TITLE: A Research Note on the Soviet Census of 1979

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ABSTRACT

This research note is an incidental byproduct of research on ethnic relations in the USSR. Based upon the findings of analysis of interviews with recent emigres from the USSR, the author warns that Soviet census data in at least two categories, "nationality" and "native language", and perhaps other categories, should not be taken at face value due to the likelihood of systematic bais introduced by census taking practices.

Soviet Germans who had emigrated to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1979 indicated that among their own ethnic group and among some other minority nationalities in the USSR the population by "native language" and "nationality" may be under-stated in census data by reason of misinformation given to census takers. Such misinformation has a variety of causes and motives including, among others, a) consideration of career or better living conditions; b) mixed marriages; c) a negative image of particular ethnic groups; d) orphaned children; and e) opportunity to emigrate. Among some groups the opposite also may hold true. Thus doubt is raised about the validity of the frequently encountered argument that the generally high percentage of non-Russians who regard their native language as that of their "nationality" indicates a low level of linguistic assimilation into Russian. More precisely, it may indicate a high level of ethnic self-assurance among some minority ethnic groups.

Soviet census taking authorities have shown awareness of the problems of the present census categories and procedures, and have debated them. Western analysts and users of the Soviet census should also be aware of them.

* Prepared by the National Council.

The published results of the Soviet censuses constitute a major data source for analysts studying the Soviet Union, including those interested in understanding its ethnic development and trends. It is contended here, however, that one must go beyond the mere utilization of the statistics and inquire about the meaning of various categories employed by the Soviet census takers. The complex nature of two such categories, i.e. 'nationality' and 'native language', will be illustrated by certain material accumulated during interviews with recent emigrants from the USSR. In the context of an interview project dealing with ethnicity in the USSR, Soviet Germans who had emigrated to the FRG in 1979 were asked a number of questions about nationality and language behavior which proved to be relevant for the interpretation of Soviet census results. Additional suggestive insights were obtained by inquiring specifically about census experiences.

1. How is the nationality of individuals established? Although one of the respondents thought that 'in Russia, only the passport matters', passports were apparently examined only in a very few cases (10% of our sample). The overwhelming majority of persons asked about this said that the Soviet census taker had registered their nationality on the basis of their verbal statement. A few guessed that they had not been asked to show their papers because a local administration -- the one of a Sovkhoz for example -- already knew their nationality. However, this

*The project consists of 200 systematic oral interviews. It is administered by The University of Chicago and funded by a grant of the National Council on Soviet and East European Research.*
guess appears mistaken and one may wonder why anyone at all had to show a passport since officially Soviet census takers were not supposed to ask for it. The verbal self-identification of census subjects was supposed to be decisive and apparently indeed was in at least 90% of the cases.

This procedure itself is suggestive, it may be seen as a tacit acknowledgement of the Soviet census authorities that 'nationality' is a category open to subjective interpretation. Individuals were given the opportunity to claim a nationality other than that inscribed in their internal passport and as our interview data suggest, quite a few may have done so. As a matter of fact, there are ways of changing one's official nationality in the passport as well. In both cases -- either changing the passport or claiming a new nationality in a census -- the same motives and problems lie at the root. For one, certain people have a genuine difficulty in identifying their nationality, particularly those of mixed parentage. For another, there are always individuals who feel it to be advantageous to change their nationality, or have been impelled to do so.

Turning first to an examination of the latter case, it is interesting to note that 80% of our respondents were able to provide illustrative examples. While the Soviet Germans admittedly are a rather unusual group within the context of the entire Soviet Union, some of the factors mentioned no doubt apply to other groups as well. In summary, mention was made of the following causes of nationality change: growing up without parents, acquiring a spouse of different nationality, consequences of war and border disputes, negative image of own ethnic group, and considerations of career and better living conditions. Some typical remarks:
Orphans: R 85 * 'yes, it is possible to change one's nationality to Russian, but that is done mostly by children without parents who have been raised in orphanages'; R 147 'my husband didn't know what to think himself to be, once, in the census of 1970, he stated himself to be a German, but at other times a Russian ... he had grown up in an orphanage after his parents died of hunger in Siberia in 1947 and the orphanage registered him as a Russian'.

Mixed marriages: R 177 'an acquaintance married a Russian woman, he took her last name and had his nationality changed to Russian in his passport'; R 145 'in mixed marriages, where one partner is German, they usually claim Russian nationality'.

Consequences of war and border disputes: R 141 'there were cases right after the war when people didn't want it to be known that they were Germans'; R 91 'when we were released form the camps a KGB man asked us whether we didn't want to change our nationality'; R 172 'in those parts of Lithuania that previously belonged to Germany there are Germans who have registered themselves as Lithuanians ... now some claim their German nationality because they want to emigrate'.

Negative image of particular ethnic group: R 91 'Germans and Jews do that frequently, (they) change their last names too ... (they) don't want to be looked upon ascance'; R 96 'Germans are somehow set apart, they are treated differently. When I was in school, in 8th grade, I was such a fool then, I wished if only I were a Russian, then I would be like all the others'; R 98 'yes, there are quite a few Germans who want to be thought of as Russians...

*The number serves to identify each respondent in the research files.
because of the television programs, they always show the Germans to be so much more stupid than the Russians'.

Career and better living conditions: R 168 'yes, in order to live better, some change passports, some even their last names'; R 166 '(it is done by) those who want to get ahead and are hindered by their nationality, specialists, artists, or scholars'.

When asked about groups other than the Soviet Germans, quite a few respondents also knew cases of nationality change. The examples cited most frequently were those of Ukrainians and Belorussians (living outside their own republics), Jews, Poles; some mention was also made of Mordvins and Udmurts. One respondent had lived in a border area of Georgia where many Azeri Turks had claimed Georgian nationality in order to get ahead better. However, when asked about Kazakhs or Kirgiz, the reply was negative, while in the case of Estonians one respondent thought that some might claim Russian nationality while another denied it saying 'the Estonians do not turn themselves into Russians, they are strong for their own' (R 171). There was an intriguing remark about gypsies, 'wherever they are born that is the nationality they claim: Moldavian in Moldavia, Ukrainian in the Ukraine, and Kazakh in Kazakhstan' (R 84). Generally, one notes that the persons most likely to change their nationality have an extraterritorial status or belong to the smaller ethnic groups and peoples. Since the official nationality is most frequently changed to the Russian one, the tendency not surprisingly is stronger among those with stronger cultural affinities to the Russians.

The difficulty of determining the nationality of children from ethnically mixed families is another major example of our contention that the 'nationality'
category in the Soviet census is by no means clear and unproblematic. The number of interethnic marriages is relatively high in the Soviet Union, amounting to ca. 15% for the entire USSR. However, there are notable fluctuations according to national group or region. Thus, exogamy is comparatively rare among the Muslims, but quite high among Latvians (31%), Ukrainians (29.8%), Moldavians (25.4%), and Belarusians (22.8%). In regions with a strongly mixed population such as Northern Kazakhstan, the incidence of exogamy is high among all groups, fluctuating between 23% and 46%. Accordingly, the number of children with mixed parentage is considerable, and since children generally constitute a substantial part of the persons accounted for in the census, it is important to discuss how their nationality is determined.

As was already noted before, procedures matter. Generally, the parents were to state the nationality of their children, and 'only in families where father and mother belong to different nationalities and the parents themselves have difficulty determining the nationality of the children, preference is to be given to the nationality of the mother'. This sounds clear enough, ignores however the role of coincidence and subjectivity injected by the fact that in practice the decision on what to say about the nationality of the children frequently is made by just one parent, whoever happens to be present at the time of the census taker's visit. One should also consider that the parent has a variety of choices: he may claim all children to be of his -- or the spouse's -- nationality, or the children may be 'divided up' between the parents (such as in one case where all girls had been registered with the mother's last name and nationality, and all boys with the father's last name and nationality), or
the children may be ascribed a nationality different from that of either parent. As our interviews suggest, all these variations occur, although the first appears to be the most frequent.

In those instances where all children are registered with the nationality of one of the parents, it is important to inquire about determining factors for a particular choice. It is curious that the Soviet census authorities have given preference to the mother in the case of undecided nationality, since one frequently encounters a tradition of the father being decisive. This is especially true for Muslim peoples, but an ethnological survey conducted in the Baltic republics also found that 'often, in accordance with local tradition, children from mixed families are regarded as being of the same nationality as the father, even when the family does not speak his native tongue and the children do not know it'. In Soviet studies of choices made by youngsters acquiring their first personal passport at age sixteen a pattern emerged which may very well also be predominant in the case of the census. According to these data, if one of the parents belongs to the nationality of the republic in which the youngster lives, he or she will most frequently choose that nationality. Otherwise, if one of the parents is Russian, the youngster will in most cases choose the Russian nationality. Thus, the groups most likely to lose nationality members through the process of intermarriage are those living outside their own republics, the small people without republic status, and the extraterritorial groups such as Germans, Jews, Poles, or Koreans.
2. 'Native language' is another important factor listed in Soviet census compilations bearing a complex meaning. Again, the two most relevant points to discuss are the self-identification by census subjects and the dual identity of children from ethnically mixed families.

The instructions for the Soviet census of 1979 stipulated that the language which an individual regarded as his native one was to be registered as such. Thus, the subjective interpretation of 'native language' on the part of respondents in the census was to be decisive. No questions were asked about actual knowledge of the language or its use at home or otherwise. As our research indicates, this makes the category rather ambiguous. Or, to put it differently, it should be clarified that in a considerable number of cases 'native language' is less an indicator of actual linguistic ability or usage than a psychological measure indicating self-perception.

This is first of all evident from interviewing Soviet German emigrants about their census experience. Since the majority of respondents were interviewed in early spring and summer of 1979, their memory of the census was relatively fresh. Asked about it, an overwhelming majority stated that they had claimed German as their mother tongue, and, more importantly, had claimed the same for their children. This was done even though many adults and most children knew German only rudimentarily. As one mother said 'we stated German to be our mother tongue even for the children, although they don't know any German' (R 147). Sticking to this statement even in face of challenges was a point of pride for many: R 140 'the woman asked "what is the native language of the children, it appears to be Russian", but I said "no, it is German " ';
R 106: 'all of us stated German to be our mother tongue, then they asked whether the children didn't talk in Russian and we said no' (the same respondent said in a different context that he spoke Russian with his children). There were several similar statements.

It is interesting to consider the differentiated reactions of the census takers. In some cases they accepted statements without interjection, but in others challenged them or asked additional questions on language behavior, such as in the case of R 98 who recalls being asked 'what is the native language, what other language do you know well, in what language do you converse at home, in what language do the children talk to each other?' And respondent R 143 recalled: 'they asked about native language, I said "it is German", but she said "but how do you talk to each other", I said "in Lithuanian", "in that case", said she, "I have to write down Lithuanian", and she wrote that'. In this instance the census taker overreached her authority since she was officially authorized to interject her own evaluation only if parents were unable to define the native language of their children.10

While accounts of replies given in the Soviet census already indicate the complexity of the results, our own data on language behavior accumulated in interviews strengthen the impression that the psychological and self-identificatory content of the 'native language' category is significant. When we posed the same question asked in the Soviet census 'what is your native language', two respondents had difficulties replying, one saying 'I am German', and the other 'I am German although I speak Russian better than German - so, I assume that my mother tongue is German'. Overall, an overwhelming majority of respondents (160 out of 164) stated German to be their native language11, but a comparison with
replies about the knowledge and use of the German language reveals that both are rather weak. Since language use within the family is especially closely linked to a definition of native language, and since the overall pattern in terms of generational differences overlaps with that of language knowledge, the following may be taken as indicative:

TABLE 1

| Language used with parents with spouse with children |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| only German n=157 | 77,7% | 49,6% | 33,9% |
| both German and Russian | 13,3% | 19% | 28,5% |
| only Russian | 9% | 31,4% | 37,6% |

The data clearly indicate that 'native language' is by no means always identical with the language used in family conversations. In the case of the Soviet Germans it also shows a tendency of Russian being used increasingly with each following generation.

Interestingly enough our data are supported by findings of Soviet ethnographers. A study of linguistic processes in Karelia cites less than half of those regarding Karelian as their native language actually using it as the exclusive family language, with ca. 20% using only Russian, and the rest both Karelian and Russian. Other Soviet surveys have shown similar results for Moldavians.
in the entire USSR, and Tatars in Kazan. The latter study also cites data for the rather paradoxical cases of Russians who regard Tatar as their native language but speak Russian at home, and Tatars who regard Russian as their native language but speak Tatar at home...

While in the case of the Soviet surveys the data apparently include both ethnically mixed and mono-ethnic families, our own data on the Soviet Germans include just the latter. This illustrates that it is problematic to assume a direct overlap between native language and language actually used in the family even in those cases where both parents are of the same nationality. In the case of ethnically mixed families the situation no doubt is more complicated again. As was the case regarding the choice of nationality, no single pattern exists. Thus, we find that in the case of Kirgiz or Kazakh men marrying German or Russian women the wives frequently learn the native language and accept it as that of their children (R 100, R 145, and R 170), but there are other cases where the native families opposed such mixed marriages and the family language became Russian (R 141). In the case of the Soviet Germans, respondents stated that in a majority of mixed families Russian would be used and claimed as native language with individual exceptions of a German parent using German with the children and possibly even claiming it as the native language of the children. In unusual cases a Russian, or Komi, or Kirgiz wife had learned to speak German, but we do not know what native language might have been claimed for the children.

3. Having raised the problem of the complexity of Soviet census categories, we have to discuss the scope of it. A rough numerical measure is provided by the data on intermarriage, which suggest that
10-20% of Soviet families have a specific problem determining nationality and native language. This number increases if we add mono-ethnic families from groups with a sensitive national image, or extraterritorial status, or other traits contributing to assimilatory tendencies.

One could also obtain a sense of the scope of the problem by comparing census data over decades and noting unusual numerical gains or losses of individual nationalities. Insights could further be gained by comparing the percentage of persons citing the language of their name-giving nationality as their native language over the years and in various regions. However, if one were to undertake this task systematically, one would again have to deal with the core problem discussed in this note, i.e. how to interpret the categories used. As was found, a considerable number of individuals counted as belonging to one particular nationality are in fact of an ethnically mixed parentage, and a certain number of people misclaim their nationality. Similar problems affect the native language category, which, in addition, bears strong psychological overtones and cannot simply be taken as a factual indicator of language knowledge or use. The latter finding, incidentally, raises doubts about the validity of the frequently encountered argument that the generally high percentage of non-Russians regarding as their native language the language of their name-giving nationality indicates a low level of linguistic assimilation. More precisely, it indicates a high level of ethnic self-assurance.

In conclusion, one should add that the Soviet census taking authorities have shown awareness of the problems implied by the use of the present census categories and procedures, and have debated them. It is to be hoped that the analysts and users of the census results will do the same.
Footnotes

1 Tsentral'nnoe Statisticheskoe Upravlenie pri Sovete Ministrov SSSR, Vsesoyuznaya perepis' naseleniya -- vsenarodnoe delo (Moscow, 1978) pp. 45-51.

2 Several respondents stated that it was possible to do so by merely filing an application with ZAGS (Vital Statistics Bureau). Others emphasized that either a husband or wife could change their nationality at the time of a marriage ceremony. Still others thought that it was only possible illegally, through bribes. Two mentions were made of Germans who had at some time assumed Russian nationality and later fought prolonged court battles to regain their German nationality.

3 Fear of negative consequences was also cited by a Soviet ethnographic team which found that nearly half of the Germans in Transcarpathia had not admitted to being German in the census of 1959. Sovetskaya etnografiya, 1970, no. 1, pp. 138-139.


6 Perepis' naseleniya, op. cit. p. 51.


8 L. N. Terent'eva, 'Opredelenie svoei natsional'noi prinadlezhnosti podrostkami v natsional'no-smeshannych sem'iyakh', Sovetskaya etnografiya, 1969, no. 3, pp. 20-30; Evstigneev, op. cit. p. 14; and others.
The other four individuals claimed Russian. It is interesting to note that several respondents cited a particular German dialect as their mother tongue.

One should note that the data for this table are also based on the self-evaluation of respondents and it is the impression of the interviewers that there was a tendency for the respondents to overrate their actual use of German. There were several respondents who said that they spoke German to their children, but in fact used Russian to the hearing of the interviewer.

Among our respondents there were two young parents married to Russians—one a woman and once a man—who had spoken German to their children and had listed their children’s native language as being German in the census of 1979.

Close relatives of respondents R 77, R 85, R 53.