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INTRODUCTION

In 1947, Soviet architects and engineers embarked on a project to transform the cityscape of the Soviet capital through the construction of eight skyscrapers. When seven of these monumental buildings were completed in the 1950s, they would serve as elite apartment complexes, as luxury hotels, and as the headquarters of Moscow State University, the Ministry of Railways, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Yet, in 1947, the function of Moscow's skyscrapers was secondary to the role these structures were to play collectively on the cityscape. These buildings stood as monuments to Soviet victory in the Great Patriotic War, as pillars of Russian cultural achievement, and as evidence of the USSR's emergence as a world superpower in the postwar era. The skyscrapers were designed with the express purpose of transforming Moscow into a world-class capital city—as Stalin put it, “the capital of all capitals.”¹ Monumental by design, Moscow's skyscraper project had far-reaching consequences for the urban fabric of the Soviet capital and its inhabitants alike.

This book is a study of monumentalism and its consequences. It is a history of efforts during the Stalin era to transform Moscow from a provincial and run-down former Russian capital into *the* showcase socialist city. In the 1930s, Soviet officials and leading architects began to implement large-scale building projects in Moscow, including the Moscow-Volga Canal and the first lines of the Moscow metro. Construction of the Palace of Soviets also got underway during the 1930s. This enormous structure would have been the tallest building in the world had it been completed as planned. While in the interwar period Muscovites celebrated the construction of the large underground palaces of the metro, they would have to wait until the postwar years to witness the emergence of tall towers on their cityscape.

Moscow's postwar skyscraper project built upon the work begun in the interwar years with an even more ambitious program. The vision for the capital that emerged in 1947 placed the still-unbuilt Palace of Soviets at the center of a citywide skyscraper ensemble. With the Palace in the middle, there were to be nine skyscrapers in all. And although in the end only seven of these structures were completed, the desired effect was achieved. Each building is positioned at some distance from the next, elevating the cityscape with staccato peaks that gaze toward one another across the city below. The similarities between these tiered, ornate structures serve to unite the cityscape, creating a sense of continuity and repetition along the horizon. Moscow's skyscrapers continue to stand today as the quintessential architectural works of the Stalin era. Collectively, they are known, in English, as the “seven sisters.” In Russian, they are known as Stalin's “*vysotki*.” Together, they made, and make, Moscow monumental.



There is nothing new about architectural monumentalism. In fact, many who study this phenomenon are experts in the history of the ancient world. As archaeologist Bruce Trigger explains, architecture is monumental when its scale exceeds the practical function that the building is intended to perform.² Whether it is a residential structure or a public building, that which exists in excess of pure necessity is, by this definition, part of what makes the building “monumental.” This is not to say that monumentalism is without function. Monumental structures do more than simply contain and shelter people and things; they also guard and convey meaning and memory. From palaces to temples to tombs, monumental architecture throughout history has served the purpose of honoring one’s connection to the sacred and communicating the right to rule. Building monumentally typically serves an official purpose, tied as it is to the desire to project power or make a statement. Whether it is a pyramid or a ziggurat, a Gothic cathedral or a skyscraper, monumentality has proven useful to many societies throughout history. The Soviet Union was no exception.

The Soviet Union under Stalin was, among twentieth-century societies, one of the most enamored with architectural monumentalism. In Moscow in the 1930s, the question of architectural monumentality was brought to the fore by the Palace of Soviets. This building project prompted not just architects and engineers, but ordinary Soviet citizens as well, to reflect on monumentalism. What was the purpose of monumental structures in a “proletarian” state? What symbols and values should they communicate? While the Palace of Soviets was to stand as a monument to an individual—Lenin—it was also a structure that would bring together the collective. As Henri Lefebvre put it when commenting on the long global history of building monumentally, “monumental space offered each member of a society an image of that membership, an image of his or her social visage. It thus constituted a collective mirror more faithful than any personal one.”³ That Soviet citizens might look up at the Palace of Soviets and see themselves was precisely the point.

But the Palace of Soviets was never finished. Instead, in 1947 work began in Moscow on eight other structures, seven of which were completed. The Palace of Soviets would remain an important icon through the Stalin years, but only its progeny—a ring of skyscrapers—would take real form. While historians have typically focused on the idealized visions for Moscow’s iconic structures, this book looks at what happened when monumental plan met material reality during the final years of the Stalin era. From the displacement of residents to the downfall of architectural and political elites, Moscow’s skyscrapers changed the course of political, social, and cultural life in the Soviet capital. Insofar as they served as mirrors in which each individual could understand their place in the collective (to borrow Lefebvre’s phrase), Moscow’s skyscrapers reflected different images to different people. This book explores what those diverse groups, from architects to workers to residents, saw in these buildings.



The enormous energy dedicated to making Moscow monumental brought with it a number of consequences specific to the Soviet, and Stalinist, context: it fostered internationalism, reshaped the city of Moscow in unintended ways, and served as an opportunity to connect the Soviet capital to the pre-revolutionary Russian past. First, Soviet architectural monumentalism compelled Moscow’s architects to engage with

the wider world beyond socialist borders. In their work on the Palace of Soviets in the 1930s, Moscow's architects went abroad, seeking technical knowledge that would enable them to build ever higher. In 1934, Palace of Soviets architect Boris Iofan led a group of his colleagues on a study tour of major building sites across the United States. On this trip, Iofan and his team hired a New York-based engineering firm to assist with work on the Palace of Soviets in Moscow. And when they were in Manhattan, the Soviet group toured the Rockefeller Center construction site, where they made lasting connections to the American building industry. The relationship between Soviet internationalism and monumentalism changed in the postwar years, when the focus shifted from the dream of the Palace of Soviets to the construction of eight other skyscrapers. Moscow's postwar skyscrapers, in contrast to the never-realized Palace of Soviets, transformed Soviet monumentalism from socialist realist projection to built reality with long-lasting consequences.

Built in the first years of the Cold War, Moscow's skyscrapers signaled a shift in the way the Soviet Union positioned itself globally. Gone were the days when Soviet architects would go abroad—least of all to America—for assistance. Now, architects from the expanding socialist world would flock to Moscow to study the capital city's new buildings. There was newfound irony in transforming the icon of capitalist triumph, the skyscraper, into a symbol of communism. And the message about Soviet supremacy that Moscow's architects sought to convey with their buildings was one that refused to translate beyond socialist borders. Nonetheless, Moscow's skyscrapers played an important role in the shifting dynamics of Soviet internationalism. By examining the 1930s through the 1950s, this book traces the long build-up to the *Zhdanovshchina*: the xenophobic and anti-Western ideological campaigns that dominated Soviet culture in the postwar Stalin period.

Second, this book argues that Stalin-era monumentalism had much larger consequences than its planners and architects originally intended—consequences that affected both the shape of the Soviet capital and the lives of its inhabitants. Moscow's postwar skyscrapers symbolized the stability and longevity of the Stalinist regime in the wake of Soviet victory in 1945. Yet in the day-to-day life of the capital these buildings were destabilizing structures that rose only to create new chasms in late-Stalinist society. In 1952, I. G. Kartashov wrote a letter to Lavrentii Beria, the Soviet official who oversaw the construction of Moscow's eight skyscrapers until his arrest in 1953. Kartashov had worked on the skyscraper at the Red Gates. "I took part in the construction," Kartashov wrote, "and the whole time I cherished a dream that I might be lucky enough to live out my old age in that building."⁴ Kartashov dreamed of escaping the damp room he lived in with his family in a communal apartment in Moscow. His hopes, like those of so many others, would not and could not be satisfied by Stalinist monumentalism. While the Soviet state granted apartments in the residential skyscrapers to a number of elites, far more Soviet citizens were left to carry on dreaming.

In addition to creating disillusionment among Muscovites like Kartashov, Moscow's postwar skyscrapers led to disappointment among another group: the tens of thousands of people evicted from their homes and displaced to the outskirts of the city. Monumentalism propelled the urban expansion of Moscow outward, all while solidifying and making ever more visible the social hierarchies of late Stalinism. The

project also required the influx of large numbers of construction workers—both free and incarcerated—brought into Moscow from the hinterland. In order to build the skyscrapers, construction managers found themselves tasked with hastily building housing and other amenities for uprooted Muscovites and incoming workers. In tracing how the skyscraper project pushed Moscow's expansion into the forested suburbs, villages, and collective farms around the capital, this book examines how, in requiring so much other construction, the project to build skyscrapers in Moscow was in the end far grander and more all-encompassing than its architects ever imagined.

Finally, this book argues that Moscow's skyscrapers tied the Stalin era to the Russian past in ways that both bolstered and undermined the Soviet state's claims to legitimacy. Designed in stylistic reference to the Kremlin towers, Moscow's monumental new buildings harmonized with the existing cityscape. But these structures also stood as evidence of the tension between history and revolution. The skyscraper project was publicly unveiled in September 1947 during Moscow's 800th anniversary celebrations, an occasion that threatened to overshadow the upcoming thirtieth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. In the lead-up to this new municipal holiday, city officials and residents alike struggled to draw a straight line between the long pre-revolutionary past and the comparatively short Soviet present. Moscow's skyscraper architects faced a similar challenge in early design discussions held in that autumn of 1947. Which past Moscow's skyscrapers should represent—which heritage they should build upon—was a vexing question with no clear answer.

When time came to break ground and build, skyscraper construction managers were confronted by the past in yet another way. In 1949, workers digging the foundation pit for the skyscraper in the *Zariad'e* district unearthed the remains of a settlement more than eight hundred years old. Upturned in the soil lay earthenware vessels, glass bracelets, and other remnants of the distant past. While these objects may well have been ignored in earlier decades, the feverish historicism of the late-Stalin years made them valuable. Construction work on the *Zariad'e* skyscraper would be delayed while archaeological digs were carried out on the site in 1949 and 1950. Ultimately, the backward glance of late Stalinism both shaped and complicated Moscow's postwar urban transformation. Today, the historical symbolism of the skyscrapers is less complex: they stand out on the Moscow cityscape simply as indelible symbols of Stalinism.



Moscow Monumental develops its tripartite argument about international engagement, urban restructuring, and historical ties in eight chapters. The book begins by examining how Moscow was seen and imagined in the late 1920s, in the years immediately following its designation as the Soviet capital and in the period immediately before the city's so-called "socialist reconstruction." The tensions that flared up in this moment between destruction and preservation and between the old and the new would remain alive throughout the subsequent Stalin era.

When Soviet officials began to take charge of the redevelopment of their new capital city in the 1930s, they embarked on a series of iconic projects, including the Palace of Soviets. Although it was never completed, the Palace was the cornerstone

of interwar debates about urban monumentalism, and any history of Stalin's postwar skyscrapers is incomplete without it. This book builds on the established narrative of the Palace's design to also consider its attempted construction. Not only did this gargantuan structure provide a stylistic precedent for the city's postwar monumental development, its construction established important institutional structures and international ties. Moscow's, and the Soviet Union's, experience at war starting in 1941 also served as a crucial step on the path to postwar monumentalism. Before turning to the postwar period, the third chapter of this book explores Muscovites' wartime ordeals, including the flight of the Palace of Soviets architects to the Urals in 1941.

With the fourth chapter, the book turns to Moscow's postwar skyscraper project by analyzing the design and planning process that led up to construction. Top Soviet leaders and architects were influenced in their discussions in 1947 by the broader political and cultural context of the postwar Stalin era. The postwar ideological campaign, known as the *Zhdanovshchina*, and the Cold War more generally, influenced the planning process in fundamental ways, ensuring that Moscow's skyscrapers would be conceived as examples of both Soviet world supremacy and Russian national achievement. When the skyscraper project got underway, however, idealized plans had unintended consequences on the ground. The fifth chapter of this book focuses on Moscow's Zariad'e, the district chosen for skyscraper development closest to the Kremlin. This chapter examines the buildings, people, and pasts that existed already on the plots chosen for skyscraper development. It describes how social differentiation was embedded in Moscow's urban terrain as tens of thousands of Muscovites were moved away from the skyscraper plots to new housing built for them on the outskirts of the capital.

The book moves in its final chapters to the histories of those who built and those who lived in Moscow's skyscrapers. These chapters explore how skyscraper building served as a means through which both the state and the self could be rebuilt after the war. Chapter 6 follows the experiences of builders, both regular workers and Gulag laborers, who came mainly from regions beyond Moscow. This chapter weighs the idealized skyscraper builder—the “*vysotnik*”—against the reality of life on these construction sites. Chapter 7 turns to investigate the lives of Soviet elites who requested apartments in the residential skyscrapers. This elect group sought to escape Moscow's housing crisis by appealing to top officials for apartments in one of the city's new towers. Drawing on letters of request written to Beria and other Soviet leaders, Chapter 7 explores the hope and disappointment that Moscow's skyscrapers represented in the popular and elite imaginations. Those who created and those who benefited from the skyscrapers, like those displaced for them, were compelled to engage directly with the Soviet state. As Chapters 5 through 7 show, architectural monumentalism served not only to reshape the skyline of the Soviet capital, but also to reframe relations between state and society in the final years of the Stalin era.

At the very moment Moscow's skyscrapers were completed in the mid-1950s, they became symbols of Stalinist “excess.” The final chapter of *Moscow Monumental* charts Nikita Khrushchev's attack at the Builders' Conference in December 1954 on these structures and on the architects who built them. Moscow's monumental buildings were swiftly cast as villains in the battle against uneconomical design. Yet the capital's

new skyscrapers, as useful as they were monumental, continued to dominate the cityscape. During the Khrushchev era, Moscow State University, in particular, served as a key site of the Thaw. And when identical buildings were given as “gifts” to Soviet and Eastern European capitals in the 1950s, the Stalinist skyscraper cast its long shadow from Moscow to Warsaw, Riga, Prague, Bucharest, and Kyiv.



In the trajectory of Stalinist construction projects, Moscow’s skyscrapers were late arrivals. The smokestacks of Magnitogorsk had been billowing for two decades by the time the skyscrapers made their debut in the Soviet capital. Through the 1930s, industrialization drove urban development across the Soviet Union.⁵ Moscow’s postwar refashioning was different. The buildings that made Stalinism legible on the skyline of the Soviet capital appeared at the moment that the Stalinist regime was coming to an end. This timing has had an effect on how the skyscrapers are seen—or, often, not seen—by historians.

It was Nikita Khrushchev who first provided the script still used to interrogate Moscow’s skyscrapers today. In his speech at the Builders’ Conference in 1954, Khrushchev denigrated Moscow’s new buildings, casting them aside as remnants of an earlier, illegitimate past. That Moscow’s skyscrapers were so closely associated with Stalin himself made them particularly good targets in 1954. In his speech, Khrushchev characterized Moscow’s skyscrapers as frivolous, wasteful buildings that epitomized Stalinist “excess.” The rising Soviet leader provided the template by which historians have understood these buildings ever since. This book looks beyond Khrushchev’s template to tell a more complicated story about how these buildings were designed and constructed—and what they reveal about life in the Soviet capital during late Stalinism. We may well agree with Khrushchev’s characterization of Moscow’s skyscrapers, but in order to understand these buildings historically, we must view them through the lens of late-Stalinism, not through the script of de-Stalinization.

Historians have also overlooked Moscow’s skyscrapers, even though they loom so prominently on the city’s horizon, because much of the scholarly literature on Stalinist architecture in Moscow focuses on the Palace of Soviets. This unbuilt structure is often seen as the most significant and symbolic architectural monument of the Stalin era, while also serving as a central metaphor for the grand ambitions and real-world failures of Stalinism. The Palace of Soviets lends itself well to moralizing narratives of the Soviet Union’s foolishness and hubris: the failure to build the Palace of Soviets is equated with the failure of the Soviet project more broadly.

As monumental structures that were actually built, Moscow’s skyscrapers have much to tell us about the eight or so years that make up the late-Stalin period. The skyscrapers embody the contradictions of their era: they are ornate, monumental structures built at a time of deep physical and economic devastation. Moscow’s skyscrapers represented both the hope of a grand Soviet capital and the disillusionment of displaced populations and workers who would never be allowed to live in the buildings they constructed. In her foundational work on the postwar period, Elena Zubkova shows how hope gave way to disillusionment in a restless postwar society. She observes that this disillusionment was kept in check in the final years of the Stalin

era by an increasingly repressive state.⁶ As this book shows, architectural monumentalism served to encapsulate and intensify many of the continuities and changes that characterized postwar life in the Soviet capital.

In numerous ways, late Stalinism saw a return to patterns of the 1930s. The *Zhdanovshchina*, the Leningrad Affair, and the “Doctors’ Plot” were all reminiscent of the purges of the pre-war years. But less repressive measures of state control carried into the postwar period as well. The social and cultural “embourgeoisement” that characterized Soviet society in the 1930s returned as the Stalinist state continued after the war to reward its most loyal citizens with the promise of “middle-class” lifestyles. The good life might take the form of a holiday on the Black Sea coast or a skyscraper apartment, both of which were part of an agreement between the postwar state and society that Vera Dunham has labeled the “Big Deal.”⁷ The war itself also served to prolong and intensify pre-war initiatives. Official efforts to elevate Russian national sentiment and shore up the cult of Stalin gained added strength from Soviet victory in 1945.⁸ The Gulag system that swelled in the years of the Great Terror continued to expand during the war and into the postwar period, when forced labor became a crucial instrument for the country’s reconstruction.⁹ In rebuilding Soviet cities after the war, planners and officials turned to the prewar past for inspiration. But they also faced concerns and challenges that were unique to the postwar years.¹⁰

The late-Stalin era saw a return to the past, but this period also ushered in new developments, some of which bring these years more in line with what was to come during the Khrushchev era. Juliane Fürst argues that late Stalinism was a time of contradiction and flux. This “Janus-faced” period, she writes, was “as much about reinvention as it was about reconstruction.”¹¹ Fürst and others have questioned the break typically seen in 1953, stressing continuities from the late-Stalinist into the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras.¹² In cutting across four historical moments—the Stalinist 1930s, the war, the postwar Stalin era, and the Khrushchev period—this book engages with questions of continuity and discontinuity. The skyscrapers that stand at the center of this book echoed the architecture of the planned Palace of Soviets and drew inspiration from other ambitious urban projects of the 1930s. At the same time, they reflected the Soviet Union’s efforts to reposition itself internationally after 1945.

This is the first book about Moscow’s Stalinist skyscrapers that is grounded in archival sources. Earlier studies have relied mainly on the extensive record of published materials relating to these buildings, while often foregrounding aesthetic questions.¹³ This book, by contrast, draws on archival material from both Russian and American collections. Documents from the Russian State Archive of the Economy, the State Archive of the Russian Federation, and the Moscow City Archives form the archival basis of the book. Archival sources address questions about how and why these buildings were built while also bringing new voices into this history. From residents who watched the skyscrapers emerge on the horizon of their city, to construction workers who built Moscow’s skyscrapers, and on to those who were permitted to live in these structures—the archives are full of their stories.



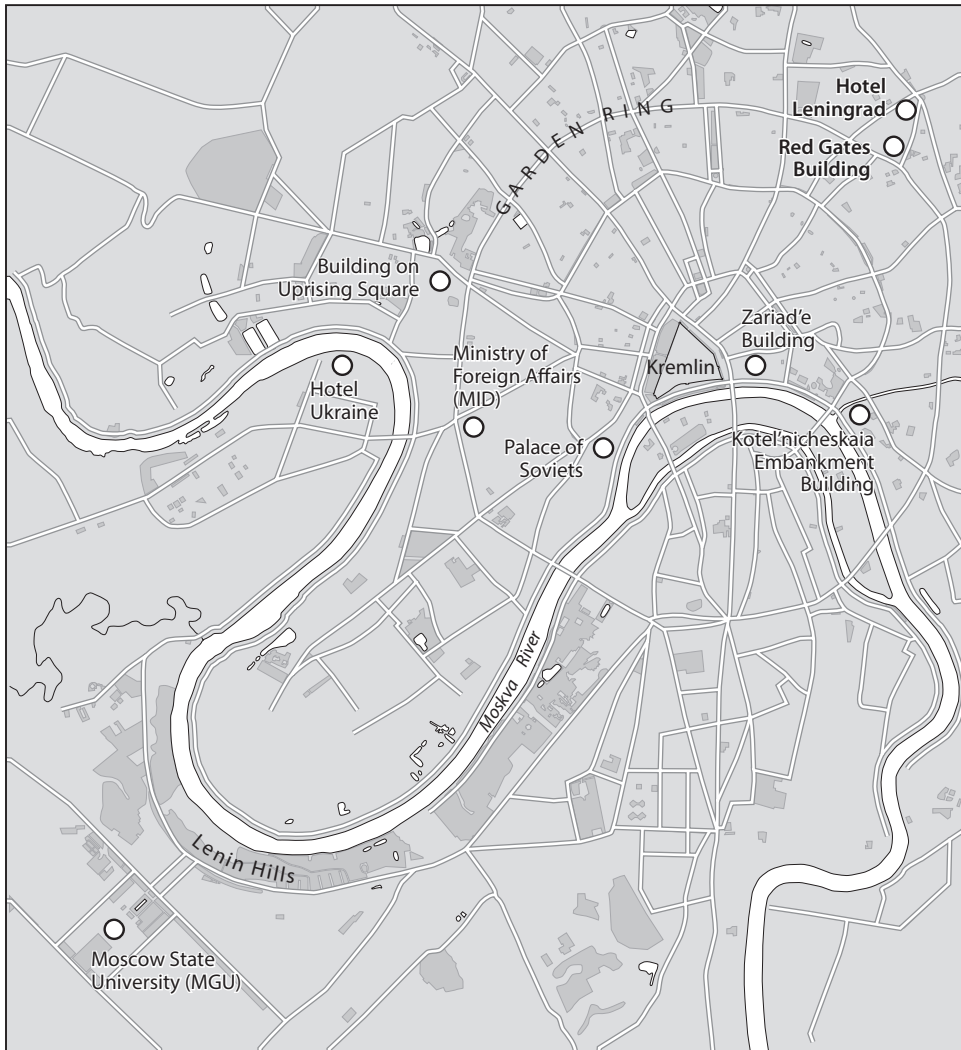


Figure I.1: Map of Moscow c. 1950s with Stalinist skyscrapers marked.
Map by Cox Cartographic Ltd.

Anyone who has spent time in Moscow knows the buildings discussed in this book well. Today, nearly seventy years after their completion, Moscow's Stalin-era skyscrapers continue to serve in their original roles as key residential, institutional, and tourist sites in the city. Built at key junctions throughout the capital—on hilltops, at river bends, and next to railway terminals—these structures mark the horizon even now, in a city that has tripled its 1947 population.

Following the Moskva River as it winds its way into the city from the northwest, we come first to the Hotel Ukraine. This building, which stands on the southern bank of the river near the Kiev Train Station, was the last of the skyscrapers to be completed in 1957. For many decades to come, it would host foreign dignitaries and tourists in its opulent interiors. Across the river to the north stands the residential skyscraper on Uprising Square. Completed in 1954, this building faces toward the

Garden Ring Road, then the largest of Moscow's circular arteries. To the south and across the Garden Ring stands the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID), a building completed in 1953. Just as the hotel is still a hotel, and the residential skyscraper still contains apartments, this last building remains the headquarters of MID in Moscow today.

Heading back along the river from the MID skyscraper we arrive at the showpiece structure of the lot: Moscow State University (MGU). This thirty-six-story building stands tall above the riverbank below, overlooking the city from its place atop the Sparrow Hills, or Lenin Hills as they were called in the 1940s. When it was under construction, the MGU skyscraper was on the outskirts of town. But by the time the first class of students graduated, the southwestern region of Moscow was better connected to the center of the city.

Continuing back along the river, we pass under the bridge along the Garden Ring Road and into central Moscow. Here, not far from the Kremlin, we arrive at the site selected in 1931 for the Palace of Soviets. Still following the river, passing the Kremlin on our left, we see the plot chosen for the skyscraper on the Zariad'e. Neither of these centermost skyscrapers was built to completion, but plans for their construction nonetheless changed the shape of central Moscow. The Zariad'e neighborhood was cleared in the late 1940s and early 1950s to make way for this structure. A handful of churches were left standing on the site and they remain there to this day.

As the river makes its way southward, we come to the Kotel'nicheskaja embankment tower not far from the Zariad'e plot. From the time it was completed in late 1952, Moscow's cultural, scientific, and bureaucratic elites lived in this residential skyscraper, located closest to the city center, not far from the eastern side of the Garden Ring Road. As we head north up this road, we come to the last two skyscrapers. The Hotel Leningrad, built next to a trio of railway terminals, welcomes visitors to Moscow. Not far from the hotel is the skyscraper at the Red Gates, home to the Ministry of Railways and to residents housed in one, two, and three-bedroom apartments.

Moscow's skyscrapers, positioned at key points throughout the capital, were designed to speak loudly, to impress the viewer with the constructive power of the Soviet state. In lifting the Soviet capital skyward, these buildings changed the face of Moscow and altered the course of the city's history.

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