

Jessica Baloun
2021 LAURE Reflection Story Essay

The Lost Census Uncovered Amid Pandemic

With pandemics, politics, and protests for racial justice, 2020 will undoubtedly be written into history books for years to come. While many moments defined the year, one usually mundane event also caused waves-- the 2020 U.S. Census. As a tenant of his 2020 campaign, President Trump pushed for the inclusion of a question on citizenship status on the upcoming census. This request posed logistical issues for the Census Bureau as well as a more serious issue of the citizenship question perpetuating rumors of mass deportations for the estimated 10.8 million people living in the U.S. undocumented. With these fears, the legality of asking for citizenship on the census came into question, steadily moving its way through the courts and concluding with a 5-4 Supreme Court decision stating that census organizers did not have a compelling enough reason to include the citizenship question into the 2020 census. Despite the ruling, irreparable damage had been done to the census as organizers estimated that millions of undocumented immigrants would abstain from the census out of fear of the Trump administration and the use of personal information being used as a means for deportation.

I was captivated by how so many parties held a stake in something as seemingly mundane as a census. Census workers feared that their years of planning were about to be wasted, while others in the population feared that their very existence would be put in jeopardy due to the addition of a single question. This problem lingered in the back of my mind as I entered my junior year and my first semester of the Honors History Program.

My first semester in the program was memorable as I completed the class remotely while I studied abroad in St. Petersburg, Russia. Because of my interest in Soviet history, I stumbled upon the anomaly of the 1937 Soviet Census. After its completion in January, this census was labeled defective and its organizers were arrested and executed by the state. The 1937 results were sealed away until the 1990s. Once again, simple numbers and questions had spiked fear into a population and its leaders and I had found a thesis topic: *What value does a census have for a state? For its people? How does fear of a census connect to the people's fear of the state?*

While abroad, I intended to use resources in Russia to aid in my research, like the original census documents housed in Moscow. Unfortunately, these plans were made just as the world began to shut down and I was sent home. Luckily, my advisor, Dr. Stephen Norris, pointed me towards the Miami Libraries and their wealth of online databases. I was reintroduced to the exhaustive collection of *Pravda* and *Moscow News*, Russian newspapers published by the Soviet state. These papers served as the foundation of my paper and ultimately changed the direction of my project for the better.

As a historian, exploring archives is a vital and admittedly fun process in research. Primary documents are at the core of any project and my thesis was no exception. But with the rise of the pandemic and the closure of these archives, the use of digital resources became pivotal in my work. The Eastview databases offered crisp images of papers both in English and Russian,

and the OhioLink system allowed me to order books located at the libraries I was no longer able to visit. Additionally, librarians such as Masha Stepanova provided me with an idea of what materials Miami's own archives had to offer.

My thesis, entitled *Before the Numbers Disappeared: Media and Perception of the 1937 Soviet Census*, explores the ever-daunting and churning machine that was Soviet media and its role in perpetuating (or hindering) nationalism through the census. Previous scholarship focuses on the fallout after the census as an example of Soviet terror, but my research is situated in the period before its collection and the experiences of census collectors during the process. I began by trying to understand how the state hoped to use the census as a tool in promoting nationalism domestically and abroad, showing a flourishing population with happy citizens. The Eastview databases accessed through the Miami University Libraries website provided me with the propaganda pushed by the state as well as a wealth of images of census workers that helped me paint a clearer image of what the census process was like. Diaries of the workers and participants of the census were published and translated to English are housed at King Library, which allowed me to analyze the census on a more personal level where I could focus on the terror enlisted by enumeration. Mirroring the U.S. census's citizenship question, my thesis looks at controversies of religion, nationality, and anti-Soviet thought and how the census became a conduit of the overall unease within the Soviet population.

Research on censuses is invaluable in continuing conversations on what it means to be a part of society while also existing as a private individual as well as highlighting how fragile the census process is to the state and its people, especially at a time where personal data has increasingly become commodified. While occurring over 80 years ago, the 1937 Soviet census contains parallels to issues of today and as a historian, I am excited to present my research on campus and in publication at the end of the semester. This research process has been one of the most challenging and rewarding experiences I've faced while at Miami, and, despite the adversities caused by a global pandemic, I am thankful for the digital resources offered at the Miami University Libraries as well as the dedicated faculty and staff who have made the research process even possible.