suggest that student communes constantly debated the material and cultural life of their institutes.⁸⁴ As Balezin recorded, the communes picked up where the party and Komsomol cells left off, agitating against the crumbling infrastructure and slovenly conditions of student life.⁸⁵ He would himself turn to the communes to overcome what he saw as educational and cultural apathy among some sections of the Petrograd Komsomol.⁸⁶ At the start of the twentieth century, the debating circle (*kruzhok*) formed a node of student radicalism within Russia’s higher education system.⁸⁷ Alongside the regional student network (*zemliachestvo*), and student assembly

⁸¹ Izmozik and Lebina, *Peterburg sovetskii*, 142-152; Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn’ sovetskogo goroda*, chap 2.

⁸² M. A. Rom, “V bor’be za sovetizatsiiu universiteta,” *Na shturm nauki, vospominaniia byvshikh studentov fakul’teta obshchestvennykh nauk leningradskogo universiteta*, 7-16

⁸³ Ibsen-Shtrait, “Studencheskie kommuny,” *Krasnyi student*, no. 8-9, September (1924): 44-45; Pozdenko, “O kommunakh II MGU,” *Krasnoe studenchestvo*, no. 11, December (1926): 24-26.

⁸⁴ MRGPU im. Herzen, d. B-5, ll. 20-16.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Alice K. Wildman, “The Russian Intelligentsia of the 1890s,” *American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 19, no. 2 (April, 1960): 157-79, 160.

(*skhodka*), some radicals used the *kruzhki* to co-organize mutual aid programs, aspiring to shape civic values in line with populist revolutionary visions.⁸⁸ After 1917, however, it was the commune and communards that tried to act as the brokers of institutional and cultural change.

Starting in single dormitory rooms with a few like-minded individuals, sometimes expanding across whole floors, the commune structure offered young enthusiasts the opportunity to present themselves as exemplary revolutionaries to their peers and institute authorities. Around the obligatory common fund, into which members placed their stipends and earnings, student groups added routines of collective dining, amassed shared libraries, and promoted cleanly living, conducive to study.⁸⁹ These practical contingencies were promoted by budding communards as a first step toward the improvement of material conditions and dormitory life more generally.⁹⁰ As well as leading the domestic collectivist movement, these communes used their shared funds to undertake joint activities, including political and cultural campaigning. They also promoted the idea of social or civic work (*obshchestvennaia rabota*), which included aiding fellow students and assisting local Komsomol cells.⁹¹ As stated in the journals and newspapers to which many communes subscribed, involvement

⁸⁸ Susan K. Morrissey, *Heralds of Revolution: Russian Students and the Mythologies of Radicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 24-25. Also see S. P. Mel'gunov, *Iz istorii studencheskikh obshchestv v russkikh universitetakh* (Moscow, 1904). On the Chaikovskii circle of the early 1870s, see: Daniel R. Brower, *Training the Nihilists: Education and Radicalism in Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 202-205; S. L. Chudnovskii, "Iz dal'nikh let (Otryvki iz vospominanii)," *Byloe*, no. 9-10, (1907); P. S. Gusiatsnikov, *Revoliutsionnoe studencheskoe dvizhenie v Rossii* (Moscow, 1971).

⁸⁹ "Oskolok novogo byta (Kommuna vodnikov Politekhniceskogo Instituta im. Kalinina)," *Krasnyi student*, no. 2, February (1925): 35.

⁹⁰ Chlen kommuny, "Kommuna studentov-vodnikov," *Krasnyi student*, no. 4-5, May (1924): 44-45.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

in wider social activities and the promotion of revolutionary values became a crucial aspect of commune and university life.⁹² In sum, the activists of the urban communes not only pressed the “housing question,” extending commune principles indoors, they also sought to overcome the ideological and cultural shortfalls of Soviet institutes.

Ripples within Revolution

The disciplined lifestyle exhibited by the urban communes, proudly regaled in letters sent to the youth press, shows how the October Revolution both framed and fired the imagination of activists, encouraging a sense of participation and self-initiative.⁹³ At this time, many young revolutionary enthusiasts wrote to Soviet journals asking what it meant to be a communist and how they should conduct themselves. Replying to some of these queries in 1922, Alexandra Mikhailovna Kollontai said that a communist had to reject “bourgeois morality” and submit every aspect of their lives to “a collective regime.”⁹⁴ When challenged to provide a more detailed answer, Kollontai insisted that morality was “an instrument in class domination and class struggle.” As such, “a person can be taught to think like a communist,” if they lived by a certain “code of ethics.” It was a “categorical imperative” of communism, she continued, that each individual advance the lessons, experiences, and feelings of the “proletarian life.”⁹⁵ Extending the ideas of Marxism into everyday life, collectivism was presented as an antithesis to the self-interested, individualist societies of both the capitalist world

⁹² E. Petrov, “Akademizm i obshchestvennost’,” *Krasnyi student*, no. 6, (1925): 12.

⁹³ Cf. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*; Fredrick C. Corney, *Telling October. Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 126-48.

⁹⁴ A. M. Kollontai, “Pis’ma k trudiashesia molodezhi. Kakim dolzhen byt’ kommunist?,” *Molodaia gvardiia*, no. 1-2, April-May (1922): 1-10.

⁹⁵ A. M. Kollontai, “Pis’ma k trudiashesia molodezhi. Moral’, kak orudie klassovogo gospodstva i klassovoi bor’by,” *Molodaia gvardiia*, no. 6-7, October-November (1922): 8-16.

and the Russian past. Asking the same question as many of their peers: “What did it mean to be communist?” the communes and communards thought the answer was ripe for picking. Many had already formed their own collective contracts, vowing to adhere to new socialist values and ideas. Their compact nature and direct action, claimed one student commune, offered “the best means to influence everyday life.”⁹⁶

The urban communes offered young activists the means of discussing revolution, displaying their political convictions, and participating in the process of renovation.⁹⁷ These groups were formed around the imaginative appropriation and re-appropriation of key revolutionary themes and discourses, including the much-lauded 1871 Paris Commune - its association with workers’ control, direction democracy, social reformation, and collective action - and the revolutionary ideals envisioned within the *artel*, the cell, other pre-revolutionary comradesly forms, and Russia’s own experience of collectivism. As such, the constructs of the urban commune emerged as an un-mandated development, providing the rank-and-file with a greater platform to engage with revolution. Inside higher education, a number of student communes partook in the political campaigns of the Komsomol, as well as trying to instil communist ideals within the dormitory. Similarly, inside Soviet factories, a number of youth communes tried to change working practices, while promoting new domestic and social habits in general. Building on the immediate ambition of these early revolutionary years, the communes and communards looked to turn theory into practice, using their collective structures as a means of transforming the surrounding environment.

In this way, the communes sent ripples through the established revolutionary canon and the apparatus of state. Adopting and adapting key Soviet ideals, their actions soon became embroiled within broader developments, including the pursuit of “cultural revolution”: the battle to replace

⁹⁶ Chlen kommuny, “Kommuna studentov-vodnikov”, no. 4-5, (1924): 44-45.

⁹⁷ “Rabochaia zhizn,” *Pravda* 11 April, 1919, 4; “Pervaia rabochaia domovaia kommuna,” *Pravda*, 12 August 1919, 2.

bourgeois life with a new collective community, complete with new values and mores. From 1919, leading youth journals, such as *Young Communist*, were praising the urban communards for their commitment to revolutionary undertakings; comparing them to state facilities, such as public canteens, nurseries, and laundries, all designed to promote a new collective polity.⁹⁸ In the coming years, as the urban commune became an established part of the revolutionary landscape, members continued to write to the Soviet press with tales of their revolutionary exploits. The Rubber commune explained how the common fund and shared resources at the heart of their alliance not only provided them with clothing, footwear, linen, and food: it taught them the financial and personal discipline necessary to stand as an example of communism.⁹⁹ The rules of cohabitation, monitored by a rotating system of duty officers, it was noted, enforced a strict regime of hygiene management, education, and political campaigning. These were the markers of modern, socialist enlightenment. The Rubber commune insisted that their methods should be “extended to all youths” and those living in the numerous hostels and dormitories of the new Soviet state.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, a twelve-person commune in Tomsk wrote to explain how they had created a scientific means of organizing their daily routine.¹⁰¹ Ensuring that all members met their social responsibilities, which included helping to promote local literacy campaigns, the commune established a timetable that regulated their activities from eight in the morning until midnight.¹⁰²

As the activists of the urban communes were well aware, the revolution was moving beyond armed insurrections and political upheaval. Now the challenge was to create a new social and cultural stock. The rational and aesthetic reordering of everyday life became an ever more important

⁹⁸ [Aktivnyi rabotnik] “Kommuny molodezhi,” 10; Dunaevskii, “Kommuny molodezhi,” 5-6.

⁹⁹ Levgur, “Komsomol’skaia kommuna ‘Kauchuk’,” 26-27.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Kollektiv, “Stroiut novyi byt,” 45.

¹⁰² Ibid.

component of the Revolution. Far from being curtailed by the onset of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and its capitalist elements in 1921, the promise of socialist modernity rallied against new obstacles. Between 1921 and 1922 activists and sections of the Soviet press confirmed their embrace with “cultural revolution”. The revolutionary reprieve of NEP was met with hostility from activists, including the communards, and sections of the Komsomol.¹⁰³ In opposition to the cultural surplus of this policy, calls for the complete renovation of everyday life continued to be heard, encouraging Leon Trotsky to declare that revolution could not proceed “by politics alone”, it also required a “cultural struggle” in work, life, and society.¹⁰⁴

Starting in the immediate aftermath of October, the activists of the urban commune can be seen to appropriate, ground, and augment revolution, helping to lay the way for some of the political, social, and cultural developments of the 1920s. Krupskaja declared that the communards acted as “agitators” for the “socialization of life”, attempting to “forge new social bonds” between comrades, as well as “new relations between man and woman.”¹⁰⁵ As Anne E. Gorsuch noted in her study of Soviet youth, some student communes at Moscow State University went as far as banning sexual relations and marriage until a new collective bond was established.¹⁰⁶ In these cases, it was believed that the commune would replace the family, acculturate the next generation, and, with hints of

¹⁰³ Cf. Peter Gooderham, “The Komsomol and Worker Youth: The Inculcation of ‘Communist Values’ in Leningrad During NEP,” *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 34, no. 4, (October, 1982): 506-528.

¹⁰⁴ L. D. Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture & Science* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), 15-24. Originally published in *Pravda*, 10 July 1923.

¹⁰⁵ Krupskaja, *O Bytovykh voprosakh* (Moscow, 1930), 30-36.

¹⁰⁶ Anne E. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 55.

Nietzsche's promethean superman, develop a new subject.¹⁰⁷ More importantly, these actions were noted by local level representatives and the Soviet press. Indeed, the press and subsequent Soviet studies increasingly associated the urban communes with the much-extolled "new way of life" (*novyi byt*) being developed under communism. The communes even acquired the generic prefix *bytovaia*, associated with daily routine, social practice, domestic life, and cultural values.¹⁰⁸ The *bytovaia* commune, it was later reported, "swept out the old" and created the ideal socialist environment in which to raise the New Soviet Person (*Novyi sovetskii chelovek*).¹⁰⁹

As self-conscious advocates of revolutionary values and practices, the urban communards found themselves involved in a number of social and cultural struggles throughout the opening decade of the Soviet state. In their various forms, they initiated a corrective project that encompassed domesticity, the family, society, work, and culture. By the mid-1920s they commented on matters such as the moral panic building over cases of hooliganism and drunkenness among youths, while the late 1920s saw commune groups increasingly engaged in the pursuit of new industrial practices.¹¹⁰ Much like the first cohabitational communes that arose during the housing resettlements of 1917-1921, these groups took the form of an interaction between the impulses of state and activist by operating in a space between the authorized and the autonomous, and occasionally surpassing the

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, esp. chap. 3; Bernice G. Rosenthal, ed. *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture. Ally and Adversary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁰⁸ A. Kaishtat, I. Ryvkin, and I. Soschovik, *Kommuny molodezhi* (Moscow, 1931); V. Ol'khov, *Za zhivoe rukovodstvo sotsorevnovaniem* (Moscow, 1930); Iu. Larin, *Stroitel'stvo sotsializma i kollektivizatsiia byta* (Moscow, 1930).

¹⁰⁹ "V nastuplenie!" 1.

¹¹⁰ "Kak vesti bor'bu s khuliganstvom," *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 30 September, 1926, 3; "Vzorvem staryi byt" *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 13 September, 1929, 3; Iu. Ber, *Kommuna segodnya: opyt proizvodstvennykh i bytovykh kommun molodezhi* (Moscow, 1930), 53-62.

ideological objectives of official bodies. Some Komsomol members even decided to utilize the unofficial constructs of the commune to fulfill local and national revolutionary imperatives. But, in all cases, the concept of the urban commune, bolstered by press interest, stood in opposition to the shortcomings of the established revolutionary apparatus, highlighting the gap between promise and reality.

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