

Census Doesn't Count

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China has been taking a periodic census of its population for more than 2,000 years, sometimes as frequently as once every 10 to 20 years. Those records reveal an interesting picture. For example, in the year A.D. 175 — nine years before the Yellow Turban Rebellion that led to the end of the Late Han Dynasty — the population amounted to about 62 million people. In 220, that number fell to 13 million. In 755, during the Tang Dynasty and right on the eve of the An Lushan Rebellion, 53 million people were recorded, and nine years later the census showed only 16.9 million people.

Now these figures do not mean that the An Lushan Rebellion claimed 36 million lives or that the Yellow Turban Rebellion wiped out nearly 50 million people. In fact, they reflect the ability of the state to accurately count the population at any given time. Following the uprisings and revolts, the Chinese people fled in all directions and refused to cooperate with the authorities.

What about Russia's recent nationwide census? To begin with, there is no need for one in a post-industrial society. The census is a tool for an empire or a national monarchy to control its tax-paying population. The main object is for the census takers to record as many

taxpayers as possible, while the taxpayers themselves do their best to avoid being counted — their success depending on the severity of societal controls in place. Economically developed countries have replaced the traditional method of collecting census data with surveys or, as in the United States, sending questionnaires to each household.

The scope of the fraud in Russia's recent census even surpassed the extent of election fraud regularly seen here. According to a survey of 5,253 people by Fontanki.ru, only 38 percent of the population took part in the census. Of those who were not counted, 8.6 percent "intentionally did not participate," 33.9 percent said that "maybe someone knocked on their door but they were not home at the time," and another 19.7 percent responded, "Why should I take part?"

Considering that Russians who participated in this census were not threatened with having to pay tribute like the Chinese households of the Tang Dynasty, the results are quite similar to those of China's census of 764. The social disintegration characterizing Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's power vertical exceeds the confusion that reigned in China's Hebei province after the An Lushan Rebellion more than 1,200 years ago. By the way, no census takers came to my door or to my parents' either. In fact, not a single census taker came to the whole suburban district where they live. It was the same story with friends living in posh neighborhoods in the Moscow suburbs. Other friends living in gated communities told me that they had instructed the guards not to even let the census takers in.

This raises a question: If this census did not obtain a tally of Russia's wealthier citizens, how can the government calculate the ratio of rich to poor?

Where and when is it possible to conduct an accurate census? The answer: In 755 during China's Tang Dynasty; in 19th-century Russia, when every peasant could be found at home; and in the modern United States, where people actually respond to government surveys.

On the other hand, it is impossible to organize even a moderately reasonable count in the Congo, where either the respondent or the census taker might be a cannibal; in Afghanistan, where census workers could get their ears sliced off on suspicion of being U.S. spies; in England during the 1139-53 Civil War; in Byzantium after the 532 Nika riots; and in Putin's Russia.

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