

Building Modernity in Soviet Alma-Ata

Cities typically materialise broader socio-economic processes in a heightened form. This was particularly true of Soviet cities, once cast as the engine of 'progress' and modernity.

This paper examines both the rapid growth of Soviet Alma-Ata during and after the Great Patriotic War, and the responses of the authorities and its citizens. Housing in Alma-Ata was severely stretched at this time. Factories were moved there from Kharkov's frontline, along with their entire staff. With the Tselina, another 600,000 'volunteers' came to Kazakhstan, many of whom later moved to Alma-Ata. Khrushchev's housing drive in the 1950s coincided with the desire of Kunaev, Kazakhstan's First Secretary, to transform Alma-Ata from a small town to a major modern Republican metropolis of the Soviet Union. This involved moving thousands of people from self-built, mud and reed houses in the city centre to the south eastern edge where concrete panel built apartment blocks began to be built from the start of the 1960s, using the latest technologies and materials. In their place, grand architectural complexes for culture, education administration and celebration were constructed, theoretically drawing on national traditions. People who were moved at the time to the new micro-regions, those who were not, administrators and architects all produce very different narratives of the period, revealing different ideas of urban class topographies, how the city should embody socialist modernity—and the limitations on achieving ideal plans. Similar tropes of beauty, health and cleanliness emerged again in the twenty-first century to sanction new changes in the city centre's appearance.