



# VERSITA

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## HOUSING DEMAND IN THE POLISH PEOPLES' REPUBLIC

*Although historians and social scientists devoted considerable attention to issues related to housing in the Polish Peoples' Republic era, many problems still need further research. The crucial problem of the paper is to find an answer to the question: what did Poles have to do in the period between 1944/45 and 1989 in order to obtain housing? The answer given is the effect of several years of primary source research which encompassed archival material of assorted types and origins.*

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Historians of the postwar period in Poland have not delved too deeply into the housing problems that were part and parcel of that era. Sociologists, town and country planners, architects, lawyers, and Polish social policy specialists have written about various issues, such as interesting inquiries into housing policy, social differences in housing standards, the utilisation of residential real estate, the development of the idea of a social estate, and transformations of various forms of ownership. However, many important problems have slipped through the net of more penetrating inquiries. Among them, special attention is merited to analyses of the strategies of the acquisition of homes. The point is to find an answer to the basic question: what did Poles have to do in the period between 1944/45 and 1989 in order to obtain housing? The attempt at answering this question below is the effect of several years of primary source research which encompassed archival material of assorted types and origins.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See: D. Jarosz, *Mieszkanie się należy... Studium z peerelowskich praktyk społecznych*, Warszawa 2010; M. Jarmuż, *Problemy mieszkaniowe Polaków w latach siedemdziesiątych*

## THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Primary source research so far confirms that despite housing development programmes which, at times, were very intensive, the unsatisfied demand for housing accompanied Poles throughout the entire period of the Polish Peoples' Republic (PRL). In fact, this carried over into the subsequent period as well, but insofar as in 1950 the number of flats stood at 5.9 million, in 1988 their figure had risen to 10.7 million. In 1988 there were 111.7 households per 100 flats of which 111.7 were in the towns and 111.6 in rural areas; in 1960 the corresponding indicators stood at 117.5 (122.3 and 112.5); in 1970 - 115.9 (119.5 and 111.3), in 1978 - 117.3 (118.1 and 115.8). Thus, we can speak of a moderate improvement in the field of the independent management of the housing stock which was greater in towns than in the countryside.<sup>2</sup>

The national census results were indicative of improving standards of housing (equipped with basic installations) even if progress was laborious and far off the mark in terms of expectations. There was a gradual reduction in the average density of residents per homes, and homes became increasingly spacious; in 1970 there was 12.9 m<sup>2</sup> of usable space per capita; in 1978 it was 14.7 m<sup>2</sup>; in 1988 - 17.1 m<sup>2</sup>, of which, respectively, 12.8, 14.6 and 16.8 was available in towns and 12.9, 14.9 and 17.4 in the countryside.

Despite qualitative improvement, the degree of satisfied housing demands remained inadequate. The situation was all the more complicated because the rate of development, being dependent on the priorities of economic policy and the investment capacity of the country, was variable. Generally, it increased systematically to the end of the 1970s, then plummeted in the next decade. Insofar as in 1978 - a record year in the entire history of the PRL - 284,000 flats were built, and in 1982, 186,000, which meant a return in this respect to the growth rates achieved in the pre-1970 period.<sup>3</sup>

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*w świetle dokumentów osobistych [w:] Letnia Szkoła Historii Najnowszej IPN. Tom IV, Warszawa 2011, s. 44-56.*

<sup>2</sup> M. Górczyca, *Regionalne zróżnicowanie warunków mieszkaniowych w Polsce w latach 1950-1988*, Warszawa 1992.

<sup>3</sup> A. Andrzejewski, *Polityka mieszkaniowa*, Warszawa 1987, p. 314.

## LACK OF HOUSING AND SELECT ASPECTS OF SOCIAL MASS BEHAVIOUR

A flat was a deficit commodity, and to have a flat of one's own was an object of desire. The feeling of an unsatisfied need in this field was exceptionally important in Polish thinking. In sociological research of 1981, 1984 and 1988, in the course of which people were asked about the most important issues to be resolved, the need to obtain a flat achieved the highest scores (52.7%, 49.5% and 51.5% respectively) which decidedly outdistanced items such as "personal and family life issues", the "material-existential situation", "buying a car", "getting a better job", "improving professional qualifications" and "improved levels of supplies".<sup>4</sup>

According to research results in 1987, the inability to meet the demand in this area (housing) affected young people (68%) more than others; the degree of dissatisfaction gradually decreased over the higher age groups, peaking at 31% with the oldest respondents. Basically, income did not make a difference in the scope of housing problems; that was the effect of the operation of the then obligatory principle of the housing policy: in a market controlled by the state, the allocation of flats had greater purchasing power than cash. Allocations were the privileged domain of members of the political and state elites.<sup>5</sup>

The increased rate of development in housing and its fair allocation were also a fixed item on the agenda of striking workers in 1970-71 and 1980.<sup>6</sup>

The possibility of obtaining a flat impacted the social processes on a mass scale in Peoples' Poland. Sociological research shows that in the 1970s and 80s, it was not the inability to find employment (as was the case before), but decent living conditions that became the most important factor in undertaking decisions to migrate – chiefly from country to town, but not just in that direction.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Polacy 88. *Dynamika konfliktu a szanse reform. Raport z badania "Sprawy Polaków '87"*, Warszawa 1989, p. 44, tab. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> B. Chmiel and E. Kaczyńska [coll. and edit.], *Postulaty 1970-1971 i 1980. Materiały źródłowe do dziejów wystąpień pracowniczych w latach 1970-1971 i 1980 (Gdańsk i Szczecin)*, Warszawa 1998, pp. 26-27, 29-31, 39, 56, 71, 179, 181-95, 202, 207-14, 235.

<sup>7</sup> P. Korcelli, A. Gawryszewski, A. Potrykowska, *Przestrzenna struktura ludności Polski. Tendencje i perspektywy*, Warszawa, 1992, p. 85ff; J. Bobiński, *Motywy decyzji migracyjnych*

Other research work carried out in the same period showed, moreover, that the problems connected with the possibility of obtaining a flat had a very significant impact on the attitudes of newlyweds to life, in this, above all, to family size and reproduction.<sup>8</sup>

The feeling of unsatisfied housing demands made its specific mark on colloquial language. Such pejorative terms as "złodziejówka" ("thief town"), "Zatoka Czerwonych Świń" (Bay of Red Pigs), as designations for concentrations of housing developments (houses and apartments) for people in power (privileged prominent communist party officials), testify to the commonly held view that not only was there too little accommodation, but also that the housing resources that were available, were allocated inequitably.

## POLISH ROADS TO HOUSING: THE POLITICS

Searching for access routes to one's own flat in postwar Poland took place within the framework created by state policy. Its principles were already set in the 1940s. In attempting to characterise the communist housing policy in the most general of terms, it can be asserted that living accommodation – in the way its legal status was determined, the method of its distribution, and in what was to be built or rebuilt – came under stringent control. The erratic implementation of housing policy principles reflected, among other things, the fluctuating changes in the binding housing laws and regulations. In effect, housing was assuming the guise of a social benefit. With time, the universal conviction took hold that a flat was one's right.

The concept of allocating accommodation, previously unknown in Polish law, was introduced in 1944. Living accommodation was to be allocated by commissions set up alongside local government offices.<sup>9</sup> It was further elaborated upon in the decree of 21 December 1945 on public accom-

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*i poszukiwanie czynników umożliwiających sterowanie procesami przemieszczeń ludności, Sprawy Mieszkaniowe, 1975, nr 4, pp. 59-68.*

<sup>8</sup> *Życie rodzinne i postawy prokreacyjne nowożeńców na podstawie "Ankiety Nowożeńców 1985"*, Warszawa, 1988; A. Sobczak, *Standard mieszkaniowy i jego rola w procesie dzietności ludności miejskiej w Polsce*, Poznań, 1993; Z. Smoliński (Ed.), *Dzietność kobiet w Polsce*, Warszawa, 1980.

<sup>9</sup> I. Paczyńska, *Gospodarka mieszkaniowa a polityka państwa w warunkach przekształceń ustrojowych w Polsce w latach 1945-1950 na przykładzie Krakowa*, Kraków, 1994, p. 48.

modation management and rented accommodation control, which armed the authorities with various weapons for intervening in the residential accommodation domain. In its more radical application, flats and sub-tenancies could only be occupied by persons who had the right to such accommodation by allocation, that is, those who were allocated accommodation on account of their profession, occupation or position, which required that they lived in town. National councils acquired the right to introduce resident to residential space ratios, and to determine the minimum number of people per room and the minimum usable space per lodger.<sup>10</sup>

The systemic principles of housing policy were liberalised after 1956. In line with the new principles of the housing policy, the act of 28 May 1957 took certain categories of residential accommodation from the control of the public sector. Moreover, the state started to withdraw from covering the entire cost of housing development, forcing new tenants to share in the costs. One of the few rent increases in the postwar period was imposed in 1956, but it failed in its purpose of stopping the process of decapitalisation of accommodation resources.

These principles were reformulated yet again in 1970. The element which distinguished Gierek's housing policy from other periods of Peoples' Poland was the domination of cooperatives as the vehicle to meet the housing demand. For this reason, in 1976, council (municipal) housing development, which had satisfied the needs of the poorest, came to a complete standstill.<sup>11</sup> Cooperatives virtually became the only investors in the socialised housing sector. However, their role as distributors of living accommodation was subject to proportional contraction and was mainly taken over by workplaces (especially from 1976) and provincial governors (voivods – who were given their own stocks of housing to be allocated at their own discretion).

The 1980s did not change the general main principles of the housing policy that were binding in the earlier period. When looking at the new detailed solutions that were propounded, it seems essential to point to the return to council housing for the poorest (as from 1981).

The effect of this stringent control was not just the dilution of the law on home ownership rights. The state and cooperatives staffed by political ap-

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Archiwum Akt Nowych (hereafter AAN), Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej (hereafter KC PZPR), mikr. 2940 (sygn. 1771), Załącznik nr 1 do protokołu nr 79 posiedzenia BP, 10 lipca 1973, „Wstępne założenia polityki mieszkaniowej na lata 1976-1980”, Warszawa, lipiec 1973.

pointments, not only decided on who would get a flat and when, but also on what sort it should be: the cyclically-set building standards defined how big a flat should be for a family of a given size. The admissible norms in terms of living space also applied to private single family houses.

## POLISH ROADS TO HOUSING: TYPES

What were the most important routes to acquiring housing in the period of the Polish People's Republic? We think that they can be divided into two basic types:

1. the "normal" route to obtaining accommodation (from the point of view of the political system at that time);
2. Active routes bypassing housing waiting lists and/or accelerating allocation procedures (at various degrees of legality).

Within the framework of each of them, one can find numerous "sub-types" whose frequency of application depended on the resourcefulness and policy of the housing officers and those who were seeking to be housed. The "normal" route in getting accommodation assumed being put on the waiting list upon fulfilling the conditions envisaged by the regulations. The binding regulations anticipated, above all, the necessity of submitting the necessary documents confirming employment, income, one's housing conditions to date, and, in the case of cooperative housing, the accumulation of the appropriate contribution to the enterprise. Each of these paths, which were to lead to receiving the desired accommodation, was usually sufficiently long to tempt people into seeking short-cuts of various degrees of legality. Let us, therefore, take a look at the most typical ones.

In the case of council housing, the deciding parties were the local councils which were supposed to be guided by the established principles of housing laws and regulations. Here, a decisive effect was exerted by the changing the hierarchy of importance in relations to circumstances, such as difficult housing conditions, low income, and utility of the applicant for an allocation "to the implementation of the planned economic tasks of socialised workplaces or the functioning of central government offices".<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> E. Ochendowski, *Prawo mieszkaniowe i polityka mieszkaniowa*, Toruń, 1980, p. 64.

In practice, the thus established rules were repeatedly broken. Controls over the distribution of these flats revealed glaring infringements of the law; they were habitually allocating to people who were not entitled to them. The progressive lowering of per capita family income thresholds which entitled families to this type of accommodation made their acquisition increasingly difficult. In the case of council housing a commonly found abuse was also the non-verification of applications for allocations submitted by applicants, the failure to check the veracity of the data they gave and their non-updating of existing applications. This primarily concerned the housing conditions of applicants, actual employment status and levels of earnings, material standing including ownership of real property (flats, houses or land with building permission), as well as special entitlements stemming from health conditions or job type. The consequence of this were allocations "in contravention of the law and the principles of social justice".<sup>13</sup>

While it transpired that the possibility of getting accommodation by compulsory allocation was increasingly illusory, the role of housing cooperatives increased and the number of their members (and candidates) considerably exceeded investment capabilities.

Making cooperatives (after 1956) more and more important institutions to meet housing demands with the help of numerous financial and legal instruments, produced questionable effects. Cooperatives already grappled with the problem of a growing waiting list of those trying to get their dreamed accommodation starting from the end of the 1950s. In 1959, it was ascertained that in big cities, they were not able to register everybody who wished to be enrolled on the waiting list.<sup>14</sup> An attempt to slow-down this pressure by introducing the institution of candidate members brought very limited results.

In 1984, 226,900 members (32.2%) and 22,800 candidates (2%) had to wait over ten years for a cooperative flat; 179,300 (25.4%) and 596,200 (52.2%) respectively had to wait 6 - 10 years, and 297,400 (42.3%) and 523,600 (45.8%) - respectively - up to five years.<sup>15</sup> In such a situation, various queue-jumping procedures became increasingly common.

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<sup>13</sup> Najwyższa Izba Kontroli. *Inspekcja Robotniczo-Chłopska, Informacja o wynikach społecznej oceny zasadności przydziałów mieszkań w 1985 r.*, Warszawa, wrzesień 1985, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Związek Spółdzielni Mieszkaniowych i Budowlanych, *Sprawozdanie Zarządu za okres od 1 stycznia do 31 grudnia 1959*, Warszawa, 1960, pp. 10-15.

<sup>15</sup> AAN, KC PZPR, LXIX/315, "Wybrane problemy funkcjonowania spółdzielczości mieszkaniowej (tezy do dyskusji)", Warszawa, marzec 1986, f. 112ff.

Without doubt, the system of privilege and preference that was created for certain social-professional groups was abused on a fairly regular basis. Besides the obvious consequence of the system's logic being the easier access to housing of people in power and public figures, much of the preserved source materials points at employment in housing cooperatives as a factor which decisively facilitated access to this deficit commodity. Cooperative management boards admitted their employees in accelerated mode as members and then allocated them accommodation on a queue-jumping basis.<sup>16</sup>

From the point of view of getting a flat, it was also exceptionally advantageous to take up employment in an enterprise which had a hand in building it. In conditions of permanent shortage of building materials and building workers, cooperatives ever more frequently ensured for themselves access to both in exchange for homes in the properties they built. Chain transactions (flats for workers of building firms in exchange for building and fitting out blocks and estates) were increasingly commonplace.<sup>17</sup>

Another increasingly frequent abuse was the allocation of more than one flat to select categories of people. Audit reports on housing cooperatives confirm that a varied array of techniques was employed to obtain additional accommodation. There were verified cases of members of cooperatives getting divorced to obtain two flats, of selling one flat and moving in with a new spouse.<sup>18</sup> In some situations, breaking the law could enable one family to have more than one cooperative flat and a single family house.<sup>19</sup> Such cases seem to have been few and far between, but a reasonably reliable estimate of their incidence seems impossible.

For many Poles, the first and most important place with which they tied their hopes for solving their housing problems was the workplace. The workplace could support its workers both in their efforts to obtain a flat as well as to refurbish it. Primarily, this was because many of them owned so-called workplace flats or were building them. Moreover, after

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<sup>16</sup> Archiwum Zakładowe Najwyższej Izby Kontroli (hereafter AZNIK), Zespół Administracji i Gospodarki Terenowej, 1629/48, "Informacja o wynikach kontroli przestrzegania zasad przydziału mieszkań spółdzielczych", Warszawa, April 1983, p. 70.

<sup>17</sup> AZNIK, Zespół Administracji i Gospodarki Terenowej, 1619/11, "Informacja o wynikach kontroli przestrzegania zasad przydziału mieszkań", Warszawa, maj 1980, ff. 46-48.

<sup>18</sup> AAN, CZSBM, 5/352, "Synteza wyników lustracji problemowych dotyczących badania organizacji i realizacji zamian mieszkań i zmian uprawnień do lokali", f. 303ff.

<sup>19</sup> AZNIK, Zespół Administracji i Gospodarki Terenowej, 1619/11, op. cit., ff. 35-38.

1956, workplace and inter-workplace housing cooperatives came into being which shared flats among their workers. Apart from that, they could "buy out" some of the accommodation that was being built by common cooperatives and support the efforts of their workers aimed at receiving service flats (known as "mieszkanie kwaterunkowe").

The system of obtaining and of allocating housing accommodation (and the financial resources for this purpose), through or with the participation of workplaces, was seen by the interested parties themselves and the extra-workplace institutions concerned with their distribution, as exceptionally complicated, because it was based to a very large degree on unclear criteria. Research in the archives of various workplaces confirms these opinions. It is, thus, difficult to establish on the basis of this research the reasons for the differentiated treatment of various employees, but the fact of existence of these complexities is beyond any doubt.<sup>20</sup>

Audits regarding allocations of so-called workplace flats repeatedly revealed the non-observance of binding regulations. Enterprises did not abide by the Council of Ministers (Cabinet) instructions and continued to dedicate "their" accommodation to the purpose of improving the then prevailing living conditions of their workers, and more rarely on satisfying their most urgent needs or supplementing their skilled staff.

An audit of allocations of flats in nine provinces completed in April 1980 revealed that accommodation intended for temporary supply workers and for people who were indispensable in given industries, were allocated to local big-wigs within the framework of "improving their housing conditions". Bypassing waiting lists in allocating accommodation also applied to sportsmen.<sup>21</sup> A flat was an exceptionally attractive deficit commodity which could facilitate sorting out an exceptionally varied range of transactions, not least between private persons.

That the time of waiting for accommodation depended on the housing official in charge, can be seen by taking data for 1977. On a countrywide scale, out of the general number of cooperative housing units allocated in 1977 by workplaces, 61.8% were received by persons who in that year received cooperative membership rights. This was a glaring violation of the rule of first come, first served, that is, that the first in line for a flat alloca-

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<sup>20</sup> See, among others, Archiwum Państwowe w Łodzi (hereafter APŁ), Zakłady Przemysłu Wełnianego im. Piotra Bardowskiego "Vigotex" w Łodzi 1947-1975, 70, "Protokół Konferencji Samorządu Robotniczego przy ZPW im. Bardowskiego w dniu 5 lipca 1966"; *ibidem*, "Protokół z KSR w ZPW im. P. Bardowskiego w dniu 20 IV 1968".

<sup>21</sup> AZNIK, Zespół Administracji i Gospodarki Terenowej, 1619/11, *op. cit.*, ff. 35-38.

tion were supposed to be the long standing cooperative members at the top of the waiting list.<sup>22</sup>

The practice of grace and favour as a consciously adopted policy in allocating housing accommodation to workers of enterprises treated as key to the economy, ensured the desired stabilisation of their staff. Even so, a relatively high proportion of workers took up employment in enterprises that were of importance to the economy to get their own living accommodation all the faster or to change their existing smaller accommodation for something bigger; but upon achieving that aim, they would leave the employer from whom they received the desired accommodation. Thus, enterprises lost not only useful workers but also housing facilities, and to attract others with analogous qualifications, they had to apply for further housing resources.<sup>23</sup>

In this way, the declared universal right to housing was travestied by its subordination to employment policy which, through preferential motivational allocation practices, impacted specific professional groupings, enterprises, institutions and attitudes.<sup>24</sup>

Another way of satisfying housing demands was to build single family houses. A more friendly climate for this type of solution appeared after 1956. Numerous legal acts were passed then which were aimed at offering public aid for this type of investment.<sup>25</sup> But in spite of this, investments still encountered numerous barriers which in a very significant way restricted their scale. One of the most formidable difficulties lay in obtaining state-owned building plots. Their allocation was frequently impossible due to the absence of local zoning plans.<sup>26</sup> The areas offered to those building their own homes were deprived of infrastructure; the allocation

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<sup>22</sup> AAN, Urząd Rady Ministrów (hereafter URM), 2.9/47, "Informacja o wynikach kontroli rozdziału mieszkań będących w dyspozycji zakładów pracy", Warszawa, lipiec 1978, ff. 122-26.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, ff. 119-25.

<sup>24</sup> A. Kulesza, *Ogólna charakterystyka sytuacji i potrzeb mieszkaniowych w Polsce*, [in:] P. Wójcik (Ed.), *Położenie klasy robotniczej w Polsce*, vol. 2. *Kwestia mieszkaniowa*, Warszawa 1984, pp. 7-37.

<sup>25</sup> The most important of them was the resolution of the Council of Ministers (cabinet) of 15 March 1957 regarding public aid for housing development out of the population's own resources (*Monitor Polski*, 1957, nr 22, pos. 157); resolution of the Council of Ministers of 22 May 1965 regarding public aid in building single family houses and flats in small blocks by individuals (*Monitor Polski*, 1965, nr 27, pos. 140).

<sup>26</sup> AAN, Ministerstwo Gospodarki komunalnej (hereafter MGK), 12/2, "Sprawozdanie z przebiegu realizacji budownictwa mieszkaniowego ze środków własnych ludności (spółdzielcze i indywidualne) w r. 1957", f. 73.

of building materials was extremely insufficient, likewise the granting of loans. Not infrequently, obtaining planning permission involved corrupt practices.

Building a single family house, irrespective of any bureaucratic and material obstacles, was usually very complicated, not least because of the intensified audits of the fiscal authorities.<sup>27</sup> All of this gave rise to a number of pathological behavioural modes in the building and housing sectors, including the incidence of building without the necessary permits and consents. One such scam was to purpose-build a house which could collapse because the local authorities would then be forced to allocate a flat of a decent standard.<sup>28</sup> Countering these incipient lawless building practices was proving increasingly ineffective.<sup>29</sup>

In the opinion of experts on PRL, there was practically no possibility of building a house without using stolen materials if the building works were not to drag on for years. Building was thus not only an extremely costly enterprise, but also one that led those who undertook it into the outer fringes of the law and, frequently, to cross the bounds of legality.

The need to break through a system hamstrung by red tape induced people to seek ways of circumventing the law or to break it outright. In trying to get a flat, people often had no compunction about handing out bribes and lying in their statutory applications for housing – just to increase their chances in their struggle for this deficit commodity. With this very aim in mind, spouses would take fictitious divorces and families noticeably “swelled up” with dependants when applying for a flat (because the bigger the family, the bigger the flat), which “swelling” would then go down a few months after getting what they wanted.

Difficulties in getting a flat, especially by young people setting up families in the 1970s, contributed to a deepening mood of frustration and discontent. This malaise, intensified by the crisis in housing development in the 1980s, may have played a significant role in shaping the anti-establishment postures of the young and most active group of Polish workers.

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<sup>27</sup> W. Małicka, *Motywy podjęcia budowy oraz preferencje mieszkaniowe budujących domy jednorodzinne. Cz. I. Korzystający z pomocy kredytowej państwa*, Instytut Gospodarki Mieszkaniowej, Materiały i Studia, z. 4/175/69, Warszawa 1969, p. 53.

<sup>28</sup> J. Cegielski, *Dzikié budownictwo w Warszawie (w świetle dokumentów walki z samowolą budowlaną)*, Warszawa 1963, p. 86.

<sup>29</sup> AAN, Komitet Budownictwa, Urbanistyki i Architektury (hereafter KBUiA), 3/9, “Prezydium Rady Narodowej w Krakowie do Wydziału Organizacyjno-Karnego (informacja o samowolach budowlanych w Krakowie w r. 1959)”.

It seems that the general mood of discontent may have actually been triggered most of all by the situation on the housing front. It was less significant in the case of white collar workers than blue collar workers, but in conjunction with future attitudes, it had an equal share in laying the foundations of rebellion. In this way, the inability to satisfy the demand for decent housing which – according to popular belief – was the birthright of PRL citizens, contributed to the downfall of communism. On the other hand, the methods of procuring a decent home had a “criminalising” effect on everyday life which consolidated law-breaking habits. This heritage had its negative resonance in post-1989 social attitudes and behaviour which endures until today.

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