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1256

• SOVIET UNION:  
Traffic

10 January 1972

## TRAFFIC FATALITIES - A PRESSING PROBLEM IN SPITE OF FEW VEHICLES

Summary: Possession of one's own automobile remains a dream for the majority of the Soviet people; the number of cars, buses and trucks found in traffic is far less than in the industrialized Western countries. Yet the variety of problems associated with traffic, particularly the resultant air pollution and the growing increase in accidents, is as topical there as in the West. The Soviet press has recently published numerous articles on the subject.

The Soviet party bureaucracy constantly demonstrates a particular preference for organizing special "weeks" and "decades" to promote certain programs. However, the recently organized "Union Decade of Traffic Safety" passed in virtual silence. Only a few newspapers, specifically the Byelorussian ones, published articles on the occasion. Yet traffic safety is an anxiety-arousing problem in the Soviet Union.

In October Sovetskaya Belorussiya (1) published a short item concerning the number of traffic accidents in the Byelorussian SSR during the last ten days of September 1971. According to the paper:

In the last ten days more than 40 traffic accidents with tragic results were registered in the Republic. Forty-four persons, of which four were children, were killed. In every second accident a motorcycle or a tractor was involved.

### Traffic Fatalities Among Children

The greatest concern of the officials and the public is directed toward the increasing number of children who are killed or injured in the streets. Isolated reports on this problem can be found in all the Republic's newspapers during the past few months. More precise data again, however, is found in statements from Byelorussia: "In the [first] nine months of this year, 114 children have been killed in traffic accidents; more than 600 suffered injuries." (2) The Byelorussian Party organ criticized the Department of the Interior, teachers and parents as being chiefly responsible for doing too little to educate children in traffic safety. But the already notorious mistakes in city planning are also a contributing factor: playgrounds are either poorly located or non-existent, not only in housing developments but for an entire region as well. Thus, children are compelled to use the streets as the "most convenient playground." (3)

The same source reports that during the nine months in 1971 there were 4,500 automobile accidents on the streets and roads of Byelorussia which resulted in 831 deaths and 4,300 injuries.

### Driving While Intoxicated: The Most Frequent Cause of Accidents

All the newspapers have deplored the extremely low degree of self-discipline found among drivers. In the case of Byelorussia it was estimated that this lack of self-discipline was a direct cause of 73% of the accidents. Drunken drivers were responsible for the worst accidents. Sovetskaya Belorussiya reported, for example, that every fourth accident was caused by an intoxicated driver. The reports show that this offense is especially widespread in the country, where it is often reported that children at play and unsuspecting pedestrians are simply run down on the sidewalks by drunken tractor drivers.

Military vehicle drivers are often involved in accidents as well. In the Soviet Union the law prohibits drivers without special training to transport other persons, but in practice this is often ignored. Many private drivers on country roads

exploit the lack of good public transport to earn extra money by picking up hitch-hikers. An article in the defense ministry's paper Krasnaya zvezda reports that even military officials disregarded the pertinent statutes. It reports the following:

The traffic laws and regulations clearly state which drivers are permitted to undertake public transport. These regulations are often abused, and drivers who have no training are being employed in public transportation. (6)

Surprisingly several items in Krasnaya zvezda reported the extent of shortcomings in the military transport services. Those held immediately responsible for the respective vehicles' traffic safety are called "starshie mashin". According to Krasnaya zvezda:

Not all sections demonstrate the requisite responsibility in training and appointing "starshie mashin". These posts are often filled by persons who neither know traffic control nor their own duties. Quite often "starshie mashin" violate traffic laws and the regulations on the use of vehicles. The consequences can be disastrous. Thus, Colonel Zhurbenko, an engineer, drank while on duty and even offered Driver Melnik some alcohol. Strashina Dianov, a "starshi mashiny," drove himself despite his driver's presence. His inability to handle the steering wheel resulted in an accident. (7)

#### Poor Service for Vehicles and Excessive Demands on Drivers

Technical defects in automobiles and excessive demands on drivers are further causes of accidents. Recently Pravda considered the problems of proper car servicing and technical supervision:

The technically low level of vehicular preparedness for road conditions is primarily caused by shortcomings in the existing methods of service and repair. They are out of date and inadequate for current needs. How can this backwardness be explained? At least partially by a lack of thorough research. Up to now most of the important practical questions in public transport were answered without the sufficient scientific groundwork. There is virtually no theory on the utilization of vehicles. There are no scientific research centers working toward the solution of this important problem. (8)

The author holds a doctorate in the technical sciences. He is Professor N. Govorushchenko, a competent expert on the

subject who is chairman of a department on road and traffic studies at the Kharkov Institute. He points out that a 1962 ordinance requires thorough and regular inspections of all vehicles. The ordinance provides an exact list of points to be checked by mechanics. In practice, however, service check-ups are made irregularly, even in large transport operations, there are not enough qualified inspectors and the inspections often are carried out by unqualified personnel.

Radyanska Ukraina reported quite recently about another problem -- the growing lack of qualified drivers. Because of this, the available personnel is truly being exploited. Drivers have no Saturdays or Sundays off and they have to work overtime. In spite of all this they are very badly paid. Therefore the newspaper exclaims: "It is high time to examine working conditions and the ways in which they are being stimulated to work!" (9)

Several propositions have been made concerning the resolution of this question. Some have proposed to employ bus drivers with a third category operator's license if they have had at least three years' driving experience. But the problem is not so easily solved since those drivers have to be retrained for the new position. Others propose to employ females as bus drivers, who hold an operator's license in the first or second category. The Soviet law -- already famous for its contradictions -- does permit female trolley drivers but does not allow women bus drivers, in spite of the fact that steering a bus is much easier than controlling a trolley. Here, too, some legal changes must take place. In general it seems that the juridical problems and the unsolved transportation questions are of additional difficulty for the sources' already existent grievances in transportation. Two competent authors report on this in the last edition of Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo. (10)

The Soviet people now find themselves with a type of motorization fever. The waiting lists for cars are very long although the prices for new cars are extremely high (a Volga-Gas 21 costs 5,600 rubles or about \$ 6,800; the Volga Model 1970 - rubles 9,500 or about \$11,800; the Zaporozhets - 3,500 rubles or about \$ 4,350) and delivery may take more than two and a half years. Very few Soviet citizens are able to buy black market second-hand cars which are often three times as expensive as the official new cars. Therefore Soviet citizens will depend for a long time on public transportation and taxis. But there are not enough taxis: Kiev, for example, had 2,600 taxis in 1971; in 1975 there should be 3,500. (Compared to Munich, which has about the same number of inhabitants, there were 3,400 registered taxis in 1971 as well as about 500 other operators registered under "Call-Car", "Minicar", etc.)



The Soviet leadership does not make concrete promises to fulfill the wish of possessing one's own car -- a sign of private success similar to that in the West. However, they know very well that this is a definite desire for most of the Soviet people, and that it cannot be as easily satisfied, as it was in the thirties; with a simple bicycle or motorcycle. This is a more complicated matter than it may at first seem. The resolution is not only based on the increased production of private cars; it also depends on the solution of different socio-political problems; as well as on the organization of car services and maintenance, production of spare parts and many other problems, among them the famous "Oh! The roads!" ("... ekh dorogi!").

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- (1) Sovetskaya Belorussiya, 13 October 1971.
  - (2) Ibid., 20 November 1971.
  - (3) Ibid.
  - (4) Ibid.
  - (5) Ibid.
  - (6) Krasnaya zvezda, 19 May 1971.
  - (7) Ibid.
  - (8) Pravda, 17 September 1971.
  - (9) Radyanska Ukraina, 16 December 1971.
  - (10) V.I. Zhulev and T.I. Korotkova "Administrativnaya etvetstvennost' na avtotransporte" (The administrative responsibilities in Public Transport), in Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo, 1971, No. 12, p. 72.