

Believers' Responses to the 1937 and 1939 Soviet Censuses

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Few of the Soviet Union's seven censuses proceeded entirely smoothly. The amount of information published in the wake of each varied enormously, ranging from the complete suppression of the 1937 results to the relatively full publication of the 1989 figures.¹ It is only in the past few years as scholars have begun to examine the archives of the Tsentral'ny Gosudarstvenny Arkhiv Narodnogo Khozyaistva in Moscow, now the Rossiisky Gosudarstvenny Arkhiv Ekonomiki (RGAE), that a fuller picture has emerged of the course and results of earlier censuses.² Of interest to us here are the two censuses of the 1930s, where religious factors played an important part. A useful history and analysis of the 1937 census, from which I have drawn here, is provided by two recent articles: 'Polveka molchaniya' ('Half a century of silence') by Yu. A. Polyakov, V. B. Zhiromskaya and I. N. Kiselev,³ and 'Iz istorii perepisi naseleniya 1937 goda' ('From the history of the 1937 census of the population') by A. Volkov.⁴

The last full census in the tsarist empire was conducted in 1897 in an atmosphere more like a police operation.⁵ Religious affiliation was one of the items of information collected from all citizens. Several censuses were attempted during the First World War and the Civil War, but the chaos of the times ensured that the tsarist and communist governments were unable to produce an accurate survey of the population.

The first full Soviet census took place in 1926 and ran into opposition from those opposed to the Soviet state. But it was the two censuses of the 1930s – at the height of Stalin's terror – which were to cause the greatest problems. The purges which had sent millions of people to their deaths were to become painfully clear in the figures collected. It can be argued that in addition to the question of the total Soviet population, an equally important element in causing the disruption was the question on religious affiliation inserted in the 1937 census. Stalin's dissatisfaction with the results led to its cancellation and the institution of a new census just two years later. Although the question on religious affiliation was deleted from the 1939 census, there was a lingering suspicion of the whole process among believers.

Archive documents show the extent of opposition to the 1939 census and refusal to participate in it, much of which came from religious believers. The detailed reports sent to Moscow about 'antisoviet activity connected with the census of the population' give a vivid picture of the often sharp exchanges between the census officials and individual believers which would at times verge on the hilarious, were it not for the fate that awaited those refusing to take part. It is of interest that during both the tsarist and Soviet periods census officials used coercion as a means to ensure partici-

pation. Citizens viewed the censuses very much as an instrument of power, not as a scientific survey of the population.

No Soviet census after 1937 attempted to find out about citizens' religious affiliation. The trouble this question caused – out of all proportion to its usefulness – perhaps persuaded the authorities that an accurate survey of the population was more important than details of how many people declared themselves to be religious.

The first Soviet Census of 1926

The 1926 census had no question on the religious affiliation of citizens. Yemel'yan Yaroslavsky, the head of the League of Militant Atheists, later explained to a visiting American delegation that such a question would be unconstitutional and would violate the principle of freedom of conscience.⁶ This was in accord with the view of Lenin, who in 1920 had called for the question on religion to be removed from the all-Russian census of that year, a suggestion that was taken up in a decree of the Sovnarkom.⁷ The 1926 census form did categorise the population by profession, among which 'servant of cult' was listed among the free professions.

Given the openly antireligious nature of the Soviet state some believers viewed the census as the work of the Antichrist and called on their fellow-believers to refuse to take part. Chief among them were smaller religious groups, such as the Old Believers of the Belaya Krinitza concord. They urged the faithful not even to let census officials into their homes.⁸ This resistance was coupled with a general refusal to take part in other civic activities such as elections, to accept passports (which were compulsory) and to perform military service.

The 1937 Census

The second census, designed to confirm the achievements of Soviet power since Stalin assumed full control of the country in 1929, was first signalled for 1933, but did not finally take place until 1937. It came in the glow of triumphalist propaganda generated by Stalin's 1936 Constitution and in the wake of the 1936 mass trial of Trotskyites and other enemies. Few in the government's statistical office, the Central Directorate of the National Economic Account (the TsUNKhU or CDNEA), knew then the extent of the trouble the results of this census would bring them.

Stalin took a keen personal interest in the census, even down to amending the questions proposed by the census bureau. 'The census form has been carefully edited by comrade Stalin personally,' a 1936 article in the journal *Plan* declared.⁹ The original draft of the questions presented by the census bureau to the government on 22 February 1935¹⁰ contained 18 somewhat convoluted questions. There was no question on religious affiliation. By the time of the final form, there were just 14 much simpler questions. By now the question on religion had appeared. Listed on the form as question 5, this merely asked 'religion', and left a space for an answer.

In addition to basic data, citizens were also obliged to give their level of education, their native language and their citizenship. The question on religion was included, according to Polyakov, Zhiromskaya and Kiselev,¹¹ at Stalin's initiative. It was to be answered by all those 16 years of age and above. In the category of 'social group' (question 14), citizens could choose from a list of options, one of which was 'servants of cult and non-labour elements'. In the previous census of 1926, 'servants of cult' had been grouped together with 'persons of free professions', that is with members of the intelligentsia. Polyakov *et al.* note that the inclusion of questions on

religion and social group flew in the face of classic theory of statistics. N. Ya. Vorob'yev had warned in his textbook for statistical workers that such questions evoked only distorted answers far from the truth,¹² hardly a surprise given the persecution which could result from a true answer.

To help the more than one million census officials gain accurate and consistent results, special instructions were issued to every official throughout the Soviet Union. Although the first instructions, issued in April 1936, were very brief (just four pages) and contained no guidance on how the religious question was to be correctly answered, later instructions were far more specific. A pair of booklets for census officials was issued later that year giving samples of the forms, details of proper responses in individual situations and explanations of difficulties. Uniquely of all the questions, that on religion also necessitated a full explanation of how to reply.

On question 5: An answer to this question should be given only for people aged 16 and above. The question is not about the faith to which the person asked or his parents belonged officially in past times [i.e. in the tsarist era]. If the person asked considers himself a nonbeliever, write 'nonbeliever'. If the person asked considers himself a believer, write 'believer', and for believers holding a particular dogma, write the name of the religion (for example, Orthodox, Lutheran, Baptist, Molokan, Mohammedan, Jew, Buddhist etc.)¹³

It is difficult to tell whether these instructions were designed to produce figures of religious practice which were as accurate as possible, or merely to try to reduce the numbers of people declaring themselves religious.

The question on religion also inspired the publication of a dictionary of religion¹⁴ for use by census officials. This explained the various religious groups and atheist viewpoints. Its alphabetic list of religious groups ran to 470, indicating where they were to be found and among which nations.

Interestingly, the date chosen for the census was 6 January, Orthodox Christmas Eve, which cannot have failed to remind believers of their faith. In the run-up to the day, the media expected the census to show the success of the atheist campaigns and the decline of religiosity. On census day *Pravda* explained what the results would show in a front page article entitled 'Dolg sovetskogo grazhdanina' ('The duty of the Soviet citizen'): 'The question on religion is special. The number of religious people recorded by the census officials among the general masses is, as one would expect, very insignificant. This attests that one of the strongest survivals of capitalism in people's consciousness is being rooted out.' This prejudging of the results was echoed in other papers. 'Very important are the data of the census on the attitude of citizens of the USSR to religion,' *Komsomol'skaya pravda* reported the same day. 'They will demonstrate how great our successes are in the struggle against religious prejudices, where this work is proceeding successfully and where it is standing still.' (The same front page article also proclaimed – with almost religious zeal – how the census would prove the growth in the population: 'In the USSR, as in no other country in the world, the number of births is great, great is the yearly increase of the population!')

Several whimsical stories inadvertently revealed the confusion aroused by the question on religion. One 75-year-old man insisted on entering himself as a believer because, as he explained: 'I believe in the triumph of communism.' A 60-year-old lady is reported as telling the census official: 'I believed, my boy, I believed. And I went to church and used to bow down in prayer. But now I don't believe. I've lived through a lot and I can see that you shouldn't have faith in god but in yourself and

your neighbours.' The official told *Pravda* readers that on his round he had discovered a few believers among building workers, but among manual and office workers he had found none.

Even among these assurances of success, there were signs of general official unease at indications of forthcoming revolt. Some papers reported people's concern about the motivation for the religious question, as well as wilder 'provocative rumours' which everyone connected with the census had to do their best to counter. 'One old lady asked if it was true that they will move all believers out of Moscow. Indeed, I had to take on the role of a propagandist,' one census official in the capital explained in *Pravda*. Some rumours were so wild that the papers reported them with no comment. 'At Novinsky textile factory in Moscow region,' *Komsomol'skaya pravda* revealed, 'a rumour was started that the census would take place at night and those who are for religion will be stamped with ... the mark of the Antichrist.' Soon after the census was over, *Pravda* reported that in Rostov and elsewhere it had 'discovered the results of hostile agitation. Believers announced to census officials: "People told us that if a lot of believers are recorded during the census then they'll build churches."' In a wood factory near Arkhangel'sk 24 workers who had previously described themselves as nonbelievers changed their minds on census day. 'Someone at the factory put out the counterrevolutionary rumour that the question was not about religion, but about whether the person asked believed in Soviet power.' In this case, the census official was able to reach a happy conclusion. 'When the exact meaning of the question had been explained to them, those asked returned to their original answers.'¹⁵

'N. Ya. Vorob'yev was right,' Polyakov *et al.* conclude.

While the census as a whole took place successfully with a helpful attitude from the population, all three questions – on religion, social group and citizenship – evoked extreme annoyance, even fear among a certain part of it. In many districts of the country – Belorussia, Uzbekistan, Krasnoyarsk territory, the Kiev, Sverdlovsk and Moscow regions and others – rumours circulated that 'they will levy taxes on believers', that 'they must take away' those who had registered themselves as believers, that all nonbelievers 'will be burnt out by the fascists, and there will be war soon' and that 'they will deport believers from the district and throw the children out of school'.¹⁶

Other rumours reported included one in Moscow region that religious believers would be treated as *kulaks* had been and that therefore it was better not to answer this question or to evade the census by hiding. 'Forty commissars will arrive and those recorded as believers will be expelled from the district.' A rumour in Sverdlovsk region warned that all believers would be thrown out of the collective farm.¹⁷ Many simply chose to hide or to run away from their homes during the census.

Despite these fears, more people than expected boldly declared themselves to be believers. In March the head of the census operation, I. A. Kraval', informed the Central Committee that there had been 'provocative' rumours circulated at the time of the census 'that everyone should be registered as a believer, then they will open a church for them, as the census will be sent for scrutiny by the League of Nations, and the League of Nations will ask comrade Litvinov [Commissar for Foreign Affairs] why we closed the churches when we have so many believers.' In Kiev region, he reported, 'they say the state wants to find out exactly how many religious people there are in our country in order to prove to foreign states the fact that religious

believers exist and that religion is not hindered in our state, and that because of this one should write "Orthodox".¹⁸

The census revealed religiosity was above expectations. The results¹⁹ showed that 55,277,049 people aged 16 years and over declared themselves to be believers. A total of 42,243,214 declared themselves to be nonbelievers. Only 890,869 people (mainly among the young and literate) did not give an answer. Disregarding non-respondents to this question, just over 56 per cent of Soviet adults declared themselves believers, and just under 43 per cent nonbelievers (see Table 1).

The question on religion allowed statisticians to assess believers as a group and to compare those declaring themselves to be believers with the population as a whole. As expected, perhaps, women were more likely to be believers than men. Only among Muslims, Buddhists, lamaists and shamanists was the percentage of women approximately equal to that in the population as a whole (around 54 per cent). Among all other religious groups women made up between 61 and 67 per cent.

The census also allows a comparison of the age profiles of different religious groups and the adult population as a whole. For all religious groups there is a marked decline in adherence among younger generations. While in the over-70 age group believers made up nearly 93 per cent of the population, this fell to just 35 per cent of 16-19-year-olds (see Table 2). Although comparing the number of believers in different age groups is a more complex task because of the varying numbers of people in each group, certain figures will help to highlight general trends. The total number of people in the 16-19 and 50-59 age groups in the population as a whole is almost identical. However, a comparison of believers in these two age groups shows many denominations suffering a precipitous decline (see Table 3). The Jews suffered the biggest fall, with believers in their fifties outnumbering believers in the second half

TABLE 1 Religious believers in the 1937 census

Denomination	Number	Percentage of population	Percentage who are women	Literacy rate
Orthodox	41,621,572	42.29	66.23	58.74
Armenian	142,099	0.14	61.21	36.82
Catholic	484,731	0.49	62.34	67.44
Protestant	457,885	0.47	61.65	88.19
Other Christian	392,939	0.40	60.79	68.33
Muslim	8,256,550	8.39	53.46	29.78
Jewish	281,112	0.29	62.64	67.20
Buddhist/lamaist	82,139	0.08	56.72	26.87
Shamanist	20,944	0.02	54.02	20.49
Others and imprecisely categorised	3,537,078	3.59	64.65	55.52
Total adult believers	55,277,049	56.16	64.06	54.52
Adult nonbelievers	42,243,214	42.93	42.10	89.03
Confession not indicated	890,869	0.91	40.86	81.29
Total adult population	98,411,132	100.00	54.86	69.58

Note: All percentages are rounded to two decimal places.

Source: Figures are derived from literacy tables in *Vestnik statistiki*, No. 8, 1990, pp. 68-73, which are from RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 144, pp. 41-3.

of their teens by more than 21 to one. The Buddhists and lamaists (although, curiously, not the shamanists) suffered large falls, as did the Armenian Church. The Protestants and Muslims held up best, although even here they did not keep up with the population as a whole. It is interesting to note that the birth of the 16–19-year-old age group coincides almost exactly with the imposition of the communist system.

An analysis of literacy among believers aged 16 and above turns up some interesting information. The number of literate believers, at 37,443,732, did not greatly exceed the number of illiterate believers, of whom there were 29,937,843. Of the illiterates, women (22,529,025) far outnumbered men (7,408,818). Perhaps surprisingly, the number of illiterate Muslim women (3,433,923) was not that far above the number of men (2,363,569). Indeed, of Muslims as a whole far more described them

TABLE 2 Religiosity by age

Age	Percentage declaring themselves believers
16–19	35.23
20–29	44.37
30–39	52.41
40–49	63.75
50–59	77.89
60–69	88.23
70+	92.87

Note: Nonrespondents eliminated, percentages rounded to two decimal places.

Source: Figures derived from literacy tables in *Vestnik statistiki*, No. 8, 1990, pp. 68–73, which are from RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 144, pp. 41–3.

TABLE 3 Religiosity by age and denomination

Denomination	Number of believers aged 50–59 to each believer aged 16–19
Orthodox	2.42
Armenian	8.57
Catholic	2.38
Protestant	1.76
Other Christian	2.94
Muslim	1.83
Jewish	21.51
Buddhist/lamaist	11.24
Shamanist	3.66
Other believers	1.91
Nonbelievers	0.36
No information	0.09
Total population	1.01

Note: Figures are rounded to two decimal places.

Source: Figures derived from literacy tables in *Vestnik statistiki*, No. 8, 1990, pp. 68–73, which are from RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 144, pp. 41–3.

selves as illiterate (5,797,492) than literate (2,459,058). The only other faiths in which illiteracy exceeded literacy were the Armenian Church, Buddhism, lamaism and shamanism. (These high illiteracy rates might be explained by the more rural and traditional societies in the areas of these religions and the fact that education was often less well developed, at least in the native language, in these areas.) The most literate group by far were the Protestants, where the literate outnumbered the illiterate more than seven times.²⁰ Other groups with literacy to illiteracy rates of about two to one were the Catholics, the Jews and other Christian groups (i.e. not Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant or Armenian), though even these were just below the average for the population. Only the Protestants were more literate than the population at large.

The results of question 14 showed a total of 31,298 'servants of cult' in the Soviet Union out of a total population of just over 160 million, not including Red Army soldiers and border guards.²¹ Of these, 28,818 were men and 2,480 women. These figures are not so easy to assess, as dependants (nonworking wives and children) were included in the same category, as were retired clergy. Conversely, the figure probably did not include many priests or pastors who had a secular job (almost the norm in Protestant churches) and who would for preference have listed themselves under that social group. The fact that for more than 28,000 men – most of whom were undoubtedly married Orthodox clergy – there were fewer than 2,500 female dependants indicates that most priests' wives were able somehow to list themselves under other categories. The 1929 legislation on religion stipulated high taxation rates for clergy, and until the 1936 Constitution came into force clergy were restricted in voting rights, so there were strong reasons to avoid social classification as a 'servant of cult' whenever possible.

How accurate were the figures collected? It is difficult to be sure, although we can discount allegations by the Soviet establishment of widespread 'mistakes' in the conduct of the census, which were used to justify the suppression of the results in their entirety. Records show that some people evaded the religious question in particular out of fear, while others insisted that they and their fellow-believers must be included as religious. In addition there is the problem of the guidelines, which stressed that any faith noted must be a personal and not a notional faith. As the figures produced tend to be broadly in line with what objective observers might have expected, it can be assumed that they do reflect the true state of the population's faith within normal parameters of statistical error appropriate to such a large survey. It is clear that it was precisely because the figures reflected the state of the population so accurately that they were suppressed.

In a report to Stalin and Molotov, Kraval' explained what procedures had been used to ensure the accuracy of the figures. In passing he mentioned some of the difficulties that had arisen over the religious question. 'In preparing the census,' he wrote, 'we encountered highly active attempts by class-hostile elements to obstruct the conducting of it by means of spreading hostile rumours, especially on the question of religion.' The religious question also caused problems in the conduct of the census. Kraval' went on:

The question on religion on the census form caused the greatest difficulties also in the organisation of the census, as statements by counterrevolutionaries and backward [*otstalyye*] elements were made mostly on this very question ... A series of reports by census participants shows that the number of believers turned out to be greater than they expected. This attests to the very poor state of antireligious propaganda.²² Kraval' is

clearly trying to shift the blame for the high figures of believers away from the census officials, finding the scapegoat in the antireligious establishment.

Retribution did not escape the organisers of the census. Investigations began into the 'inadequacies' of its organisation. One criticism – directed at the deputy head of the CDNEA, A. S. Popov, by the head of the Leningrad directorate, Serov, in April 1937 – was that the notes to census officials did not adequately explain how answers should be given. On the question of literacy, for example, Serov complained that the notes offered as possible answers to the question 'Are you literate?' merely 'yes' and 'no'. He went on:

The instructions likewise shed very little light on the fifth question of the census form, 'religion', the fourteenth question and others ... As a result, one can suppose that on such questions as literacy and religion we had a range of crucial blunders which may have an impact on the results of the census.²³

Kraval' was removed from his post in May 1937 and replaced by I. D. Vermenichev. Purges began at the top and lower down the census bureau. The census was officially annulled by a decree of the USSR Soviet of People's Commissars on 25 September.²⁴

Before the results were officially annulled there was strong pressure from local authorities for the census bureau to reveal the results it had collated. According to the head of the Moscow city bureau, Sikra, writing to Vermenichev on 8 June 1937, Kraval' had phoned the Moscow bureau to instruct them to give out information if it was requested by district authorities. However, Sikra reported, he did not carry out this instruction with regard to data collected on the religious question. Nikita Khrushchev's aide Kalashnikova 'advised me to refrain from reporting the information on religiosity until there was an indication from the Moscow Party Committee on this matter'. Sikra told Vermenichev that Gosplan had also requested this same information, but in this case he had handed over the data in accordance with the instruction from Kraval'.²⁵

Although the results were suppressed and leading officials purged, figures for the general religiosity of the population which may have been based on the suppressed figures were published at the time. Yaroslavsky estimated in the same year that in the towns more than half the workers, about two-thirds of the adult population over 16, called themselves atheists, while in the countryside (where most of the population lived) between about a half and two-thirds believed in God.²⁶ Although these figures were later contradicted by more optimistic (from the atheists' point of view) assessments of the abandonment of religion, by the early 1940s Yaroslavsky's figures were generally accepted in Soviet publications once again.

Whether in consequence of the hint from Kraval' or not, the antireligious establishment suffered a thorough purge later in 1937 as a result of its apparent ineffectiveness. Yaroslavsky was spared as head of the League of Militant Atheists, but his deputy and numerous other officials were punished. The surviving church leaders too suffered a renewed wave of persecution.²⁷

The 1939 Census

Preparation for the second census in two years was thorough. The authorities were determined that the 'mistakes' of 1937 would not be repeated. Preliminary visits to

homes by census officials were conducted in the run-up to the census itself, which took place on 17 January 1939. This time there was no question on religious affiliation. As in 1937 there was widespread suspicion of the motives for the census, especially as it came so soon after the suppression of the results of 1937. The Moscow headquarters was soon aware that the problems encountered in 1937 were being repeated, as local officials bombarded it with telegrams requesting guidance on how to deal with those refusing to answer questions. A typical reply is the telegram sent by I. V. Sautin, the head of the census bureau, to the party secretary for the Kursk region on 18 January: 'According to reports received from Yasenovsky district, forty households of sectarians have refused to undergo the census. I ask for urgent intervention and the taking of measures.'²⁸ Perhaps mindful of the sad fate of those in charge of the 1937 census, Sautin was determined to ensure that this one would be carried out without a hitch. He was not shy about bringing in leading local party officials to ensure compliance.

The census office in Moscow obliged local areas to file detailed reports on the course of the census and any 'hostile activity' in connection with it. Local officials faithfully reported the rumours circulating in the towns and villages, as well as action taken against those trying to 'sabotage' the exercise. The often vivid reports, at times funny in their deadpan reporting, show a surprising public readiness to resist the Soviet state, despite the political atmosphere created by Stalin's purges. Of the 'anti-soviet activity in connection with the census of the population' (as many of the reports were titled), a surprising percentage of reported incidents concerned religious believers.

In his report of 31 January 1939 to the secretary of the Communist Party Central Committee, A. A. Andreyev, Sautin declared that

Reports continue to arrive from on the spot about attempts by the class enemy to conduct hostile work during the census. There is a series of reports on attempts by churchpeople and members of sects to evade the census and to agitate against the census of the population.

Sautin went on to detail some of the instances of 'hostile' activity.

Thus, according to the report of the CDNEA from Kirov region, a series of cases of refusal by sect members to reply to questions on the census form were noted in Murashi and Sanchursk districts, and in the Berezov rural soviet, according to the head of the DNEA, almost the entire population refused to answer the questions.

He went on to list areas all over Russia where similar events had occurred. 'In districts of Voronezh region about 100 people from the "Fedorov" sect [a breakaway Orthodox group] were discovered who had refused [to participate in] the census. In Khoper district of Stalingrad region 140 Baptists refused [to participate in] the census.' In a village near Tambov 'a nun conducted agitation against the census. She visited seven homes, after which these homes did not allow the census official in.' In a village near Moscow 'two sisters, Old Believer fanatics, gave only their surname, and replied to the question on the head of the family that for them the head of the family is god.' In another village in Omsk region, '49 homes inhabited by members of sects tried to evade the census. On the arrival of the census official the sect members put on their coats and went out, telling the census official to "take what you brought and go away".' Sautin records cases of believers who 'fell to their knees and started to pray to god' and who refused to answer census questions after being warned not to by their priest.

Sautin reported that the central bureau had indicated to local officials that in cases where they could get no satisfactory answers they should fill in the details with information from neighbours and that those refusing to answer should be held criminally responsible.²⁹

By this time the central office in Moscow was already in receipt of numerous reports from around the country of 'agitation against the census', which had begun even before the census took place. A report to the deputy head in Moscow, Bozin, of 19 January 1939 had outlined renewed problems in Mordovia. 'In Ignatovka district, in the village of Andreyevka, some nuns, apparently from the Gor'ky area, who were visiting for a funeral, said: "During the census pretend to be dumb. After last year's census [1937] they sent many people to prison, now the same thing will happen again." In this locality,' the report's author added wistfully, 'pretending to be deaf, deaf and dumb or not knowing any of the languages spoken by the population here (Erzya, Moksha, Tatar, Russian, etc.) is one of the favourite ways of concealing a hostile attitude.' The report mentions five other nuns refusing to answer census questions. In one rural soviet the report notes that one individual farmer whose husband had been arrested by the NKVD refused to give her surname. She replied to the question on citizenship: 'I'm not of the Soviet state, but of the Orthodox.' Another couple declared: 'We are not giving any information about ourselves. We know what this census is being taken for. We don't need a census, but a priest and a church.'³⁰

A second report to Bozin from Mordovia gives full details of refusals to take part, many of them from former nuns. Of 24 people refusing to participate in Ichalki district, 21 were women. A 58-year-old 'former nun', Anna Andronova, who had served a sentence for 'antisoviet agitation', refused to answer any questions. 'I can't give any information about myself,' she told the census official, 'I fear god. In the census you will mix up the believers with the atheists.' The official replied: 'You took part in the census of 1897 and there were unbelievers then and people of different faiths, why won't you take part in the census now?' Andronova countered: 'Then the government was Orthodox.' At the end of a two-hour conversation with the official, she announced: 'You closed the church, took all our property away from us and made us live in mud huts.' She refused to take any further part. Another 'former nun', Anna Kosenkova, told an official: 'I won't take part in the census. You closed the church. Open the church and then we'll take part.'³¹

A report from Smolensk region of 19 January 1939 details similar problems in gaining census information. In the Vladimir rural soviet in Kholm-Zhirkovsky district, 'citizens the Baikovs, Nester Yefimov and Yakovleva, individual farmers, members of a sect, refused point-blank to answer the census official, saying "we are for god". When the DD [district department] of the NKVD was called, they pretended to be idiots.' In Kasplya region one believer would give his nationality only if they would put him down as a believer.³²

A second long report of 24 January 1939 from Smolensk region contains numerous details 'on antisoviet attacks aimed at disrupting the all-Union census' described district by district. In one village, Bol'shaya Dubrovka, six households would only answer: 'We don't know anything and we won't answer any questions.' The report notes: 'According to the district inspector of the National Economic Account, Comrade Yekimenkova, all these people are sect members. Sect members meet together regularly. They are led by citizens Gerasim Stepochkin and Ivan Kalugin, who systematically call their sect together.' The report notes, with a touch of concern: 'Reports on this matter have reached the district department of the NKVD and the district committee of the ACP(b) [the Communist Party]. The district com-

mittee of the ACP(b) has not taken the necessary measures to prevent the facts noted.' In the village of Stan'ka, an evangelical, Kuznetsova, refused to allow the census official in. When senior census and party officials arrived in the village and entered her home she reportedly declared: 'The five antichrists have arrived.' Then she added: 'Don't you dare read me the papers of the antichrist.' When she was warned about her refusal to cooperate she 'flew into a fury'. The report states laconically: 'The material on citizen Kuznetsova has been reported to the district department of the NKVD.' In the village of Agafonovo 'citizen Anna Dubova, answering the question on the census form "citizen of which state?" announced that it was "god's".' In other villages people refused to give their nationality as they considered this to be connected with religion. The report concludes: 'The relevant organs have been informed of all these instances in order that they can take measures.' Indeed, of the five copies of this document, one went to the NKVD and another to the local party.³³

Not all the cases of refusal to participate involved religious believers. Some used the occasion of the census to voice their objections to Soviet rule as a whole: 'In Sel'tso rural soviet in the village of Sel'tso, the individual farmers Praskov'ya Bochkova, Anastasiya Mersulova, and Fedot, Anastasiya and Serafima Kovalevy declared that they didn't need a census of the population and they didn't need Soviet power either.'³⁴ Others had specific objections to giving their nationality as 'Soviet' for non-religious reasons, describing themselves as 'citizens of the Russian Empire'.

One report from Mordovia aims to find out more about motivations for refusal to take part.

Sometimes these refusals have no motivation; in other cases people have explained their desire not to take part in the census as arising out of the incompatibility of the census with religious convictions. Nuns, former disenfranchised persons [*lishentsy*], the dekulakised recently returned from exile and some individual farmers have conducted agitation to the effect that the census is concealing some measure by Soviet power directed against believers and other citizens.

The author of the report noted the frequent similarities in the answers to question 10 of the census ('citizen of which state?'), even from one district to another. He concluded that 'one can presume that this agitation has been fomented by someone'. The answers he records ('Christian, Orthodox, citizen of the Russian Empire') lead him to an interesting conclusion: 'agitation was directed at the necessity of recording on the census form the attitude to religion, i.e. in order that it will be recorded on the census form that the given citizen is a believer.' Refusal to participate in the census was also a sign of general alienation from the Soviet state. 'Almost all the people who refused to take part in the census also refused to take part in the elections to the Supreme Soviets of the USSR and the MASSR [Mordovian Autonomous SSR].'³⁵ Similar correlations were noted in reports from other areas.

The author records a 'political mistake' in the village of Lobaski where the local agitator, the deputy chairman of the district executive committee Kruchinnikov, was also the census official. He announced that the week before the census signatures would be collected on a petition to close the village church. Local people immediately linked the two events and 'started to say that the census was directed against believers'.³⁶

What happened to those who refused to take part? Most of the reports record laconically that the information was passed to local party offices and the NKVD for

'further measures'. As many of the refusers were individual farmers, economic pressure was difficult to apply. Doubtless many were quietly forgotten about if the information on them was available from neighbours or from the local soviet. One of the Mordovia reports, however, indicates that punishments were applied, allegedly at popular request.

The population's attitude to the census was excellent and they were indignant when no measures were taken against people refusing the census. When the sentence of the court was announced, in which some were sentenced to three months' imprisonment, others to 300-rouble fines, the peasants attending greeted the sentence with applause, and from the hall many cried: 'Too little', 'Too little', 'These opponents must be punished more harshly'.³⁷

In Krasnoyarsk region there were physical attacks on census officials, resulting in sentences of two years' imprisonment.³⁸ There was also a bizarre instance of three women dressing up as male census officials and going from house to house for several hours. They were arrested by the NKVD and sentenced.³⁹

Although many of the rumours circulating at the time of the census – and faithfully reported to the Soviet leadership – were wildly inaccurate, citizens were right to be concerned that incidental information picked up during the course of the census would be used against them. The census offices on a local level passed information to the NKVD about people's whereabouts, their work and source of revenue and other non-census-related material for follow-up action.

The 1939 census divided believers. Many were aware that the cancellation of the 1937 results may have been due to the high percentage of believers recorded, and intended that the 1939 figures should likewise show such a response. With no specific question on religion, the question on citizenship could be used to display religious faith. Others considered that believers should have nothing to do with the work of the Antichrist. It is noteworthy that most of those refusing to take part were rural believers, many of them from 'sects'. With the central church organisations all but destroyed, it was often the word of local religious authorities – priests, preachers or nuns – which determined the response by local believers. It is clear that the overwhelming majority of believers in the Soviet Union caused no problem for the census authorities. It is equally clear, however, that the census of just two years before still lingered in the memory of believers, colouring their response to the new survey.

Later Censuses

No further Soviet censuses included any question on religious affiliation. The lessons of 1937 had been learned. However, there was continuing resistance to the census itself from some religious groups, especially Jehovah's Witnesses. In 1959 a court in Moldavia sentenced a Witness to ten years' imprisonment. During the trial it was noted that he had refused to enter himself in that year's census as a Soviet citizen, declaring instead that he was a 'citizen of the New World and the Theocratic State'.⁴⁰

Without regular information on religiosity from censuses, the Soviet authorities had to rely on surveys by sociologists and atheist workers which, while probably not as accurate as census returns in providing a full picture, did allow more sophisticated research. After 1943 the various Councils for Religious Affairs also collected detailed statistics on all aspects of religious life, as did the KGB. In the 1960s some

scholars regretted the abandonment of a question on religion in the censuses and called for full surveys of religion to be revived,⁴¹ but these calls went unheeded.

Appendix: 1937 Results by Denomination and Age Group

		16-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+	Total adult
Orthodox	Literate	2,296,286	7,561,775	6,331,963	3,876,499	2,495,725	1,387,945	494,260	24,448,236
	Illiterate	249,357	2,148,708	2,649,138	3,004,617	3,678,077	3,356,177	2,084,769	17,173,336
	Total	2,545,643	9,710,483	8,981,101	6,881,116	6,173,802	4,744,122	2,579,029	41,621,572
Armenian	Literate	2,405	10,460	10,500	9,462	8,418	6,735	4,295	52,315
	Illiterate	614	8,318	12,431	15,252	17,447	17,808	17,870	89,784
	Total	3,019	18,778	22,931	24,714	25,865	24,543	22,165	142,099
Catholic	Literate	27,624	84,944	77,349	57,986	39,613	26,584	12,739	326,893
	Illiterate	3,086	20,290	23,406	27,006	33,386	30,197	20,440	157,838
	Total	30,710	105,234	100,755	84,992	72,999	56,781	33,179	484,731
Protestant	Literate	30,417	105,035	96,176	68,630	49,697	35,440	18,364	403,815
	Illiterate	2,615	13,443	9,198	7,243	8,479	7,914	5,160	54,070
	Total	33,032	118,478	105,374	75,873	58,176	43,354	23,524	457,885
Other Christian	Literate	19,653	63,737	67,412	53,645	35,354	20,627	7,997	268,492
	Illiterate	1,909	13,391	18,978	22,859	27,947	24,748	14,591	124,447
	Total	21,562	77,128	86,390	76,504	63,301	45,375	22,588	392,939
Muslim	Literate	346,787	913,090	609,709	292,223	155,475	96,327	44,903	2,459,058
	Illiterate	206,887	1,213,117	1,341,333	1,046,732	859,914	703,153	425,069	5,797,492
	Total	553,674	2,126,207	1,951,042	1,338,955	1,015,389	799,480	469,972	8,256,550
Jewish	Literate	2,393	9,684	16,071	25,292	45,600	57,818	32,033	188,905
	Illiterate	586	3,839	5,931	8,495	18,492	30,995	23,854	92,207
	Total	2,979	13,523	22,002	33,787	64,092	88,813	55,887	281,112
Buddhist/ lamaist	Literate	1,270	5,469	6,077	4,731	2,603	1,391	527	22,071
	Illiterate	425	4,118	9,217	12,875	16,453	12,130	4,843	60,068
	Total	1,695	9,587	15,294	17,606	19,056	13,521	5,370	82,139
Shamanist	Literate	275	974	1,188	956	521	276	101	4,292
	Illiterate	784	2,228	2,683	3,085	3,350	2,745	1,774	16,652
	Total	1,059	3,202	3,871	4,041	3,871	3,021	1,875	20,944
Other believers	Literate	212,799	682,855	501,591	278,253	165,023	88,996	33,816	1,963,780
	Illiterate	31,747	247,713	278,446	276,853	301,157	262,749	174,284	1,573,298
	Total	244,546	930,568	780,037	555,106	466,180	351,745	208,100	3,537,078
Nonbelievers	Literate	6,116,454	15,202,127	9,796,769	4,305,462	1,624,994	462,413	95,827	37,611,202
	Illiterate	203,509	1,238,189	1,161,322	865,596	634,990	360,466	166,684	4,632,012
	Total	6,319,963	16,440,316	10,958,091	5,171,058	2,259,984	822,879	262,511	42,243,214
No information	Literate	356,559	151,704	100,389	48,832	21,890	9,341	3,993	724,230
	Illiterate	38,649	34,120	26,005	19,449	14,021	10,911	9,624	166,639
	Total	395,208	185,824	126,394	68,281	35,911	20,252	13,617	890,869
Total	Literate	9,412,922	24,791,854	17,615,194	9,021,971	4,644,913	2,193,893	748,855	68,473,289
	Illiterate	740,168	4,947,474	5,538,088	5,310,062	5,613,713	4,819,993	2,948,962	29,937,843
	Total	10,153,090	29,739,328	23,153,282	14,332,033	10,258,626	7,013,886	3,697,817	98,411,132

Note: Figures for respondents where no age was recorded are omitted.
 Source: Derived from tables in *Vestnik statistiki*, No. 8, 1990, pp. 68-73, which are from RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 144, pp. 41-3.

Notes and References

¹ See Timothy Heleniak, 'Glasnost' and the publication of Soviet census results', *Journal of Soviet Nationalities*, Spring 1991, pp. 139-60, which gives details of when and where the results of each census were published.

- ² I have only briefly examined the archives myself. Material for the 1937 section is mostly derived from the two articles named below. The 1939 material is from copies of the documents. I am grateful to Dr John Anderson of the University of St Andrews and Michael Rowe for their useful comments on this article.
- ³ Yu. A. Polyakov, V. B. Zhiromskaya and I. N. Kiselev, 'Polveka molchaniya', *Sotsiologicheskiye issledovaniya* (Moscow), nos 6, 7 and 8, 1990.
- ⁴ A. Volkov, 'Iz istorii perepisi naseleniya 1937 goda', *Vestnik statistiki* (Moscow), no. 8, 1990. See also the collection of materials *Vsesoyuznaya perepis' naseleniya 1937g.: kratkiye itogi* (Moscow, 1991).
- ⁵ V. M. Kabuzan, 'The census in Russia and the Soviet Union', in Joseph Wieczynski (ed.), *The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History* (Gulf Breeze, Florida, 1978), Vol. 6, pp. 153–7.
- ⁶ Ye. Yaroslavsky, *Protiv religii i tserkvi* (Moscow, 1932–5), vol. 4, p. 321.
- ⁷ The decree read: 'On the exclusion from the programme of the all-Russian census of the question on denomination. Decree of the Soviet of People's Commissars, adopted at the suggestion of V. I. Lenin, 11 May 1920. Exclude.' V. I. Lenin, *Ob organizatsii sovetskoj statistiki* (Moscow, 1956), p. 15.
- ⁸ A. Dolotov, *Tserkov' i sektantstvo v Sibiri* (Novosibirsk, 1930), pp. 56–73.
- ⁹ *Vsesoyuznaya perepis' naseleniya*, *Plan* (Moscow), no. 10, 1936, p. 3. According to Volkov, *op. cit.* p. 48, Stalin's copy of the draft questions with his many amendments has not been found.
- ¹⁰ RGAE, f. 1562, op. 1, d. 845, pp. 43–6.
- ¹¹ Polyakov, Zhiromskaya and Kiselev, *op. cit.*, Part I, *Sotsiologicheskiye issledovaniya*, No. 6, 1990, p. 6. The view is shared by Volkov, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
- ¹² RGAE, f. 208, op. 1, d. 49, pp. 27–9.
- ¹³ *Blanki i posobiya dlya shchetchika v gorodskikh poseleniyakh* (Tsentral'noye upravleniye narodnokhozyaistvennogo ucheta Gosplana SSSR, Moscow, 1936), p. 15. A similar booklet was issued for census officials in the countryside.
- ¹⁴ *Slovar' religii* (Moscow, 1937).
- ¹⁵ *Pravda*, 5,6,7 and 8 January 1937, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 4 and 6 January 1937.
- ¹⁶ Polyakov, Zhiromskaya and Kiselev, *op. cit.*, Part I, p. 7.
- ¹⁷ RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 143, p. 137. Other questions aroused 'undesirable' answers. To the question on citizenship, some people responded 'Citizen of the Russian state [*derzhava*]' or even 'anything except Soviet' [*tol'ko ne sovetskogo*]. What really brought problems for the officials of the census office, however, was the figure for the total Soviet population. speaking at the 17th Communist Party Congress in 1934, Stalin had given a figure for the end of 1933 of 168 million people. With the myth of rising living standards, the number was expected to be significantly above that. On 24 January 1937 Kraval' reported to Stalin and Molotov that, excluding those in the care of the NKVD (i.e. prisoners), the People's Commissariat of Defence (i.e. soldiers) and passengers on trains and ferries the initial total was 156 million people. In the end the census showed a population of some 162 million, about 8 million fewer than the authorities reckoned.
- ¹⁸ RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 143, pp. 114–16.
- ¹⁹ The figures quoted here and in the table are derived from literacy tables published in *Vestnik statistiki*, No. 8, 1990, pp. 68–73, which themselves are from RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 144, pp. 41–3. Note that these are not the final figures, as the census results were never finally tallied. This accounts for discrepancies between figures in different files.
- ²⁰ Interestingly, a Soviet book noted that 'because of the almost complete absence of literate people in the immediate postwar years', many of the leading figures in local soviets, industry and agriculture in Moldavia (which became part of the Soviet Union only during the war) were Baptists or other sect members 'on the strength of their higher educational level'. A. I. Babi, M. A. Gol'denberg and D. N. Tabarku, *Preodeleniye religii i utverzhdeniye ateizma v Moldavskoi SSR* (Kishinev, 1983), p. 42.
- ²¹ RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 144, pp. 61–3.

- ²² *O predvaritel'nikh itogakh vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya*, RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 151, pp. 148–60.
- ²³ *Zamechaniya o nedostatkakh organizatsii perepisi naseleniya i yeye razrabotki*, RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 151, pp. 62–3.
- ²⁴ *Pravda*, 26 September 1937.
- ²⁵ RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 126.
- ²⁶ *Ob antireligioznoi propagande* (Moscow, 1937).
- ²⁷ Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (London, 1961), pp. 12–13.
- ²⁸ RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 285, p. 34. There are many similar telegrams in the same file.
- ²⁹ RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 278, pp. 12–15.
- ³⁰ RGAE, f. 1562, op. 329, d. 285, doc. 42.
- ³¹ *ibid.*, doc. 62.
- ³² *Informatsiya ob antisovetskikh vylazkakh napravlennykh k sryvu perepisi naseleniya po raionam Smolenskoï oblasti*, *ibid.*, doc. 43.
- ³³ *Informatsiya ob antisovetskikh vylazkakh napravlennykh k sryvu vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1939 goda v raionakh Smolenskoï oblasti*, *ibid.*, doc. 44.
- ³⁴ *ibid.*, doc. 43.
- ³⁵ *ibid.*, doc. 62.
- ³⁶ *ibid.*
- ³⁷ *ibid.*
- ³⁸ *ibid.*, doc. 41.
- ³⁹ *ibid.*, doc. 74.
- ⁴⁰ *Sovetskaya Moldaviya*, 28 October 1959.
- ⁴¹ A. Okulov, 'Nauchno-ateisticheskoye vospitaniye segodnya', *Nauka i religiya*, no. 8, 1967, p. 17, and V. I. Yevdokimov 'Ateisticheskoye vospitaniye trudyashchikhsya v protsesse stroitel'stva kommunizma', *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, no. 4, 1967, p. 96, ft. 2.