IS THE ROAD REALLY FOR EVERYONE? – TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS AS A HISTORICAL PHENOMENON

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Strictly speaking, the project was supposed to be about East Frisian tea. Peter Itzen laughs. But since the sources weren't particularly abundant, the historian was led to change tack when an entirely different, yet extremely interesting research project presented itself during an arduous car journey from Freiburg to his home region of East Frisia. Despite the fact that thousands of people die in traffic accidents in Germany each year, and several hundreds of thousands more are injured – some very severely – to date there has been no investigation into the social history of traffic accidents as a historic phenomenon.

The death toll on German roads has always been measured in extreme figures. Almost a million dead and 30 million seriously injured since 1950 paint a vivid picture of road traffic in the Federal Republic. The question of social acceptance, however, has remained largely unanswered. By way of comparison, from an ethical and moral standpoint alone, it would be impossible to implement any other project that involved such horrific consequences for humankind. So why does modern society accept this state of affairs with regard to traffic? Why is the traffic accident perceived as a general, everyday risk to human life? Here, Itzen has gained insights that point beyond the topic itself: the development and significance of technical innovations, the role of the state in the 20th century, the altered perception of the human body and finally the change in our ideas of guilt and responsibility are all aspects that become more comprehensible when viewed in relation to the history of the traffic accident.

In his project "Tod auf den Straßen" (Death on the road), Peter Itzen, Junior Fellow and lecturer at the University of Freiburg History Department, attempts to examine the traffic accident from the perspective of social history. The historian interprets the phenomenon as an everyday social conflict and posits that the way in which this is resolved reveals something of the understanding of social justice within a society. The study covers a period beginning in 1870, in the age of the stagecoach accident, and ending in 1970, the year in which the number of fatal accidents reached a temporary peak and a new awareness of the problem began to develop.

In the 19th century, traffic regulations, or rudimentary forms thereof, were primarily designed to maintain road conditions, explains Itzen. Germany itself was a latecomer among the car-driven countries. The first cars, which were difficult to handle, initially became established in France, Great Britain and the United States. As automobility increased during the 1920s, discussions of road safety finally also began in Germany. At the time, an average of four people died each day on the roads in Berlin.

So there have always been accidents, even if improved technology and the great expenditure that is now put into passenger protection mean that today fewer accident victims meet their death as a result. What has changed, however, are the debates that rage about traffic accidents, and this is where Itzen's work comes into play. "When traffic accidents became a hot topic in the early 20th century, public discussion still centred largely on blame and moral values. A car driver who caused an accident was also a morally questionable person, since he or she was morally liable for the injury or death of another person. Today, the person causing an accident has very little to do with the event, with insurance companies and the police regulating everything between them. The question of guilt is left aside. In public debate, much less is said about blame than accountability," explains Itzen, citing an important observation from his basic research. Newspaper reporting, specialist legal and medical literature, classic administrative measures and archives from the Reich Ministry of Transport all serve as a basis for the scholar's research project. These documents also testify to the fact that different social classes were affected by traffic accidents to varying degrees, and that road traffic itself established new social groups and orders. This aspect also provides a further focus for the research project. "The image that prevails in early sources is that of the nouveau riche car driver who sends labourers and farmers to their deaths as they make their way to work and to the fields," states Itzen. His plan to demonstrate changes in the concepts of fairness within modern societies based on the history of the road traffic accident is extremely exciting. According to Itzen's theory, the penalties for those causing road accidents and the structure of highway codes, for example, ultimately reflect the general perception of fairness within a society. As a result, the history of the traffic accident as researched by the historian also represents a history of social conflict.
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