Research Guide to the Russian and Soviet Censuses

Clem, Ralph S.

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Chapter 4

The Ethnic and Language Dimensions in Russian and Soviet Censuses

BRIAN D. SILVER

The Soviet government emphasizes its leading role in the social and economic transformation of society. Information gathered from censuses is important for the periodic assessment of state policies. Therefore, census data on nationality and native language of the population serve as a way both to determine the ethnic composition of Soviet society and, in conjunction with other data, to assess and compare the progress of policies designed to promote the economic and social development of the nationalities of the USSR. Censuses, moreover, are the only source of systematic information on change in the ethnic composition and language preferences of the population as a whole.

Russian and Soviet census planners have always included questions about nationality and language in the census forms (see Table 4.1). The First General Census of Population in 1897 contained questions about native language (rodnoy yazyk) and religion of the imperial population. The five general censuses reported since the 1917 Revolution (1926, 1939, 1959, 1970, and 1979) asked questions about native language and nationality of the Soviet population. In addition to the questions about native language, the 1970 and 1979 censuses included a question about second language or, more precisely, "another language of the peoples of the USSR" that an individual could "freely command."

The utility of the information on nationality, language, and religion depends both on the exact formulation of census questions and on the

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Table 4.1. Availability of nationality, language, and religion data in Russian and Soviet census reports, 1897–1979

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1897</th>
<th>1926</th>
<th>1939</th>
<th>1959</th>
<th>1970</th>
<th>1979</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Native language</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second language</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nationality/Narodnost'</td>
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</table>

form in which the results are reported, in particular, whether the data on ethnicity are cross-tabulated in the census reports with information on age, sex, education, marital status, occupation, migration history, and other variables. A summary of the extent to which each indicator has been cross-tabulated with other census variables is presented in the Index (see also Anderson, 1977; Arutyunyan et al., 1984: 42–43) but will not be discussed in the text. The main issues treated here will be (1) the formulation of questions on nationality, religion, and language; (2) the meaning of the responses; and (3) the use of Soviet census data on nationality and language in conjunction with other sources of information on the ethnic composition and linguistic practices of the Soviet population.

In treating the formulation and meaning of the census questions on nationality, religion, and language, I focus on the questions' validity—the correspondence between the census measures and the concepts for which the measures are the operational indicators. There are two main sources of invalidity of the census measures: (1) vagueness or uncertainty in the definition of the concept that the census question is intended to measure operationally; and (2) imprecision or bias in the measurement of the concept—in the wording of the census question, the method of asking the question (including the instructions to the census enumerators), and the method of tabulating the results. A focus on the validity of the census measures is appropriate because no single publication has compiled information on the formulation and interpretation of the measures and because several important features of these measures have not been examined carefully by users of the census data.

For example, although nationality, language, and religion may each be regarded as self-standing dimensions of the ethnic or cultural composition of a population, and although for the most part the three dimensions have been treated as independent questions during the gathering of Russian and Soviet census data, the independence of these indicators has often been compromised during the processing of the data for publication. Certain operational rules have been employed that lessen the independence of the indicators. The significance of these rules has not been widely recognized.
The 1897 Census

The history of the confounding of the different ethnic dimensions can be dated from the interpretation of "native language" in the 1897 census (Russian Empire, 1905a; 1905b; 1905c). In the six general population censuses for which results have been published, only the 1897 census asked about religion; the unpublished 1937 census also included a question on religion (Gozulov, 1936: 131–32; Pustokhod and Voblyy, 1936: 202–5). Because the 1897 census is also the only one that did not include a question about nationality, one might initially suppose that the census designers intended to treat religion as a surrogate for nationality. In fact, however, they intended to treat native language as a surrogate for nationality, while religion was a self-standing question included for other purposes (Russian Empire, 1905b).

Because of a series of problems caused by the reliance on the native-language question, the ethnic composition of the Russian Empire in 1897 cannot readily be determined from the census. Most of these problems were openly acknowledged in the introductory remarks to the general summary volume of the census report (Russian Empire, 1905b: II, ii). As was noted in the report itself, native language "far from always gives a correct idea of the nationality of one or another group of the population." Confusion occurs because persons of one nationality often declare the language of another nationality as native language. In particular, the 1897 census data on native language underrepresented the size of the populations of nationalities and ethnic groups that were experiencing linguistic russification (adoption of Russian as native language), such as the Votyaks (Udmurts), Mordvinians, and Zyryans (Komis). At the same time, the data overrepresented the number of Russians in the population—perhaps intentionally, as has been suggested by Soviet population specialists (e.g., Gozulov, 1936: 201–2).

To improve the reliability of native language as an indicator of nationality, certain "corrections" were introduced. For example, the information gathered on the estates (sosloviya) and on religion often contained information on nationality, information that was then used to derive better estimates of the ethnic makeup of the population of certain regions. As a result of these corrections, reported native language is not derived solely from the direct census responses to the question on native language.

An even more serious problem with the native-language data, which was also acknowledged in the introduction to the summary volume, is that inadequate anticipation of the kinds of responses that would be
generated led to post hoc reclassification of the responses during the preparation of the data for publication. In Dagestan, for example, many people reported as their native language the language of their village or town, making it difficult to allocate the population according to standard linguistic categories. In addition, the widespread use of such terms as “Tatar” and “Tyurk” by many different Turkic-speaking groups and the use of the term “Cherkess” as the language of many different groups in the North Caucasus confounded the problem of deriving information on ethnic groups from the native-language information. At the same time, potentially valuable information on native language was lost because the information gathered on the many different Caucasian languages or dialects was aggregated into a general category termed “Georgian.”

The 1897 census report devotes much attention to religious affiliation (religioznaya prinadlezhnost’) or religion (veroispovedaniye) and presents many detailed cross-tabulations with other variables such as native language, literacy, sex, urban-rural residence, and region of the country. Every person was placed into one or another religious category, with no allowance for nonbelievers or indication of the intensity of religious belief. Furthermore, there is reason to believe that the census was constructed to maximize the estimated number of people who adhered to the Russian Orthodox religion (Gozulov, 1936: 202–3). Nonetheless, precisely because of the omission of a direct question on nationality in the 1897 census, the substantial detail in the reporting of religion in combination with native language and with numerous demographic characteristics makes the data an indispensable source of information on the ethnic composition of late-nineteenth-century Russia. However, in recent efforts to determine the ethnic composition of the Russian Empire, Soviet scholars have avoided using the 1897 census results (e.g., Bruk and Kabuzan, 1980a, 1980b; Polyakov and Kisilev, 1980).

The Soviet Censuses

Table 4.2 summarizes the formulations of the census questions on nationality and language used in the Russian and Soviet censuses. Although I follow the practice of Soviet census administrators of referring to the items on the census form as questions, the questions on nationality and native language are each simply terms on the census form, with blank spaces or boxes for the census taker to fill in. Proposals by Soviet ethnographers to have the questions on nationality and language expressed on the census protocol in sentence form have not been adopted (e.g., Bruk and Kozlov, 1968: 34; USSR, 1969c: 227).
Table 4.2. Wording of questions on nationality and language in the Russian and Soviet censuses, 1897–1979

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census year</th>
<th>Formulation of question</th>
<th>General instructions to census taker*</th>
<th>Answers for children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td><em>Narodnost' (People)</em> For foreigners: of which state are they a citizen?</td>
<td>To what *narodnost' does the respondent consider himself to belong? If the respondent has difficulty answering the question, preference is given to the nationality of the mother. Since the census has the aim of defining the tribal (ethnographic) composition of the population, it is not appropriate to replace *narodnost' by religion, citizenship-country of origin or an indicator of residing in the territory of some republic. It is possible for the answer to the question on *narodnost' not to correspond with the answer on native language. Supplemental Instruction: Although the term *narodnost' was adopted with the aim of emphasizing the tribal (ethnographic) composition of the population, nonetheless the definition of *narodnost' is left to the respondent himself, and in writing the answer down it is improper to alter the respondent’s answer. Persons who have lost their link with the *narodnost' of their ancestors can indicate a *narodnost' to which they regard themselves as belonging now.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>*Natsional'nost' (Nationality) Citizen of which state?</td>
<td>Write the nationality to which the respondent considers himself to belong. For children under 16, if their nationality is not listed on the census form, then the child is attributed the nationality of the parents if the parents both belong to the same nationality.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Answers for children In Urban Areas: if the *narodnost' of children is missing and the parents belong to one *narodnost', children should be assigned the same *narodnost'. If the parents belong to different *narodnosti and an answer is missing on the *narodnost' of a child, then preference should be given to the *narodnost' of the mother. In Rural Areas: If the *narodnost' of a child is missing from the form, the blank spot can be filled in only if all members of the family are of the same nationality.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census year</th>
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<th>Answers for children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td><em>Natsional' nost'</em> (Nationality)</td>
<td>Write the nationality that the respondent himself indicates.</td>
<td>Nationality of children is determined by parents. In families where the father and mother belong to different nationalities, and the parents themselves have difficulty defining the nationality of the children, preference is given to the nationality of the mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td><em>Natsional' nost'</em> (Nationality)</td>
<td>Write the nationality that the respondent himself indicates.</td>
<td>Nationality of children is determined by parents. Only in families where the father and mother belong to different nationalities and the parents have difficulty themselves in determining the nationality of children, should preference be given to the nationality of the mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td><em>Natsional' nost'</em> (Nationality)</td>
<td>Write the nationality that the respondent himself indicates.</td>
<td>Nationality of children is determined by parents. Only in families where the father and mother belong to different nationalities and the parents have difficulty themselves in determining the nationality of children, should preference be given to the nationality of the mother.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Native Language**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census year</th>
<th>Formulation of question</th>
<th>General instructions to census taker*</th>
<th>Answers for children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td><em>Rodnoy yazyk</em> (native language)</td>
<td>Here is written the language each person considers native for himself.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td><em>Rodnoy yazyk</em> (Native language)</td>
<td>The language the respondent knows best of all or that he usually speaks is identified as his native language.</td>
<td>If an answer to the question on native language is missing for a child age 1 or less, fill in the blank on the basis of the mother’s native language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Census year</td>
<td>Formulation of question</td>
<td>General instructions to census taker*</td>
<td>Answers for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native Language</td>
<td>Supplemental Instruction: The native language of deaf people is considered the language that they use for communication with their associates.</td>
<td>Supplemental Instruction: The native language of children not knowing how to talk is considered the language of the mother.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Rodnoy yazyk</td>
<td>That language the respondent himself considers to be his native language.</td>
<td>For children under 16, if their native language is not listed on the census form, then the language of their nationality is to be used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Native language)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1959</td>
<td>Rodnoy yazyk</td>
<td>Write the name of the language that the respondent himself considers his native language. If the respondent has difficulty naming some language as native language, then write down the language that the respondent commands best of all or that is usually used in the family. The native language of deaf people is considered the language that they read and write or that is used by their family or by a person with whom they primarily communicate. It is possible for native language not to coincide with nationality.</td>
<td>As the native language of children not yet able to talk, write the language usually used for conversation in the family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Native language)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Rodnoy yazyk</td>
<td>Write the name of the language that the respondent himself considers his native language. If the respondent has difficulty naming some language as native language, then write down the name of the language that he commands best of all or that is usually used in the family. The native language of deaf people is considered the language that they read and write or that is used by their family or by a person with whom they primarily communicate.</td>
<td>As the native language of children still not able to talk, write the language usually used for conversation in the family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Native language)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Ethnic and Language Dimensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Formulation of Question</th>
<th>General Instructions to Census Taker*</th>
<th>Answers for Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td><em>Rodnoy yazyk</em> (Native Language)</td>
<td>To the question on native language write down the name of the language that the respondent himself considers his native language.</td>
<td>The native language of children still not able to talk, and of other young children is defined by their parents. If the parents have difficulty defining the native language of a child, write down the language usually used in conversation in the family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It is possible for native language not to coincide with nationality.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If the respondent has difficulty naming some language as native language, write down the language that he commands best of all or that is usually used in the family.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The native language of deaf people is considered to be the language that they read and write or the language used by their family or those with whom they primarily communicate.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Second Language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Formulation of Question</th>
<th>General Instructions to Census Taker*</th>
<th>Answers for Children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Indicate also another language of the peoples of the USSR that he freely commands.</td>
<td>After writing down the native language, for people freely commanding another language of the people of the USSR (i.e., able to speak freely in that language), write down which one (for example, Russian, Ukrainian).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If the respondent, in addition to the native language, freely commands two or more languages of the peoples of the USSR, write down only the one of those that he commands best.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Census year</td>
<td>Formulation of question</td>
<td>General instructions to census taker*</td>
<td>Answers for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------</td>
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<td>----------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Indicate also another language of the peoples of the USSR that he freely commands.</td>
<td>After writing down the native language, for people freely commanding another language of the peoples of the USSR or knowing only how to converse freely in the given language, write down the name of the language (Russian, Ukrainian, Kazakh, Latvian, etc.). If the respondent, in addition to the native language, freely commands two or more languages of the peoples of the USSR, write down only the one of those that he knows best. For persons not freely commanding another language of the peoples of the USSR, after writing the native language write &quot;No.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The instructions listed in the table are general instructions that have been published by the Central Statistical Board or reported in other sources given in the References. Certain specific instructions dealing with special problems and circumstances were also issued. In the case of the 1926 census, each volume of the census report summarizes some of the special instructions that applied in particular regions.

For example, in Volume XIII it was reported that "to clarify the written answers for persons calling themselves 'Russian,' it is necessary to determine in precisely which—Russian, Ukrainian, or Belorussian—the individual places himself. 'Great Russian' (Velikoross) is considered the same as 'Russian' and is recorded as 'Russian' in the individual census lists.'

'To clarify the written answers on language of persons answering 'Russian' language, it is necessary for the respondent to specify precisely which language—Russian, Ukrainian, or Belorussian—he has in view. If someone calls his language 'Great Russian,' then write 'Russian' in the individual census lists.'

As additional examples, in the volumes reporting data for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the census takers were told that "in no circumstance" were they to write Moslem, Christian, Orthodox, and so on, as an answer to the question on narodnost'. In Uzbekistan, census takers were instructed to interpret "Sart" as "Uzbek (Sart)." In Turkmenistan, census takers were instructed to write down not only narodnost' but also tribe and clan (rod). They were told not to confuse "Tyurki" with "Farsi" and that Persians often called themselves Tyurki-Azerbaidzhantsy or Tyurki-Persidskiy.
While there has been a reliance on self-enumeration in the U.S. Census since 1960, in the Soviet Union census takers visit each residence. Census takers are supposed to follow certain instructions in eliciting information from the respondents. Table 4.2 lists the general instructions for the questions on nationality and language in each Soviet census. Although the instructions may clarify the intended meanings of certain terms for the census takers, the instructions are not necessarily read to the respondents. Hence, the respondents are less likely than the census takers to be informed of the intended interpretations.

**Subjective measures.** The census questions are designed to elicit the subjective nationality and the subjective native language of the respondent. "Nationality" is a completely open-ended question, with the response to be written verbatim on the census blank. Similarly, "native language" is supposed to be inscribed verbatim and is whatever the respondent declares it to be. The census takers are instructed not to check any documents during the census; they are to accept an answer to the question on nationality that is inconsistent with the answer to the question on native language. The classification of the population by nationality and by native language is exhaustive, and everyone has a nationality and a native language. There are no reported "don't knows" or missing data on these questions.

Because of the subjectivity of the census measures of nationality and native language, neither characteristic of an individual is necessarily permanent or "official." Although it has been suggested that the use of nationality labels on individual internal passports, personnel records, and other official documents may "fix" the subjective nationality of people in the USSR, especially after adolescence (Kozlov, 1969: 298; 1975: 230–31), strong empirical evidence exists that self-identified nationality often changes between censuses even among people who are beyond their adolescent years (Anderson and Silver, 1983).

There is no inconsistency between international practice and the Soviet census's treatment of nationality and native language as subjective indicators because there is no uniform international standard. A large variety of classifications by race, language, nativity, citizenship, and ethnic group are used in the censuses of other countries. There is no standard classification of ethnic groups or languages comparable to the International Standard Classification of Occupations. U.S. censuses have used a variety of classifications by race and "nativity"; measures of country of birth of the respondents or of their parents have often served as imperfect surrogates for measures of "ethnic group" or "nationality" (Shryock and Siegel, 1976: 145–46).

A positive feature of the Soviet census's approach to measuring
nationality is its consistency with the notion of ethnicity preferred by many contemporary scholars as essentially a notion based on self-definition (e.g., Barth, 1969; Kozlov, 1969; Armstrong, 1982). By not linking census nationality by definition to official nationality, Soviet census planners have made it easier for census respondents to define their own nationality and to change their ethnic self-designation between censuses. The same emphasis on measuring change applies to the self-designation of native language.

For this reason, inconsistency of individual responses from one census to the next is not necessarily indicative of measurement error in the censuses. Measurement of nationality and language in successive censuses is not designed as, and should not be regarded as, a test-retest reliability check. In contrast, inconsistency between successive measures of characteristics such as race or country of birth used in the censuses of other countries would be a sign of unreliability. Instead, the Soviet measures are designed to register intercensal change—although on the aggregate, rather than the individual, level.

Instructions to census takers. When questioning adults in a household, the census taker has essentially only (according to the typical instruction—see Table 4.2) to “write down the nationality (native language) that the respondent himself indicates.” The census takers receive written instructions about what to do if the respondents have difficulty answering the questions. What is not known is how well the formal instructions are followed in practice; there are no published studies by Soviet scholars of the extent to which census enumerators comply with the instructions, although some errors by census takers have been mentioned.

During both the 1959 and 1970 censuses, for example, many census takers mistakenly inscribed the word for a female Even (evenka) when they should have used the term for a female Evenk (evenkiyka), and this mistake led to a serious undercount of female Evenks and an overestimate of the number of female Evens (Ter-Izrael’yan, 1979: 192). A more consequential error may have occurred involving Ukrainians living in the Kuban’ region of the RSFSR. A. S. Bezhkovich (1967) has speculated that in the 1959 census, census takers frequently confused the response “rus’kiy,” a term used as a self-identification by some Ukrainians, with its near homonym “russkiy,” which means Russian. Although official census documents for the 1959 and 1970 censuses (USSR, 1959; 1969a), to which Bezhkovich does not refer, clearly state that people who claim rus’kiy as their nationality were supposed to be classified as Ukrainian, he suggests that the response “rus’kiy” was mistakenly interpreted as “russkiy.” This practice (in addition to assimilation, the agricultural collectivization and the 1932–3 famine, and emigration from the region)
could partly account for the sharp decline in the number of reported Ukrainians in the Kuban' between 1926 and 1959.

We would like to know who in the household generally answers census questions and how accurately and consistently the recorded responses to the questions on nationality and native language represent the direct oral responses of each member of the household. Either the general instructions to the census takers or the specific instructions for the questions on nationality and native language deal with the situation of children, of deaf people, and of people who are temporarily absent from their permanent place of residence. The information on the nationality and native language of children is especially important because it can be used to measure intergenerational change, but the instructions themselves are not complete (see Table 4.2). For example, the instructions do not state clearly under which circumstances the answers for children are to be given by parents (Kuvshinova, 1984: 27). Although in the last three censuses the nationality of children was supposed to be reported by parents, the instructions do not define what age these "children" were supposed to be. For the questions on native language, census takers were instructed in most censuses to follow one rule or another to determine the native language of children who were not yet able to talk, but how the native language of children who were able to talk was supposed to be determined or was in fact determined is not clear.

The instructions for the 1979 census stated that the native language of all "young children" (age not defined) was to be determined by the parents (see Table 4.2). This seems to imply that the native language of "old" children was to be determined by some other means, perhaps by the children themselves. The instructions for earlier Soviet censuses, however, did not tell how to determine the native language of either young or old children who were able to talk. Thus, although in principle all census responses to the questions on nationality and native language are to reflect the subjective judgment of Soviet citizens, the nationality of children (age not specified) is defined by the parents, and the native language of children not yet able to talk is also determined by the parents, but the native language of other children (except for "young" children) is presumably not determined by parents.

**Nationality in the Soviet Censuses**

*Terminology.* A special Soviet terminology classifies ethnic units or communities according to their stage of historical development as clan/tribes, peoples, and nations. However, leading Soviet ethnographers
have recently supported use of a general term "ethnic community" (етническая общность) or "ethnos" (етнос) that incorporates or subsumes the different types of ethnic community (e.g., Kozlov, 1969: 15–26; Bromley, 1981: 10–45). In addition, the term "ethnic group" (етническая группа) is commonly reserved for references to small ethnic communities or to clusters of people belonging to larger nationalities but residing as minorities away from the primary area of geographic concentration of their nationality.

In administrative practice and in census usage, however, the Russian concept of национальность (nationality) is the common generic term used to refer to the ethnic affiliation of Soviet citizens (Kozlov, 1977: 32). The Russian meaning of национальность is essentially equivalent to the Western notions of both ethnic affiliation and ethnic group (Clem, 1980: 12). Therefore, despite the special Soviet usage of the term "ethnic group," the term "nationality" is used here interchangeably with the terms "ethnic group" and "ethnic affiliation."

Except for the 1926 census, which used the term народность (people), the general population censuses of the Soviet Union have consistently employed a single Russian concept to express the basic ethnic or nationality affiliation of the population: национальность (nationality). The 1926 census employed the concept народность rather than национальность even though the latter term had been used in the censuses of 1920 and 1923. During the planning for the 1926 census, a controversy arose between those who wanted to obtain a picture of the ethnic composition of the population and those who wanted to depict the nationality composition of the population in the form that it was taking as a result of the post-revolutionary self-determination of nationalities (Vorob'ev, 1957: 27). The proponents of the first opinion won out, and the term народность was chosen because this term was thought to reflect better the notion of ethnic origins. It was believed that people would more readily claim affiliation with a народность or ethnic group of the population than with a национальность—a concept closely linked to that of нация (nation).

The 1939, 1959, 1970, and 1979 census forms included a question on национальность (nationality) in place of the question on народность. The concept of nationality as employed in the censuses has been criticized by Soviet ethnographers (e.g., Bruk and Kozlov, 1967: 5) who argue that it is not well understood by the broad masses of the population, but its repeated use over time—with no change in the wording and little change in the instructions to the census takers—has the virtue of permitting longitudinal comparison of the distribution of the Soviet population by ethnic group. In addition, the use of the term "nationality" in Soviet
administrative practice and in official documents and statistics is by now so well established that few people are likely to have any difficulty identifying themselves as belonging to a nationality.

The number of distinct nationalities. One important problem in the study of ethnicity in the USSR is that of labeling and counting distinct ethnic groups. Determining how many nationalities existed in the USSR at each census date is not simple. The number of the nationalities actually listed in tables of the census reports always falls short of the number mentioned in Soviet literature about the census. Even within a given census report, some nationalities are listed only in footnotes, are included in some summary tables but not others, are collapsed together with other nationalities for some purposes, or are lumped into an “other” category. For example, one secondary source (Isupov, 1964: 12) refers to an official list of 126 ethnic groups used for tabulating the 1959 census results, but the summary volume of the 1959 census report (USSR, 1963) lists only 109 nationalities in the main tables and roughly another half dozen in footnotes.

Nevertheless, Soviet scholars generally acknowledge that the number of nationalities enumerated in the censuses has diminished substantially over time. Furthermore, the reduction in the number of distinct ethnic or nationality groups is often said to result not only from ethnic assimilation but also from a change in the main concept employed in the census question from narodnost’ in 1926 to natsional’nost’ in later census years. As evidence supporting such a conclusion, it is noted that the 1926 census report listed 194 distinct ethnic titles (160 titles of nationalities that are treated as indigenous to the USSR), while the 1939 census listed only 97 such titles (62 indigenous to the USSR) (e.g., Isupov, 1964: 12). One difficulty with this argument is that about 20 of the 194 narodnosti listed in the 1926 census report either had no recorded population, had populations so small that the groups were subsumed under other ethnic labels in the published reports (USSR, 1928; 1929), or were combined with other groups in some tables (e.g., Czechs and Slovaks). Bruk and Kozlov (1967: 6) note that separate population figures were provided in the 1926 census report for only 178 narodnosti.

A second difficulty with this argument is that in tabulating census results from 1959 and later census years approximately 125 different ethnic titles were employed—that is, an increase since 1939, even though the term natsional’nost’ was used both in 1939 and in all subsequent censuses. The major reason for the pattern of change over time is that the number of officially recognized nationalities in the 1939 census was, in the words of Bruk and Kozlov (1967: 6), “artificially
contracted." A. A. Isupov, the director of the 1979 Soviet census, in 1964 attributed the small size of the list of nationalities in 1939 to the "influence of the [Stalin] personality cult" (Isupov, 1964: 12).

A third difficulty with the argument that use of the term natsional'nost' in place of narodnost' led to a reduction in the number of distinct ethnic entities is that it assumes that the set of nationalities or peoples listed in the census reports is determined empirically by the number of ethnonyms that people offer in their verbatim responses to the census question on nationality. It is not widely recognized among Western scholars who use Soviet census data that the "nationalities" included in the census reports are partly synthetic. The way in which native-language responses in the 1897 census were handled was not repeated in later censuses; instead, much planning preceded the tabulation of the questions on nationality and language. This planning was not only technical but also involved policy decisions on whether or not to treat some groups as distinct nationalities.

For the 1926 census, for example, the compilation of the data by narodnost' was based on a "List of Peoples of the USSR" (Perechen' narodnostey SSSR) prepared by the Commission of the Academy of Sciences on the Study of the Ethnic (plemennogo) Composition of the Population of the USSR (USSR, 1928; Vorob'ev, 1957: 55; Bruk and Kozlov, 1967: 12–13). As is stated in the 1926 census report, the "List of Peoples of the USSR" was supplemented by a "Glossary of Peoples of the USSR" (Slovar' narodnostey SSSR) to be used by local statistical administrations to place the numerous concrete names of narodnosti within the categories of the official "List." The 194 narodnosti listed in the 1926 census report amounted to only one quarter to one third of the actual number of ethnic subdivisions in the Soviet population (Kozlov, 1982: 7).

Both a glossary of nationalities and a glossary of languages were employed in the 1939 census (Pustokhod and Voblyy, 1940: 155; Pod'yachikh, 1957b: 32) Work by Soviet ethnographers and linguists also contributed to the tabulation of the data on nationality and language from the 1959 and 1970 censuses. The 126 ethnic titles (92 of which were for "indigenous" nationalities) used for tabulating the 1959 census results were reduced from 733 distinct ethnic titles included in a "Glossary of Nationalities and Languages" prepared before the census was fielded (USSR, 1959; Isupov, 1964: 12). The 117 main languages identified in the census report were condensed from a total of more than 320 "names of languages and dialects" in the glossary (Bruk and Kozlov, 1967: 13; USSR, 1959). A slightly modified "Glossary of Nationalities and Languages" (USSR, 1969a) was used in tabulating the results of the questions on nationality and language in the 1970 census,
and a similar glossary was employed in the 1979 census (Zinchenko, 1984: 151).

Unfortunately, no figures on the distribution of the Soviet population among the over 700 ethnic self-designations or the over 300 language-dialects listed in the glossaries in 1959 and 1970 have been published. The published census volumes report the ethnic and linguistic composition of the population only within the larger synthetic groupings. However, when one considers the need for such large lists of ethnonyms and languages to complete the census tabulation, it seems reasonable to conclude that the shift from the concept of narodnost' to the concept of natsional'nost' is much less important than other factors in determining how many separate ethnic groups are listed in the census reports.

Even if we do not have tabulations of the Soviet population using the detailed ethnographic and linguistic groups identified in the glossaries, the information contained in the glossaries themselves is valuable. The glossaries reveal that the census question on nationality does not provide the sole "ethnic" information used to derive the reported total population sizes of nationalities. In fact, the ethnic composition of the Soviet population as reported in the recent censuses is determined in part by the data on native language. For example, the case of the Cossacks in the 1970 census is instructive. The glossary for the 1970 census (USSR, 1969a) states that people who claimed Cossack as their nationality but claimed Russian as their native language were to be classified by nationality as Russians in the census report, while people who claimed Cossack as their nationality but claimed Ukrainian as their native language were to be classified by nationality as Ukrainians. This classification rule could also help to account for the substantial decline in the number of Ukrainians (Ukrainian Cossacks) in some regions between 1926 and later census years: if some Ukrainian Cossacks shifted their native language to Russian while calling themselves Cossack (but not Ukrainian) by nationality, they were classified in the census as having Russian nationality. Moreover, since Ukrainians in the RSFSR lack native-language schools and mass media, their accelerated linguistic russification (given the classification rule just described) would lead to an administrative transformation of Ukrainians into Russians.

Similarly, people who claimed to be Kypchaks by nationality were reclassified by nationality as Uzbeks if they claimed Uzbek as their native language and as Kazakhs if they claimed Kazakh as their native language. In numerous other cases in the glossaries, native-language information is employed to determine nationality. For instance, the problem that confounded the tabulators of the 1897 census of how to classify ethnically the numerous peoples who called themselves "Tyurk" has been solved in recent censuses by use of the information gathered on
native language. Tyurks with Azerbaydzhanis as their native language are classified by nationality as Azerbaydzhanis, Tyurks with Turkmeni as their native language are classified as Turkmenis, Tyurks with Uzbek as their native language are classified as Uzbeks, and so on.

The glossaries also provide a valuable guide to ways in which the 194 narodnosti listed in the 1926 census can be “mapped” onto the approximately 125 natsional’nosti listed in the recent Soviet census reports. The 1926 census, for example, listed as separate narodnosti the following groups: Tatars, Kryasheny, Mishars, Teptyars, and Nagaybaks. The “Glossary of Nationalities and Languages” for the 1970 census listed Kryasheny, Mishars, Teptyars, and Nagaybaks (among others) as “other names that might be encountered on the census forms” that belong to the Tatar “nationality.” Although there are some inconsistencies between the glossaries for 1959 and 1970, these glossaries, in combination with data from other sources, such as Soviet monographs on language (e.g., Isayev, 1970; 1978) and Soviet and Western writings on the ethnography of the Soviet population (e.g., Wixman, 1980; 1984), make it possible to devise a nearly exhaustive mapping of the narodnosti from 1926 onto the natsional’nosti in the recent census reports. A similar, though crude, mapping between 1897 and 1926 was published in a short compendium (USSR, 1928) to the 1926 census report. Additional information from the 1926 census on the aggregated 1926 narodnosti that form part of a given (later) nationality, such as data on literacy, native language, or geographic location, can also be combined to establish a referent or base for measuring change over time.

Uncertainty exists, however, concerning the extent to which the combining of ethnic groups in the glossaries reflects actual assimilation or consolidation of ethnic groups rather than only a paper transfer of ethnic affiliations from smaller to larger groups. In other words, census users are uncertain whether the merging of ethnic groups in the recent census reports registers a social rather than a bureaucratic phenomenon. Furthermore, the extent to which the use of linguistic data to classify people by nationality affects the relative sizes of nationalities cannot be precisely determined. The extent of the administrative transformation of Ukrainian Cossacks into Russians, for example, depends both on how many Ukrainian Cossacks call themselves Cossack rather than Ukrainian during the census and on how many Ukrainian Cossacks have adopted Russian as native language.

A “Soviet” nationality? Prior to the 1979 census, V. I. Kozlov, the leading Soviet ethnic demographer, proposed that a category “Soviet nationality” be added to the 1979 census list of nationalities (Ter-
Kozlov proposed that this category be used for people who had difficulty defining their ethnic affiliation, and he stated that this category would most likely be employed by people who had long ago been separated from their nationality and by children of ethnically mixed marriages. Kozlov also maintained that the census instruction to assign nationality of children of mixed marriages according to the nationality of the mother was incorrect because it treated nationality as a biological phenomenon rather than a social phenomenon based on self-consciousness.

No Soviet censuses had ever included a category “Soviet nationality.” Nothing akin to the category “Yugoslavs nationally undeclared” employed in recent Yugoslav censuses (Shoup, 1981) had ever been employed in the Soviet censuses. Instead, all citizens had been classified into specific ethnic groups (nationalities). Kozlov’s proposal for the 1979 census was not adopted. Had his proposal been adopted, it would probably have been difficult to confine the use of the category “Soviet nationality” to cases where respondents had trouble defining their nationality or where children had parents of different nationalities and parents had trouble determining the nationality of their children. Although there is every indication that Kozlov’s motivation was to provide an accurate ethnographic accounting of the Soviet population, use of the term “Soviet nationality” would almost inevitably have become politicized, mainly because of the strong official doctrinal emphasis in the past two decades on the emergence of a “new historical community of people—the Soviet people” (sovetskiy narod), a form of community that is said to transcend traditional ethnic allegiances.

In view of this doctrinal emphasis, it is interesting that a “Soviet nationality” category was not added to the list of acceptable responses. One reason may have been that addition of a new category could have had very unpredictable or undesirable results (from the government’s standpoint). Since historical evidence shows that Russians have assimilated substantial numbers of non-Russians (cf. Kozlov, 1975; Lewis, Rowland, and Clem, 1976; Anderson and Silver, 1983), one can speculate that many people who identified themselves as Russians in the 1979 census and who could trace their ancestry to non-Russian origins might well have chosen the label “Soviet nationality” rather than “Russian” if encouraged to do so. The number of self-identified Russians who chose this label might have exceeded the number of self-identified non-Russians who found it attractive to call themselves “Soviet.” Since self-identified Russians amounted to only 52.4 percent of the Soviet population in the 1979 census, providing a “Soviet nationality” category might have eliminated the Russian numerical majority.
Native Language in the Soviet Censuses

All of the general Russian and Soviet population censuses have included a question on *rodnoy yazyk*, sometimes translated in English as "mother tongue" and sometimes as "native language." The term in Russian has not differed across censuses, although, as noted earlier, the instructions to census takers have changed somewhat (see Table 4.2).

The United Nations defines "mother tongue" for census purposes as "the language usually spoken in the individual’s home in his early childhood" (Shryock and Siegel, 1976: 157). The UN states that the criterion for determining language for children not yet able to speak should be clearly indicated. Soviet censuses do clearly identify the latter criterion, but the Soviet interpretation of "mother tongue" differs substantially from the UN definition.

"Native language" is not a precise linguistic concept and does not have a clear empirical referent. While most Soviet scholars interpret the term to mean conversational language, many people, including many respondents to the censuses, apparently regard native language as something else—perhaps as the language used in the family when they were children, the language spoken by their mothers, or the language of their nationality. Furthermore, numerous sociolinguistic surveys conducted in the USSR have shown that the language that people claim as their native language is sometimes not the language they use most frequently, use in the family, know best, or occasionally even know at all (e.g., see Bruk and Kozlov, 1967: 10; Arutyunyan, 1973: 292; Klement′yev, 1974: 35).

Soviet scholars have debated the meaning of native language at the All-Union Conferences of Statisticians held on the eve of each of the last three censuses to review the census plans (USSR, 1958b, 1969c; Ter-Izrael′yan, 1979). During each debate, some scholars have proposed substituting a question on "conversational language" for the question on native language or including a separate question on conversational language on the census form. Each time, the proposal has been rejected. Thus, the formulation of the question on native language has gone essentially unchanged for the past five censuses.

The most telling argument against changing the wording of the question on native language was offered in 1967 by the director of the All-Union Census Bureau, P. G. Pod′yachikh, who asserted that the question should remain unchanged for the sake of continuity and comparability with previous census results (USSR, 1969c: 178).1 At the All-Union Conference of Statisticians held in May 1977, the close subjective link between native language and nationality and the impor-

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1. This position was challenged by a prominent Soviet ethnographer, S. I. Bruk, on grounds that if earlier data were unsatisfactory, nothing would be lost if there were no comparability with better, later data (USSR, 1969c: 226).
tance of native language as a symbol of national consciousness were also cited as substantial reasons not to drop the question on native language (Ter-Izrael'yan, 1979: 159). Thus, a major accepted rationale for including the native-language question in the Soviet census is the significance of native language as an ethnic rather than a linguistic indicator.

It should not be surprising that a subjective measure of native language turns out not to match a well-defined set of objective linguistic capabilities or behaviors. This does not mean, however, that the indicator is unrelated to linguistic behavior. Even if some people claim a given language as native while they do not use it or know it well, comparing the proportion of the population that claims a given language as native across nationalities still provides a useful comparative indicator of linguistic behavior.

In this vein, some Soviet scholars have suggested that native language can perhaps be most usefully regarded as another measure of ethnic group attachment rather than as a measure of language use (Kozlov, 1969: 299; Guboglo, 1972: 32; Bondarchik, 1980: 214). Change of native language may therefore denote change in one indicator of ethnic attachment rather than change in language use. Although native language cannot serve as a definitive indicator of ethnic attachment, census data on native language can be used for most nationalities to represent a stage in an overall process of assimilation (Kozlov, 1975).

Second Language in the 1970 and 1979 Censuses

The meaning of the question on second language, which was added to the 1970 and 1979 censuses, has been controversial. The formulation of this question in the 1970 and 1979 censuses is given in Table 4.2. This formulation has been challenged on several grounds, the most common criticism being the lack of precision of the term "freely command" (svobodno vladet'). When the question was introduced into the 1970 census plan, Pod'yachikh stated that the phrase "freely command" was generally understood to mean "freely converse," but he conceded that the phrase was in fact "loose" (rastyazhimy), and he invited proposals for a more precise formulation (USSR, 1969c: 239). However, proposals made prior to the 1979 census that the qualifier "freely" be dropped and that the question be rephrased to ask whether people could freely speak, freely read, or freely write were not accepted (Ter-Izrael'yan, 1979: 118, 159–60).

Another criticism of the question has been directed at its restriction to "languages of the peoples of the USSR." One Soviet writer defended this restriction as follows: "Some comrades who were working on the plan of the [1970] census program proposed to ask people about their
knowledge of foreign languages, but because of the extreme subjectivity of the personal assessment of such knowledge, the question [on foreign languages] was not included on the census list" (Kolpakov, 1969: 31). Considering the many strong criticisms of the validity of the second-language question in general, this defense cannot be taken seriously. Pod"yachikh offered what appears to have been a definitive justification at the All-Union Conference of Statisticians in 1967 (USSR, 1969c: 314). He stated that he initially preferred not to limit the responses to indigenous languages, but "a judgment was made" to put the words "of the peoples of the USSR" into the formulation in order to help study the rapprochement (sblizhenie) among peoples of the USSR.

In the context of the heightened emphasis at that time on spreading knowledge of Russian as a second language among the non-Russian nationalities, and in the context of an ideological campaign to promote rapprochement between Russians and non-Russians, it seems likely that both the inclusion and the formulation of the question on second language were designed to provide the government with measures of its success in spreading Russian-language knowledge and of the level of sympathy for Russians among the non-Russian nationalities. In fact, Soviet officials frequently cited the 1970 census results on the knowledge of Russian language among non-Russians when comparing the performance of different non-Russian republics in teaching the Russian language. Moreover, maintaining the question on second language in the 1979 census protocol was defended at the 1977 All-Union Conference of Statisticians as having "enormous significance, since it allows examination of the spread and functioning of the language of inter-nationality discourse—the Russian language" (Ter-Izrael’y an, 1979: 159).

That the non-Russian populations, or key officials in some of the republics, understand the importance of the message conveyed by the census results on second language perhaps explains the volatility of the second-language figures between 1970 and 1979. For example, between the censuses of those years, the Uzbeks took an enormous leap forward, from 15 percent claiming Russian as a second language in 1970 to 49 percent in 1979, while the Estonians took a long step backward, from 29 percent claiming Russian as a second language to 24 percent. Though not impossible, neither of these shifts seems likely to reflect real change in linguistic competency.

Two other implications of the formulation of the question on second language deserve mention. First, the decision to record only one "other" language means that the census results distort the language facility of many non-Russians in another way. Among certain nationalities, trilingualism is historically very common. Second, how census respondents are to know which languages are "of the peoples of the USSR" is not defined
in the census instructions. However, the published census figures for 1970 and 1979 make it clear that although "nonindigenous" peoples can claim their own nationality’s traditional language as their native language, they cannot officially "freely command" their group’s language as a second language. No Soviet Germans, for example, are recorded as commanding German as a second language.

Relating Census Data and Other Data on Nationality and Language

Data on nationality derived from the Soviet censuses are often used in conjunction with data on nationality developed from other sources. Data from other sources almost always represent a form of official nationality. Most Soviet citizens, for example, have an internal passport that lists their nationality. The passport system (which was created in 1932) and the registration of changes in residence, births, and deaths all rely on the notion of an official nationality. In addition, school records and work records contain information on nationality. These records are the source of such official statistics as data on the nationality composition of professional manpower or of enrollees in institutions of higher education (Feshbach, 1962).

Although some Soviet scholars (e.g., V. I. Kozlov) argue that there is likely to be substantial consistency between "official nationality" and "census nationality," Soviet sources provide no empirical evidence about the extent of such consistency. Because the two notions of nationality are derived in very different ways, statistical distortions can result when data from two sources are combined. For example, if a large proportion of people whose official nationality is non-Russian—and thus are reported as members of a non-Russian nationality by employers—claim to be Russian in the census, then per capita figures on professional manpower in that nationality will be overestimated. Similarly, any statistical rates that rely on both census data on nationality and reports of official nationality, such as marriage registration, births by nationality of the mother, death registration, and migration, could be distorted. Especially for populations experiencing substantial ethnic assimilation, among whom a shift in official nationality is likely to lag behind a shift in census nationality, any statistics that combine official and census nationality data could be very distorted.

Combining census and noncensus information on native language presents a different kind of problem. Soviet sociological studies of language practices often ask respondents to identify their native language as well as, among other things, what language they use in various social spheres (home, workplace, media, and so on). These studies (e.g., Arutyunyan, 1973) are the main source of information about the link
between "native language" and actual language behavior. Although a rich fund of information on language use, the studies have not generated data that can be compared directly with census data on language: the samples have not been designed to be representative of population units comparable to those used in the censuses, only a few nationalities have been studied, and none of the studies is USSR-wide. Hence, these studies have limited use for validating or invalidating the census results, and the Soviet censuses remain the only source of information on the language preferences of the entire Soviet population.  

Conclusion: General Assessment of the Reliability of Census Nationality and Language Data

Second Language

There is reason to question the reliability of the second-language data from the 1970 and 1979 Soviet censuses. The term "freely command" was not clearly defined. During the administration of the census, the respondents' language ability was not tested. Moreover, census takers were not supposed to prompt or to question the respondents' answers as to whether they did or did not "freely command" a language. In short, the respondents' answers to the question on second language are purely subjective.

Because of the apparent special purpose of the second-language question, many census takers and respondents are likely to have accepted a liberal approach to claiming free command of Russian as a second language. In some cases, as the 1979 data for the Estonians seem to suggest, a certain amount of strategic underreporting of knowledge of Russian as a second language may also have occurred. But in general, the census data on second language probably exaggerate the number of non-Russians who are fluent in Russian.

Assertions by Soviet scholars that the census may underestimate the extent of knowledge of Russian among non-Russians, though based on independent empirical research (e.g., Bruk and Guboglo, 1974; Guboglo, 1978), have not been based on either representative samples of the non-Russian population or an explicit comparison of results using the census wording ("freely command") and results using other questions or

2. In January 1985, the Central Statistical Administration conducted a special "Sample Socio-Demographic Study of the Population." Based on a 5-percent sample, the study covered the entire Soviet population, with the exception of the Far North and a few other regions not readily accessible during January (Troshina, 1984). This "midcensus" study included the standard Soviet question on nationality (Labutova, 1984) but no questions on language. The published results may provide a useful censuslike source of systematic information about the ethnic composition of the USSR.
question formats. The differences in the results between the sociolinguistic surveys and the censuses appear to have two main causes: (1) differences in the level of Russian-language competency measured and (2) differences in the measuring instrument, with the surveys focusing on specific competencies (reading, writing, conversing) and the censuses focusing on a general self-assessment of the respondent's "command" of Russian. Although sociolinguistic surveys suggest that more non-Russians can read or write or converse in Russian than claim to command it freely, the surveys have not shown that more non-Russians think that they "freely command" Russian (using the census formulation) than is revealed by the census data.

It is clear from the debates at the recent All-Union Conferences of Soviet Statisticians that the "freely command" formulation in the 1970 and 1979 censuses is more restrictive than the proposed alternatives, which are analogous to those used in sociolinguistic surveys by Guboglo and others. Consequently, while the data for the second-language question probably underestimate the number of non-Russians who know some Russian, the data could at the same time overestimate the number of non-Russians who can converse fluently in Russian. But the central problem with the second-language question is that the formulation "freely command another language of the peoples of the USSR" is vague.

Native Language

The measure of native language appears to be less volatile than the second-language measure. In addition, any bias in the responses probably runs in the opposite direction from the bias in the responses to the second-language question for several reasons.

First, responses to the census question on native language are likely to be constrained by certain features of the census-taking process itself. Most census takers are likely to be fluent in Russian. Although census takers are not supposed to administer a language test at the doorstep, we expect that they would be skeptical about people who claimed Russian as their native language but did not speak it well. Hence, it seems unlikely, though not impossible, that people who claimed to be non-Russian by nationality would have claimed Russian (or some language other than the language of their nationality) as their native language if they did not at least speak it fluently. Second, with the advent of the second-language question, non-Russians who want to claim knowledge of Russian have another way of doing so. The use of this question could retard the tendency of non-Russians to claim Russian as native language.

Third, to the extent that rodnoy yazyk is interpreted by some non-
Russians as "the language of their childhood" (consistent, by the way, with the UN definition), the census figures on native language are likely to underestimate the extent of linguistic russification. It might be more common for non-Russians to claim the traditional language of their nationality as native language even if they do not speak it well than for them to claim Russian as native language if they do not speak Russian fluently.

On balance, then, considering the various potential sources of bias, the bias in the native-language responses seems likely to be toward overestimating use of the traditional language of the respondent's nationality. Similarly, any bias in native language as an indicator of ethnic attachment rather than of language use is likely to be toward greater consistency between self-identified nationality and self-identified native language.

Nationality

Of the three main census items discussed here, the question on nationality appears to be the most reliable. Both Soviet and non-Soviet researchers commonly employ Soviet census data on nationality as key indicators of ethnic-group attachment or identity. Although some problems in enumeration by nationality have been noted, the nationality question on the census forms has evoked little controversy or even discussion in recent years. That the nationalities listed in the census reports represent something of a distillation from a larger set of ethnic self-designations has not been controversial.

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