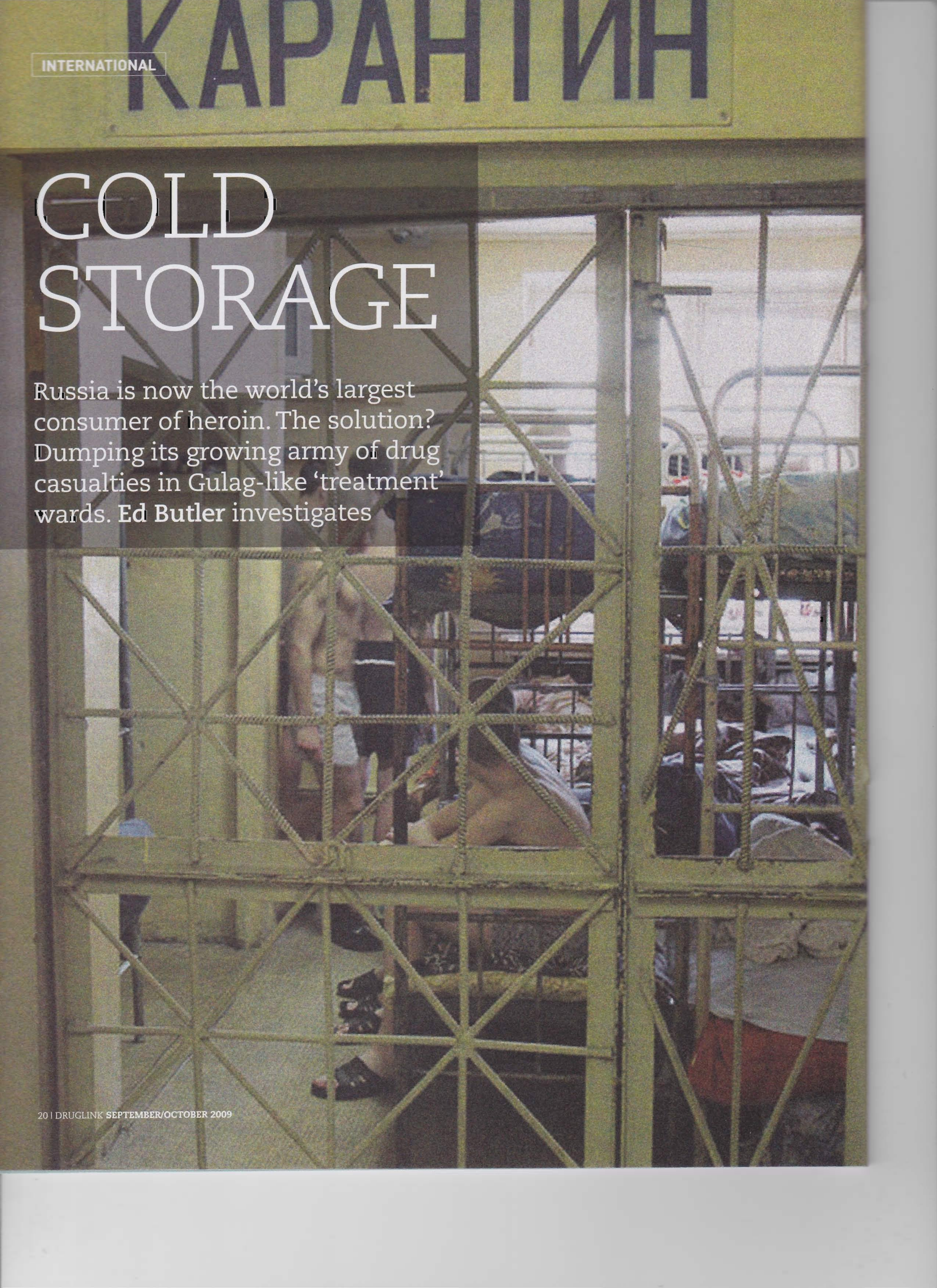


INTERNATIONAL

КАРАНИН

# COLD STORAGE

Russia is now the world's largest consumer of heroin. The solution? Dumping its growing army of drug casualties in Gulag-like 'treatment' wards. Ed Butler investigates





# dneworld DIARIES

Just over two months ago, on 19 June 2009, Kostya Proletarsky's tired body finally gave in to the ravages of TB and AIDS. A heroin addict for much of his adult life, he passed away in the cold and sterile wards of the Botkin Hospital, St Petersburg.

He was not yet 35 years of age. As far as problem heroin users are concerned, Proletarsky was an unexceptional man: he found himself involved in petty theft to feed his habit. Having been caught and convicted, he was sent to the Segezhs Rayon medical correctional facility situated in Karelia province, just 150km south of the Arctic Circle. Here he was to receive help to wean him off heroin, receive treatment for his already advanced stages of TB and AIDS, as well receive punishment for his crimes. But his ordeal had only just began.

Fortunately, for the sake of posterity, the hell that Proletarsky endured during his two year spell in Segezhs Rayon is now a matter of record. After prison Proletarsky had worked as a social worker in the Humanitarian Action Foundation in St Petersburg. It was there he met Anya Sarang, President of the Andrey Rylkov Foundation for Health and Social Justice. Shortly before his death, Proletarsky recounted a regime of cruel negligence and sadistic abuse inside Segezhs.

The enforced inhaling of pure ammonia, which caused severe burning to the mouth, throat and lungs, seems to have been a favourite of the guards. He told Sarang how huge quantities of bleach and ammonia would be poured onto the floor of a small room, before inmates were herded in to suffer the noxious fumes. 'It was like a gas chamber', he wrote. 'They pour it and you just can't breathe. I remember it....It was a room half the size of my ward. They packed 20 people in there - inmates. And you couldn't see further than a half a metre - the bleach was in the air already. And people started suffocating right away. Some fainted and fell down. Panicking, people started breaking the door - they were trying to save their lives you know. And they knocked the door out altogether with a piece of the wall - just trying to survive.'

For dinner, a bowl of green pickled tomatoes cooked in tap water comprised a 'soup'. In the TB-ridden prison, a high

calorie diet would have been essential. 'You need to feed tuberculosis so that it eats the calories, not you,' said Proletarsky. Without such sustenance, the inmates gradually became more and more emaciated.

Proletarsky was moved temporarily to Onda, a TB colony within the prison, supposedly to receive better treatment. However, the patients seemed to impart more knowledge to the doctors than vice versa. He takes up the story: 'And so the doctor calls me and says 'well, what's up with you, why did they bring you here, why was it necessary?' So, I told him, explained everything. He said: 'Wow, I've learned something from you'. That was after I told him about viral load, ARV and stuff, he didn't know anything about it. He said: 'You're so well versed, you must be from St Petersburg.' And that's it, during the two weeks that I was there he saw me only once and I was transferred back.'

Medication was doled out arbitrarily and with little concern for the performance of the patients. Proletarsky describes one man who had a flare up of hepatitis. 'They stuffed him with TB drugs, which are highly toxic....And his stomach kept swelling, he was all yellow. He told the doctors that he was feeling real bad and they just answered that they didn't know anything.' All the same, taking incorrect medicine was seen as preferable to being sent to the notorious SHIZO, the isolation chamber. So the patient continued with his course of treatment, duly got ascite ('drum belly') and died.

The experience of Proletarsky inside Segezhs Rayon is not an isolated one. He lost so many friends there he was unable to recall all of them. Neither was the prison itself an anomaly among other medical correctional facilities across the country. Reports written by authorities such as Human Rights Watch (HRW), USAID and Yale University have exposed the institutionalised persecution of drug users across Russia.

Unfortunately, there is little respite for drug users outside prison walls: the brutality of the police forces more than matches that of the prison guards. A number of sources, including HRW, cite the phenomenon of 'bespredel', which refers to the unrestrained police violence that effectively goes unchecked in

Russian society.

A report published in May, *Policing Drug Users in Russia: Risk, Fear and Structural Violence*, co-authored by Anya Sarang alongside the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the University of California, said: "GULAG is alive. The [penal] system is designed in such a way that any person can be grabbed and annihilated in prison. As long as the society tolerates the massacre, it can happen to any of you."

The report, published in the journal *Substance Use and Misuse*, based its findings on over 200 interviews with heroin users recruited through local harm reduction centres in three cities across Russia: Moscow, Bamau and Volgograd. All of them give a damning indictment of a police depicted as brutal and unrestrained. Given the huge risks open to submitting such incriminating (or not) evidence, the sources are understandably confidential, though the testimony provided is no less profound.

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Arbitrary arrest for suspected drug users, let alone dealers, is a common occurrence, the report finds. One young man from Volgograd writes: 'If they find needle marks, then you get the full of it. They can just lock you up for two weeks, 'for examination'. It's the same as prison, but just called something else.'

This in a country where drug use per se is not a criminal offence. Where no evidence of drug use is found, then the police will often simply plant it as a way of meeting the daily quota of drug arrests, or as a means to extract a bribe. One source exclaims that for the police, drug selling areas "are like pastures on which they graze". Other sources describe how the police effectively set themselves up as doormen to drug dealing houses. They will commonly