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## Squatting in Britain 1945-1955

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*Published in:*  
International Journal of Housing Policy

*DOI:*  
[10.1080/19491247.2017.1338035](https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2017.1338035)

**IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.**

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*  
2017

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Huisman, C. J. (2017). Squatting in Britain 1945-1955: housing, politics, and direct action. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 17(4), 611-613. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2017.1338035>

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## A Review of "Squatting in Britain 1945–1955: housing, politics, and direct action", by Don Watson

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To cite this article: Carla J. Huisman (2017) A Review of "Squatting in Britain 1945–1955: housing, politics, and direct action", by Don Watson, International Journal of Housing Policy, 17:4, 611-613, DOI: [10.1080/19491247.2017.1338035](https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2017.1338035)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2017.1338035>



Published online: 28 Jun 2017.



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covered in this book, including negative attitudes toward refugees from the Global South and countries devastated by wars in other regions' (p. 252).

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2017.1372958>



**Squatting in Britain 1945–1955: housing, politics, and direct action**, by Don Watson, London, Merlin Press, 2016, 205 pp., \$16.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780850367287

Britain's housing shortage was already acute before the advent of the Second World War. Married couples, sometimes already with young children, were regularly confined to living in one room in their parental home. Beyond such absolute quantity problems, price and quality were also issues, culminating in social unrest and protests such as rent strikes. During the war new construction came to a halt, while numerous dwellings were destroyed through bombing. When the war finally ended, the willingness of people to put up with living in overcrowded conditions, paying a too large part of their wages for substandard dwellings dwindled. Meanwhile, the newly elected Labour government (admittedly having its hands full, for instance with installing the National Health Service) was slow in deciding what to do with a number of now redundant army camps and other war-related sites. Some recently demobilised service men and their families daringly took matters into their own hands and openly occupied their old army barracks. Through word of mouth and media coverage, the news spread quickly. Soon all over the country people moved – without the owner's permission – into vacant property that had previously been used by the government for the war effort. By October 1946, an estimated 48,000 people had housed themselves through such squatting actions in Great Britain. The national government reacted by devolving the responsibility for dealing with this to local governments.

This is the starting point of Don Watson's *Squatting in Britain 1945-1955*, published by the radical left Merlin Press (recent editions include selected works by Clara Zedkine, and Bakunin). Watson, an independent social historian, earlier published on social movements such as the antebellum British National Unemployed Workers Movement. His newest publication spans just over 200 pages. Given the interesting, pertinent topic and Watson's lively and none too dense writing style,

the book is enjoyable to read. Several themes are covered in the book, ranging from the role of the British Communist Party in the squatting movement, to Labour's housing policy just after the war and in how far the squatting can be seen as an emancipatory collective political action. Relevant for contemporary housing policy researchers is the startling volume of ideas that were apparently standard currency in the 1940s and which are again *en vogue* today: some of which never went away, and some of which returned after first falling out of fashion in the intervening years. The housing shortage, for instance, seems to be at least partly caused, and certainly aggravated through the insistence on classical liberal economic ideas such as the belief that government should only interfere with housing if the market fails. Another example is the idea that the housing needs of the lowest income groups could be salvaged by precisely building housing for more affluent people, freeing up affordable housing in the process. Furthermore, references to 'luxury squatters' of previously requisitioned hotels, criticisms of unfair queue jumping and a tendency towards criminalisation ring familiar and give cause for consideration.

The book brings in stark relief the gap, which persists today, between long-term bureaucratic solutions and the acute reality of people's housing needs. For young people wanting to leave the parental house, or for those who want to move in together as a couple or start a family, twelve months of waiting is already an eternity. The construction of new housing takes several years from local councils' planning decisions to actual households moving in. Politicians often refrain from short-term solutions such as building temporary prefab accommodation, fearing inefficient stop-gap spending of public money on low-quality housing. However, in the meantime people still have to solve their pressing housing needs. Unavoidably, irregular fixes will fill the gap. Illegal subletting, renting out of beds and overinflated rent levels for badly maintained accommodation are the tangible consequences, then and now. For people to break the social taboo on illegally taking up residence in someone else's house, even when it is unoccupied for a long time, pressing scarcity combined with blatant vacancies usually does *not* suffice. The impetus for the mass squatting actions just after the war was the feeling of entitlement demobilised army men and their partners, but also the population more generally, had. After serving their country in war, they felt that government was obliged to supply them with adequate housing. Squatting constituted a means for exerting political pressure to obtain attention and support for a solution to one's pressing housing need. At the same time, by putting a roof over one's head, it also constituted an immediate although not necessarily very sustainable solution for that need. Today, precarious housing in Britain abounds again, but the political climate is not conducive to installing similar feelings of entitlement in the affected population.

The cover design of *Squatting in Britain* strongly resembles the style of David Kynaston's *Tales of a New Jerusalem* series, perhaps with a view towards appealing to the same audience. Indeed, for those who have finished all five instalments of that

modern social history of Great Britain and are waiting for the new one, Watson's book can provide a more political alternative with a topical focus on early post-war British housing politics in practice.

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Kynaston, D. (2007–2014). *Tales of a New Jerusalem, 1945–1979*. London: Bloomsbury.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/19491247.2017.1338035>

