

# Far Eastern Military Towns in Race to Disappear

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Ruined apartment blocks in Mirnaya. **Howard Amos**

OLOVYANINSKY DISTRICT, ZABAIKALSKY REGION — The swimming facility in the military town of Yasnaya was closed in the 1990s, but after the army pulled out last year, the doors to the sports complex were smashed in, the colorful notice boards were torn down and the empty pool began to fill up with garbage.

An unused residential building nearby is being dismantled from the top down by locals who sell its bricks for no more than 60 kopeks (2 cents) each.

The signs of decay in Yasnaya are the beginning of a familiar process in the Zabaikalsky region. As troops are moved away from the Chinese border, the civilian residents of towns once entirely oriented toward the military are left to survive amid abandoned apartment blocks.

Fearful for their homes and bewildered by change, a few elderly inhabitants of Yasnaya are attempting to halt what they see unfolding before their eyes.

"We are like [expletive] in the eyes of the administration," said Mikhail Shagirev, 63, who moved to Siberia 34 years ago to work on the Baikal-Amur Mainline railroad.

Lera Smirnova, 64, is the head of a small group, which includes Shagirev, set up to coordinate the fight. All 10 of its members are elderly. They meet in one another's apartments, write letters to the local administration and attempt to publicize their cause.

Many of Yasnaya's sewer covers were recently stolen for scrap metal, leaving dangerous holes all over town, said Smirnova, whose voice became shrill as she spoke.

The plight of the pensioners is testimony to a struggle over money that pits federal authorities against regional authorities and military authorities against civilian authorities. It also reflects the gradual demilitarization of the once highly sensitive border between Russia and China.

The region needs 4 billion rubles over the next year — money it does not have — to repair and run all the infrastructure once paid for out of the Defense Ministry's budget, Ravil Geniatullin, the governor of the Zabaikalsky region, told news portal Chita.ru in May.

There are no funds to repair military sites being handed over to local authorities, the head of the Defense Ministry's property department, Dmitry Kurakin, said Thursday, Interfax reported.

But Geniatullin has made promises to the people of Yasnaya. In November 2011, he even pledged that Yasnaya's decaying swimming pool would be renovated and reopened to create local jobs.

The dismantling of military towns was a policy actively pursued by former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov as he pushed through reforms to move Russia toward a smaller, more professional army. The Defense Ministry has said that it wants to slash the number of military towns to less than 200. There were once more than 20,000 across the country.

Residents of Yasnaya do not have to look far for a stark warning of the fate that may await them.

In 2000, the military pulled out of Bezrechnaya, about 50 kilometers away.

Today, Yevgenia Arameyeva, 38, is one of the luckier residents. She has steady work in the school and the local shop, while her husband is employed by Russian Railways.

But the town is a shadow of its former self, and the slow exodus continues.

"People higher up probably don't even know that we are here," she said.

Behind her house is a collection of ruins, buildings that have been dismantled for their bricks and the shells of others that cannot be taken apart because they are made of concrete.

Though a stable source of income, illegally stripping buildings is dangerous. About 10 people have been killed in the district, including in Bezrechnaya, while engaged in such work over the last decade, officials say.

"It's all scary. It looks like the aftermath of a bombing raid," Arameyeva said, gesturing with her hand toward the scene of desolation.

The military's presence in the Zabaikalsky region has been slowly reduced since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as relations with neighboring China have thawed.

In 1997, President Boris Yeltsin signed an agreement with Beijing that settled long-running territorial disputes and laid to rest memories of the 1969 Damansky Island conflict between the two communist powers, in which almost 100 soldiers on both sides were killed.

About 200 kilometers south of Bezrechnaya, on the border with China, three-story concrete bunkers now lie abandoned, while dug-in tanks that long formed part of Russia's defenses have been sold for scrap metal by enterprising locals.

Chita, the capital of the Zabaikalsky region, was the center of the Siberian Military District until that administrative unit was dissolved by order of President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010. The Zabaikalsky region now comes under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Military District, which is headquartered in Khabarovsk.

"When I served [in the army], the No. 1 enemy was China," said Shagirev, who has bitterly criticized the Kremlin's defense policy of recent years. "Mongolia guards its border better than we do."

One solution pushed by local authorities is to concentrate the inhabitants of several ex-military towns in one location. Residents of the former Air Force town of Step have been offered accommodation in Yasnaya, a few kilometers down the road.

But despite a statement from Geniatullin in September that he will not accept responsibility for Step's heating system during the winter months, some residents still refuse to leave.

Other former military towns have found a way to achieve an uneasy stability.

Once a town of more than 10,000, nearby Mirnaya now has only about 1,500 inhabitants. They reside among the remains of eight enormous, empty apartment blocks. The story is the same as in Bezrechnaya: The military left in 2000.

The main problem is lack of work, said Maria Lobanova, the principal of Mirnaya's school, which educates 180 children in a building designed for 800.

"There are no businesses in the area from which you can collect taxes," she said. The only employment available is with state firms.

Having scavenged all the possible materials for resale from abandoned buildings locally, she added, many men now eke out a living collecting and selling the metal remains from controlled explosions in the nearby ordnance disposal yard.

While Mirnaya's population is relatively static, there is still some deterioration in living conditions. Vice principal Tatyana Borodina, who has worked at the school since 1978, said that last year the water supply, sewage system and heating in her Stalin-era apartment block were turned off. She now heats her apartment with electrical heaters and has to carry water up the stairs in cans.

But it is seeing their towns begin to resemble Bezrechnaya that the inhabitants of Step and Yasnaya fear most. And Shagirev worries that degradation in Yasnaya could occur even faster.

"In a year's time, they will have pilfered everything," he said.

Some local officials expressed their misgivings about the departure of troops as it was beginning two years ago. In 2010, Nina Beketova, the head of the Olovyaninsky district's legislature, said that "if [Yasnaya and Step] are given over to municipal ownership, it will be a disaster."

But at least the residents of Yasnaya have Bezrechnaya as a reminder of what they are struggling against — unlike the people living in Bezrechnaya 12 years ago.

Olga Sasonova, 29, has lived in Bezrechnaya all her life and is now the vice principal at the village school where she herself studied.

Bezrechnaya will be completely abandoned in 10 years, she said as if she was stating a fact.

She added: "Nobody expected that things would end up like this."

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