



The Moscow Times » Issue 3561 » News

Drunk Tanks Face Money Woes and Bad PR

14 December 2006

By Carl Schreck / The Moscow Times

Two police officers escorted Boris into the station at about 6 p.m. His speech was slurred. He had trouble recalling his last name. When the cops forcibly removed his coat and sweater, the stench of booze and sweat was overpowering.

"Why did you bring me here?" Boris screamed after the nurse managed to coax his age, 53, out of him.

When the officers told him he'd have to take off all his clothes, Boris less-than-politely declined.

One double-arm lock later, three officers had Boris hoisted in the air, immobilized. They removed his boots, stripped him down to his tattered boxer shorts, and hustled him off to a ward where two men who had pissed themselves hours before were passed out on their cots.

Boris is among the hundreds of thousands of Russians scooped up off the street by police each year and forced to dry out at the infamous, century-old institution known as the *vytrezvitel*, or sobering-up station.

With winter approaching, sobering-up stations can be lifesavers for people who drink themselves unconscious in freezing temperatures.

But now the sobering-up station, or drunk tank, is facing an uncertain future, plagued with financial woes, legal questions and a public image tainted by times past.

Since the Soviet collapse, the number of sobering-up stations has plummeted. There are now 586 stations in the country, down from 1,249 in 1990, said Yulia Ivanova, spokeswoman for the Interior Ministry's Public Order Department, which oversees the stations.

In Moscow alone, several sobering-up stations have been closed in recent years. There are 12 facilities in the city -- 11 for men and one for women.



Vladimir Filonov / MT
Boris, 53, being restrained by officers at the sobering-up station. Shortly after this photograph was taken, the officers forcibly removed his clothing.

Police Lieutenant Oleg Sergeyev of Moscow's No. 3 Sobering-Up Station, in the Northern Administrative District, voiced serious concerns about the months ahead.

"Winter is especially dangerous," Sergeyev said. "I think our patrol guys have saved the lives of a lot of the people they've found. We get thank-you notes from people thanking us for saving their lives."

The No. 1 problem facing stations is money. The fees charged to drunks for sobering up vary widely -- 100 rubles in Moscow, 50 rubles in Vladimir, 1,900 rubles in Yakutsk -- and are rarely enough to cover overhead.

Another hurdle the drunk tanks must contend with is the courts. With the forced disrobing and prison-like atmosphere, many have questioned whether Russia, like the Soviet Union before it, has the right to force people to get sober.

In May 2005, a Chelyabinsk man took his case to the Supreme Court, arguing that his civil liberties had been violated when local police detained him overnight in a sobering-up station. The court rejected that argument, but other challenges seem likely.

Indeed, officials are well aware of the police-state provenance of the vytrezvitel, the first station having opened in Leningrad in 1931 under the jurisdiction of the People's Health Commissariat.



Vladimir Filonov / MT

Boris drying out at a sobering-up station. The facilities could face extinction.

Following a 1940 decree by secret police chief Lavrenty Beria, one of the era's most searing symbols of the Stalin dictatorship, the drunk tanks were transferred to the control of the NKVD, the predecessor to the KGB.

After the Soviet collapse, the government sought to distance sobering-up stations from the police, ordering the facilities transferred to the Health and Social Development Ministry. Despite that, the Interior Ministry continues to run them.

Compounding the stations' PR problems have been reports of police abuse at the facilities.

In June, Moscow region prosecutors charged a lieutenant with stealing a detainee's ATM card and withdrawing \$5,000 from his account.

And in 2003, prosecutors charged seven officers from Moscow's Sobering-Up Station No. 4 with theft and abuse of power for stopping people who were rushing to catch trains at the nearby Kursky Station. The officers then forced these people to pay bribes -- or miss their trains, prosecutors said. Attendants at the station were also accused of robbing detainees.

Still, those who man the sobering-up stations insist they play a critical role.

For one thing, alcohol remains a critical problem. The health ministry estimates that there are 2 million alcoholics nationwide. Alcoholism has been cited as a leading killer, with an estimated 40,000 people believed to die annually from alcohol poisoning.

"Sobering-up stations are a way to prevent crime," said Sergeyev of Sobering-Up Station No. 3. "If he's getting rowdy in here, it means he's not getting rowdy on the street or beating up his wife at home."

For another, the stations, while having a lock-down feel, do provide safety and some modicum of cleanliness.

Consider Sobering-Up Station No. 3. Sergeyev has spent the past six years at the station, which has 15 beds in two wards sealed off by thick, gray, metal doors with a small window for attendants to keep an eye on detainees.

After being deposited at the station, detainees check in their clothes and valuables, are questioned by medics and are then given a cot with fresh linens to sleep off their drunkenness.

Granted, sobering-up stations are not hotels. In Boris' ward, for instance, the sheets on his neighbor's cot were decorated with a urine stain the size of a human torso. Nor did Boris seem to care much about letting the other men in his ward sleep: Minutes after being locked up, he began banging on the steel door and begging for a cigarette.

Most of the men at the sobering-up station were more resigned: less hostile, less pugnacious. While they seemed surprised they'd have to get undressed, they did so voluntarily.

But they didn't necessarily think they belonged behind bars.

"We'd been sitting at the cafe just across the street and having some drinks after work," explained a man in his fifties sitting on his cot. "We left the cafe, and the police picked us up right away. That's a very convenient location for them."

A duty officer offered a different version of what had happened. The two men, the officer said, had been loitering just outside the train station, cursing loudly and struggling to keep their balance.

Whatever the case, Interior Ministry officials are convinced the sobering-up stations cannot be left to rot.

"Whatever it's called, whether it's part of the police or part of the health authorities, it's clear something has to exist to help these people and prevent them from committing crimes or becoming victims of crimes themselves," said Ivanova, the ministry spokeswoman.

Especially with winter coming on, officials said, the drunks on Moscow's soon-to-be frozen streets will need somewhere warm to get sober.

Vladimir Kiselyov, who has worked for 10 years at Sobering-Up Station No. 3, has seen all too many vodka-swilling men come through the turnstile at the drunk tank.

"A lot of people turn up here several times each month," Kiselyov said. "Some people might come here six or eight times a month. Our patrolmen know their faces."

He said one 40-year-old man last winter was brought in four times over a 24-hour period. Every time the man left the station he would try to ease his hangover with some vodka from the store across the road.

"Our patrolmen brought him in three times, and the last time he was brought in by an ambulance," Kiselyov said. "He drank until he passed out in a snowdrift."

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