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A Census the Golden Horde Would Love

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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My family was not counted in the census that was carried out from Oct. 14 to 25. My wife and I were out when the census takers came to our apartment, and our children would not open the door or talk to them. Meanwhile, one of my friends was counted twice. His mother, who is Jewish, must have confused the census with a 19th-century pogrom and fibbed, declaring that she was Russian. When my friend found out, he registered again, this time as a Jew.

There is often a problem trying to identify people's ethnicity for the census. In the northern Arkhangelsk region, there appeared a people identifying themselves as the "white-eyed Chudes" — as if they had risen out of a fairy- tale swamp of some sort. People have also tried to claim their nationality or ethnicity as "Siberian," "Far Easterner" and "Cossack." The last census revealed the existence of even more exotic groups. Several thousand people identified themselves as Orcs, goblins and elves. Perhaps they should be given their own autonomous region. Nowadays, it is also fashionable to call yourself a "Khazar" after the Jewish people who lived on the Volga in the 7th century. Respondents also occasionally listed themselves as "extraterrestrial," and one young man wrote "anarchist" as his nationality.

Such idiosyncrasies would be amusing were they not masking an absurdity on a much larger scale. The decision to conduct a national census fewer than eight years after the previous one can only be interpreted as a tacit admission that the previous census was a failure. The Soviet Union conducted a census only six times during its history, although the census of 1937 overlooked the massive number of people living in gulags, making it necessary to conduct a full recount in 1939.

The 2010 census will not correct the mistakes committed in 2002. The Internet is full of reports of inept census workers, of workers simply copying data from passport office records or inventing names and numbers out of thin air.

Today, when a census taker comes calling at your door, you are having a firsthand encounter with the legacy of the Tatar yoke — although the young people wearing blue scarves might bear no resemblance to the darughachi, the tax collectors of the Mongol-Tatar Golden Horde.

The problem is that mankind has achieved significant progress in technology and social organization since the time of Batu Khan, the Mongol ruler and founder of the Golden Horde. For example, most European countries had stopped taking door-to-door censuses by the early 1990s. The Federal Tax Service accomplishes its mission perfectly well without the need for a national census. The difficult part lies in compiling, synthesizing and cross-checking all that information. And that job does not require an army of census takers fanning out across the country like the Tatar and Mongol invaders of yore. A set of computer programs and several dozen specialists can accomplish the same job while sitting in their comfortable Moscow offices. What's more, they can gather that information in something approaching real time and automatically update it daily.

But the main advantage of the labor-intensive door-to-door national census is that it is far more expensive than the high-tech version, and that means budgetary funds end up in many people's pockets. And in this regard, the Russian bureaucrats of the 21st century are no different from those of the ancient conquering hordes.

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