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In Armenia's Second City, Russian Military Outpost With a Dark Past Faces a Precarious Future

Russia’s army base in Gyumri is Moscow’s last major outpost of military influence in Armenia. But amid changing geopolitical tides, are its days numbered?

By Brawley Benson

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The town hall in Gyumri, a city of 150,000 in northwestern Armenia that has hosted a Russian military base for decades. **Brawley Benson**

GYUMRI, Armenia — When Russia first set up a military base on the dusty hills overlooking what is now Armenia’s second-largest city, it marked the edge of the Tsarist empire.

Then, as now, the position was a strategic asset. On one side, the city of Gyumri, with its buildings made of black stone, extends across a vast plain. Just a few miles in the other

direction is the border with Turkey, Armenia's long-standing adversary.

For decades, the proximity to Turkey meant Armenians welcomed this outpost of Russian military influence.

But geopolitical tides are changing. Incensed by what they see as Russia's inaction during the conflict with Azerbaijan in recent years, many Armenians have grown distrustful of their historic ally.

Officials have initiated a dizzying geopolitical realignment. Last year, Yerevan demanded that Russian border guards leave the country's main airport as well as the tense border region with Azerbaijan. And Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan froze Armenia's participation in the Russia-led CSTO military alliance.

As a result, the 102nd Military Base has effectively become Moscow's last major outpost of military influence in Armenia — and one of its last in the wider Caucasus region.

But these days its future, too, seems precarious.

Critics see the Russian base's presence as an impediment to normalizing relations with Turkey, and a series of mysterious crimes tied to the base — some details of which The Moscow Times is reporting for the first time — have produced complicated feelings among locals.

As a trial over the most recent of these crimes nears its end, those involved feel their window might be closing to get answers.

'The base is a political instrument'

Russia's military presence in Gyumri, a city of more than 100,000 located about 50 miles northwest of Armenia's capital Yerevan, dates back to the early 19th century.

During a period of conflict with the Ottoman Empire in the 1830s, Russia built an imposing fortress in the hills west of town. When Armenia and Russia established the 102nd Military Base in the 1990s, they chose the same location for the new base.

Russian soldiers' ability to deploy quickly from the base was believed to be a deterrent to an Azerbaijani takeover of the Armenia-backed breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

But when that exact scenario played out in 2023 and Russia did not come to Armenia's aid, the Armenian public's perception of Russia plummeted.

Experts say that because Armenia and Russia's security situations have changed dramatically, the base now serves little purpose.

"The base is a political instrument rather than a real military one," said Areg Kochinyan, president of the Research Center on Security Policy, a Yerevan-based think tank.

"With the war in Ukraine," he added, "a large portion of the Russian military personnel from the base was lifted back to Russia."

Nevertheless, the 102nd's presence has shaped Gyumri over the years.

Russian soldiers and their families are integrated into the local community, and the base has contributed to Gyumri's vitality.

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Daily flights to Moscow bolster a modest local tourism industry — something that was especially important after an earthquake in 1988 devastated the region's economy.

Signs of national unity are everywhere. A Russian Orthodox church constructed a century and a half ago still flies the Russian and Armenian flags.

A controversial history

For nearly as long as it has existed the base has been a magnet for controversy, owing to a series of crimes that have strained relations with locals.

There was the time in 1999 when two soldiers opened fire near a local market, killing two.

In 2013 two boys in a neighboring town found and accidentally set off leftover training ordinance in a field.

And many Armenians recall with horror the 2015 Avetisyan killings, when a deserter from the base killed seven members of a local family — a display of wanton violence for which there is still no explanation, people who were involved with the case told The Moscow Times.

Locals were outraged. They gathered in front of the 102nd's gates, demanding that Russia hand the suspect, Valery Permyakov, over to Armenian authorities.

"It was not easy to keep these people from attacking the base," Levon Barseghyan, the head of a local journalists association, said of the mood. "I was on the front line at that time, and it was very problematic."

Protesters got their way. Permyakov was tried in an Armenian court and sentenced to life imprisonment in 2016.

The furor died down — but not for long.

A murder and the search for justice

Anahit Ghukasyan remembers how people started to lock their doors in the days after the Avetisyan killings. She never could have imagined that a similar series of events would befall her family.

Her story begins almost four years later. It was a morning in early December 2018, like any other. She and her mother, 57-year-old Julieta Ghukasyan, had left the family home in central Gyumri early to go to their jobs as street cleaners.

Anahit was at work when she got a call. It was her neighbor: Did Anahit know why the police were at the house?

Anahit rushed home, where the police had been questioning her grandmother. There had been an incident, they said, and her mother was injured.

At the hospital, for reasons she still does not understand, she was not allowed to see her mother. Instead, she had to rely on information given to her by a police officer before she arrived.

"Your mother was beaten" in the street, she recalls him saying. "There's a bruise under her eye, [she'll be] home in half an hour."

But the wounds were more severe than expected. Julieta died later that day.

It took more than a week for Anahit to find out the suspect's identity: a soldier stationed at the Russian base named Andrei Razgildeyev.

Like in the Avetisyan killings, there was no discernable motive. Anahit said her mother "didn't have any enemies," that she "lived such a pure life with honor and grace."

According to investigators, Razgildeyev had been drinking and, spotting Julieta walking down the street, decided to engage in a spontaneous act of violence.

But to Anahit this is an inadequate explanation for her mother's death. Why, according to her, does a CCTV video appear to show Razgildeyev hiding behind trees before the killing? Why did he target her mother?

In an interview at her home not far from where the killing took place, a neighborhood where the laughter of children walking home from school fills the afternoon air, Anahit, 36, recounted to a Moscow Times reporter the confusing process of coming to terms with her mother's death under mysterious circumstances.

The only memento she has to remember her is a portrait, professionally done but fading with age, looking out from atop a glass display case.

Armenian officials launched an investigation over Julieta's killing — but six years and five judges later, the trial has gone nowhere.

One of Anahit's biggest complaints is that the defendant does not show up in court.

When Razgildeyev was arrested, the Russian side kept him at the military base. Eventually, they requested that he attend hearings virtually due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

But he has not been seen in person since, raising questions about his true whereabouts.

"I'm not sure he's really at the Russian [military] base," Anahit said. "If he were there, they would at least bring him to the court once, wouldn't they?"

Artur Sakunts, a human rights defender who worked on the case, said that Razgildeyev should

be in an Armenian prison.

“The procedural rules are being violated,” he said, “and the commander of the military base ignores Armenian laws.”

Barseghyan, the journalist, thought something should be done to prevent such crimes from happening again. At the time he was a city councilor and suggested installing a barbed wire fence and security cameras around the base.

It was not much, but it would be something. Barseghyan had made similar recommendations after the Avetisyan killings that ultimately did not materialize. Local officials, he claimed, had no interest in rocking the boat with the base’s Russian leadership on such a sensitive issue.

“It is very frustrating,” said Barseghyan. “We are trying to find solutions. [All that happens] is just talks — no real suggestions, no real changes. These kinds of things can happen again at any moment.”

‘I don’t know if he’s alive and well in [Russia] or if he’s been released’

Thirty miles away in the neighboring town of Vanadzor, Sakunts, the human rights defender, sat in his office on a clear summer day in 2024, his mind rifling through years of memories.

Sakunts oversees the local chapter of the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly, a human rights NGO, and has studied the base extensively during his career.

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The opinion Sakunts has formed based on years of advocacy — including representing the families of those killed in the Avetisyan and Ghukasyan killings — is bleak.

“The Armenian government has no effective mechanisms for monitoring and controlling the activities of the Russian base on the territory of Armenia,” he said.

For him, both cases bolster this claim.

Like Razgildeyev, Russian authorities wanted to keep Permyakov in detention at the base and try him in a Russian court; it was only after a major public outcry that his case was transferred to Armenian authorities.

“In both cases, the Russian side… detained those people of the military base and prevented them from being brought to the Armenian court,” Sakunts said.

Adding to the controversy, officials agreed to extradite Permyakov to Russia in 2017 to serve out his sentence. Since then, neither Armenian nor Russian officials have provided an update on his status.

“I don’t know if he’s alive and well in [Russia] or if he’s been released,” Sakunts said. “How would you know?”

In January, the 10th anniversary of the Avetisyan killings, Justice Minister Srbuhi Galyan said Armenian authorities have "no information about the whereabouts of this person."

An uncertain future

Officials in Yerevan said as recently as January that closing the base is "not on the agenda at the moment." But that could change in the coming years.

Arman Babajanyan, chairman of the pro-European For the Republic party, told The Moscow Times that if his party wins a sufficient number of seats in next year's parliamentary elections, they will try to start the process of removing the base.

"The base's removal would not only symbolize a break from this dependency but also create a tangible pathway for Armenia to assert its sovereignty in regional diplomacy," he said.

He added that the "physical and symbolic presence of a Russian military base at Armenia's western gate to Turkey is a significant barrier" to normalizing relations with Turkey and diversifying the country's diplomatic ties.

Such a decision would likely face stiff opposition. In 2010, Armenia and Russia agreed to extend the lease of the base until 2044. Even though relations are deteriorating, Kochinyan, the security expert, predicted that the base will be among the last vestiges of Armenia and Russia's security relationship to be done away with.

"This would be probably the biggest trigger for [the] Russians," he said. "I definitely don't think that there will be any conversation about the base prior to the 2026 elections."

In the meantime, as she waits for the trial to end, Anahit fears that the investigation into her mother's murder will follow the trajectory of cases in the past and provide few answers.

Over six years, she has grown skeptical that justice can be achieved.

Last fall, at her request, the Shirak regional court began the trial anew, something she hopes will lead to a fair outcome. Her lawyers are prepared to submit appeals if they disagree with the ruling and raise the case with the European Court of Human Rights.

"My mother won't return, I know that," Anahit said. "But the truth to be known, the truth to be revealed — that's what I want."

Shushan Abrahamyan contributed reporting.

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