

Glasnost reveals Soviet smoking 'epidemic'

by Vladimir Belykov

Novosti Press Agency

MOSCOW — The Soviet Union had a non-smoking day April 7, 1988, for the first time. On that day the USSR joined 165 other countries — members of the World Health Organization in observing a day of non-smoking.

All the major Soviet newspapers carried the physicians' call upon the smokers to refrain from smoking on that day and start a new life, giving up that habit which is one of the most hazardous to one's health. The cardiologists called smoking "a great threat to health which can only be compared to an A-bomb, hunger and plague."

Under *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the Soviet people have learned with anxiety that the Soviet Union has become one of the most smoking nations in the world. The statistics released shocked many people as they learned that there were 70 million smokers in the USSR, half the adult men and a quarter of women smoking.

Smoking among 16- to 17-year-olds is as widespread as among adults. And there are nearly as many smoking teen-age girls as there are smoking adult women.

In some Soviet cities, a majority of the population has assumed the habit.

Some statistics: in Tallin (Estonia) 53 percent of men in the 20-54 age bracket smoke; in Ashkhabad (Turkmenia) - 59 percent; Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan) - 61 percent; Tbilisi (Georgia) - 64.5 percent; while in Baku (Azerbaijan) - as many as 65 percent.

There are smokers even among doctors. A recent poll of the medical personnel in the hospitals in one of Moscow's districts revealed that more than 11 percent of doctors (mostly women) smoked.

The trade in tobacco products has been on the rise over the past few years. In the 1970-1986 period it grew by 23 percent. In 1986, 6.8 billion rubles worth of cigarettes was sold. By contrast, trade in cars, including spare parts, amounted to 12.9 billion rubles that year.

In 1987, 378.5 billion cigarettes were produced in the Soviet Union. That is 1,332 cigarettes per capita. It must be noted that four trillion cigarettes are produced annually worldwide — 1,000 cigarettes per inhabitant of this planet.

Until March 14, 1493, nobody smoked in Europe. On the next day, Columbus' ship *Nina* returned to Spain from its voyage to the New World. Sailor Rodrigo de Jerez disembarked,

puffing at a pipe. He was the first European to take to smoking.

He was punished for his irresponsibility. The authorities put him behind bars.

There were far more severe punishments for smoking in Russia. Smokers were whipped and branded, even impaled. But despite all those measures, tobacco had reached every corner of Russia by the beginning of the 18th century.

Since that time there has been a confrontation between smokers and non-smokers.

Despite this confrontation, the ban on smoking eventually was lifted in Russia, and punishment for it was abolished.

Smokers have never been left in peace. However, there has been no really vigorous campaign against smoking in recent years. On the contrary, Stalin was portrayed with a pipe in hand, and President Brezhnev with a cigarette, to say nothing of the photos of smoking athletes and theater and movie actors. These photos served as an encouragement to those who had just begun to smoke, and the number of smokers grew all the time.

People smoked freely in planes, restaurants, at beaches at the non-smoking Black Sea resort of Sochi, in

elevators, apartment house staircases and even at hospitals.

Today smoking is regarded as a national epidemic. The extremists have demanded that smoking and trade in cigarettes be banned and tobacco plantations destroyed.

But it seems that the golden mean lies in the following reasonable plan: one should make a choice in favor of health on one's own. We should not pressure too hard those who imperil their own health, but give every support to those who stand for healthy lifestyles.

A ban on smoking in all public places has been proposed, along with fines for those who violate that ban, higher prices on tobacco products, a halt to importing cigarettes and a ban on smoking in the Armed Forces. Also proposed is an end to the advertisement of smoking in movie and theater productions.

It is most likely that all those proposals will be included in a state program to combat smoking, which will be submitted to a general discussion. But so far little progress has been made. Few people gave up smoking April 7.

At the very least, however, the campaign served to underscore the notion that the problem is serious and it drew public attention to it.