

“To the Memory of Sergei Esenin” by Leon Trotsky

# 100 years since the death of Russian poet Sergei Esenin

23 December 2025

*On December 28, 1925, the young and very popular Russian poet Sergei Esenin hanged himself in the Hotel Angleterre in Leningrad. His suicide generated an outpouring of shock and grief throughout the USSR and beyond. On December 31, Esenin’s funeral in Moscow was attended by an estimated 200,000 people who assembled in his honor near the monument to Alexander Pushkin.*

*Hundreds of articles and messages were written about the 30-year-old’s death. But among them, one of the most prominent appeared on January 19, 1926, in Pravda, the nation’s main newspaper. The writer Maksim Gorky soon commented: “The best about Esenin has been written by Trotsky.”*

*Trotsky was known as one of the most insightful writers about literature among the leading Bolsheviks at the time. His book, Literature and Revolution, had been published in two editions in 1923 and 1924, to wide acclaim. He was also known as a defender of Esenin during the latter’s repeated scandals in the early ‘20s, often resulting from drunken outbursts in Moscow’s cafes and taverns. Trotsky, Aleksandr Voronsky and Christian Rakovsky repeatedly sought to find rehabilitation for Esenin’s increasingly life-threatening alcoholism. Their efforts ultimately failed.*

*Esenin’s poetry was admired by many but also sharply criticized by political opponents. Some tried to disparage his poetry as having a deleterious effect on the youth, even coining the pejorative term “eseninshchina” [Eseninism]. In sharp contrast, Trotsky’s article below, in a new translation, gives a moving assessment of Esenin’s poetic gift and political views.*

*It should be noted that Esenin—Life, Personality and Works, one of the first books to commemorate the poet in 1926, contained Trotsky’s article. When Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party in 1927 as leader of the Left Opposition, the book was condemned as “Trotskyist” and removed from libraries, schools and bookstores. Esenin’s writings were suppressed; it was only in 1955 that he began to be republished. As late as the early 1990s, a copy of Trotsky’s article with Gorky’s approving note was contained in the Gorky archives in a folder marked: “Do Not Hand out to the Reading Room.” The Stalinists’ fear of Trotsky’s reputation lasted until they finally dissolved the Soviet Union in 1991.*

*Esenin’s death has been a topic of controversy in the post-Soviet period. Several discounted works dispute that his death was a*

*suicide. His poetry, however, is celebrated, and will continue to be celebrated, as some of the finest produced in the 20th century. Let us turn to Trotsky’s assessment from early 1926. (The words or sentences in bold were emphasized in the original.)*

\* \* \* \* \*

We have lost Esenin—such a wonderful poet, so fresh, so genuine. And how tragically we have lost him! He left us himself, bidding farewell with blood to an unnamed friend —perhaps to all of us. His last lines are striking in their tenderness and gentleness! He left this life without a cry of resentment, without a note of protest—not slamming the door, but quietly closing it with his hand, from which blood was trickling. At this moment, the poetic and human image of Esenin flashed with an unforgettable farewell light.

Esenin composed sharp “hooligan” songs and added his melodiousness—unique to Esenin—to the mischievous sounds of Moscow’s taverns. He often boasted with sharp gestures and rude words. But beneath all this trembled the very special tenderness of an unguarded, unprotected soul. Esenin used his feigned rudeness to shield himself from the harsh times into which he was born—he shielded himself, but he did not hide. “I can’t take it anymore,” said the poet, defeated by life, on December 27, without defiance or reproach. ... We have to talk about the feigned rudeness because Esenin did not simply choose his form, but absorbed it into himself from the conditions of our by no means soft, by no means gentle, times. Hiding behind a mask of mischief and paying this mask an internal, and therefore not accidental, tribute, Esenin always seemed to feel that he was not of this world. This is not a compliment, because it was precisely because of this otherworldliness that we lost Esenin. But it is not a reproach either—is it conceivable to reproach the most lyrical poet, whom we were unable to keep for ourselves?

Our times are harsh, perhaps among the harshest in the history of so-called civilized humanity. Revolutionaries born in these decades are possessed by the frenzied patriotism of their era—of their homeland, of their time. Esenin was not a revolutionary. The author of “Pugachev” and “The Ballad of the Twenty-Six” was a most intimate lyricist. Our era, however, is not a lyrical one. This is the main reason why Sergei Esenin, of his own will, left us and his era so early.

Esenin’s roots are deeply rooted among the people, and, like everything else about him, his national character is genuine. The

most indisputable evidence of this is not his poem about a popular uprising, but once again his lyrics:

*Quietly in the thicket of juniper trees on the cliff  
Autumn, a red mare, combs her mane.*

This image of autumn and many other of his images struck us at first as unmotivated audacity. But the poet made us feel the peasant roots of his image and deeply accept it for ourselves. Fet would not have spoken this way, and Tyutchev even less so. Esenin's peasant background, refracted and refined by his creative gift, is strong. But this strength of his peasant background is the reason for Esenin's personal weakness: he was torn from his old roots, and his new roots did not take hold. The city did not strengthen him, but shook and wounded him. Traveling to foreign countries, across Europe and overseas, did not stabilize him. Tehran he perceived incomparably more deeply than New York. In Persia, his lyrical intimacy with its Ryazan roots found more kindred spirits than in the cultural centers of Europe and America. Esenin was not hostile to the revolution and was by no means alien to it; on the contrary, he always aspired to it—writing continuously in 1918:

*The homeland is my mother, I am a Bolshevik.*

He wrote somewhat differently in recent years:

*Now, on the Soviet side,*

*I am the most ardent fellow traveler. [1924]*

The revolution broke into the structure of his poetry and into its image, which was first cluttered and then purified. In the collapse of the old, Esenin lost nothing and regretted nothing. No, the poet was not alien to the revolution—he was not akin to it. Esenin was intimate, gentle, and lyrical—the revolution was public, epic, and catastrophic. That is why the poet's short life ended in catastrophe.

Someone once said that everyone carries within themselves the spring of their destiny, and that life unwinds this spring to the very end. This is only partly true. Esenin's creative spring, as it unwound, collided with the boundaries of the epoch and was broken.

Esenin has many precious verses imbued with the spirit of the epoch. His entire poetry is suffused with it. At the same time, Esenin is "not of this world." He is not a poet of the revolution.

*I accept everything as it is, I accept everything.*

*I am ready to follow in well-trodden footsteps,*

*I will give my entire soul to October and May*

***But I will not give up my beloved lyre!***

His lyrical spring could only unfold to its fullest extent in a harmonious, happy society that lives with song, where friendship, love, and tender compassion reign instead of struggle. Such a time will come. The current era, in whose womb many merciless and life-saving battles of men against men are still hidden, will be followed by different times—the very ones that are being prepared by the current struggle. The human personality will then blossom in its true color. And with it, poetry. **For the first time, the revolution will win for every person the right not only to bread, but also to poetry.** To whom did Esenin write with his blood in his last hour? Perhaps he was communicating with a friend who had not yet been born, with a person of the coming era, whom some are preparing through battles, and Esenin through his

songs. The poet died because he was not akin to the revolution. But in the name of the future, it will adopt him forever.

Esenin was drawn to death almost from the very beginning of his creative career, aware of his inner vulnerability. In one of his last songs, Esenin bids farewell to flowers:

*Well, my beloved ones, oh well,  
I have seen you and have seen the earth,  
And this tremor of the grave,  
Like a new caress, I accept.*

Only now, after December 27, can all of us, who knew little or nothing at all about the poet, fully appreciate the intimate sincerity of Esenin's poetry, where almost every line is written with the blood of wounded veins. There is a sharp bitterness of loss. But even without leaving his personal circle, Esenin found melancholic and touching consolation in the premonition of his imminent departure from life:

*And, listening to the song in silence,  
My beloved, with another beloved,  
Will perhaps remember me,  
As a flower, never to be repeated.*

And in our minds, the grief that is acute and still fresh is tempered by the thought that this wonderful and genuine poet reflected the era in his own way and enriched it with his songs, speaking in a new way about love, about the blue sky that has fallen into the river, about the moon grazing like a lamb in the heavens, and about an unrepeatable flower—about himself.

Let there be nothing decadent or enervating in honoring the memory of the poet. The spring embedded in our epoch is immeasurably more powerful than the personal spring embedded in each of us. The spiral of history will unfold to the end. We must not resist it, but help it with conscious efforts of thought and will. Let us prepare the future! Let us win for each and every one the right to bread and the right to song.

The poet has died. Long live poetry! An unprotected human child has fallen off the cliff. Long live the creative life into which Sergei Esenin wove precious threads of poetry until his very last moment!

January 1926

(Afanasy Fet and Fyodor Tyutchev were 19th-century Russian poets. Esenin was born in the Ryazan region.)



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**