3. A History of Russian and Soviet Censuses

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Chapter 3

A History of Russian and Soviet Censuses

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Many of the problems associated with the use of Russian and Soviet census data, as described in later chapters in this volume, derive from the historical and political context in which the different enumerations were conducted and the state of the art of census-taking at those times. Although the earlier enumerations were less technically sophisticated and less accurate than more recent ones, the availability of published figures has been increasingly curtailed in those censuses taken just before and after World War II. The following chronological review of census-taking procedures in Russia and the USSR addresses issues such as the organization of the census-taking apparatus; the conducting of individual censuses; the completeness of the count; and some of the methodological, statistical, and political difficulties involved in presenting the results. Analysis of results, instructions to census takers, definitional issues, and questionnaire comparisons will be dealt with here in an overall sense; the individual chapters that follow discuss these topics in more detail as they relate to the utilization of various categories of census data. In addition to works cited in this chapter, the reader may want to consult the excellent bibliographies in Lorimer (1946) and Dubester (1969).

Prerevolutionary Population Counts

Historical Background

The earliest censuses, in Russia and throughout Europe, were conducted by feudal principalities primarily to determine the population eligible for taxation or military service and, therefore, typically left out women and children. Population counts were taken for taxation purposes in the lands of Novgorod and Kievan Rus as far back as the eighth century. Later,
various Russian principalities enumerated their populations in order to
determine measures of tribute and duty demanded by the Mongol-Tatar
overlords. Such counts were taken in Kiev (1245), Ryazan (1257), and
Novgorod (1273) (Bruk and Kozlov, 1977: 174).

After the overthrow of the Tatar yoke, the gradual elimination of
feudal remnants, and the formation of a central Russian state, counts of
the population began to take a new direction. By the fifteenth and
sixteenth centuries, landholdings came to be considered taxable units,
leading to the development of land-tax censuses upon which the popula-
tion was estimated. These so-called pistsoviye knigi (cadastres) registered
characteristics of the population as well as descriptions of cities, vil-
lages, estates, churches, and monasteries, and records of prison debts
(Kolpakov, 1969: 9). These counts were at best incomplete, and many
have not been preserved, succumbing to various historical circumstances
(e.g., the 1626 Moscow fire). ¹

In the seventeenth century, as the result of the development of trade
and handicrafts, “courts” (or household economies) gained consider-
ation as units of taxation, and Russian censuses were transformed from
land- to household-based counts. The censuses of 1646 and 1678 were
the first to count households, based on men of estate class, at least
throughout the territory of the principality of Moscow. The 1710 house-
hold census encompassed the entire territory of the Russian state and was
the first to include females. The detail provided by these counts (age,
occupation, social class) far exceeded many censuses of western Europe
at the time.

An edict of Peter I in 1718 changed the counting of the Russian
population from a household to a person-by-person census. Such a
compilation first took place in 1720–21 and was subject to subsequent
verification—or reviziya. Ten revizii were conducted over the next 140
years, the last from 1857 to 1860. These limited their enumeration to the
male population in the taxable gentry classes. Apart from soldiers,
eighteen nontaxable privileged classes were exempt from the reviziya
counts, including the palace retinue, titled citizens, state civil servants
(chinovniki), and the nobility. Outlying areas of the state were often
omitted, and landowners (pomeshchiki) tended to understate the number
of persons on their estate subject to taxation. Despite these deficiencies
and limitations, the revizi provided, in addition to a count of taxpayers,
useful data regarding the population composition by sex, nationality,
social position, and family status (Feshbach, 1981: 3).

After the abolition of serfdom (1861), the need developed for a more

¹. For a detailed survey of early counts of the prerevolutionary Russian population, see V.
Plandovskiy, Narodnaya Perepis’ (St. Petersburg: 1898).
detailed count of the population. Yet, nearly forty years passed before the tsarist government prepared a comprehensive census. In the meantime (between 1860 and 1889), seventy-nine local and city censuses were independently conducted throughout the Russian Empire, mostly in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Pskov, and the Baltic provinces (USSR, 1978: 17).

The Russian Census of 1897

The first and only ‘‘All-General (Universal) Census of Population’’ of tsarist Russia was conducted on February 9, 1897 (January 28, according to the old calendar). Encompassing the entire Russian Empire with the exception of Finland, this census was the culmination of years of labor (Russian Empire, 1905). Given the size and diversity of Russia’s territory, only a massive effort could have achieved the comprehensive and relatively unified census program that resulted. The undertaking was an intellectual exercise as well, incorporating members of the Russian intelligentsia into the preparation and conducting of the census. Lenin and Kalinin wrote of the importance of the census, as did Mendeleyev, Tolstoy, and Chekhov. The latter two directly participated in the census taking as enumerator and controller respectively; very few segments of Russian society remained untouched by the census effort.

The well-known Russian geographer P. P. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky played an especially significant role in the organization and coordination of the 1897 census. As director of the Central Statistical Committee (1864–75), he helped prepare a proposal for just such an endeavor, only to have the Statistical Council limit the count to a census of men in Russia subject to the new universal military service statutes, which had become effective in 1874 (Lincoln, 1980: 60). After a prolonged period, a revised plan was approved in 1895, calling for an empirewide census based on scientific statistical principles similar to those used in conducting western European censuses.

The organization and conducting of the census was entrusted to civil servants of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and its regional offices. They administered and trained over 100,000 enumerators to count the 127 million Russian subjects living in village dwellings as well as urban apartments. Along with the population present at the time of the census survey, temporary and permanent populations were also calculated at each place of enumeration. Census forms with a single set of questions and instructions were filled out individually for each person. The census form was distributed according to three main categories: Form A was for peasant households on agricultural land, Form B was for landed estates, and Form C was for urban populations. The basic form consisted of
fourteen questions that determined relationship to head of household, age, family composition, social class, place of birth, place of permanent dwelling, status of transients, religion, native language, literacy, and main and secondary occupations. Only a limited number and range of answers to these questions were provided, although columns were available in which to write further necessary or explanatory details.

It is interesting to note that the information collected for the 1897 census was compiled and calculated with the aid of the same tabulating machines that were developed in the United States by Herman Hollerith for automating the work of the 1890 U.S. census. These machines recorded data via a system of holes punched into special cards (Russian Empire, 1905: ii–iii). A card was punched for every person, and each person was given a number corresponding to the number on the census form in case a check was necessary. For the compilation of tables, each category required a separate run of the appropriate cards.

Despite these automated statistical manipulations, which provided for the cross-tabulation of massive amounts of information, and the direct participation by many of the country’s leading figures, the census program and its methodology still had deficiencies. There was, for example, a shortage of trained personnel who fully understood the meaning and methods of statistical analysis. Furthermore, because many of the categories provided a limited set of possible answers, it was impossible to differentiate fully occupations, educational levels, or class stratification among peasants (kulaks, middle, and poor peasants were all listed together under one census heading). In addition, there was no question about nationality (only native language and religion). Finally, although the census reached most regions of the vast Russian Empire, it by no means reached them all. Many communities continued to shun the census because of its tax purposes; according to some estimates, the population in parts of Siberia was miscalculated by as much as 30 percent and Finland was excluded altogether.

In early 1902, the Central Statistical Committee published results of the 1897 census in one volume for eighteen gubernii and in two volumes for another six. The published categories, however, were considered to be inappropriately designated and a special conference was called to rework the results based on the de facto and de jure population figures. (Robert Lewis discusses in his chapter the importance of checking whether figures from the Russian and Soviet censuses are for the de facto [nalichnoye] or de jure [postoyannoye] population and how de jure is defined operationally in a given enumeration. As Anderson and Silver (1985) noted, there may be a significant difference between the two categories.) The final census was fully published by 1905, eight years after its inception. Results were presented in twenty-five main tables for
each of the eighty-nine gubernii, a summary volume for the empire, supplements listing urban settlements greater than 2,000 people and places with more than 500 inhabitants, and volumes on several specialized topics.²

The question about the necessity for a new Russian census was raised several times in the early years of the twentieth century. The Central Statistical Committee planned to hold a second census in 1910, later postponed to 1915 because of bureaucratic delays. With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, this census never took place.

The Soviet Censuses

When planning is paramount, as it is in socialist economies, the government must be able to take stock of the country's labor resources and materials so that a record of past production can be related to future goals. It is somewhat ironic, therefore, that the officially recognized censuses of the Soviet Union (1920, 1926, 1939, 1959, 1970, and 1979) fell at such irregular intervals. Ideally, according to the International Statistical Congress organized by Semenov-Tyan-Shansky in St. Petersburg in 1872, a census count of the population was to be taken every ten years, beginning in 1900. Unfortunately, the USSR periodically encountered difficulties or adversity (revolution, civil and world war, famine, and economic reorganization) severe enough to prevent such a regular count.

The Early Post-Revolutionary Period

The first Soviet census of population was conducted in April 1920, according to a resolution by the Seventh All-Russian Congress of Soviets. A demographic-professional census and a brief calculation of industrial enterprises were planned to coincide with a scheduled agricultural census in one statistical operation (Drobizhev, 1977: 69). Data were collected according to occupation, native language and nationality (natsional'nost'), and literacy; in addition, maps of urban apartments and lists of rural homesteads were compiled.

The 1920 census took place under the grave conditions of foreign and civil war and economic devastation. Both paper and literate cadres were in short supply, and several enumerators were reported to have been murdered by the people they were attempting to count. Owing to war-related events, the census could not be conducted in Belorussia, the Crimea, the Transcaucasus, the Far East, Turkestan, Khiva, Bukhara,

and various regions of the Ukraine, the Volga, the North Caucasus, and Siberia; altogether about 28 percent of the population was not contained in this count. Including those areas not counted, the Soviet population in 1920 has been estimated at 136.8 million (Kolpakov, 1969: 20–21).

Although not regarded as accurate and published only in part, the 1920 census did make some significant contributions. Unlike the 1897 count, it included a question about nationality (natsional'nost') as well as a question about native language. A question about general and special education was asked along with the question about literacy. According to a suggestion by Lenin, however, no question was asked about religion.

The experience of the first Soviet census of 1920 was useful in its application toward subsequent census counts. A 1923 urban census was conducted according to the same principles as the 1920 census but applied only to cities; settlements connected with factories, plants, and railroad stations; resorts of 500 people and more; and rural population points of less than 2,000 inhabitants where the dominant means of employment was provided by a local industry or trade (Kolpakov, 1969: 17). This urban census was conducted concurrently with a census of industrial enterprises and trade institutions (Zhak, 1958: 20).

The Census of 1926

The next Soviet census was taken on December 15, 1926, after peace had arrived and economic recovery was under way. For the first time during Soviet rule, the census included the entire territory of the country and provided a barometer by which to measure the success or failure of economic rehabilitation. For example, of the population of 147 million, the census found that only 18 percent (26.3 million) was urban in 1926; this rather low urban share indicated that the country remained primarily agrarian despite significant industrial strides.

The 1926 census had as its goal the collection of data about the population necessary for the compilation of the first Five-Year Plan. Indeed, this census remains the most comprehensive yet compiled by either Russia or the Soviet Union; its volumes provided a wealth of statistical information used by the government in planning the economy right up until World War II. In addition, complete life tables of the population were generated from the collected age data from the Ukraine, Belorussia, and the European part of the RSFSR.

The conducting of the census proceeded according to a detailed program. Prior to the census, community Committees of Cooperation circulated propaganda materials in order to inform the populace of the importance of census accuracy. Local census bureaus conducted surveys for the mapping of census regions and city plans, and much time and
effort was spent training enumerators to fill out forms properly. To insure an accurate return, special directives were issued by the Council of People’s Commissars which promised to treat all information as confidential, although the regional executive committees were known to threaten reprisals to those who gave false information (Petersen, 1975: 669).

The questionnaire itself was also more comprehensive than those of the previous censuses. Questions were arranged in a series of six census forms, the first of which was a personal survey providing the standard census information. While the 1926 census was essentially a demographic one, the additional forms requested data by family lists, ownership charts for urban dwellers, and homeowner details for rural locales. These data provided statistics on housing resources, taxes, construction, and accommodations by urban and rural area.

As with the 1897 census, the cross-tabulation of the collected data for 1926 required a tremendous effort, most of which was done by hand. Nonetheless, the analysis proceeded rapidly, and the census was ready for publication by the end of 1929 (USSR, 1929). Results were issued in fifty-six volumes of seven major categories and in nineteen short summary volumes. These results were published based on twenty-four census regions which had been established for planning and administration to coincide with the economic and political divisions at the time; there were nearly twice as many political units in 1926 as there were in 1897.

The 1926 census, as indicated previously, marked a vast improvement in the general knowledge of the population within the borders of the Soviet state. This was especially evident in the increased number of categories designating the various ethnic groups (narodnosti), about whom the authorities now had a more comprehensive knowledge. In addition, questions were added about unemployment, physical handicaps, and mental illness.

However, the 1926 census had several deficiencies. Perhaps most glaring was the fact that the permanent population in the 1926 census, that population living permanently at the place of enumeration and born within the 1926 borders of the USSR, was not the de jure population because temporary residents were not allocated back to their places of permanent residence as temporarily absent (Lewis and Rowland, 1979: 87).

There were also discrepancies in the levels of training and education of the census takers. An effort was made to recruit more enumerators with higher or secondary education or where possible to encourage university students, teachers, and employees of statistical organizations to participate in the census-taking effort. Still, in 1926 only 10.5 percent
of the instructors had any higher education, while 18.3 percent had no education at all. Regional variations were significant. Thus, where in the RSFSR nearly 65 percent of the enumerators were school employees, student volunteers, or members of statistical organizations, only 35 percent of the Central Asian enumerators fell into these categories (Vorob'yev, 1957: 43-48). Similar urban-rural differentials existed. Although there were 163,132 enumerators for a population of 147 million, it was necessary to call in the army to take stock of the population in certain regions of the country.

The Censuses of 1937 and 1939

The next full-scale census conducted in the Soviet Union took place in 1937, following the postponement of censuses scheduled in 1930 and 1935. Although the results were apparently circulated in government agencies, the 1937 census figures never appeared in print. The results were evidently seen as unsatisfactory and declared statistically invalid; blame was placed upon alleged violations of the basic principles of science and statistics. The statistician Kvitkin, who had protested the withholding of results, was removed as head of the census department (Galin, 1951: 2).

The specific statistical principle that was criticized was one that provided a check of households to prevent a double counting of temporarily absent persons. As a result of such an innovation, the 1937 census total was reported at 158 million, several million (about 10 percent) less than had been expected. If accurate, this figure would have indicated the substantial impact that collectivization, famine, and the purges of the early Stalin years had on the Soviet population. It has also been claimed that confusion among local officials and enumerators and the lack of cooperation by respondents led to an inaccurate count (Somerville, 1940: 52-55).

On January 17, 1939, two years after the 1937 count, an all-Union census was again taken. The census form contained sixteen questions, three of which were geared towards the calculation of the de facto and de jure inhabitants for each population point of the entire country. The questionnaire was printed in twenty-two languages. For the first and only time, a system was developed for counting both convicted criminals and political detainees. This was important at the time because it has been estimated that as many as 15 million people were either incarcerated for criminal activity or interned in prisons and camps for political reasons (Galin, 1951: 2). The census provided instructions for conducting counts of prisoners, although details of the system were kept strictly secret. In terms of the work-force data, political detainees were entered according
to their occupations before internment; convicted criminals, however, were listed based on the jobs they performed at the camp or prison. Convicted criminals, but not political prisoners, were enumerated in later censuses.

Several new procedures were developed in the method of tabulation. For the first time a complete control round was instituted, whereby all residences were submitted to a follow-up check the week after the completion of the regular census (however, forms were not issued to keep track of double counting). The totals were once again tabulated by electric machines utilizing hole-punched cards. Three regional administrative centers were established at Moscow, Leningrad, and Kharkov.

Within four months, preliminary results were issued. For reasons that remain unclear, however, only partial data were ever released, in less than ten pages of tables. A tabulation for the entire population was never published, although complete totals were announced (Kulischer and Roof, 1956: 280–90). Because of its lack of detail, the 1939 census has not been particularly useful for population analysis. Nevertheless, the totals released, while considered questionable, do provide some measures for comparison with the data from 1926.3

In twelve years the urban population more than doubled, reaching 56.1 million (33 percent of the total population) by 1939, a rate of urbanization historically without precedent. In terms of the economic structure of the working class, the share of workers and employees (along with their family members) reached half of the total population by 1939, up from roughly one-sixth in 1926.4 The virtually complete collectivization of farming was also indicated by census figures.

While the 1939 Soviet census has not been widely utilized, it nevertheless provided a framework of organizational experience and added to a popular understanding of statistical methods. These developments helped especially in conducting the numerous emergency survey counts that were necessary during World War II.

The 1959 Soviet Census: The Organization of the Census-Taking Apparatus

Twenty years passed before another comprehensive census took place on Soviet soil, on January 15, 1959. The date chosen at least allowed for comparisons by twenty-year intervals, and the published tables often included previously unreleased 1939 totals as well. However, the large

3. For the published 1939 results, see Izvestiya, 2 June 1939, 1; and Izvestiya, 29 April 1940, 1. Results also appear in U.S., Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Russian Economic Notes 2 (1 July 1940): 7–10; and American Quarterly on the Soviet Union 3 (February/March 1940): 97–100.
4. Part of the increase was due to a change in the definitions of social classes.
territorial gains following World War II and the devastating effect that war losses had on the age and sex structure of the population made comparisons between census years quite difficult. Furthermore, unlike the Soviet censuses of 1920 and 1926, the 1959 questionnaire did not request information on place of birth, making difficult even a crude estimate of migration.

The organization and administration of the population count in 1959 marked a standardization in Soviet census-taking procedures; most of the methods instituted in 1959 remained virtually unchanged for the succeeding Soviet censuses of 1970 and 1979. Before 1959, census questionnaires and instructions were distributed by the bureau undertaking the census (1897—Central Statistical Committee; 1926—Central Statistical Administration; 1939—Central Administration of National Economic Accounting of GOSPLAN, the State Planning Committee). The forms were sent to the statistical boards of the union republics, which sent them on to regional and local organizations where they were distributed to the district inspectors of the census. In previous census years a temporary Bureau of the Census was established in each union and autonomous republic, in each kray and oblast, and in major cities (Somerville, 1940: 54). These bureaus were disbanded after totals were tabulated at the local levels and summarized versions were mailed in to the union republic statistical boards.

By 1959, the system for sending in census results was centralized. All enterprises, regional boards, and district inspectors sent their totals directly to the Central Statistical Administration of each republic, where results were totaled without intervening stages. Census materials were also sent by telegraph rather than post. These changes hastened the processing and analysis of census data; 1959 preliminary results were published less than four months after the census taking was completed.

In 1957 the Council of Ministers established a Department for the Supervision of the National Population Census, which was administered by the Central Statistical Administration. In one form or another, this commission, entrusted with the preparation and conducting of the census, would remain the permanent census bureau of the USSR. Attached to it were various other standing councils of the Central Statistical Administration organized to help deal with problems involved with the conducting of the censuses (Yezhov, 1967: 123). The procedural organization of census taking instituted in 1959 can be applied to the conducting of the 1970 and 1979 censuses with very few changes. While many of the procedures described below were applied in 1939, they were not established as official policy until the 1959 census.

A great deal of preparatory work goes into an event as encompassing as a national census of population. Accordingly, in June 1957 a national
conference of statisticians and representatives from various scientific, industrial, and planning institutions was held to formulate the general program and discuss some of the methodological problems associated with the census (Yezhov, 1967: 123). Preliminary work also included drawing up a list of units to be investigated, supplying the materials needed for the census, and briefing census personnel. The effectiveness of a census depends in large measure on the reliability of the data entered into the questionnaires. A great deal of effort, therefore, went into the training of personnel. An increasing number of enumerators were people with higher education and those familiar with statistical techniques, especially in the outlying republics. All organs of statistical information associated with the census at all levels were prepared, mobilized, and practiced.

The Central Statistical Administration initiated a substantial propaganda effort prior to the actual census taking. Lectures, exhibits, and discussions were conducted by inspectors and controllers of the local census department at industrial enterprises, institutions, state farms, and schools. The media actively participated as well; television, radio, newspapers, and journals carried frequent news of the impending census, and large numbers of special brochures were issued (USSR, 1958a: 26).

On August 1, 1957, a trial census counted approximately a million people in seven geographically diverse regions of the country. The experience aided in questionnaire design and set the numbers of enumerators for urban and rural locales. Regional census divisions were established by GOSPLAN for the compilation and collection of data, and set figures were decided upon for wages and time off from work for those involved in the census. Finally, the Council of Ministers chose a census date based on the assumption that a midweek day in January would find a large portion of the population in their homes, including schoolchildren on vacation. For the 1959 census this date was January 15, a Thursday. Procedures were established for conducting the census early in the Far North and remote mountain areas.

A few days before the census (January 11–14) a preliminary round was conducted, during which the enumerators made themselves familiar with their territory. They visited all of the households in each district, informing the inhabitants of the census procedures and asking what the best time would be for enumerators to come by for the actual survey. The census itself lasted eight days, from January 15 to January 22. All people, including temporary residents, were listed at the place where they were counted as the de facto population as of midnight, January 14–15. Permanent residents who were temporarily absent were noted as

well. To avoid the danger of double counting, enumerators issued to all those who were listed as temporary residents a special certificate (spravka) indicating they had already been counted. This was especially important for those on long-distance transport at the time of the census count.

Details were provided for the counting of those in hospitals, sanatoriums, and vacation homes; they were to be listed as temporary residents if their length of stay was less than six months. University students were considered permanent residents at their place of study, even if they resided there less than six months out of each year. People who had moved their residences for work, study, or training more than six months before the census were counted at their new location as permanent residents, even when they had kept material connections with their family at a previous location. Members of the armed services were enumerated at their place of duty but were counted as permanent residents at the location where they were employed before entering military duty (USSR, 1958a: 24). (Users of Soviet census data are advised to check carefully the definition of the population employed in any given table as to whether the figures are for the de facto [nalichnoye] or de jure [postoyannoye] population. In the 1979 census volume, for instance, tables 1–4 are de facto population, but the remainder are de jure (USSR, 1984: 6, n. 1). Anderson and Silver (1985) is a good guide to the nuances and possible problems connected with this usage.)

For ten days following the census (January 23–February 1) the census takers made another complete check of all dwellings in a given district in order to insure that no one was omitted or double counted and to verify the registered number of temporarily absent and temporarily present dwellers. During this round, enumerators filled out special control sheets for those people whose whereabouts were not definitely known at the time of the census count. All those who had required control sheets were issued spravki, which they were to maintain in their possession until February 10. Control sheets were also filled out when persons knew they might have been included in the census count at another location (USSR, 1958a: 23). The control sheets, which requested registration of the exact address at which the subject should have been counted as well as responses to the same questions as the regular questionnaire, revealed another 1,074,000 people who were missed the first time around or 0.51 percent of the total population (Yezhov, 1967: 126).

In addition to the questionnaire form, the Central Statistical Administration provided a list of detailed instructions in order to clarify certain ambiguities. The enumerator was instructed to fill out the census form in the words of the respondent; the contents of the answers were to be kept confidential, and no one was required to show any of their documents. The census was to be conducted by place of dwelling, not place of work;
dormitories at schools and factories were considered permanent places of dwelling. The enumerators counted people at work during the time of the census as part of the de facto population at their place of residence and not as temporarily absent. The same held true for those on suburban trains and local buses, those at children’s homes and night sanitariums, and those spending the night with friends or relatives living in the same census district (USSR, 1958b: 23). Temporary workers and those counted on long-distance trains, buses, and ships or at stations, ports, and airports were to be listed as temporary residents and included in the de facto population at the place they were counted.

The 1959 census achieved a relative degree of sophistication by raising the level of training of the enumerators, improving the application of statistical techniques, and consolidating specialists from various disciplines. As was mentioned previously, many of the preparations and operational methods introduced for the 1959 count remained similar or identical in the succeeding census programs.

**Censuses of 1970 and 1979: The Use of Sampling**

Perhaps the most significant innovation in conducting the censuses of the 1970s was the acceptance of sampling as a legitimate statistical tool for compiling population data. Sampling was first instituted into the census program at the urging of the All-Union Congress of Statisticians in April 1968. A sample format was developed on the basis of results from a trial census conducted in nine regions during March 1967 (USSR, 1978: 26).

The Congress also provided a forum for a long-standing debate between demographers and statisticians in the Soviet Union (Perevedentsev, 1967: 13). Demographers called for a reworking of the questionnaire in order to collect more detailed information for the analysis of the population, while statisticians held fast for the standardization of the basic questionnaire and the increased use of sampling and data-processing techniques. Such a debate has been repeated at various times prior to both the 1970 and 1979 censuses (Isupov, 1975: 5), but the questionnaire has remained relatively unchanged over the years. Instead, the Central Statistical Administration issued more detailed instructions in an attempt to increase the accuracy of the responses to the 1970 census questionnaire. Enumerators were instructed to explain thoroughly that the census was not in any way connected with such matters as tax ratings, the use of living space, or visa registration. The collected data were to be used by the central authorities exclusively for analysis and for the compilation of summary indexes by which to categorize the population. Census workers were not to reveal any of the responses, which were to be used only by
organs of the state and economic administrations, planning organizations, and scientific institutions (USSR, 1969a: 29).

The 1970 census, originally scheduled for 1969, was postponed until January 15, 1970, most likely because of technical difficulties encountered during the course of a trial census conducted in 1967 (Voronitsyr., 1978: 1). While the reason for the delay is unclear, the new date has been cited as marking the one-hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth. The basic questionnaire consisted of eleven questions asked of the entire population; a second form, distributed to every fourth household, contained eighteen questions, including the same eleven answered by everyone. Thus, the 1970 census used a 25-percent sample to collect information for questions 12–18, which concerned work-force and migration data. This was the first time sampling had been accepted in a Soviet census count, ostensibly to decrease the expense and accelerate the analysis of the material. Two additional questionnaire forms were also issued in 1970. Form 3 requested information on persons of able-bodied working age occupied in household and private subsidiary agriculture; Form 4 served to collect information about commuting (Pod"yachikh, 1976: 31) Sampling also came into use during the control round, which was held for six days, from January 24 to January 29. For urban areas, the control round was conducted in all districts for 50 percent of the dwellings; in rural areas, enumerators checked all of the dwellings for 50 percent of the districts (USSR, 1969a: 33).

The basic questionnaire (first eleven questions) in 1970 was similar in form and content to that of 1959, but some slight changes merit mentioning. The question about age was expanded to determine not only the number of years lived, as in all previous censuses, but also the year and month of birth. This allowed for a reduction in the distortion in data about age composition which occurs because of the tendency of many to round their ages to the -0 and -5 groups. The Central Statistical Administration modified other questions to gather more detailed information about second languages spoken and reasons for temporary absences. In addition, the 25-percent sample survey obtained data about the previous occupations of pensioners, the duration of work in the previous year, and migration trends.

The intercensal period between 1959 and 1970, although a rather unwieldy eleven years, revealed some interesting facts. With the war long over, the male-female gap had begun to return to normal. The urban population reached 136 million, surpassing 50 percent of the total for the first time (from 48 percent in 1959 to 56 percent in 1970). The growth of large cities was especially rapid; in 1959 there were three cities with over a million people, while by 1970 there were ten.

The actual conducting of the 1970 census required nearly 662,000
participants, including 534,000 enumerators and 97,000 supervisors (USSR, 1978: 26). With the help of calculators, information was compiled and processed into summary tables, and results were analyzed and ready in time for the implementation of the Ninth Five-Year Plan. The 1970 census was more comprehensive and slightly larger than that of 1959 (3,238 pages to 2,830 pages). It was fully published in seven topical volumes beginning in 1972.6

The program of the January 1979 census was based on results from the 1970 experience. Slight modifications were made in the questionnaire, which totaled sixteen questions, eleven of which were to be answered by the entire population.7 The last five questions were again issued to only 25 percent of the population (i.e., to every fourth dwelling). As in previous years, the census effort included a trial census (for nine regions in May 1977) and the convening of an All-Union Conference of Statisticians for a discussion of the methodological and organizational questions connected with the 1979 census program. The government conducted an early survey for outlying mountainous and northern regions, and the importance of the preliminary and control rounds was stressed in order to insure completeness in the count (Ivanova, 1976: 49). The control round was based on a 25-percent sample (as opposed to 50 percent in 1970), underscoring an increased confidence in sampling.

During the preparation of the 1979 census program, several points of controversy arose which had to be clarified before the new questionnaire could be formulated. It was proposed, for instance, that the term “native” (rodnoy) language be replaced with “conversational” (razgovornyy) language and also that the qualification “fluently” (svobodnyy) be omitted from the question on second language (Voronitsyn, 1978: 2). A change never ensued, partly because of the need for consistency and partly because native language was felt to connote a social function in terms of relations between people (Voronitsyn, 1978: 2). A decision was made by the Central Statistical Administration to register members of the armed forces where they were stationed and not at their former places of residence; the same applied to persons in confinement (Voronitsyn, 1979: 2).

The first eleven questions in the 1979 census were nearly identical to

6. USSR, Tsentral'noye Statisticheskoye Upravleniye, Itogi Vsesoyuznoy perepisi naseleniya 1970 goda, 7 vols. (1972), Vol. 1: Number of people; Vol. 2: Sex, age, and marital status; Vol. 3: Level of education; Vol. 4: Nationality composition; Vol. 5: Distribution according to social group; Vol. 6: Distribution according to occupation; Vol. 7: Migration.
7. In ASSRs, autonomous oblasts, and autonomous okrugs with less than 500,000 inhabitants, the entire population was required to answer all sixteen questions (USSR, 1978: 27).
those asked in 1970. The new forms, however, no longer requested the reason for or length of absence for temporary residents and absentees. For the first time since 1926 the questionnaire provided marital status by type (widowed, divorced, or never married). Meanwhile, the education question (number nine) has, with each succeeding census year, required less and less information about literacy. This development has most likely come about because nearly the entire population, with the exception of the elderly and the very young, has become literate. In fact, the 1979 form had no separate list for those who were illiterate. If the enumerator came across a person who was illiterate, he was instructed to note the fact on the census blank and to indicate the reason for illiteracy.

The All-Union Conference of Statisticians suggested several changes in the program of the sample survey (questions 12–16). A reworking of the 1970 migration questions in order to account for those who had moved more than once was considered and abandoned (Isupov, 1975: 5). Instead, a question was inserted requesting the number of children ever born to all women aged 16 and over. Furthermore, the supplementary form on commuting was dropped from the 1979 program. Data gathered from commuters in 1970 had most likely already been utilized (although not published) to help determine an estimate for the number of people on local transport at the time of the census count. Finally, a poll was conducted simultaneously with the census which sought information on the work force engaged in housework or in private agriculture. This form requested details on the number of dependent children, the composition of the working-age population, and the source of livelihood, as well as willingness to accept employment and the reason not employed (i.e., not ‘occupied in the social production’) at the time of the census.

The 1979 census, while involving over 700,000 workers (enumerators, controllers, and supervisors), was the first Soviet census to make wide use of a sophisticated network of computers. The census questionnaires, although not filled out directly by the respondent, were mark-sensing forms that were machine readable and could be transmitted onto magnetic tape for direct input into a computer. The census-processing operation utilized a unified system of twenty-nine regional computer centers connected with a main terminal in Moscow (Feshbach, 1981: 6).

Because the census day needed to fall in the middle of the week, the date was changed from January 15 (a Monday) to January 17 (a Wednesday). The Council of Ministers also decided to conduct the census only nine years after the previous one. This decision resulted in irregular intervals between census years but brought a return to the
pattern established with the 1939 and 1959 counts (the 1970 census, it should be recalled, was originally slated for 1969). Furthermore, the earlier date meant that the results would be available in time for the compilation of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (Voronitsyn, 1981: 1).

Notwithstanding the technical advances connected with the 1979 census, the publication—or lack thereof—of results from the enumeration is quite limited for a country with resources and vast data-gathering apparatus such as the USSR possesses. Although preliminary total results, by political-administrative unit, were released in April 1979, additional information appeared only sporadically and in highly incomplete form in issues of the journal Vestnik statistiki. These figures were subsequently compiled and republished (with some minor additions) in a single volume in 1984, more than five years after the census was taken (USSR, 1984); by contrast, the initial volume of the 1959 census was published in 1962 and that of the 1970 census in 1972.

Of much greater concern than timeliness, however, is the lack of detail provided in the Vestnik statistiki tables or the 1984 compendium. Despite the deliberations about the age question and the decision to improve the quality of responses by asking for month and year of birth, no age data have yet been published from the 1979 count. The absence of such figures to date significantly reduces the utility of the census for many important analytic purposes. The Soviet Union can now be regarded as ranking behind most developing countries in terms of the volume of available published census figures.

The Russian and Soviet Censuses: A General Assessment

Although the censuses constitute by far the largest body of empirical information on the socioeconomic situation in Russia and the USSR, there are important shortcomings in the data as collected, tabulated, and published; specific definitional, operational, and availability problems are discussed at length in the topical chapters that follow. It is clear, however, that census data from any country present the researcher with a variety of difficulties. Thus, it might be useful to make some general comparisons between the Russian and Soviet censuses and international standards as a means by which these problems can be placed in a relevant context.

Compared to the most advanced countries, the USSR has lagged behind in the introduction of some technical advances in the enumeration process. For example, whereas sampling was first used in the U.S. census of 1940, the USSR adopted this technique for the 1970 census. A
question on month and year of birth (a better means of obtaining age data), included in the 1970 Soviet census, had been incorporated earlier in European and U.S. censuses. Mark-sensing forms and readers were first introduced in the U.S. census in 1960 but in the Soviet census only in 1979. Certainly, the USSR has been slow to utilize computers fully in the census operation, although this tendency is characteristic of the Soviet bureaucracy, economy, and society in general.

Beginning in the 1950s, the Statistical Office of the United Nations (now a branch of the Department of International Economic and Social Affairs) initiated a series of publications containing guidance for countries in planning and carrying out national population censuses; this office also sponsored numerous technical manuals dealing with different operational aspects of census taking (United Nations, 1958; 1967; 1974; 1980). These important documents, which reflect the growing international concern for obtaining more and better information on socioeconomic conditions in the world’s countries, incorporate lessons learned in previous censuses, the results of conferences and expert consultations, and recommendations submitted by international, regional, and national statistical bodies.

In the most recent of these publications, the UN (1980: 2–3) considers that four “essential features” are desirable in any population census: individual enumeration, universality, simultaneity, and defined periodicity. With reference to the Soviet censuses, including the latest ones, the first three of these features are adhered to; the last is violated by the troublesome irregularity of intercensal periods. At one point, the UN recommended that countries take censuses in years ending in zero to facilitate international comparisons, but that suggestion has been downplayed of late (UN, 1980: 3).

Beyond these very general “essential features,” the UN provides more specific guidelines for the planning, organization, and administration of censuses (UN, 1980: 12–37). First, extensive preparatory work is necessary for any national census, including establishing a legal basis for the enumeration, securing funding, agreeing on a census calendar, setting up administrative bodies, publicizing the census, mapping census units, preparing the questionnaire, and recruiting and training staff. Although not privy to all internal workings of the Soviet census apparatus, we do know that considerable effort goes into the preparatory work of the census. For example, planning conferences involving demographers, ethnographers, statisticians, and other social scientists, and representatives of the Central Statistical Administration are convened well in advance of the projected census date to review procedures and discuss changes in technical or operational aspects of the enumeration; lengthy
Lee Schwartz reports on the issues discussed, as well as copies of the household list and questionnaire forms, are published regularly (USSR, 1958a; 1958b; 1969a; 1969b; 1978). Of particular interest in these publications are descriptions of test census results, which in some cases prompt refinements in the full census. In this connection, the fact that the USSR has had a permanent census bureau since 1957 provides for continuity in matters relating to census methodology.

Second, according to the UN, operational aspects of the census process must receive attention. Decisions must be made regarding the manner in which the population will be counted (enumerator or householder methods), the timing and length of the enumeration period, and the use of sampling. The Soviet census has always employed enumerators rather than relying on self-enumeration. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, serious consideration is given to fixing the date of the Soviet census in an attempt to minimize undercounting or double counting due to travel, work, and schooling. During the census period, control slips (spravki) are used to keep track of persons already counted. Remote areas are usually enumerated early to avoid delaying the process. Finally, sampling is now an important feature of the Soviet censuses.

Third, data processing and, fourth, evaluation of results must proceed once the census is completed. Computers and their applications have become more common in data processing in the USSR, and this trend will no doubt continue. However, although initial results of the Soviet census are released reasonably early, the tabulation process is slower than in the U.S. census. The evaluation of results through internal checks and postenumeration surveys is standard practice in Soviet census taking.

Finally, the UN considers the dissemination of results to be the last stage in the census process and a vital one for the obvious reason that even the most accurate and extensively tabulated data are of limited utility unless they are made available to researchers (UN, 1980: 36–37). In this chapter and throughout this volume it is made abundantly clear that the major failure of census taking in the USSR is in the area of dissemination of results.

The UN series on population censuses also contains recommendations for topics to be investigated and tabulations to be made therefrom (UN, 1967: 40–41; 1958: 18–19). In terms of topics covered by the census, the USSR has a good and improving record (UN, 1974: 9). For example, of fifteen high priority topics recommended by the UN, the 1959 Soviet census covered twelve (missing only place of birth, children ever born, and children living); children ever born was added in the 1979 census. By comparison, the 1960 U.S. census also included twelve of fifteen high priority topics (missing de facto residence, children living, and
literacy). The tabulation of results varies from census to census, but—with the obvious exception of the 1979 count—the USSR satisfies the vast majority of recommended direct or derived tabulations (UN, 1967: 40–41).

In conclusion, by accepted international standards the censuses of the USSR conform to most recommendations regarding the preparation and conducting of the enumeration but fall far short in rendering available results of the count and tabulations. As was mentioned in the earlier chapter by Ralph Clem, the accuracy of Soviet census data has improved over the years, an improvement that makes it especially ironic that the publication of the figures has been so severely reduced.

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