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INTRODUCTION

An Infinity of Treasures

IN FEBRUARY 1917, the monarchy that had ruled the Russian Empire for three hundred years collapsed. For the next eight months, this empire's many peoples embarked on a search for freedom and democracy until, at the end of October, the more radical branch of the Russian Social Democratic Party, the Bolsheviks, seized power in the capital city, with the aim of bringing about a global communist revolution. Sometime between these two revolutions, a new language began to be heard in city streets, in shops and offices, markets and homes.¹ Some of the words making up this new language were entirely new: "*sovdep*," to indicate a local institution of government; "*domkom*," for a committee elected by residents of an apartment building to administer it; "*narkhoz*," to denote an important new object of governance, the "people's economy." Some of the words in this language were familiar, but, as countless newspaper articles, diaries, and memoirs would attest, they were now being used in new ways. Many of the words described different kinds of loss. The simultaneous loss of one's home together with the movable property inside of it, for instance, was called "eviction" (*vyseleniye*). "Concentration" (*uplotneniye*), a technical term formally referring to the density of chemicals and other materials, rather suddenly came to mean the packing of an apartment with additional residents. "Valuables" (*tsennosti*), in addition to its general meaning, now specifically denoted a material object that was made of precious gems or metals but which lacked an ineffable quality that would elevate it to the level of "art."

The new lexicon grated on the ears of Moscow's feuilletonists, who mocked it in their last columns before the Bolshevik government shuttered their newspapers for good.² But in truth, even the people who embraced the language sometimes found it vexing. "These are sharp sounds, unpleasant for the ear, 'Goskhran,'" a trade official commented on one new institution's proposed

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name at a meeting. His boss, the People's Commissar of Foreign Trade, curtly informed the group that, in fact, "it will be called 'Gokhran,'" a clarification met by general silence.³ No less an authority than Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviks and of the postrevolutionary state, can be seen diligently working to master and incorporate the new terms. Several weeks after seizing power, Lenin composed a set of "theses" on the fate of urban real estate, in which he proposed the "alienation" of "all (urban) buildings systematically rented out" by their owners. But upon reflection he scratched out, by hand, the prerevolutionary word, "alienation." In its place, he wrote a new one: "confiscation."⁴

These difficulties in no way hampered this lexicon's explosive spread. People used these words whether they wanted to or not, because they described something new and specific taking place all around them, a process that was not only violent—violence, however unwelcome, already had a place in the language—but more precisely, one that was aimed at dismantling basic features of material life. It was a lexicon of inversion, created to capture the unmaking of property and the hierarchies of social life, law, and political power it sustained, to express the undoing and revaluing of the material world. In short, it was a lexicon of dispossession.

In the weeks and months after Bolshevik revolutionaries seized power in October 1917, they declared themselves and the dissolving state they inherited to be the masters of a dazzling array of resources. Nationalization decrees asserted ownership over major industries, transport infrastructure, and the imperial banking network. Local governments claimed the rights to dispose of everything that trailed behind, from bakeries and apartments to hats and coats. In the blink of an eye, the revolutionaries asserted themselves as the rulers not only of the land and the people, but also of material things, becoming purveyors-in-chief of Russia's material wealth. This book is a history of this unprecedented quest to abolish private property and the search for an alternative system of political economy—socialism—that grew out of it. While pre-revolutionary ideologies of socialism in Russia and abroad had trained their sights on the abolition of private property rights in land, factories, and other pieces of major infrastructure as the key precursor to socialist development, dispossession in the Russian Revolution burst far beyond these conventional

landmarks, seeping into the nooks and crannies of daily life. It thus subsumed not only great industrial objects of significance to the whole society but also tiny, wholly unproductive ones, of significance to no one but their owners. Revolutionary dispossession therefore bore a double character, as a mechanism for rearranging the building blocks of economic production that, at the same time, held out the promise of rearranging the basic rhythms of daily life and the social relationships that engendered them.

It was in cities where these two aspects of dispossession most sharply collided.⁵ This book examines the seizure and statization of the immovable and movable properties—buildings and their contents—that organized daily life in Russia's dense, bustling capitals. A vast confiscatory project was unfolding at the same time in the Russian countryside, where, in the summer of 1917, peasants seized land and estates, sometimes destroying houses; soldiers fighting in the First World War raced home from the front to participate and share in the spoils.⁶ The war sharply expanded the possibilities for state seizure as well, as first the tsarist government and then its short-lived successor, the Provisional Government, made new use of "requisition" and "confiscation," forms of alienation introduced in 1914 to seize the property of enemy aliens, and, eventually, grain from Russian subjects.⁷ The story told here, rooted in urban property, intersects with these other strands of seizure, while also illuminating distinctive problems in governance and economy connected to the modern city.

The outlines of this story have been dramatized in great works of literature and revolutionary satire. Although the Bolsheviks would quickly go silent on revolutionary dispossession and eschew its memorialization, they were among the first to caricature it. In 1918, Anatoly Lunacharsky, the new Commissar of Enlightenment himself, wrote the script for a film called "Concentration" and cheekily performed an uncredited cameo to boot. The plot was simple, if surprisingly heartwarming given the social conflict at the root of the process: after revolutionary authorities force an elite professor to cede space in his apartment to a working man and his grown daughter, the professor is unexpectedly drawn into their milieu. His younger son falls in love with the worker's daughter, while his villainous older son is exposed as a class enemy. The so-called communal apartments that resulted from their encounter, and from the hundreds of thousands of other "concentrations" carried out across Russia in real life over the next three years, became enduring symbols of Soviet socialism that were, at the same time, artifacts of how it came into the world—through the redistribution of built space.

I narrate this unmaking of private property in cities during the Revolution across two different stages of “dispossession,” a term I employ throughout the text, together with “seizure,” to indicate the generic act of removing a thing from somebody’s possession. Both the specificity and the politicization of the language of seizure that developed during the Revolution make such a term necessary for distinguishing my analysis of dispossession from the rich lexicon of property-breaking and property-making contemporaries used to characterize it. The first part of the book examines the unmaking of the legal, cultural, and political infrastructure of private property in buildings and movable goods between 1917 and 1920. The seizure and redistribution of people’s homes and belongings came to appear as a natural, indeed essential, element of the transition to socialism. As these chapters detail, however, it was in key respects a surprise—to the revolutionaries no less than the population. The book asks not only how this extraordinary unraveling happened, but also how the revolutionary state sought to remake the seized bounty of the city into a new kind of thing—socialist state property—and to remake itself into a nonmarket proprietor of seized things.

For nearly three years, the seizure of both real estate and movable property occurred largely in the absence of specific, central authorizing laws. But in the spring of 1920, the revolutionary government promulgated its first “Decree on Requisition and Confiscation,” introducing new dynamics of property and power in the Revolution. The second part of the book follows seized things across this divide, as the revolutionary state sought to master its immense material inheritance in the city. These chapters ask how the revolutionaries tried to determine quite literally what there was and what they, as authors of a socialist revolution, ought to do with this trove: how to know and document the material world without the administrative apparatus of private property; how to find the value of material things without markets; and finally, after 1920, how to rebuild bonds of possession without erasing the great transformations that dispossession had wrought.

This story connects the phenomenon of revolutionary dispossession in Russian cities to other episodes of mass dispossession that played out across the twentieth century, both in Europe and beyond it: in the context of communist revolutions, population exchanges, and projects of social extermination. Material dispossession went hand in hand with the cataclysmic violence of these events, yet for much of the century, as one scholar of the Holocaust has written, it attracted comparatively little attention in either public discourse or scholarship, overshadowed by the loss of human life. In Europe, this began

to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s—that is, with the end of Soviet power. The collapse of communism in Eastern Europe triggered a broad reckoning with the two interconnected episodes of dispossession on which the Soviet satellite states were built: of Jews in the Holocaust and of the new subjects of communist rule after the Second World War. The opening up of eastern European states as sites for specific claims of restitution in the 1990s produced a surge of interest in calculating and documenting dispossession on an individual and collective scale, a surge so powerful that it spread even beyond Eastern Europe, to France, Germany, and other western European countries with their own histories of Nazi occupation and collaboration. In all these places, in addition to the work of scholars, government-sponsored reports on the techniques, laws, and experiences of dispossession wielded against Jews and others in the service of “aryanization” began to appear, giving rise to court cases and petitions for restitution that are still wending their ways through the legal system in the present day.⁸

Paradoxically, the end of the Soviet Union did not have a similar impact on the study of dispossession inside the Soviet Union itself, particularly when it came to the Revolution.⁹ The reasons for this difference are connected not only to the original conditions of dispossession in Russia and the longevity of the political economy that grew out of it, but also to the frenzied politics of the Soviet Union’s exit from communism. A major stimulus to revisiting the wartime aryanization of property and postwar campaigns of state seizure in the 1990s was, after all, the pursuit of restitution. This stimulus was absent in post-Soviet Russia, where the privatization of state property, for a variety of reasons, did not involve a focus on prerevolutionary claims of ownership.¹⁰ Ten years after the fall of communism in Russia, wrote the Belarusian historian Konstantin Kharchenko at the turn of the twenty-first century, amid the opening of “a great many topics once closed,” there had been no serious opening in the topic of dispossession among scholars in the former Soviet states or abroad. Kharchenko, author of the first and, to date, still one of the few monographs on the topic, attributes this fact to a special reticence around the “property cataclysm” among former Soviet subjects, particularly as it concerned the types of property that are a central interest here—people’s homes and their contents—connected to “the minimal social sanction for the alienation of this form of property” both before and after the Soviet collapse.¹¹ More broadly, as the historian Boris Kolonitskii writes, the “implosion of the communist experiment” dealt a body blow to the study of the Revolution in Russia, tearing down old “interpretive frameworks” and leaving nothing in their place.¹²

The interpretive emptiness, Kolonitskii contends, allowed the political figures and geopolitical fantasies of the Revolution to persist in contemporary Russian political life. In the West, the politics of the collapse were different, but the outcome for the Revolution as an object of study was much the same. “Nothing fails like failure,” the eminent historian of the Revolution Sheila Fitzpatrick mused on the occasion of its centenary, describing the twinned loss of political import and scholarly interest in 1917.¹³

And yet, whatever the end of Soviet power has meant for the fate of communism, few moments have as much to offer conceptually to the study of the Revolution and the political economy to which it gave rise as does the Soviet collapse. Like the Revolution, the end of communism was attended by profound transformations in the concepts of property, value, and the state; by a vast project to redraw boundaries between public and private spheres that was embedded in material resources; and by the simultaneous labor of building new institutions and a new kind of economy. This book takes inspiration from studies of how the Soviet project unraveled, not because revolutionary dispossession and subsequent “statization” perfectly mirrored the collapse, but rather because, if the political economy of Soviet socialism lived and died as this literature contends, then there are new stories to tell and questions to ask of the Revolution.

My focus is on the fate of property in what was an avowedly socialist revolution, as one of many institutions that revolutionaries associated with capitalism and sought to eliminate in the expectation that eliminating private owners would pave the way to social justice and material abundance. Whether formal or informal, rooted in law or custom, property systems mediate the relationships between people through things. However they are constituted, the legal scholar Carol Rose contends, the most important function of a property system—what separates property from mere possession—is that of enabling “legibility, making clear what belongs to whom,” and why.¹⁴ Property systems, that is, do more than bind particular people to particular things; they are ways of knowing and valuing the material world. They assign certain kinds of powers and rights to things but, more than this, they identify and define who can bear these powers, and to what kinds of things.

After the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, writes the anthropologist Katherine Verdery, everything about the post-Soviet property landscape appeared “fuzzy.” The fuzziness of this moment sets it apart from other major episodes of dispossession, nationalization, and privatization, in which particular enterprises, or even entire sectors, moved between state and private

ownership. Here, the relative sizes of the public and private spheres did not merely grow or shrink; the spheres themselves and the division between them had to be wholly reconstituted. The architects of privatization in the 1990s assumed the existence of private landowners and found instead people who continued to limn themselves into collective bodies.¹⁵ The would-be objects of property rights were no more distinct. Comprehensive state ownership had scrambled what were, in the liberal order, conventional boundaries between public and private infrastructure.¹⁶ Even physical boundaries turned out to be muddy. In preparation for privatization, it was not uncommon to find the officials of two neighboring institutions pacing the land between their respective buildings, trying to establish where one parcel should end and the other should begin.¹⁷

The subjects and objects of a property relationship, then, are not given a priori—they are made. And critically, as this book shows, this was as true for the Soviet state, as the chief bearer of astonishing new powers in material life in the revolutionary era, as it was for private owners at the Soviet collapse. This book thus investigates the seizure and statization of urban infrastructure as, among other things, a process of state-making: of building (or not building) the institutions that would hold and manage the staggering array of material resources nominally flowing into state possession, and of articulating the boundaries within and among these institutions, inside and outside this vast new state domain. As will be seen, the Bolshevik abolition of private property in land and factories triggered a broad cascade of seizure, in some instances decreed by the revolutionary government and in many others not. The speed of dispossession as it ripped through revolutionary society came as a shock to the people who lost things and also to those put in charge of securing, redistributing, and managing them. Dispossession, that is, preceded the existence of a state that could govern it. If this was partly by design on the part of Bolshevik revolutionaries—who welcomed the demise of the “bourgeois” property order and, as need be, its proprietors—it also plunged them, together with the erstwhile proprietors who lost things, and the people who gained them, onto unfamiliar terrain. In eliminating private property in general and dispossessing “bourgeois” owners in particular, the Bolsheviks conceived of seizure in the cities as a blow against those private owners, the so-called non-laboring element, in favor of their opposites, the laboring element. But as this book shows, dispossession did not cease action at the borders of the bourgeoisie or others targeted as enemies of the new order. It ricocheted through Russian society from top to bottom, thrusting losers and winners alike, up to

and including the institutions of the revolutionary state, into a general condition of propertylessness—not in the sense of having or not having things, but in the sense of knowing how, why, and who could possess what.

Documenting Dispossession: Property, Law, and Socialism

Dispossession is a process that, quite often, destroys things: material objects, intangible valuables—and also the paper records that would allow us to trace the action of dispossession itself. The difficulty of documenting dispossession is a constituent part of the phenomenon, one that was amplified in 1917 by the anti-law instincts of the Bolsheviks, the coincidence of dispossession with political revolution, and by a widely shared sense that the act of dispossession represented not simply the transfer of a given piece of property from one owner to another, but a fundamental change in the nature of property itself, obviating the need for the old system's recordkeeping. This book recovers an archive of revolutionary dispossession, but it does not find it in the conventional legal documents sustaining the property order in prerevolutionary Russia or other places. Rather, this archive of dispossession grew up squarely in this order's absence.

The documentation of dispossession varies widely across episodes in place and time, making its format an important indicator for the nature of the process. Documentation is historically most robust when dispossession has been preemptively sanctioned by legal order, and when those doing the seizing anticipate being able to solidify their grip over seized things through recourse to existing property law, such that they have an interest in ensuring proper records of the transfer. In order to assuage investors' fears of trucking in stolen property, for instance, some Nazi-occupied and collaborating governments erected "extensive legal and administrative frameworks to legitimize" the ary-anization of Jewish property, with correspondingly large bases of transfer records.¹⁸ These records would later become the basis for restitution claims and histories of dispossession after the Second World War.

The Soviet case lacks this sort of documentary basis. This absence derives from two basic features of revolutionary dispossession: the ambition to eradicate capitalism of which it was a part, and its slippery relationship to law. The fact that the Bolsheviks set out to destroy capitalism changed the character of their engagement with the paperwork of economic life. The architects of ary-anization under Nazi occupation sought to preserve the economic value of the resources they seized, not only material assets but also paper instruments of

credit. To that end, they created fictional banks—with real account books—into which Jews were required to transfer assets. They profited on the forcible takeover of businesses by falsifying (lowballing) the value of brand names, intellectual property, and other intangible resources—but they kept the markets that told them what the value of those assets was.¹⁹

By contrast, the Bolsheviks purposefully scrambled the economic value of entire asset classes after the Revolution, nullifying government bonds (while in theory allowing smallholders to cash out) and seizing firms and invalidating stocks in them (although sometimes keeping former owners on the hook for debts). Amid a countrywide paper shortage, some officials recycled the credit papers of seized firms, turning them over to use the blank sides as stationery.²⁰ Some of these papers made it out of Russia; according to a former merchant in Petrograd who kept up ties with his foreign trading partners after 1917, there were lively speculative markets in the stock papers of nationalized Russian firms in European cities into the 1920s.²¹ But inside Russia, it would have been hard not to see the paperwork of value revealed as a fiction—if not metaphysically, as the Bolsheviks might have hoped, then simply in a practical sense. A mind-boggling quantity of paper wealth went up in smoke, with repercussions that were in no way limited to the wealthy, particularly in the case of the canceled war bonds.²² Again and again, people wrote to Moscow from the provinces asking where to send the physical remnants of this value: the canceled papers, and, later, canceled currencies.²³ It was hard to imagine, at first, that so recently valuable things were now not only worthless but a matter of indifference. The documentation of property and the changes in it were part of the transformation brought about by the Revolution. Indeed, this was one of the many ways the Bolsheviks made their vision of a world without capital a reality.

Revolutionary dispossession in Russia cannot be traced through the conventional records of a liberal property order, then, not least because the revolutionaries had no interest in sustaining that order. Although it was not uncommon for the transfer of a building from its private owner to the new state to be accompanied by a formal walk-through (often with a janitor or superintendent accompanying a representative from a state institution), such handovers were virtually never accompanied by prerevolutionary property records, such as titles, leases, or other documents. The Bolsheviks forbade notaries from validating property documents of this sort not long after seizing power. (Although there is evidence that many continued to do so even after transactions between individuals were banned, for obvious reasons these

papers were generally not saved).²⁴ If these transfers did occur in the “municipalization” of real estate, it was in a vanishingly small proportion of cases. When it came to movable goods, of course, the likelihood of owners who had written proof of ownership was that much smaller; few people had written attestations for any but the most remarkable of household possessions, a fact they frequently lamented after the Revolution, when petitioning for the return of seized goods. At first, petitioners were sometimes told by local soviets and other institutions involved in seizure that the return of “improperly seized” things was possible if they could produce written record of prior possession. Later on, as will be seen in the book’s final chapter, those who sought the return of things taken from them during the Revolution were instructed to provide clear evidence of an object’s “theft,” on top of the already-required evidence of prior possession. Needless to say, they never could. In a way, this was the Bolsheviks invoking a fictional version of the liberal property order, in which all possessions of all kinds left paper trails—or perhaps, more accurately, it was their vision of a new socialist property order peeking through, an order in which all possessions of all kinds really did leave paper trails, at least in theory, because they were allocated by the state.

And yet, there is a voluminous paperwork of dispossession, documenting the wounds it inflicted on people and that they inflicted on one another in searing detail, like an autopsy of revolutionary events. Symptomatically, while made during the Revolution, this is a paperwork of retrospection rather than instigation, in which those who have witnessed dispossession and perhaps been party to it recount what happened, and what they think should have happened, in the great labor of parsing people and things that the Revolution brought about. This paperwork grew out of documents that began to appear simultaneously with revolutionary dispossession itself, bearing witness to the coming of the Revolution at home, in the places where people lived. These accounts were composed by individuals or collectives, typically in the aftermath of a dispossessive encounter. They tell of nighttime searches and violent evictions, cases of mistaken identity, sealed rooms, and power-hungry janitors. Sometimes, these narratives were written for a reason beside or on top of the material losses of dispossession, reflecting the embedded quality of seizure during the Revolution, a constituent part of arrests, inspections, “concentrations,” and other common revolutionary events. But often, seizure was the main event. People wrote these accounts not simply when they lost things, but especially when they sensed some kind of error in their loss: in how it was

performed, in the reasons that were provided, and, less commonly, in the very premise of seizure itself.

These accounts were just the beginning of the archive of revolutionary dispossession, the seeds from which it grew. They landed in the mailboxes of a wide array of revolutionary authorities, including local soviets, powerful individual officials, and major institutions, particularly the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom). When, due to their large number, this became too cumbersome, they were concentrated in the hands of a new institution, the People's Commissariat of Government Control—heir to the office responsible for auditing the tsarist state—which in turn created a special department to manage them, the Central Bureau of Complaint.²⁵ No matter which institution handled them, such accounts commonly underwent thorough processes of review, which involved gathering witness testimonies, auditing account books, and reviewing official correspondence. In the hands of revolutionary officials, that is, these accounts of dispossession, narrating the experience of it from within, entered into a second life as a “case”—a problem or a question about the Revolution and its design or operation no less than about an individual petitioner, deserving of inquiry and investigation.

Through this trove of documents, this book marries the lived experience of the Revolution with an inquiry into problems of political economy and state-making more commonly narrated through theoretical tracts, decrees, and political speeches. This perspective offers an unusually intimate vantage onto the conceptual, political, and practical dilemmas that revolutionaries and ordinary people encountered as they struggled to bring socialism, variously conceived, to life. Petitions that developed into “cases” typically revolved around questions about the new order that lacked obvious answers, either because they reflected situations that existing Bolshevik ideology, governing practice, or common mores had not yet encountered, or because they could be answered, according to these same guiding frameworks, in multiple ways. How to apply norms, identify “parasites,” manage material life without markets and property rights—all these questions and more coalesced in the explosive flash of an eviction or a seized possession. While the book ultimately relies on a wide variety of sources beyond these cases—published and unpublished memoirs and diaries, the painstakingly preserved records of Vladimir Lenin's personal administration at the Sovnarkom, the barely preserved records of neighborhood housing departments, Communist Party personnel files, meeting transcripts, audits of the political police, and more—the questions these

cases pose orient my analysis around distinct problems of power and possession in the revolutionary era: from the onset of dispossession, through the elaboration of tools of governance suited to a material world without legal markets or property rights, to attempts to close out dispossession and erase its revolutionary signature.

To the frequent surprise of petitioners, these experiences and the cases built around them circulated at the highest levels of the Soviet state. They were saved in its archives, not only those of the People's Commissariat of Government Control and its successor, the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate, but also, in the state's earliest days, those of the Sovnarkom, as well as the local soviets. As the book shows, these cases provided the source material for revolutionary governance; they inspired decrees, orders, and practices that would define core elements of socialism during the Revolution and after it.²⁶ In addition to its substantive value, then, this paperwork is significant as an artifact in itself of the revolutionary process. In the course of investigation, these petitions and complaints were sometimes reviewed by half a dozen different institutions, at all levels of power. The resulting case files could run to dozens of pages long, reflecting weeks or months of investigation. The richness and depth of this documentation presents a curious paradox—and with it, an important point of entry into the investigation of the revolutionary state.

What is lawlessness during a revolution? How did law and lawlessness change in the hands of revolutionaries who saw themselves as the heralds of socialism? One of the chief aims of the October Revolution was to sever the connection between law and property, to place the disposal of material resources under the control of rational economic plans rather than the vicissitudes of property law, thereby displacing law—cudgel of the bourgeoisie that it was, in the Bolsheviks' view—from its seat as arbiter of who got what.²⁷ The history of dispossession and the statization of economic life after the October Revolution nevertheless often appears as a story of law, narrated through Bolshevik decrees that began with the "Decree on Land," issued on October 26, 1917, and continued in fits and starts through the following summer, when the Sovnarkom released orders seizing the last privately held branches of major industry.²⁸ This framing does not do justice to the process of statization in several respects—particularly when it comes to the objects at the heart of this book, which were generally excluded from this raft of central orders. The seizure of buildings and their contents—the stuff of urban material life—became an archetypal feature of the revolutionary process and a benchmark of socialist political economy, but the central government did not regulate it in a

meaningful way for nearly a year after the Revolution, and then only in the case of buildings. As for movable goods, no central decree at all arrived until the Sovnarkom's "Decree on Requisition and Confiscation" of April 1920, which, rather than instigating the process of seizure, was intended to put a stop to it.

The absence of central laws regulating dispossession in urban life has had several important effects on our understanding of its history and that of the Revolution (in addition to the documentary effects described above). On the one hand, the absence of law has lent itself to an interpretive displacement of revolutionary dispossession into lawlessness—a manifestation of the collapse of the state's monopoly on violence and an expression of ahistorical thuggery and disregard for the law that was, depending on one's view of the Bolsheviks, either peripheral or central to the main revolutionary event. This perspective finds reinforcement in the fact that revolutionary society was, indeed, afflicted by a surge in violent crime that dispossession nourished, and which it resembled in any number of ways.²⁹ Like thieves, the revolutionaries eschewed regular business hours, working primarily at night; like thieves, the revolutionaries sometimes took and kept for themselves.

At the same time, the absence of central laws regulating dispossession has also manifested simply as absence: the seizure of buildings and their contents, because it does not appear in the raft of central orders on statization, has been left out of statization and revolutionary political economy analytically.³⁰ This is a missed opportunity, insofar as the revolutionary economy was in key respects one of "redistribution" rather than "production," as the historian Mary McAuley has noted.³¹ The seizure, redistribution, and attempted statization of buildings and their contents—the things with which people lived and were forced to make do in the absence of new production—in fact made up an important site for developing tools of revolutionary governance in economic life, to which the second half of this book is devoted. But the absence of central laws, particularly when combined with the fact that these objects did not classically belong to the "means of production" in Bolshevik ideology, meant that, dating back to the early days of Soviet rule, they were not treated as part of socialist economic development.

The earliest Soviet accounts of the Revolution acknowledged freely that the seizure of apartments and movable property had been a surprise, noting even that, to the extent that the expropriation of buildings had been imagined before 1917, it was by "bourgeois" reformers, not Russian Social Democrats who, like their peers in Europe, disdained the "gas and water socialism" of municipal political life.³² But Stalin-era histories glossed over the spontaneity, diversity,

and extent of dispossession during the Revolution, taking credit only for what had, by then, become the linchpin of the Soviet welfare offering—the promise of housing, precisely as Hoovervilles began to rise in the United States—while effacing the seizure of movable goods.³³ Indeed, as John Hazard observed in his 1945 classic on Soviet property law, by the start of the first Five-Year Plan in 1928, the Bolsheviks had begun to attribute their success in seizing and retaining power, “and the defeat of their colleagues in other countries, in considerable measure to the manner in which the property problem was handled.” By this, they meant that their Revolution had struck the necessary balance—destroying private ownership of the means of production while retaining it in the “consumer sphere”—a reference to the protections built up around so-called personal property that would be ensconced in the Constitution of 1936.³⁴ As a result, many of the most consequential accounts of dispossession during the Revolution appeared not in its histories but in its great literature—Mikhail Bulgakov’s *White Guard*; Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago*—and in the recollections of those who fled from it, landing penniless in Istanbul, Prague, and Paris. These renderings colored revolutionary dispossession in a distinctively aristocratic hue, to which the Bolsheviks hardly objected. On the contrary, they enjoyed sparring with the impoverished nobles and statesmen on the pages of émigré publications.³⁵

The petitions and cases that I rely upon here exist precisely because the revolutionary state did not provide an authoritative legal footing to dispossession—or, for that matter, to possession. Local regulations announced routinely changing prohibitions on the possession of particular categories of things, by particular categories of people—objects associated with vice, such as narcotics, but also ordinary things above fixed quantities, and objects deemed precious or “counterrevolutionary.” The problem in revolutionary society, that is, was not simply that illegal behaviors exploded, that crime flourished, that the revolutionary state failed to tamp it down, as the narrative of lawlessness emphasizes; it was that the very conditions of possession as well as dispossession had become indeterminate, a situation enabled and perpetuated, purposefully and otherwise, by the revolutionary state.

This book follows the absence of central laws about possession and dispossession into its significant administrative and interpersonal aftermath, in local governments and at the center, illuminating the creation of entire institutions to manage the fallout in social and material life—not only the Central Bureau of Complaint, but also dedicated offices in the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Battle against Counterrevolution and Sabotage (Cheka,

later the Extraordinary Commission for the Battle against Counterrevolution, Speculation, and Abuse of Power), housing departments, so-called conflict commissions, and special-purpose “*troikas*,” all charged with resolving the disposal of material things. Through these agencies, the disorder of dispossession was documented meticulously, although not comprehensively. Some of these bodies did not retain records of their decisions as a matter of routine—even offering their files to interested petitioners—precisely because they did not intend the allocations they made to constitute legal property. Still, thanks to the constant second-guessing that pervaded decision-making about allocation, relevant records frequently appear in the files of more than one institution, making it possible to reconstruct a number of cases in detail.

The conflicts and questions captured in these accounts reveal the absence of central law during the Revolution to have produced something more than lawlessness; they reveal a feverish search for meaning even within chaotic dispossessive encounters, a surfeit of new words to describe possession and loss and a surfeit of “property sentiments” and routines that flooded into the vacuum of authoritative legal order.³⁶ The revolutionary state’s insatiable curiosity about its subjects, and its openness to learning from the solutions they devised to bumps on the road to socialism, elevated these documents from a form of public outreach to a sustained inquiry into the nature of this new political economy. Most important, these sources uncover the perspectives and property stories not only of erstwhile owners who lost things—a framing imported from studies of liberal property orders and favored in accounts of the period’s lawlessness—but also those of people who gained them, and of collectives and bodies within perhaps the most significant and nebulous subject of property rights to take shape during the Revolution: the revolutionary state. They reveal an essential dilemma of the socialist Revolution—the dilemma of recreating large swathes of material life as the property of the state.

Making state property and making the new state, this book contends, went hand in hand. Rather than conceiving of the revolutionary state exogenously, as something that came into people’s lives whole, my aim here is to illuminate the practices, concepts, and tools of governance that gave shape to revolutionary institutions as they sought to rule through new spheres of material life.³⁷ Like a ship retooling itself while at sea, the revolutionary state came into being through the process of taking on this material cargo—this infinity of treasures that Alexander Herzen, the spiritual father of Russian socialism, had so earnestly hoped Russia to be without.³⁸ This revolutionary state’s nominal agents and institutions were summoned to witness, negotiate, and rule on

dispossessive encounters by the people living through them, even when it did not order them directly.

To assert that statization was a process of state-making implies no normative judgment of the revolutionary state's capacity.³⁹ The ideal-type standards on which such judgments depend are ill-suited to revolutionary states in general, and the Soviet state in particular.⁴⁰ The Revolutions of 1917 augured a violent reimagining of the possibilities for state power, during which time the locus of power was not confined to formal institutions. As Boris Kolonitskii notes, "specific forms and methods of exercising power that differ greatly from those practiced during 'normal' times" characterize all revolutionary periods; "the operation of laws, for example, is rather limited." In place of law, a constitution, or some other enabling framework, the idea of the Revolution itself authorizes popular action, crystallized in particular institutions, symbols, flags, language, and behavior, which competing political forces seek to master.⁴¹ Indeed, the emergence of this exceptional, "self-reflexive" authority, wielding power during the caesura between constitutionally defined periods of rule, is a hallmark of the modern phenomenon of revolution.⁴² Whatever its ideological coloration, revolutionary authority derives its power in part from its affiliation with lawlessness; William Sewell pinpoints the birth of the modern revolution to the taking of the Bastille precisely because it was an infraction of law, an action that "in any other circumstance would have been deemed criminal," subsequently embraced by the deputies of the national assembly as "unlawful and legitimate at once."⁴³ Its connection to lawlessness, Dan Edelstein suggests, is part of what makes it difficult for state institutions to capture the *élan* of revolution for themselves; instead, they come up with workarounds—calling themselves extraordinary commissions, temporary bodies—to make themselves appear more irregular, and thus, more revolutionary.

In Russia, of course, this was not the hurdle that it had been in France. The Bolsheviks embraced lawlessness to a greater degree than other revolutionary movements, viewing it not merely as a tactic but as the aim of Marxist transformation. Their first months in power were marked by a distinctly "anti-law" stance, a reluctance to consider adopting a legal code of their own, even in the service of socialism. In the fall of 1918 this began to change.⁴⁴ The central government announced that henceforth, tsarist-era laws that were not explicitly repealed by revolutionary orders should be considered still in force. Theft, then, would have a legal grounding, even in the socialist revolution. But signally, the legal grounding for theft was not accompanied by an equivalent framework for possession—or for the legitimate versions of revolutionary

dispossession, known as “requisition” and “confiscation.” As a result, while the criminal iteration of dispossession could be identified and known, the non-criminal variants of it could not. In the spring of 1920, the People’s Commissariat of Justice (Narkomiust) declared that in order to relieve citizens from the “incorrect and inexpedient deprivation of that property [*imushchestvo*] necessary to sustain a normal capacity for labor and psychological energy, which has been gradually drained from the entire population” over the previous three years, it was necessary at last to codify revolutionary dispossession, practiced without law these long years.⁴⁵ Even then, however, in setting “requisition” and “confiscation” to law, Narkomiust expressly declined to make similar provisions for possession, thereby avoiding what had been before 1917, in Russia as elsewhere, the basic state function of defending private property.⁴⁶

The changes in the property regime brought about by the Revolution therefore affected not only peoples’ lives and destinies, but also formed the foundation of the Soviet state, which defined itself in the management of this lawlessness and in the abandonment of what, in other places, was the state’s traditional role as defender of private property rights.⁴⁷ This book identifies that state not through firm institutional or policy criteria, but through the eyes of its subjects and its employees, through the mechanics and practices of government that they witnessed and ascribed to it.⁴⁸ It traces the degradation of clear boundaries identifying and delineating the state precisely through the breakdown of property relations, in spaces such as warehouses and apartments, where people confronted them on a daily basis. Rather than merely weak, the revolutionary state was indeterminate, both in the sense of who precisely represented it, and also, at a moment when the legal order of private property had ceased, in the sense of the limits between the state as a material domain and what was beyond it.

The indeterminacy of the revolutionary state fueled the process of dispossession far beyond what Bolshevik ideology had envisioned, indeed far beyond what state institutions could manage. In this sense, dispossession was broadly participatory. Urban residents from many walks of life involved themselves in the seizure and disposal of material resources, for a host of different reasons. Because dispossession could visit people more than once, they might also experience it in different registers: as state agents and as residents; as seizers and dispossessed. While this book identifies people in the social roles they occupied at the time, it eschews the assignment of rigid social categories, which risk occluding the social dynamism so essential to the revolutionary process. This was especially so in Moscow, where the new state was concentrated,

where tens of thousands of people were transformed into state employees in the first few years of Bolshevik power, and where few of these people were members of the Bolshevik party.⁴⁹ As the literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky insisted at the time, fighting the prevailing headwinds of “participation” and social categorization, they were all “people.”⁵⁰ It was a point to which he returned again and again, telling stories of people who, in the crucible of Revolution, were forced to make choices—choices that changed them. “And you and I are people,” Shklovsky wrote. “So I’m writing what kind of people we were.”⁵¹

Inventories and Estrangement: The Management of Seized Things

In its earliest days, the whirlwind of dispossession created just one kind of problem for people caught up in its movement—a problem of loss. But as it went on, dispossession created other kinds of problems as well. Some months in, a new complaint began to appear in official mailbags. Rather than describing the loss of things one needed or cherished, this complaint described being made to live with things one did not want. One household reported having moved into a new room that was ideal in almost every way, save for the existence of a large cabinet packed with the belongings of the room’s previous inhabitant, which now stood behind an imposing wax seal. The new inhabitants begged local officials to intervene, as they “lived in fear” of what might happen should they accidentally rupture the seal—would they “lose materially” in the event of damage? Could they be held criminally responsible for it? Their complaint drew a representative from the police precinct that placed the seal originally, who performed an inventory, replaced the seal, and—to their dismay—left.⁵² In another building, the building committee chairman wrote to inform local authorities that a large stock of dishware and café furniture belonging to a shuttered pub stood in a storage area in his building. “Unidentified thieves” visited the unsecured storage area regularly. The building committee had already contacted the Moscow Cheka (MChK) about the matter, as well as the local police precinct—they had visited and set “protocols,” but had not removed the dishes from the building. The chairman therefore formally declared that henceforth, the building committee “removed responsibility from itself” for the dishes, which it “lacked the means” to “defend.”⁵³

Commonly identified as a period of material dearth, these years were also a time of profound alienation, as people lost connections to particular objects

and to the manners of conduct and care for material things to which they had long been accustomed. Shklovsky described how a group of his old friends in Petrograd lived in a house “on a very aristocratic street,” in which they burned first the furniture and then the floorboards, before moving into the next apartment. In Moscow, the members of a military unit he knew settled onto the lowest floor of an apartment building, burned through its contents, then moved one story up, cutting a hole through the floor and locking the lower apartment to fashion a toilet. “It wasn’t so much swinishness as the use of things from a new point of view, and weakness,” he explained.⁵⁴ The abolition of private property in the urban environment took things from some people and deposited them with others. But the changes it wrought in the material landscape and in the relationships between people and their things cannot be measured purely as a matter of quantity lost or gained. Seizure and statization altered the bonds of possession, introducing distinctive logics into people’s relationships with material things, and leading to situations like the one encountered by the building committee chairman or the household with the sealed cabinet—situations in which people sought loudly to distance themselves from things nearby, because they could not “defend” those things or because they feared they would suffer from them.

At the root of these encounters was the question of state property—whose was it and what should they do with it? Factories and agricultural land had long histories of being owned by a state in Russia and abroad, but the same was not true of apartment buildings, to say nothing of sofas.⁵⁵ For several decades before the Revolution, European progressives had debated whether and how the state might directly own housing on a large scale, a question that was troubling because it involved recasting the private and privately enjoyed space of the home as a public good. Not long before the First World War, municipal authorities in Great Britain had provided proof of concept, in the form of state-built and state-owned apartment blocks for the “deserving” poor.⁵⁶ But these debates offered little guidance to the sorts of situations unfolding in apartments across Russian cities, where people lived with things they wanted but that were not theirs, and also with things they did not want, from which they sought estrangement. The advent of state property coincided with these palpable demonstrations of estrangement from material things, and from what had seemed, until recently, basic principles of husbandry in material life. Shklovsky narrated another story, about milk brought to a collection point as a tax in kind, poured for transport into barrels that previously stored her-ring. “They poured in the milk, hauled it off, got it there and then had to pour

it out. Even the smell made them sick.”⁵⁷ Waste, like destruction, is a constituent part of the dispossessive phenomenon, no matter where it occurs. Leora Auslander has remarked upon its prevalence in the aryanization of Jewish movable goods in Paris, where seized things, while intended for redistribution into “Aryan” hands, more commonly languished in warehouses (even after the war ended) or were taken by neighbors.⁵⁸ But what Shklovsky described was different from mere waste, which functioned within recognizable logics of utility and profit. What Shklovsky described was the lived experience of becoming estranged from material things, in the course of which these logics seemed to disappear.

The second part of this book examines the earliest installments of a longer story of state property and socialist management. The revolutionary political economy is often set apart from the main event of socialism, the command economy.⁵⁹ But the history of the Revolution belongs in this narrative—not because the solutions identified before 1922 necessarily endured, but rather because they sought answers to what became enduring questions. When staging the Revolution, the Bolsheviks had anticipated that, in its earliest days, they would be able to rely upon capitalist tools of management—most notably accounting—in order to take charge of economic life. These expectations almost immediately imploded after the Revolution, under the pressure of confounding new circumstances in economic life. Like dispossession, the search for alternative methods of economic management was not restricted to formal institutions or theoretical tracts; it too was a part of the revolutionary experience.

The scale of transformation embedded in these techniques can be easy to miss. Some of the showiest exemplars of nonmarket management—material (nonmonetary) budgets; a “labor unit” currency—bottomed out in 1920, succeeded by the more familiar categories of “profit,” “economic accounting,” and conventional money under the New Economic Policy (NEP) introduced the following year.⁶⁰ Yet, as in the case of dispossession, continuities in language could mask significant underlying change. Continuities in terminology between capitalism and socialism, the anthropologist Caroline Humphrey observes of a later period, have tended to obscure “the historic difference between capitalist and socialist economies.”⁶¹ The Soviet economy owed itself a new terminology, Humphrey argues, but its theoreticians avoided creating one, because doing so would require acknowledging the plethora of new phenomena actually developing in economic practice, in violation of ideological commitments to the idea of fixed laws of economic development. This feature

of Soviet socialism makes it imperative to examine what content filled up the lexicon of economic life, as I do here through two essential concepts in the revolutionary economy: inventories and valuation.

Inventories were an unremarkable part of material life before the Revolution, a seemingly straightforward component of the more sophisticated double-entry bookkeeping practice in broad use by the turn of the twentieth century. After the Revolution, however, they emerged as a locus for defining what kinds of things mattered in the new economy—what should be counted, how to measure it, what the assets flowing into state coffers truly were. Pre-revolutionary records were often of little help in this endeavor, as they failed to capture the attributes of material resources most important to their new keepers. In their place, in keeping with the materialist spirit of the times, revolutionary authorities elevated comprehensive physical measurement and allocation according to fixed norms as the baseline of rational nonmarket management.⁶² This analysis shows not only how the *methods* of inventorying changed with the elimination of private property and other circumstances of the revolutionary economy, but also how the *objects* of account did, depending on the optics employed to visualize them, like a kaleidoscope bringing different attributes into focus depending on how it was turned. More than a transfer from one owner to another, this book contends that state seizure entailed a process of transformation: in which powers were available to exert over material resources; in who or what could wield them; and in which material resources were available for manipulation and control.

It is undoubtedly true, as Shklovsky ruefully attested, that people did strange things with objects during the Revolution. But it is also the case that objects wielded strange powers over people in this same period. In a satire of everyday life in the 1920s, the writer Vyacheslav Shishkov described a couple who resolved to divorce, only to have their decision unravel when, unable to find separate rooms, they continued to sleep in the same bed and were drawn back together by it—as if the bed itself overturned the intentions of its occupants.⁶³ In real life, too, people spoke about objects as if they wielded exceptional power. When confronted by a demand to return a typewriter, a sub-department of Supreme Council of the National Economy, or VSNKh, extravagantly claimed that ceding the typewriter “would mean a complete halt of our work, and the death of our department.”⁶⁴ This declaration was self-serving, of course; but it also struck at something true.⁶⁵ Literary scholars have noted the intense and enduring symbolic powers wielded by particular objects under socialism.⁶⁶ During the Revolution, people encountered this strange

power vested in material objects for the first time, and we can see them grappling with it, uncertain of its source—scarcity? Political symbolism? In a stream-of-consciousness letter begging help from Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, Lenin's Administrative Director at the Sovnarkom, a woman in Moscow recounted the dawning realization that her husband had been re-imprisoned on the very day he was to be freed from detention by the Cheka, due to the incorrect appraisal of a piano in their apartment. She had not paid careful attention to the appraisal, she explained, a mistake she would never repeat. "Being in such a state of horrible worry, I did not even look at how they were valuing the things, I did not give meaning to that act, b.c. [because] I thought that this was all a mistake, it would soon be clarified. . . . Can this possibly be the reason my husband is still in prison," she stated flatly. The piano did not belong to her; it was rented. But now it seemed the cause of her undoing. "How to get out of this horror," she continued, as if working it out for herself. "What else to do, I don't know, I could write a statement like this to the Extraordinary Commission [Cheka]. Would it be read. . . . After all it could happen that tomorrow people would come and take the last things I have."⁶⁷

Many others would be arrested over the value of seized objects before the appraisals were through. The Bolsheviks forbade the free exchange of many things during their first five years in power, eliminating legal markets and with them, the existence of broadly shared, officially recognized market prices. And yet, the act of appraisal formed a routine step in the process of dispossession, either in situ at the moment of seizure, or later on, upon the physical entry of seized things into state coffers. Appraisals served a number of purposes during these years: they were a weapon in the class war, a source of identifying information, a control on thieving warehouse workers, and a means of extracting revenue. What all these uses of appraisal shared was a sense that prices in the nonmarket economy, as well as the "true values" on which prices were meant to be based, were now the product of purposeful decision-making.⁶⁸ As such, appraisal was a site rich with political intrigue, the search for ideological fidelity, and the complex mechanics of governing a purportedly closed economy. Some of the problems that would-be appraisers encountered when handling seized goods stemmed from the nature of the objects themselves: How, if at all, did the experience of seizure affect the value of seized things? Others stemmed from the absence of legal markets, while still others stemmed from the years of deepening economic disorder, disrupting the expected equivalencies between things. The search for "normal" values drew early Soviet appraisers into contact with foreign markets and black markets, as well as into the

recesses of their own memories. It drew them back to the year 1913, which was generally agreed to be the last “normal” time, and which was elevated in official use as the last “normal” market—the best distillation of what capitalism had been, and therefore, the ideal benchmark against which socialism could be judged.

The chronological focus of this book falls in the years between 1917 and 1922, with forays into earlier and later events in the book’s prologue and conclusion. The advent of the NEP in 1921 is not the key turning point here, although its effects are a focus of the last chapters of the book. Rather, dispossession is bisected by the events of 1920, when revolutionary authorities embarked on efforts to restrict seizure and put seized things to use in new ways. Geographically, the emphasis is on Moscow, an epicenter of seizure and nonmarket statemaking in this period. Stories from other cities in the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) supplement those situated in Moscow, documenting the spread of the dispossession outside the capital. Dispossession in many of these places was inspired by texts, orders, reports, and people from the center, but it also incorporated eclectic methods and aims, generated isomorphically, at the same time in different places, in response to shared ideas and challenges as much as concrete orders. As in the capitals, dispossession in other cities also occurred in violation of directives; as in the capitals, that is, “legal” and “lawless” dispossession occurred not as separate processes but as different and often complementary aspects of the same process, the tensions between which served as a wellspring of power in the revolutionary era. Attending to these stories exposes the creativity of local attempts to use law to codify dispossession—the great diversity of lawfulness after the Revolution—which saw regional, municipal, and village soviets anticipate central decrees, revise them, and violate them in the service of their own dispossessive pursuits. Beginning in 1920, the central government would take aim at this diversity, which it sought to stamp out together with any lingering remnants of the bourgeoisie.

Because these other stories are told through documents that arrived in the center, they do not ever swing the perspective entirely out of the capital. At the same time, this book relies upon unusual archival points of access to Moscow’s story, due to the fact that the location of the files of the Moscow Soviet, on which a book like this would ordinarily depend, is unknown for the years between 1917 and 1928.⁶⁹ Like other histories of Moscow in this period, this

one necessarily reconstructs the city's past through alternative sources, depending most of all on documents from the central state on the one hand, and the neighborhood soviets on the other.⁷⁰ Thanks to the parallelism of the early Soviet state, many central institutions hold extensive runs of Mossoviet meeting protocols as well as communication with the Mossoviet; the files of the neighborhood soviets likewise contain a wealth of information about the granular, and often independent, seizure programs pursued by neighborhood authorities.⁷¹ The result is not a political history of particular institutions, but rather, a history of intersecting problems of property, everyday life, and urban governance in the revolutionary era.

The Bolsheviks and others would later claim their takeover of the urban built environment as an obvious and essential component of Soviet socialism, but, as the book's first chapters show, the incorporation of buildings into state property after the Revolution was a surprise, the unexpected byproduct of overlapping crises in the built environment precipitated by the First World War and the tsarist government's unwillingness to curb the rights of private owners in city life. The prologue of the book explores prerevolutionary ideas about "municipalization," or alienation by the city government, situating Russian approaches to urban infrastructure within the landscapes of European progressive thought and Russia's revolutionary tradition. Apartment buildings emerged as flashpoints in political life during the war, even in places that lacked the markers of the housing crisis seemingly driving the turmoil. The summer of 1917 saw a sharp escalation in popular antipathy toward landlords, on the one hand, and in the willingness of officials in local and central government to consider the possibility of "requisitioning" built space for state use on the other. But these prospects were held in check by, among other things, a deference to the physical integrity of the buildings themselves—one the Bolsheviks would not share.

The Bolsheviks abolished the private ownership of land within days of seizing power; over the next six months, orders seizing banks, factories, and other types of property followed in rapid succession. But as the first chapter shows, these decrees did not control the whirlwind of seizure whipping up across Russia in 1918 so much as they fed and inspired it, fueling local processes of dispossession that sought out ever-smaller, more intimate targets—including apartment buildings, apartments, rooms, and their contents. The abolition of private property rights in buildings and their creation as state property was known as "municipalization," a process that fused elements of property ownership with governance in pursuit of class war. The state, on behalf of the proletariat, was

the supposed beneficiary of this process, and its victims were the “bourgeoisie,” “parasites,” and other class enemies. But this chapter reveals that the abolition of private property could not be contained at the borders of these enemies. It yielded propertylessness for all, including those newly endowed with stuff, as well as the state institutions charged with managing the people’s bounty.

This gargantuan task, the overnight absorption of urban infrastructure into municipal governments, blurred the edges of the state, and presented it with a number of familiar and unfamiliar obstacles. The extent to which the socialist state could or would bear property rights for itself or as a stand-in for a collective subject over large and productive objects was a topic of sustained debate in fields ranging from industrial and agricultural management to cultural production. But nowhere were the challenges of sustaining the state as owner greater than in the seizure and disposal of things that belonged in the home.⁷² The second chapter examines the effort to create state property out of what were generally known before the Revolution as “movable things,” and what came to be known in the Soviet Union as “personal property.” The revolutionary state found it virtually impossible to own these things in most conventional senses of the term. This was due in part to pervasive mismanagement, a symptom of the state’s poor defenses against those inside and outside its ranks who would seek to profit off the Revolution’s project of social leveling (the redistribution of material things in service of social justice). Lenin and others spoke about the violations in the familiar language of theft and corruption. But this rhetoric sold the Revolution short, undervaluing the magnitude of its project to refashion the possession and allocation of intimate household goods, which sought to eliminate individuals as the owners of movable property and destabilized basic attributes of ownership in the process.

The third and fourth chapters shift the book’s focus from the seizure of material things to their management. The creation of information about the built environment was envisioned as a cornerstone of rational, nonmarket management, one that would facilitate the transformation of buildings into an abstract, fungible new resource known as “living space.” The third chapter shows how, in the process of use, this accounting utopia was turned on its head. In place of the transparent inventory of the built environment, revolutionary housing authorities ended up with “the account,” a motivated and partial record of “available” spaces, frequently provided by residents themselves. The spirit of popular participation in the accounting of built space ran the gamut, from voluntary to opportunistic to despairing, but in the absence of positive rights to living space, there was no option to sit the project out.

The fourth chapter opens at what would become a turning point in the management of seized goods: the establishment in February 1920 of an institution called Gokhran to sort, appraise, and prepare those seized things deemed “valuable” for foreign sale. The chapter exposes what we might think of as lay theories of revolutionary valuation, developed by Gokhran’s administrators and staff in the course of their work. These theories were informed not only by the inbuilt assumptions of neoclassical economics that had guided much of prerevolutionary economic life, but also by the influence of Bolshevik ideology, the mechanics of hyperinflation, and the politics of secrecy that shrouded market information in the nonmarket Republic. Gokhran failed spectacularly at its task of conjuring the market value of its wares, for which its staff paid a devastating price. But as this chapter argues, this failure resulted not so much from the venality of Gokhran’s staff—as the criminal charges against them would allege—as from the tensions embedded in the ideas of value they tried to realize, tensions in the project that the Bolsheviks resolved with violence.

It is a conundrum for all revolutionaries—at least, all those who are successful: How should the revolution end? The end of dispossession began in April 1920, with the Sovnarkom’s “Decree on Requisition and Confiscation,” a measure intended to curb dispossession and whip local legalities into a central order. Over the next two years, as the final chapter shows, revolutionary authorities made a series of unsuccessful attempts to curtail dispossession using law, sometimes borrowing prerevolutionary and foreign legal concepts to do so. These directives shared a common aim: to erect a firewall between the earlier period of disorder and the present, which the central decrees established as the beginning of a new era. And while similar measures were employed with success following other cases of mass dispossession during and after the First World War, in the RSFSR they foundered on the difficulty of creating a legal framework for dispossession without, at the same time, creating one for possession. The only way to stop revolutionary dispossession, it turned out, was to demand it be forgotten.

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