

Kazakhstan demolishes historic site where Trotsky once lived

Artem Mikhailov
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The city of Almaty in Kazakhstan is currently demolishing the house where Leon Trotsky spent several weeks in exile from the Stalinist bureaucracy. The demolition erases an important testimony to the history of the international labour movement. A luxury hotel is to be built in its place.

The building had been vacant since an earthquake in 2022 and since then had not been repaired. In 2025, the house was declared unfit for renovation during an inspection, and demolition work began in early February.

The two-storey Zhetysu House at 45 Gogol Street is also known among the population as ‘Trotsky’s House’. It was built in 1908, when today’s metropolis of Almaty (then still called ‘Verny’) had a population of just 37,000. In addition to Trotsky, various other important figures also stayed in the house, such as the Soviet-Kazakh composer Yevgeny Brusilovsky, who composed the first Kazakh opera and wrote the anthem of the Kazakh SSR, the Soviet composer Sergei Prokofiev and the botanist Nikolai Vavilov.

Trotsky himself was exiled to Almaty (then Alma-Ata) in January 1928. His exile was the culmination of the bitter factional struggle between the leadership of the Soviet Communist Party under Joseph Stalin and the Left Opposition, led by Leon Trotsky.

The struggle was about nothing less than the survival of the Marxist and socialist movement. Due to the international isolation of the October Revolution of 1917, a privileged bureaucracy had developed within the workers’ state that was increasingly hostile to the socialist revolution. This social and political attitude was openly expressed in the theory of “socialism in one country,” formulated by Joseph Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin in late 1924, with which they rejected the programme of socialist world revolution.

Trotsky and other leading Bolsheviks formed the Left Opposition to fight against this betrayal of the programme of the October Revolution. But devastating defeats of the international working class promoted the further consolidation of the bureaucracy. Of particular significance in the 1920s, following the defeated revolution in Germany in 1923, were the British general strike of 1926 and the second Chinese revolution of 1925-1927, both of which were betrayed and defeated by the opportunist policies of the Stalinist bureaucracy.

However, the Stalinist bureaucracy responded to the consequences of its policies and the criticism of the Left Opposition, which had warned of these defeats, not with a change of course, but by expelling the Left Opposition from the party at the end of 1927. In early 1928, Trotsky and numerous other oppositionists were exiled and arrested within the Soviet Union.

Trotsky’s exile to Kazakhstan was intended to isolate him politically. At the time, Alma-Ata was a small remote village, almost 4,000 kilometres away from Moscow. In winter, temperatures regularly reached -20 °C. Malaria and other diseases were widespread and also severely affected Trotsky himself and his wife, Natalya Sedova. At the same time, medical care and food supplies were very poor. Electricity and water supplies were also limited.

But even under these conditions, Trotsky continued the struggle. In exile, he maintained extensive correspondence with oppositionists throughout the Soviet Union and wrote several key works. Of particular importance were his critique of the Comintern programme in 1928 and his polemic against Karl Radek on the question of permanent revolution, which clarified the political and theoretical foundations of the International Left Opposition.

The Hotel Zhetysu in Almaty is mentioned by name in Trotsky's autobiography, "My Life." Trotsky spent three weeks there before being assigned another apartment in Almaty. In 1929, he was finally expelled from the Soviet Union and stripped of his passport. Trotsky was stateless and relentlessly persecuted up until his assassination by a Stalinist agent in August 1940. His comrades in the Soviet Union were almost without exception murdered in the Great Terror.

Until 1933, the hotel was the only hotel in the entire city. Its use changed several times over the years, serving at times as living quarters and a dormitory, later as the location of the sanitary and epidemiological service, and most recently as a police station.

Despite its age and significance, the building was never included in the list of historical and cultural monuments and never received the status of historical and cultural heritage or any other protected status. This is no coincidence, but is above all due to the violent attempts of the Stalinist bureaucracy to eradicate the memory of the history of the revolution and, above all, the Trotskyist opposition to Stalinism.

Today's ruling class in Kazakhstan emerged from this bureaucracy, which broke up the Soviet Union in 1991. While capitalist restoration plunged millions of workers in all the Soviet republics into poverty, the Stalinist bureaucrats grabbed the privatised corporations and resources for themselves and became rich oligarchs who control the political and economic life of Kazakhstan.

The demolition of the hotel, which should actually be a museum, and its planned replacement by a luxury hotel symbolise the Kazakh ruling class's hatred of historical truth and its desire to subordinate all aspects of social life to the interests of the super-rich.

Although of particular significance, the demolition of the Zhetysu House is not an isolated case. The house where Trotsky spent most of his time in Almaty was demolished in the early 2000s.

Numerous other buildings of great historical, cultural or architectural value have also been demolished in recent years. In 2006, the Almaty Palace of Schoolchildren and Pioneers, an extracurricular educational and cultural centre for children and young people, was demolished despite major protests and replaced by a luxury hotel. In 2008, the historic Sayahat bus station was destroyed, followed in September last

year by the city's oldest maternity hospital. In the summer of 2024, a scandal erupted in the city when the historic building of School No. 2 was slated for demolition.

This cultural barbarism is part of systematic attempts by the Kazakh oligarchy to undermine the historical consciousness of the working class. The Central Asian country is not only rich in raw materials, but also has a huge working class, mainly employed in the oil and gas industry, mining and metallurgy, energy production and heavy industry. Of the 7.1 million employees in Kazakhstan, two million are industrial workers. Almaty in particular is repeatedly the centre of strikes and protests.



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