Comparing Squatting in East and West Europe

[Udo Grashoff](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/people/udo-grashoff), DAAD Francis L Carsten Lecturer in Modern German History at the [School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES)](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ssees/), discusses some insights from a workshop on [illegal housing in East and West Europe](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/european-institute/events/2015-16/squatting) he organised together with UCL historian [Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/history/people/academic-staff/florence-sutcliffe-braithwaite) on 13 June 2016.

Illegal housing emerged in quite different contexts in East and West Europe, which makes it a challenge to identify useful common denominators for comparisons. In some countries it became a mass phenomenon due to a specific opportunity structure; by contrast, it remained extremely rare in others. One result of the workshop is that focusing on supposed peripheries such as Eastern Europe can provide new insights. Squatting in the Soviet bloc is an uncharted territory. Until recently, scholars even assumed ‘the non-existence of squatting under socialism’.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, as several papers of the workshop demonstrated, this view is incommensurate with the complex reality in socialist countries. There were Roma squatters in Sofia (one quarter of Bulgarian Roma lived illegally), thousands of ‘Schwarzwohner’ in many East German towns, a smaller but significant number of illegal occupants of ‘kommunalkas’ in Leningrad, and, even though not occupying existing buildings, around 50,000 people who built cottages illegally in the periphery of ‘wild Warsaw’ in the 1950s. No doubt there is still a world of hidden stories to discover in the East.

But it was not the goal of the discussions to leave it at that. In order to achieve a more nuanced understanding of squatting in East and West Europe, the main objective of the workshop was to think about the viability and suitability of comparisons. At first view, a few similarities seem to back the prevailing understanding of European squatting as a social movement. There were young squatters seeking a place to live an alternative life on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The degree of organisation might have been different, with only little cohesion in the East, but there is reason to believe at least some squatters in the Soviet bloc were similarly motivated to those in the West. At the same time, however, the absence of overtly political motivations seems to be a fundamental difference. Most people who occupied flats illegally in the East just wanted a place to live an ordinary life. Squatting in East Europe was mostly silent, invisible and basically self-help. Is this a specific feature of illegal housing in a dictatorship, then? Apparently not, as Thomas Aguilera has shown. According to his research, the majority of squatters in Paris are neither organised nor politically motivated. Hence, to have a roof over one’s head seems to be the main driving force of illegal housing in West European towns, too. E.T.C. Dee’s current research in Rotterdam suggests that relatively unpolitical squatting was also important in this Dutch town.

This raises questions: How typical are patterns of organised squatting that can be observed in West European metropolises such as London or Amsterdam? Political actions of squatters, including protests against capitalism and resistance to evictions, have shaped the public image of squatting. However, a remarkable number of squatters acted in isolation. Is it adequate to ignore those people ‘suffering severe housing deprivation’ and acting ‘without further reference to the international squatters’ movement’ as some scholars have done recently?[[2]](#endnote-2) Does conceptualising squatting as a social movement risk overlooking the ‘ordinary’ squatting?

Studying almost invisible squatters who don’t write pamphlets, don’t appear in the media and try to avoid publicity (for good reasons) certainly implies methodological and practical obstacles. But before tackling practical problems I consider it necessary to overcome a certain bias to achieve a more nuanced understanding of squatting. One possible starting point for multifarious comparisons could be Hans Pruijt’s [configurations of squatting](http://repub.eur.nl/pub/25656). Not all configurations might be of same importance in different contexts but some of them certainly are – such as deprivation-based, political and entrepreneurial squatting. Regarding the first, one might distinguish different forms according to the degree of informal or formal organisation. The case of London’s family squatting movement, organised by activists in the late 1960s and 1970s, might be an exception rather than the rule. Comparisons could also reveal other patterns (such as informal kinship networks in Poland).

As to entrepreneurial squatting, there was no consensus at the workshop how to deal with illegal appropriation of land by corporations or individuals motivated by profit. Whereas squatting in need, though not legal, is mainly considered justifiable at least morally, illegal housing for greed is certainly evil. But are we well advised to exclude it just because we don’t like it?

Another matter of lively debate at the workshop was the concept of time. Present squatters who took part in the workshop depicted their circumstances as fluctuating and unstable. In contrast, squatters in East Germany and West Berlin felt more embedded in their neighbourhood. There is room for more research on favourable factors that provide relative stability and security for squatters, at least for a certain time, and on changes in the opportunity structure. Transitions such as the transformation of ‘Schwarzwohnen’ under socialism into squatting in reunited democratic Germany, or the demolition of Roma housing as a consequence of post-socialist privatisation in Bulgaria are by no means specific to the East; comparisons could lead to a deeper understanding of the rise and decline of illegal housing.

Squatting is a global phenomenon in different contexts in the First, Second and, notably, in the Third World – it is the main area of illegal housing. It is estimated that approximately a quarter of the world`s urban population lives in slums, with over 863 million slum-dwellers in developing countries (UN-Habitat 2013). In view of that, the workshop was just the first step towards a global perspective, and a bigger conference is being planned with comparisons of illegal housing in different parts of the world.

1. Michaela Pixova/Arnost Novak, Prague. Post-1989: Boom, decline and renaissance, in: Baltic Worlds, April 2016, pp. 34-45, 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)