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An Uncensored Look at the Census

In January 1989, Professor Murray Feshbach was offered the unprecedented opportunity of accompanying Soviet census-takers on their Moscow rounds. The Georgetown University Sovietologist and demographer jumped at the chance. He recounted his experiences and some of the information he gleaned from that census for students and faculty of the Harriman Institute April 27, 1989.

At the first apartment he and the census-takers visited, the wife bristled that her husband should be named head of the household, since she had a full university education and he did not. Also, it turned out that the grandmother, who had only had two years of schooling, could not read the instructions regarding source of income. "It was embarrassing for a moment," said Feshbach, but these moments convinced him that he was not seeing "Potemkin villages." These were real households, not ones pre-selected to impress a foreign observer.

Behind Seven Seals

Since the Stalin era, Soviet censuses have been notoriously inadequate and unreliable, if they were published at all. "Nineteen twenty-six is still the glory day of census publication in the history of the Soviet Union." After that year, enormous amounts of information were compiled but rarely revealed to the public. Everything was "behind seven seals," the Russian phrase for "under lock and key."

For instance, a census was taken in 1937, but it never came to light. "They tabulated it, they processed it, they showed it to Stalin and he said, 'Throw it out,'" according to Feshbach. The 1939 census was "a fraud." It consisted of only ten pages. The 1959 census, which contained valuable information in the aftermath of WWII and the 1947-48 famine, came out only in extremely limited numbers of pages. The 1979 census did not include any age data, "the key variable in all census population data."

The 1989 census, by contrast, was conducted in what seemed to be a thorough manner and included many formerly taboo questions. For the first time since 1926, it asked about housing. "It's about time that they found out about the problems they have in housing," Feshbach commented.

Even now, fifteen to eighteen percent of the urban population lives in shared housing. Twenty years ago that figure was closer to forty percent. They also asked very specifically about date of birth. In the past they only asked for the year, which is "totally useless." The Soviets will also probably publish meaningful statistics on adult literacy for the first time, with adults defined as everyone fifteen and older. Until now they have only published statistics on nine-to forty-nine-year-olds, "so Grandma would not have shown up in those statistics."

The census-takers asked whether the respondents had electricity, central heating, water, sewage, hot water, gas, etc. These are not idle questions, said Feshbach, "because we now know that sixty-five percent of all rural district hospitals do not have hot water. Twenty-seven percent of all rural district hospitals in the country do not have sewage pipes... and sixty-five percent of *infectious disease* hospitals in Uzbekistan do not have sewage pipes." These statistics help explain the high mortality and infant mortality rates in areas such as rural Central Asia.

Information Overload

Not only are important questions being asked, but the answers are being published. There is so much statistical information coming out of the Soviet Union now that it is an "attack on Western Sovietologists." Feshbach complained, "It's a problem just handling it all. I have no time to write just because I have to read everything."

In particular, the Soviet statistical commission is now publishing a series of handbooks called *Population of the USSR*. "It has infant mortality year by year, and I used to die for that. And it has perinatal mortalities which they had never published before," as well as other previously unavailable data. New handbooks also cover agriculture, the state budget, industry, the environment, and many other topics. Much of this fascinating information is finding its way into Soviet newspapers. "I'm told that in Moscow now, people split the papers up between them. One will read these three, the other will read these three, and then they talk to each other every day, because you can't read all of it."



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Feshbach noted a few problems with this latest census. For example, higher-education statistics will be inflated because anyone who drops out after three years of university (without finishing the fourth or fifth) gets counted as having a full university education. Also, the question "where were you born?" only requires that the respondent provide the province of origin without specifying "urban" or "rural" or the name of the town or village. "That means that all the migration statistics are up for grabs." The issue of native languages is also problematic. Ethnographers claim it should be the language of the parents' nationality, but statisticians claim it should be the language the respondent actually speaks. Since the dilemma has not been resolved, the answers from the census will be inconsistent.

AIDS in the USSR

AIDS is one very important area that *glasnost* has not yet reached. Soviet officials are still talking about "one or two" cases. "To have 'one or two' means they have a different numbering system and it's not on the basis of ten," said Feshbach. A firm indication that there may actually be more cases is that the Soviets have built two 600-bed hospitals intended for patients with AIDS. This is especially

significant because "to be ahead of the curve is very unusual for Soviet work habits." Feshbach estimates that there are 2000 to 5000 cases in the Soviet Union, and at least five times as many more people who are HIV-positive.

The lack of information on AIDS is feeding tremendous fear. After the story broke that forty children had contracted AIDS from re-used hypodermic needles at a hospital in Elista (in Kalmykia), cars from that region were stoned in adjacent areas. A diabetic military serviceman was refused an insulin shot in another part of the country when it was discovered that he was from Elista. A ten-year old girl from the town was denied medical treatment even though she had a certificate saying that her illness was not AIDS. And airport workers are refusing to move blood being sent to Moscow for testing. "You can feel the fear of people," Feshbach said. "They won't even go into first aid ambulances anymore because they're afraid that they'll be using a needle."

Despite its shortcomings, the 1989 census is a vast improvement over its predecessors. Feshbach predicted that as a result of all the newly available information, Soviet self-analyses will become more interesting and useful, as will foreign examinations of the USSR.

Reported by Lolly Jewett

Glasnost' Department

Last year, renowned rock musician Neil Young released a video of his song, *This Note's For You*. The video parodies American television commercials and the pop music stars who appear in them. Because it satirizes big advertizers (such as Coke, Pepsi and Budweiser) and major performers (such as Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson), it had difficulty getting played on American music programs.

It was seen, however, on Soviet television. *Program A: Rock Films*, a new late-night rock music show on the USSR's major channel, played the video April 2. The Soviet host mentioned the difficulties in the United States and noted ironically, "In our democratic society, we will show it."

— Paul Lerner

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