

## **Historic Buildings Under Threat in Western City**

Residents of the western part of Turkmenbashi have condemned plans to demolish a whole swathe of historic buildings as an attempt to erase the past from people's collective memory. The authorities have been given secret orders to tear down residential and other buildings in this late 19th-early 20th century city that was known as Krasnovodsk until it was renamed Turkmenbashi, in honour of the title used by President Saparmurad Niazov.

The order contains a list of 11 streets scheduled for total demolition, including Naberezhnaya, Chelekenskaya, Kuibyshev, and Sovetskaya, which contain private houses built by Turkmen of the Yomud tribe, who began settling in these coastal areas in the 19th century to ply their trade of fishing.

This old quarter is also home to incomers from the Caucasus – Azerbaijanis, Dagestanis and Armenians, whose descendents still live in houses built by grandparents or great-grandparents.

The demolition plan is part of a broader campaign started two years ago, when numerous historic buildings in the old part of Krasnovodsk were destroyed. These included the Pashaev house, built by a Russian merchant, the former Caucasus and Mercury trading firm's hotel, the merchant Epifanov's row of shops, the mayor's residence, the Officer's Assembly, and merchant Gireev's salt yard.

The bulldozers also destroyed the Police Department, once famous across the Soviet Union as the Museum of the 26 Baku Commissars. This is the building where the heads of the Baku Bolshevik underground spent terrifying nights before they were finally shot. In 1993, after the Soviet Union had collapsed and Niazov had become president of Turkmenistan, he ordered the busts of the Baku commissars to be removed. Now the entire building has been destroyed.

As the time approaches for demolition work to begin, the city is awash with rumours, since the authorities have not stated whose home is to be torn down or when. Nor have they said anything about compensation for the lost housing. Letters and statements from members of the public have gone unanswered, and National Security Committee officers have already paid visits to those active citizens who have pledged to defend their homes.

A municipal official declined to comment about financial compensation, saying only that residents who lose their homes will be resettled in the village of Bekdash, 200 kilometres from Krasnovodsk. Bekdash is a deserted, run-down village, where a large number of abandoned homes were left after Kazak and Russian residents emigrated en masse; these homes have become unsuitable for habitation over the years.

One private house owner held out little hope of cash compensation since the authorities have never offered any on previous occasions, so residents face the prospect of being left homeless.

People who have read the secret order say it contains nothing about compensation.

The city authorities are not saying what will replace the buildings that are cleared away, but there is talk of plans to build luxury offices and hotels.

A source at the Krasnovodsk mayor's office had an even sadder piece of news for anyone who cares about history. He said the next phase may be to destroy the oldest building in modern Turkmenistan – the Stoletov Fort. This fortress was built by Colonel Nikolai Stoletov in 1869, when a Russian expeditionary corps landed on the then deserted shores of the Caspian to build a fortified trading post.

The authorities are also preparing to demolish the Noblemens' Assembly, currently home to a branch of Vneshekonombank. Another unique building lined up for destruction is a house thought to have been owned by the merchant Chernyaev. Built in 1893, this house – like the Stoletov Fort – survived a catastrophic earthquake in 1895, and the reasons why it proved so tough have yet to be discovered by seismologists.

The train station, built with the help of the great Russian architect Benois, may also go in the future.

Local residents say this is vandalism. Pensioner Nadezhda Konstantinovna, who was born and grew up in Krasnovodsk, recalled how historians, scholars and research expeditions used to come from all over the Soviet Union to look at the unique buildings here. The casual destruction is barbaric, she said.

A historian who asked to remain anonymous said the old streets of Krasnovodsk account for 70 per cent of Turkmenistan's architectural heritage dating from the 19th and early 20th centuries. And this heritage is to be lost forever.

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