

Mihaylov, V. and Ilchenko, M. (eds.): Post-Utopian Spaces: Transforming and Re-Evaluating Urban Icons of Socialist Modernism. Abingdon–New York, Routledge, 2023. 234 p.

With the victory of the socialist revolution in 1917 and the establishment of the Soviet Union, a new chapter in the global urbanisation began, unusual in many respects. The political, social and economic framework conditions of the emerging Soviet system differed significantly from those of capitalist countries, and this difference also left its mark on urban development. After World War II, as a result of the expansion of the Soviet sphere of interest, the communist regimes that came to power in the countries of Central Europe and the Balkans also adapted this Soviet, socialist urbanisation model, with more or less differences. Perhaps the most characteristic products of this particular urbanisation path are the newly founded, planned, socialist (industrial) cities, the construction of which began in the Soviet Union during the first five-year plan (1928–1932), and then continued at an almost unbroken pace until the mid-1980s. Although new cities were founded not only in the so-called Second World, but also in the First and the Third World, however, there is a difference of magnitude in the number of newly founded cit-

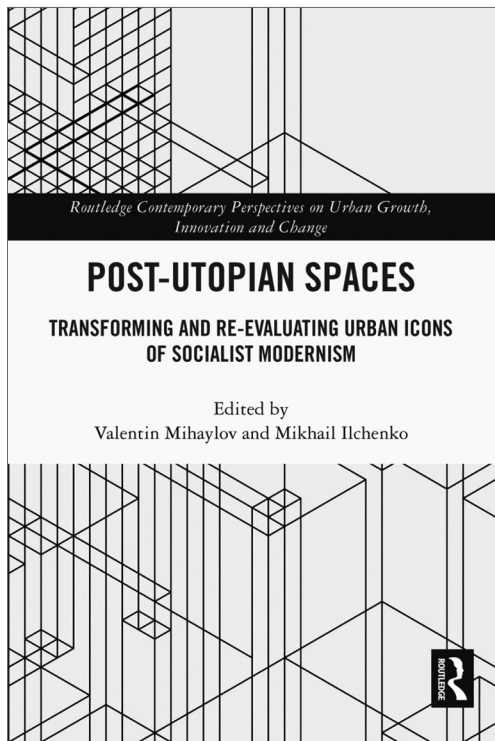
ies: during the existence of the Eastern Bloc, around 1,200 new cities were built, the vast majority of them in the Soviet Union, and a few dozen in European countries that fell into the Soviet sphere of interest.

Socialist and post-socialist urbanisation, the socialist and post-socialist city are intensively researched issues in international literature. Regarding the concept of the socialist/post-socialist city, however, it is worth noting that in the international literature these terms are not typically used for new cities founded in the Eastern Bloc, but for cities in (former) socialist countries in general, and the majority of the studies adapts to this approach. This point of view also characterised perhaps the most cited work on the topic (FRENCH, R.A. and HAMILTON, F.E.I. 1979), and it can be said to be general today: the capitals and big cities of the region are primarily the focus of interest. In some cases, the author notes that the examination of medium-sized industrial cities can lead to slightly different results – such as HIRT, S. (2013), who calls these settlements “the landscape heritage of socialism”. Although there have been articles focusing on one planned city or comparing some such settlements, as well as a larger volume of studies (SZIRMAL, V. 2016), the examination of planned socialist cities falls outside the main focus of the socialist/post-socialist urban research.

The volume edited by Valentin MIHAYLOV and Mikhail ILCHENKO, published in the “Routledge Contemporary Perspectives on Urban Growth, Innovation and Change” series, is connected to this somewhat peripheral research area. In the series, which currently has nine published volumes, the study of post-socialist urban development is prominently present. In addition to the volume reviewed here, the focus of another three volumes is also on different dimensions of post-socialist urban transformation, however, this volume is the only one that specifically focuses on planned socialist cities.

The book contains 12 chapters (9 of which are case studies of a city or district), and a total of 10 authors (including the two editors) collaborated in writing the chapters. The geographical focus of the volume is the post-Soviet region, post-socialist Central Europe and the Balkans. Among the authors are human geographers, sociologists, architects and historians, all of whom are active in the academic sphere of Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

In Chapter 1 (*Introduction: Socialist Urban Utopias and Their Continuing Transformations*), the editors state that although there is a significant literature on socialist and post-socialist cities and urbanisation, in comparison, few works specifically deal with the model cities of socialism born on the drawing board, which



were the most complete embodiment of socialist urban planning. According to them, the term “socialist city” belongs primarily and most to these utopian cities – their appearance, development and still ongoing transformation are examined in the volume.

According to the editors, the research of these settlements is particularly timely and relevant now due to two main factors. First, the symbolic revival of socialist urban spaces experienced in the last decade, the start of the social discourse related to this, the importance of which may seem secondary compared to the socio-economic challenges, but it plays an important role in the rediscovery of the urban heritage of the socialist era. (This is linked to the generally growing interest in modernist architecture, in a broader sense, and the increase in financial expenditures for the revitalisation and promotion of this heritage.) Second, the long-term changes of the urban fabric can be investigated and evaluated in the post-socialist era, for which socialist cities provide a particularly good opportunity. Since these settlements – in contrast to many capitals and large cities of the region – were largely avoided by large-scale changes and business investments that transformed the urban fabric, therefore, as the remaining “clean pieces” of socialist urbanisation, traces of their socialist urban past and their effects on their current dynamics can be examined. Furthermore, the key question of post-socialist urban research can also be investigated: how the socialist urban model can adapt and function in the absence of the ideology that created it. While the socialist urbanisation experiment can generally be considered unfinished and unrealised, in the case of the planned socialist cities, this project was almost completely realised. To examine the post-socialist transformation of these urban spaces, it is necessary to take into account the social, economic, cultural and spatial dimensions.

According to the editors, the book generally answers the following three key questions:

“1. What remains of the concept of planned, utopian socialist cities and how has their space and social organisation been adapted to the conditions of democracy, capitalism, and neo-liberal management of urban space?

2. Are these cities still convenient for life, work, and leisure, and to what extent do their urban fabric meet current needs of today’s city development?

3. What are the paths of adapting the heritage of socialist modernism to contemporary values, symbolic meanings, and the visions of post-socialist societies in different geographic, social, and cultural contexts?” (pp. 5–6)

It is an important endeavour that the case studies in the book avoid the common weakness of similar works, namely that they only focus on a narrower characteristic of each city (e.g. population decline, environmental problems). Instead, it was formulated as

an emphatic expectation of the editors for the authors of the volume that they strive for interdisciplinarity, and the formation and development of the settlements are examined from a comprehensive, as wide as possible point of view. In addition to this general expectation, the individual authors were given a fairly free hand in defining the internal structure of the chapters, selecting the emphases, and choosing the applied research methods, in accordance with their own field of expertise and research profile. Taking into account the spatial and temporal uniqueness of each settlement, a great role was devoted to embedding the research in the literature, as well as to the utilisation of archival sources and current empirical data.

The ambitious goal of Chapter 2 (*Rises and Falls of New Socialist Cities* by Valentin МИХАЙЛОВ) is to provide a comprehensive, complex, comparative overview of the issue of socialist cities, from the beginning (the founding of the Soviet Union) to the present day. The 21-page chapter (including the bibliography) is an extremely informative, interesting and compact summary of the topic written in a readable style, which can be heartily recommended to anyone interested in the issue of socialist cities.

In the first sub-chapter (*Which cities are new and socialist?*), МИХАЙЛОВ synthesises the results of various literature categorisations and sets up his own framework for defining socialist cities, which he also summarises in Figure 2.1. In the next sub-chapter (*New socialist cities during the interwar period*), the author reviews the construction of new cities in the Soviet Union from the founding of the country to World War II. He presents the antecedents of socialist cities, called “Soviet working settlement-garden”, inspired by Howard’s ideas, which were the first Soviet ideal cities, and then the concept of “agrotown”, another type of settlement, which was given a greater role than the previous one in terms of the number of established settlements. Around 1930, however, the debate of Soviet architects, planners, social utopians and politicians for more than a decade about the nature of the ideal socialist city came to an end: “The rivalry between different types of ideal cities for a classless society was won by a socialist city raised around a city-forming industrial plant” (p. 17). The author reviews the changes in ideas related to apartments and living conditions over time, presents the two main groups of socialist cities according to their geographical location, and discusses the dizzying pace of the construction of socialist cities and the prominent role these settlements played in World War II.

The next sub-chapter (*Construction of socialist cities in the Eastern Bloc after 1945*) presents the upsurge in the construction of socialist cities after World War II, when “conditions were right for the implementation of the idea of a socialist city in a wider geographical area, in countries and cultures with different cultural traditions” (p. 19). МИХАЙЛОВ, V. presents the change

of architectural and urban planning paradigms, as well as the appearance of new panel technology and the huge housing estates consisting of high-rise buildings. He refers to the urban construction boom that also took place in the Western world in the decades following World War II, and to the similarities between these new Western cities and socialist cities.

In the last unit of the chapter (*Transformation*), the author reviews the development and transformation of socialist cities after the regime changes that took place around 1990 in the countries of the region, from three main points of view: economic decline and restructuring; social and demographic problems; and the re-evaluation of the built heritage and the creation of a new identity.

The following chapters of the volume (Chapters 3–11) are the case studies presenting the selected socialist cities (or city districts). The authors of the book present the formation and development of cities and districts in nine different countries, their role in the socialist era and their post-socialist transformation, also focusing on local characteristics. The selection covers settlements of different sizes, functions and local features, of which six are administratively independent cities, while three are urban districts – the latter were originally planned as a quarter of a larger city. Through the selected settlements, most of the former European socialist countries are represented (Soviet Union, Poland, GDR, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria). The cities/districts presented in the book, in the order of the chapters, are: Uralmash in Russia (district of Yekaterinburg, written by Mikhail ILCHENKO); Zaporizhzhia in Ukraine (by Pavlo KRAVCHUK); Tychy in Poland (by Jerzy RUNGE); Eisenhüttenstadt in Germany (by Carola NEUGEBAUER); Ostrava-Poruba in Czechia (district of Ostrava, by Daniel TOPINKA); Dunaújváros in Hungary (by Kornélia KISSFAZEKAS and Melinda BENKŐ); New Belgrade in Serbia (district of Belgrade, by Zlata VUKSANOVIĆ-MACURA); Dimitrovgrad in Bulgaria (by Valentin MIHAYLOV); and Velenje in Slovenia (by Ana Kladnik).

The length of each chapter is 18–25 pages, and each has its own bibliography. The chapters are richly illustrated with black-and-white illustrations. Each chapter contains several photos (sometimes archival footage), most of them contain some kind of map, plan or scheme, and a figure showing the mental maps of local residents also appears (in the Ostrava-Poruba chapter). Tables are contained only in the Zaporizhzhia chapter (three tables). These figures and tables are useful supplements to the text.

From all the case studies, we can learn about the background and motivations of the formation of individual cities/districts, the nature of their development in the socialist era, and the developments and challenges in the post-socialist era. The authors strive for a complex approach everywhere, we can read excel-

lent urban geography studies in the book, which – not always with the same emphasis in each chapter, but – deal with the characteristics of urban fabric, architecture, society and the economy. One of the defining features of the book is that in all nine case studies the question of heritage and the cultural-symbolic dimension of the cities is emphasised. The authors deal in detail with the extent to which the visible and invisible heritage of the socialist era – including the built environment, works of art in public spaces, street names and also the mentality and local identity of the inhabitants – has remained, and how and in what direction it has changed during more than three decades of the post-socialist era. Examining individual cities/districts also creates an opportunity to present the appearance of some heavily researched, more general processes at the local level. Such is the destructive effect of the extreme profit-oriented real estate development with a “wild capitalist” approach (combined with weak state and local government regulations) on the urban fabric and cultural heritage (primarily in Uralmash and in New Belgrade); the peculiar controlled democracy that continued to exist in Ukraine from the collapse of the Soviet Union until the 2014 revolution, whose prominent power figures were “Red Directors” at the head of large factories (Zaporizhzhia); urban shrinkage (Eisenhüttenstadt); path dependence (Tychy); or the appreciation of environmental protection (Velenje).

The cities examined in the volume differ greatly in terms of how successfully they took on the challenges of the post-socialist era, and somewhat related to this, in how they are perceived in the eyes of the outside world. Sometimes, very strong local patriotism meets the incomprehension and dislike of others – in the case of Dimitrovgrad, this is manifested in persistent local resistance to attempts to change the city’s name, and in the subsequent debate that made county-wide waves after the city won the title “Bulgarian construction of the 20th century” in a television voting. Elsewhere, the socialist cities retained their generally favourable perception even in the post-socialist era (e.g. Ostrava-Poruba). The examined cities also differ in how much they try to “touristificate” the built heritage of the socialist era – the “Architectural Promenade” in Dunaújváros is a good example of such efforts.

In the last chapter of the volume (*Conclusion: Post-Utopian Spaces in Search of Alternative Urban Policies*) the two editors summarise the main research results of the previous chapters, focusing on the transformation of socialist cities in the post-socialist era, in terms of their physical space, socio-economic life and symbolic heritage. The editors identify the following three points as the main contribution of the volume to the discourse on new cities and (post-)utopian urbanisation:

1. By presenting the different paths of the post-socialist transformation, the authors move beyond

the “failure-centrism”, which is a dominant approach in the research of socialist architecture and planning.

2. By examining settlements with different geographical locations and functions, they demonstrate that socialist cities do not have a single, determined, one-dimensional development model. Instead, the nature and success of their post-socialist transformation is the result of a combination of many factors.

3. By broadening the research focus and using an interdisciplinary approach, they avoid the one-sided viewpoints that are often characteristic of studies on (post-)socialist towns.

Finally, MIHAYLOV and ILCHENKO propose possible future research directions based on the results of this volume. One such example is conducting comparative studies between socialist cities and new cities founded in other regions of the world characterised by different political, ideological, economic and ecological conditions. But the examination of socialist cities cannot be considered finished either, since their transformation is not yet complete – the dynamics of the social, economic, urban fabric and symbolic processes taking place in these cities require further monitoring.

All in all, the book is a high-quality, fresh and important contribution to the research of socialist cities. Chapter 2, which provides a complex overview of the issue, and the following nine chapters, which present case studies, stand on their own; however, by reading the book, we can get a really comprehensive and complex picture of the issue of socialist cities. A great strength of the volume is the selection of the cities of the case studies, including settlements that had almost never appeared in the international literature before. A small feeling of absence can only be related to the fact that a case study on a Romanian and an Albanian socialist city could have been included in the volume – it would also be interesting to read about whether these two countries, which until the 1980s had an extremely autarkic system, have the resulting specific features of the development and post-socialist transformation of socialist cities. Furthermore, in this way, all former European socialist countries would have been represented in the book.

Another important strength of the volume is that the issues of the symbolic dimension, heritage and identity appear much more prominently compared to most urban geography studies – while their “classical” dimensions of investigation, such as society, economy, settlement structure and architecture, are also present. The authors with a varied research profile and professional background managed to provide a complex picture of the development, transformation and future challenges of all nine investigated settlements.

The relevance of the research of socialist cities is well expressed by the words of the editors in the last chapter: “The planned socialist cities are just one of many attempts in history to create urban utopias but, undoubtedly, this experiment surpasses all previous

ones in terms of scale, geographic scope, and its profound social consequences” (p. 218). This book can be heartily recommended to all who want to get to know these special cities or expand their existing knowledge about them.

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