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HOUSING IN CENTRAL ASIA: DEMOGRAPHY, OWNERSHIP,
TRADITION. THE UZBEK EXAMPLE

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Introduction

The housing of Soviet Central Asia differs from that of the rest of the country in a number of aspects.

(1) In rural areas, as well as in traditional Muslim urban districts, clay brick remains the basic construction material; roofs are flat, walls often thick, bungalow-style construction prevails. Courtyards and roofs are parts of living space. The interior is largely traditional, adapted to the habit of sitting on rugs instead of chairs.

(2) There is a larger proportion of multi-member households (with many children and including grandparents) than in any other area of the USSR. Such large families can hardly be accommodated in standard apartment houses. The resistance to those is stronger than elsewhere in the USSR.

(3) Not only the bulk of rural housing, but a large proportion of urban housing is privately owned. Moreover, its inhabitants derive a higher proportion of their income from private initiative (private plots, black market, etc.) than their European counterparts do.

I. Construction and Interior

The technical aspects of Central Asian construction are discussed in Mr. Thiel's paper. I can only add that

there is little variation in the traditional building techniques of Central Asian peoples. This is due to the similarity of climatic conditions, availability of building materials and technical tradition derived from common cultural heritage. The Central Asian centuries-old habit of sitting and/or resting on the floor (on rugs) survives to our days and has a strong influence on interiors. Thus even most modern Muslim households tend to leave at least the central part of their living space (entire rooms if possible) free of furniture. Many interiors are built with storage space in wall niches, as substitutes for chests and other storage furniture.¹

II. Households

Soviet Central Asia is experiencing a demographic explosion. As a result, the size of its Muslim families is well above the European USSR averages, and well above the size of the European settler's families in the area.

A typical size of a rural Uzbek family is 6 or 7 people (including 4 or more children). Few families are limited to 3 - 4 persons and quite a few reach 10 - 12, including 8 - 10 children.² Uzbek couples married between 1970 and 1972 were expected to have an average of 5.36 children as opposed to 1.66 for Russian couples in the Russian Republic, married during the same period. In

addition, the Uzbek figure, while showing a drop from its 1955-59 peak, is slightly higher than its 1930-34 figure, while the Russian is less than half of its 1930-34 figure of 3.53.³

Present demographic trends are not likely to be significantly altered before the end of our century even if the often discussed, but not yet implemented, corrective measures are put into effect. Central Asian republics which already account for 30% of yearly population growth in the USSR are expected, by the year 2000, to account for a 50% of the total.⁴

Thus the very size of Central Asian Muslim families conflicts with the standard practice of Soviet public housing construction basically geared to produce 3 room (2 rooms and utilities) apartments for small (Russian size) families. It is worth noting that standard multidwelling units, inappropriate for rural needs, encounter resistance in rural areas of the RSFSR as well, and are often blamed for Russian rural exodus.⁵ The controversy about the need for urban-style housing in rural areas seems to have been settled in favor of traditional rural housing, and this for the USSR as a whole.⁶

No attempts are currently made to alter the single family private housing pattern dominant among rural Muslims, but even those urban Muslim families who are lodged in

publicly owned houses are reluctant to abandon their traditional lifestyle. Provided with modern apartments in new 9 story multi-family high-rise buildings in the city of Tashkent, they tend to show little appreciation for what is still the dream of many Russian apartment seekers. Deprived of traditional courtyards, many Uzbeks use balconies for outside native-style cooking⁷ (according to Arutunyan, 88% of urban Uzbeks - as against 2 - 6%, of urban Russians prefer their national cuisine).⁸

The difficulty is increased when "undivided" families still common in Uzbekistan are involved. They usually consist of the couple and their children, husband, parents and unmarried siblings and account for 1/3 of all rural and 1/4 of all urban Uzbek families.⁹ In the city of Tashkent local housing authorities were forced to build some one-family townhouse-style units for such families,¹⁰ a rare occurrence in Soviet public housing history indeed.

Another question which has to be answered is whether the general housing shortage prevailing in the USSR and limiting the size of Russian families may force the Central Asian Moslems to similarly reduce their family size. After all, per capita availability of living space is lower in Central Asia than in any other region of the USSR (See table A). Here, however, three qualifications must be made:

a) While, for example, per capita living space in Uzbekistan is roughly 25% lower than in RSFSR, per family space is much higher, given the much larger size of an average Uzbek family (5.3 in 1970 as against 3.5 for RSFSR). In addition, a 6 person family does not need exactly double the space of a 3 person one.

b) The traditional Uzbek use of courtyards as extensions of living space, increases per family space even further. Climatic differences (with resulting indoor pattern of life in Moscow, outdoor pattern in Taskent) demand more living space for equal degrees of comfort in the RSFSR than in Uzbekistan.

c) The Uzbek tradition of using rugs instead of furniture (and thus uncrowding the inside living space) diminishes the per capita need for interior living space even further.

III. Private Housing

The presence of large scale private housing in urban areas is another characteristic feature of the Central Asian housing situation. All Central Asian republics have more private urban living space per capita than RSFSR (See table B). In percentages of total living space per capita, Central Asian republics are outdistanced only by Georgia and Ukraine. If one begins to look into per

family figures (either in sq. m. or in percentages), only Georgia, famous for its flourishing of private initiative can compete with Central Asia. This urban private housing adds to the attraction of the area as much as favorable climatic conditions do.

In rural housing, private property (or rather "personal property", as it is called in the USSR in order to exclude prohibited income-producing schemes), prevails in all of the Soviet Union. What is special to Central Asia is that Kolkhoz members who dwell in their own "personal" houses also earn a better than average proportion of their income from their own "private plots".¹¹

In addition, per worker Kolkhoz pay is higher than in the RSFSR (by 3% in 1974), the cost of living lower by 16.8%,¹² and the traditional building material (clay bricks) more available than building materials used in European USSR.

This, in turn, increases the amount of uncontrolled funds available for further private housing. And it accounts for the visible presence of private initiative, something a visitor to Uzbekistan or Georgia almost feels in the air.

One, if not the main source of funds for private housing is the income derived from private plots maintained by Kolkhozniks, Sovkhozniks and even by some small town dwellers.

The role of such private plots in Uzbek agricultural production is on the rise. Conservative official figures speak of 15.2% of the gross output in 1965, 18.8% in 1970 and 19.5% in 1977.¹³ More realistic Soviet Uzbek estimates are around 26 to 28.8% and account for a quarter of Kolkhoznik's income.¹⁴ These figures may still be too low, given the USSR average of 26.6% of the income (1974) and the emphasis in other Soviet sources that in the southern regions of the USSR private plot production satisfies "to a large degree" both the food need of the Kolkhozniks and the kolkhoz market trade in the cities.¹⁵

Another source of private income is the kolkhoz market trade. In large Uzbek cities it shows constant increase, the amount of meat, vegetables and fruits sold doubling between 1965 and 1974.¹⁶ The volume of "second hand goods" market trade, another source of private funds, is proverbial, especially in Tashkent, and escapes statistician's eye as well.

Starting with 1976 a more benevolent attitude towards private plots became a part of a growing positive attitude towards "legitimate" private initiative in general.¹⁷ Beginning with January 1977, kolkhozniks are entitled to 1500Rb low interest 10 year loans (or appx. one-fourth of the supposed cost of a basic 78 sq. m. dwelling) for construction of their private homes.¹⁸ The June 1978 Resolution of the CC of the CPSU and the USSR Council of

Ministers concerning "the development of individual housing and the retention of cadres in the village" is in line with the new attitude. The linkage between private housing and retention of cadres is significant: private rural housing is no longer seen as a concession to the peasant, but rather as inducement to stay in the village. While primarily intended for labor-short Russian villages, not for labor-rich Uzbek villages, the new benevolence cannot fail to benefit more the private-initiative oriented Uzbek village than its Russian counterpart.

Conclusion

In Soviet Central Asia, where rural population accounts for a higher proportion of the total than anywhere else in the USSR, rural housing has been, for all practical purpose, left to private initiative.

In the cities, the picture is mixed. Publically owned housing seems to concentrate on large apartment buildings, more compatible with the taste of European settlers. While a part of native Muslim dwellers will have to be accommodated in such buildings, others would seek lodging either by their own personal initiative or through the slowly developing coops.

A new benevolent attitude towards private housing is a refreshing trend. But given the low level of Soviet salaries and the difficulty in obtaining some building

materials, such housing will better develop in areas where private initiative is widespread. And private initiative in the USSR translates itself into private plots, kolkhoz markets, "second-hand goods" markets, privately contracted services, using state or collective facilities for own production, speculation with scarce commodities, and, finally, outright theft of collective property or funds. In all these fields, the Uzbek republic is highly competitive, assuring a good future for private housing construction in that republic, as long as the present degree of tolerance towards private housing is maintained.

TABLE A
URBAN LIVING SPACE PER CAPITA (1977)

	publicly owned in sq.m.	privately owned in sq.m.	total in sq.m.	privately owned in % of the total (rounded)
RSFSR	10.14	2.30	12.44	18%
Ukraine	8.33	4.92	13.25	37%
Byelorussia	9.05	3.21	12.26	26%
Lithuania	9.96	3.10	13.06	24%
Latvia	12.18	3.00	15.18	20%
Estonia	12.06	3.36	15.42	22%
Moldavia	9.96	3.82	13.78	28%
Georgia	8.09	5.68	13.77	41%
Armenia	7.64	2.98	10.62	28%
Azerbaijan	7.02	2.84	9.86	29%
Kazakhstan	7.78	3.04	10.82	28%
Uzbekistan	5.92	3.17	9.09	35%
Tadjikistan	6.53	2.84	9.37	30%
Turkmenistan	7.26	2.79	10.05	28%
Kirgizia	5.86	3.66	9.55	38%

SOURCE: Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR v 1977 g. Statisticheskii ezhegodnik. M.1978.
population figures based on 1978 data.

TABLE B
PRIVATE HOUSING CONSTRUCTION BY REPUBLIC, 1977

	in % of total construction	in sq.cm.of usable space per capita.
RSFSR	12.84	.057
Ukraine	33.16	.13
Byelorussia	25.69	.114
Lithuania	40.89	.255
Latvia	19.65	.087
Estonia	11.03	.112
Moldavia	50.72	.207
Georgia	34.85	.106
Armenia	21.54	.086
Azerbajdjan	38.98	.085
Kazakhstan	12.84	.054
Uzbekistan	46.03	.165
Tadjikistan	56.38	.177
Turmenistan	53.94	.196
Kirgiziia	50.31	.139

Calculated from the tables of Narodnoe khoziastvo SSR v 1977 g. Statisticheskii ezhegodnik. M. 1978

FOOTNOTES

1

G.V.Vasiliev, "Nekotorye voprosy tendentsii razvitiia sovremennykh natsional'nykh traditsii i material'noi kul'tury narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana," Sovetskaia Etnografiia(N.3, 1979), pp. 22-23

2

S.M.Mirkhasimov, "Sotsial'no-kul'turnye izmeneniia i otrazhenie ikh v sovremennoi sm'e sel'skogo naseleniia Uzbekistana," ibid (N.1, 1979) p.9.

3

Skol'ko budet detei v Sovetskoi sem'ie. Rezul'taty obsledovaniia. Moscow, Statistika, 1977, pp. 47, 49.

4

O.Atamirzaev and A Atakuliev, "Problemy narodonaseleniia i regional'naia demograficheskaia politika," Kommunist Uzbekistana (N.1,1978), p. 40.

5

See Perevedentsev in Nash Sovremennik(N.3, 1974), p. 139, telling about the refusal of Russian sovkhovniks to settle in three-story multi-unit dwellings constructed for them by the sovkhov. The dwelling remained half-empty. Also M. Zaraev, "Kakim byt' sel'skomu domu," ibid(N.12, 1977), p. 152-1955.

6

Pravda, April 5, 1978, citing the opinion of the Housing Collegium of the Ministry of Agriculture.

7

Eyewitiness report.

8

IU.V.Arutiunyan, "O nekotorykh tendentsiakh kul'turnogo sblizheniia narodov SSSR na etape razvitogo sotsializma," Istoriia SSSR (Jul-Aug. 1978), p. 98.

9

Mirkhasimov, p. 9.

10

Eyewitness report

11

See K.Bedrıntsev, "Sotsial'no-ekonomicheskie problemy razvitiia proizvoditel'nykh sil Uzbekistana," Kommunist Uzbekistana (N.12, 1978), p. 17, about the special importance of private plots in Uzbekistan.

12

L.P.Kuprienko. Vliianie urovnia zhizni na raspredelenie trudovykh resursov (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), p. 90.

13

K.Saidov, "Ekonomicheskaiia rol' lichnogo podsobnogo khoziastva v Uzbekistane na sovremennom etape," Kommunist Uzbekistana (N.5, 1979), p. 28.

14

U.Matruziev, "O razvitiia kolkhoznogo proizvodstva v Uzbekistane na sovremennom etape," Obshchestvennye nauki v Uzbekistane (N.2, 1979), p. 9; Saidov, p. 30.

15

Kuprienko, pp. 97, 61.

16

Narodnoe khoziastvo Uzbekskoi SSR v 1974 g. Statisticheskii ezhegodnik. Tashkent, 1975, p. 300.

17

For a more positive attitude towards private plots, see L.I.Brezhnev speech at the October 1976 Plenum of the CC of the CPSS. For Uzbekistan, see Sh.Rashidov's speech at the Xth Plenum of the CC of the CP Uz, July 1978.

18

Radio Liberty dispatch of Febr. 8, 1977, quoting Ekonomicheskaiia Gazeta of 2.77, p. 16.