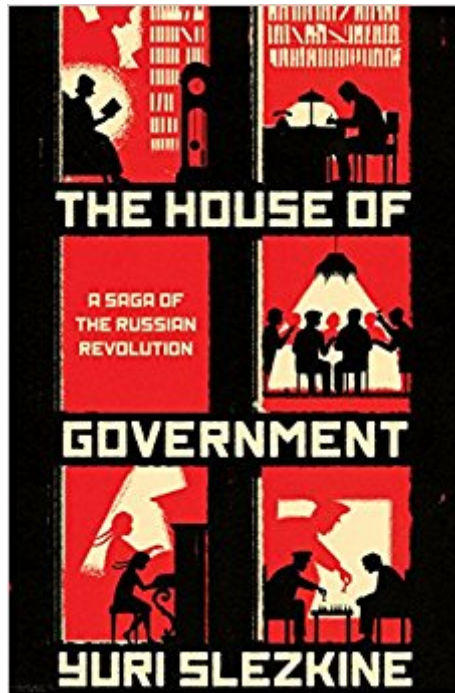




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# The House Of Government: A Saga Of The Russian Revolution



## Synopsis

On the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, the epic story of an enormous apartment building where Communist true believers lived before their destruction. The House of Government is unlike any other book about the Russian Revolution and the Soviet experiment. Written in the tradition of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Grossman's *Life and Fate*, and Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, Yuri Slezkine's gripping narrative tells the true story of the residents of an enormous Moscow apartment building where top Communist officials and their families lived before they were destroyed in Stalin's purges. A vivid account of the personal and public lives of Bolshevik true believers, the book begins with their conversion to Communism and ends with their children's loss of faith and the fall of the Soviet Union. Completed in 1931, the House of Government, later known as the House on the Embankment, was located across the Moscow River from the Kremlin. The largest residential building in Europe, it combined 505 furnished apartments with public spaces that included everything from a movie theater and a library to a tennis court and a shooting range. Slezkine tells the chilling story of how the building's residents lived in their apartments and ruled the Soviet state until some eight hundred of them were evicted from the House and led, one by one, to prison or their deaths. Drawing on letters, diaries, and interviews, and featuring hundreds of rare photographs, *The House of Government* weaves together biography, literary criticism, architectural history, and fascinating new theories of revolutions, millennial prophecies, and reigns of terror. The result is an unforgettable human saga of a building that, like the Soviet Union itself, became a haunted house, forever disturbed by the ghosts of the disappeared.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[The] chapters on the Stalinist Terror are the most vivid. Over all, Slezkine's writing is sharp, fresh, sometimes playful."--Marci Shore, New York Times Book Review

"This panoramic history plotted as an epic family tragedy describes the lives of Bolshevik revolutionaries who were swallowed up by the cause they believed in. The story is as intricate as any Russian novel, and the chapters on the Stalinist Terror are the most vivid."--Radhika Jones, New York Times Book Review (Editors' Choice)

"A Soviet War and Peace."--Sheila Fitzpatrick, London Review of Books

"Brilliant and suitably monumental. . . . Vivid, engaging and omnivorous in its deployment of anthropological and sociological ideas, The House of Government has a Tolstoyan cast of characters. . . . And as we struggle to balance the benefits of industrial modernity with its huge costs--both human and environmental--Slezkine's gripping history of these latter-day Fausts is especially relevant, even if their mental world seems so remote from our own."--David Priestland, Financial Times

"Mammoth and profusely researched. . . . A work begging to be debated; Slezkine aggregates mountains of detail for an enthralling account of the rise and fall of the revolutionary generation."--Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)

"To roam the corridors of the House of Government, following the endlessly intersecting stories of Bolshevik families at home, is to come as close as a distant reader can to the horror, strangeness and disorientating pathos of the revolution. Slezkine's scholarship and his powerful historical imagination take us into the heart of the confrontation between the everyday reality of Bolshevism and its extreme millenarian metaphysics. . . . The meaning of The House of Government is in reading it, right to the end. It is a monumental edifice of scholarship and historical insight."--Rachel Polonsky, Standpoint

"This comprehensive work of scholarship and storytelling will appeal to readers with an interest in the Russian Revolution, the early Soviet Union, and the pitfalls of utopian community building."--Laurie Unger Skinner, Library Journal

"What is most valuable about Slezkine's work is its exhaustive use of unpublished diaries and personal correspondence. . . . His erudition is unparalleled, his judgements are sane and his intentions are noble."--Donald Rayfield, Literary Review

"One can be both overwhelmed and inspired, as one often is by a classic Russian novel."--Max Holleran, Los Angeles Review of Books

"An absolute delight to read, a masterpiece of the odd, almost unclassifiable kind that Russian literature is so adept at producing."--Steve Donoghue, Christian Science Monitor

"Brilliant and extraordinary."--Michael Curtis, American Thinker

"An utterly gripping masterwork. As residents of the House of Government enjoy privileged childhoods, fall in love and marry, rise to power, betray each other, and are arrested and shot, we learn about the peculiar nature of Bolshevism and get a new history of Russia. But the book's compelling brilliance is its living organic nature--a mixture of historical narrative, novel, and family saga with echoes of Grossman, Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn, and even Tolstoy."--Simon Sebag Montefiore, author of *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar*"Few books are truly visionary, but *The House of Government* earns this description. The cumulative effect of this massive chronicle of the Soviet era is devastating and, more important, utterly satisfying. It's a work of art in itself, a beautifully written exploration of a central phase of modern history, and one that has never seemed as terrifyingly relevant. Tolstoy himself would have recognized Yuri Slezkine as an artist, as the author of a narrative with transmogrifying power, an epic that functions on countless levels at the same time."--Jay Parini, author of *The Last Station: A Novel of Tolstoy's Final Year*"The House of Government traces the public and personal lives of residents of a unique, elite Moscow housing complex as they evolve from fanatic Bolshevik revolutionaries--dreaming of a Marxist utopia and determined to shed blood to create it--to victims of Stalin's terror. Based on diaries, letters, memoirs, and interviews, featuring hundreds of rare photos, and combining history, biography, and social theory, this cornucopia of a book is a tour de force."--William Taubman, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* and *Gorbachev: His Life and Times*"Using the House of Government as a microcosm of the rise and fall of the first generation of Soviet leaders and their utopian ideas, Yuri Slezkine's remarkable book illuminates the entire experience of Stalinism. Drawing on memoirs, letters, and literature, he lays bare the emotions of the Russian Revolution and its Bolshevik beneficiaries, from love and friendship to a commitment to the end that justified the most vicious means. Perpetrators became victims as hundreds of once-powerful residents of the House were imprisoned, exiled, tortured, and shot. The House of Government is extraordinarily ambitious, exciting, and disturbing."--Ronald Grigor Suny, author of *The Soviet Experiment*"In this monumental study, Yuri Slezkine tells the story of the first Soviet ruling generation by looking through the windows of the remarkable building where many of them lived. Fittingly built in an area called the Swamp, the House of Government saw more than a third of its elite tenants evicted and arrested in the terror of the 1930s. Drawing on an amazing array of archives, memoirs, and interviews, Slezkine's unique narrative becomes a history of the Soviet Union itself. Nobody interested in Soviet history can afford to miss it."--J. Arch Getty, University of California, Los Angeles"An incomparable masterpiece, Slezkine's account of the lives of elite Bolshevik families

is as fascinating as a nineteenth-century Russian novel. He builds real drama and pathos into the stories of these people, and we find ourselves hoping against hope that they will survive. Yet this is history of the highest rigor. It would take several lifetimes for mere mortals to locate, read, and figure out what to do with the diaries, letters, notebooks, and drawings Slezkine found in the archives. This family saga heightens the tragedy of the Russian Revolution and gives the reader a quality of understanding rarely achieved by any work of history."--Lewis H. Siegelbaum, coeditor of *Stalinism as a Way of Life* and author of *Cars for Comrades*"Yuri Slezkine's brilliant account of the Soviet past shifts the story away from coal and iron statistics and into Bolshevik millenarianism, Communist love lives, and the terror that enveloped a generation of leaders. A tour de force."--Robert Service, author of *Lenin: A Biography*"Boldly conceived and brilliantly executed, *The House of Government* is at once a major scholarly and literary achievement."--Douglas Smith, author of *Former People: The Final Days of the Russian Aristocracy*

Amazing

Some of the most high-profile victims of Stalin's purges, namely, those who as privileged party members, were accommodated in the House of Government - the huge, forbidding apartment block opened in 1931, on the Moscow River's embankment - were able, once Khrushchev sanctioned de-Stalinization, to have plaques erected there in memory of their loved ones. Some even sought to have the relevant family apartments converted into museums, as secular shrines to the departed, although Moscow's housing shortage, which remains a constant whatever the changes in ideological climate, militated against this outcome. Now, however, in Yuri Slezkine's *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* the families who comprised the Bolshevik elite before the revolution began devouring its children have received a superb literary memorial, which vividly brings them back to life in the mind's eye of its readers. The transfer of the capital to Moscow justified the creation of a building close to the Kremlin to house the Bolshevik apparatchiks and other worthies but egalitarian Bolshevik ideology could never justify the creation of such luxurious living quarters. Thus in the 550 fully furnished family apartments in the largest residential building in Europe the new Soviet aristocracy enjoyed high ceilings and central heating as standard, whilst also enjoying access to amenities including a hairdressing salon, kindergarten, gymnasium, tennis court, library, laundry, movie theatre, and a cafeteria from which meals could be ordered for collection, at a time when most Muscovites had to make do with dilapidated and overcrowded communal apartments in which the

stale smell of cabbage soup competed with the general stench of despair. Slezkine argues that the Bolsheviks were millenarian sectarians who were forced to face the failure of their prophecies in the privacy of their apartments and thus failed to raise their children as future Communists, making them in at least one sense guilty as charged of betraying the cause once brought before Stalin's prosecutors. The blueprints, bricks and mortar of the House of Government were, however, themselves a standing indictment of the betrayal of the Bolshevik dream. Indeed, Bolshevism itself represents an admission of Marxism's fundamental flaw – false trade union consciousness on the part of the proletarian masses inhibiting their development of a true revolutionary consciousness obliging Lenin to develop an elitist party to seize power in their name; the dictatorship of the proletariat legitimising the dictatorship of the Bolshevik party. Slezkine's book is a cross between Jung Chang's *Wild Swans*; and Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror*, providing as it does a multi-generational portrait of the lives and loves of a fascinating group of people, roughly one third of whom ultimately found their residency at the Government House to be merely a staging post before the non-person oblivion of either incarceration or liquidation. Slezkine's book is painstakingly researched and beautifully constructed and written so as to allow him to shed new light on a period of Soviet history with which we might feel ourselves familiar. Not the least of his accomplishments is his managing to chronicle epic events whilst never losing his focus on the human beings affected.

This is a fantastic book and well worth the time it takes to read. The reviews that complain about the profuseness of coverage miss the point, which is to allow the reader to become deeply immersed in the lives and attitudes of the Bolshevik elite of true believers. They thus come across as real human beings, in spite of their inhuman ideologically driven behavior. This book will give the reader a depth of understanding of the terrible tragedy that ensued upon the eventual triumph in 1917 of the millenarian politics of the Russian oppositional intelligentsia of the late 19th century. The author has penetrated the dry facts of history and created a compelling saga of one of the most horrible chapters of human history, and done so in a way that will bring about deep reflection on the part of thoughtful readers. The book is a non-fiction *War and Peace*. Highest possible recommendation.

A sprawling view back on the Bolsheviks who took political power in Russia, then used that power, mostly monstrously, in the 1920s and '30s. While interesting at times, this book screams for better editing, greater focus, and tighter reasoning. The author, Professor Yuri Slezkine, is without doubt

intelligent and well-read on the literature about, written by, or of special interest to the Bolsheviks. He is helpful in providing comparisons to conventional millenarian religious sects to help explain the harsh actions of the Party. However he taxes the common reader with many pages of unnecessary details about various leading Red leadership families who happened to live in one large housing complex in Moscow. Meanwhile, the millions who died in the various famines, ethnic cleansings, and class slaughters are in the muted background. I do not think this is a good first book to read on the Great Terror. (Here, the prime mover in the tragedy, Stalin, is largely off stage.) However, someone with a keen interest in the Soviet experience will find many passages of interest in this thicket of a book.

This book is excellent. The detail is fascinating. The author successfully ties together the various complex threads of how individuals experienced Revolutionary Russia. This is not a good book for those unfamiliar with Russian history, but with a some meaningful preparation (consider "The Russian Revolution: A New History" by Sean McMeekin and The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia by Orlando Figes). Caught in the Revolution: Petrograd, Russia, 1917 - A World on the Edge by Helen Rappaport makes an excellent companion for this book.

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